Deities’ Chessboard

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by abcd

Summary

Bruce regarded the void on the other side of the bed; the mattress was cold. He was left alone long ago and though Bruce had his back turned then, Clark could have sensed he wasn’t sleeping. But Clark didn’t. He felt the weight of so many things circling him: a smug, enigmatic Oliver Queen, a sneering Princess, a Clown freed from his box, an orphan boy who hated him, the feeling of a looming menace and a disabled Batman who struggled with his friends’ help to catch up with time.

Bruce gazed at the stormy night outside his bedroom’s window and wondered how his life became a weird rabble of humans, superheroes and gods…
Chapter 1

The space was pitch black without any source of light but neither of them needed light. Or oxygen. Two shapeless shadows talking avidly, only the sparkles from their eyes visible.

“What is it that you want?” the smaller shadow demanded and his roar was clearly tired as much as he hid it under anger.

A hard croak answered him from the larger shadow; both of them were larger than life, rippling intangible giants, but the one was even bigger.

“I liberated you so I demand your allegiance and obedience.”

“Very authentic that one!” the sarcasm vibrated his voice. “As if I believed that you did it from ‘goodness of heart’… Spill it!”

The other grunted and steam left his nostrils.

“I think you already know what I want. You’re clever after all… though your recent disgrace says otherwise” his chuckle was like thunder.

Teeth rattling were heard from the smaller shadow.

“Then why you want to associate with someone disgraced?”

“Because the fact I saved you from disgrace will make you loyal to your benefactor and your thirst to wreak revenge on those who have disgraced you, will make you an asset to my plans.”

The smaller shadow snorted.

“You wish to be the ruler of this planet - throughout the ages, everyone like you wants the same.”

“I’m not like the losers you mention…” he sniggered “I’m not like you and your kind!”

“Of course you’re not” the arching of an eyebrow was almost audible.

“I give you the generous opportunity to be with me when the Kryptonian is smashed” teeth rattled “he’s the one who has to fall for this planet to kneel and you’ll get your revenge on the one who vanquished you.”

The second shadow’s voice was lower resembling a hiss.

“It wasn’t the Kryptonian who defeated me neither Thor…” and you’re stupid to believe that Superman is the crucial protector of this shitty planet…

“Then?” for the first time interest hued the larger shadow’s nonchalant, arrogant growl.

The smaller shadow stretched its posture.

“I’ll serve you to conquer this damn planet…” he avoided answering the question.

“Vanish!” he corrected him.

“And smash the Kryptonian and the other superheroes” his voice filled with contempt and then
became dead serious. “But I want my reward.”

“Name it. I always gratify my loyal servants.”

The second shadow felt the pang from being called a servant.

“You’ll leave Batman unspoiled and… Bruce Wayne. For me…” he uttered and his yellow irises flashed locking with the abyss of his ‘master’. His irises had lost their red-blood quality since his recent defeat.

A roar-like laughter shook the void where their meeting was taking place.

“Two mortals? Two mere humans?” he inquired sarcastic. “What special two mortals could have? I can erase them with my breath!”

“Don’t make the mistake to underestimate Batman and… the Kryptonian loves Bruce Wayne” he retorted unfazed from the heavy jeering and kept his silence for a couple of seconds.

The enormous shadow huffed.

“I’m aware that the Kryptonian loves the worthless mortal, which is…pathetic” he spat “as it is your interest in him” his satisfaction for insulting the other was more than clear. “Actually, I plan to have him killed so to break the Kryptonian’s…” he laughed “heart!”

The second shadow jolted as if hit by an electric current.

“Bruce Wayne is important” he replied indifferent for the other’s jeer. “You can’t squash Superman while the mortal is by his side. And you definitely can’t kill Wayne!”

The larger of the two shadows bulked up from anger for his subordinate’s last demanding expression.

“I’ll grant you Batman: he won’t be a problem in combat. But Superman’s lover will be annihilated!”

“I want Bruce Wayne!” he lowered his tone. “It’s my reward; the only reward I care about… And you don’t want him killed either: If he is killed Superman will be alarmed to your schemes and will come against you with his allies…” he knew better than anyone that your mate’s death can be not only the greatest, deepest wound but also the greatest motive.

Again an arrogant snort.

“Let them come! They’re specks, pests to be mashed…”

“You’ll need more than mere strength to triumph and Wayne’s death won’t help your cause” his voice became serious. “You promised me a reward after all and I promise you that you’ll get the Kryptonian.”

“Gotham is fuckin’ quiet, man – that’s kind ov creepy…” the younger of the boys puffed the smoke from his cigarette.

“Are you scared?” the second turned to him smirking.

They were sprawled on the rooftop of a long abandoned building in the center of the Narrows; the boy with the cigarette scrutinized the road underneath while the second boy gazed at the cloudy
October sky. The smoker sniggered.

“I don’t live near the City Hall with my granny and I’m not called ‘Dick’!” he jeered.

Dick narrowed his eyes and his friend arched his eyebrows challenging; his friend was younger than him but his body, posture and attitude made him look the same age. Jason was born and raised in Narrows after all, living with his alcoholic, drug addict mother.

“Yeah…” Dick shrugged “you’re called ‘Jason’ among other things and because you live in Narrows and stick that thing to your mouth you think you’re a badass…” his voice became as challenging.

Jason snorted and a sly, crooked grin engraved his child face that struggled to look adult before its time.

“Sure… Littl’ Dickie can sniff at us now - Batman is his pal after all…” his blue eyes glistened.

Dick jolted at this and gritted his teeth stilling his eyes on his friend.

“I’m here with you, you big mouth asshole! And I’m not Batman’s pal - he just saved me from that motherfucker! But anyways Batman is dead…” he concluded indifferent hiding his true emotions: fear on the memory of Joker threatening him, anger because that sonovabitch killed his family and Brian, sorrow as he re-watched the scenes from the old factory.

Jason with a jerk tossed his finished cigarette to the street under them.

“Horseshit! Ever’on’ knows that he isn’t a human - he can’t die. Ya pissed yarself and don’t know what ya saw…”

Dick shook his head and looked at the younger boy who lit a second cigarette with a smug expression as if he was doing the smartest thing in the world. He cocked an eyebrow at the spectacle.

“I know what I saw! He pushed me away just before the whole damn floor fell on him. He said to me to leave… but I didn’t and then a woman came and…and she was desperate, tearful trying to save him…but he told her to take me and leave…and she did though I was listening her sobbing as we ran away…and when we were out the entire building collapsed.”

Jason was snorting all the time sipping from his beer bottle and hit his bottle to Dick’s neglected one when his friend stopped his narration that left him gazing at the sky with blank eyes as if the scenes were played there.

“Ya need to cut beer…” Jason burst into loud laughter and Dick clenched his teeth, grabbed his bottle and drunk a large amount with his blazed eyes glaring at his friend.

“That’s the truth!”

Jason tilted his head on the right in disbelief.

“People saw him, dude! After that night.”

Dick’s patience was over and he smashed his beer on the concrete.

“They’re assholes! He couldn’t have made it!” he shouted and Jason giggling raised his palms in surrender.

“OK, dude, OK! Cool now… What yar granny gonna say if yar fine clothes are drenched in beer?”
Dick huffed exasperated and crossed his arms pouting, his eyes looking at the apartments building opposite them. Jason was a nice chap, a funny company but sometimes was unbearable. Like now that he reminded him of his granny: he had left her apartment after making sure she was fast asleep. He didn’t want her to know about his nightly excursions neither about his...shady friend.

Suddenly, he took in what the TV in the opposing leaving room was showing: Superman was landing at a rooftop carrying in his arms Bruce Wayne wrapped in his cape. Another stupid, fucking TV gossip show making tales about those two. Dick pointed with his index.

“You see? Only scums like Wayne worm out of troubles… Decent people like my family and Brian never got a superhero save them…” he shook his head and spat in contempt.

Jason stood up and approached him, looking at the same TV set.

“But ya did…” he retorted and Dick glared at him so the younger boy shrugged. “Ya’re right, pal” he sighed “yar people’s death was unfair…” he patted him and his eyes lost their sneering quality.

Dick nodded and looked again at the TV screen that still showed the same scene.

“Because of him…” he spat. “Look at him: Batman died trying to save people and Superman ran to save that pussy…”

Jason whistled.

“Ya really uttered a bad word!”

Dick glared at him, his raven hair waving on the light breeze.

“He’s really a pussy, man…” Jason shook his head. “Look how Superman holds him… It’s easy to figure why the Super freak ran behind him instead of being with Batman savin’ those kids… Ever’on’ says it – mom says it.”

The older boy pouted appalled.

“Wayne is disgusting! Whining and crying so others feel sorry for him and save his ass…”

Jason chuckled.

“He needs that ass, huh?”

Dick turned to his friend, his lips curled in disgust.

“He didn’t do anything to avenge his parents; he prefers to hide behind others wiping his fake tears pretending the grief- stricken but I know that he just cares for the money his parents left him…”

Jason sniggered putting his hands on his pockets.

“Don’t know, man... He gave work to mom an’ rehab. He gives her a big salary and a fund ‘cause she’s a single mother and that gives us the rent and food…an’ cigarettes” he laughed “an’ mom is better now that goes to the Haven” he took in Dick’s enraged eyes. “Not that I like the guy… He’s worse than the other rich buffoons ‘cause he pretends to care… as if we’re stupid! But c’me on, dude! How was he to avenge his parents? He was younger than ya” he cocked his eyebrows sarcastic. “Ya can’t blame him when ya too don’t do anything to avenge yars…”

Dick’s eyes flashed and he gritted his teeth: that was an insult and he felt the urge to punch Jason. Yet his friend was right. Jason smirked reading his expression.
“That’s gonna change…” he spat.

Jason narrowed his sly eyes and grinned.

“Yuuuuup! Now that Batman is…dead we need a new hero, huh? Ya!” he chortled.

Dick’s face twisted in anger and Jason stared at him challenging waiting his attack however the older boy looked at his wristwatch.

“I must go - I don’t want my granny to figure I left.”

Jason shrugged forgetting instantly his provoking attitude.

“I don’t have such problems…” and watching his friend leaving. “Where yar granny finds the money for such clothes?”

Dick shrugged without turning and Jason snorted looking proudly at his worn jeans and T- shirt. Although Wayne’s fund and salary was big enough he didn’t want to wear fancy clothes like Dick’s – not that his mom was saving any money for his attire except than those for the times the social worker visited them…

Bruce sat at the large balcony overlooking the wood covered mountain slope and the glimmering blue endless horizon; it was over a month he has been in Tony’s secluded villa in Thasos Island. Tony had built that house for the times he wanted truly to be left alone – there weren’t many times he wanted that but when he did he wished to be perfect, he had explained to him once sitting in this balcony. Bahamas, Caribbean, Hawaii weren’t secure enough for Tony’s reclusive part – razzi could discover him easily there. But here? In a small Greek island so out of the limelight? Tony had pouted and shaken his head: no way, little guy – they’re too stupid for me!

And every day at this time he’d come and watch the sun set in the sapphire waters. Smell the pine trees and inhale the salty light breeze that brushed his face, the only part of his body that felt normal…

He sighed; being in that round shaped balcony brought him tranquility. Although nostalgia and worry for his city lurked underneath.

But the confinement of his throne-like, unbelievably comfy chair was always there, hugging him, soothing him yet at the same time reminding him of his disability. No, he wasn’t ungrateful: Clark’s creation was wondrous, another token of his love and permitted him to move unassisted and without mechanisms and wheels giving him the false impression that things were like before.

No, he wasn’t ungrateful! He should have died in that factory – every other human would… and sometimes Bruce felt a horrible pang for the injustice: people dying daily from lesser causes and he survived because a god-like being loved him. That’s what he needed: more survivor’s guilt…

And it was his choice to save those children knowing that his body wouldn’t last even without the building collapsing over him so he was really a spoiled brat feeling like this… Selfish, ungrateful… He had all these things that no other paraplegic in the world had: alien operations and treatments that saved him, a gym with organs no eye had seen till now, high tech hydromassage pool, this magnificent wheelchair… No, no wheelchair… Throne… Like the one Clark granted him in his heart…

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply feeling the breeze pleasantly cooling his face.
“My mind and…my ears will be constantly with you…” Clark had sighed and kissed him lightly on the lips before taking off for Metropolis.

Yesterday at 14.00 hours and now was 26 hours and 27 minutes since he left… He pressed his lips: Clark had a job to maintain and the two weeks’ leave he took to stay with him in this beautiful, peaceful island were too much and he had to return.

“I’ll come back ASAP!” he had turned his head midair and cried to him but instantly he changed his course and stormed to that same balcony to hug him and suck his neck passionately. “I don’t wanna leave…” he had whined like an oversized baby.

Bruce smiled remembering those super hot and soft lips nibbling his flesh giving him goose bumps even now… well, to the percentage of his body that still could feel.

The discreet clearing of throat startled him but only mentally; even though his upper body hadn’t been as heavily damaged as his lower and was able to sense and make movements, it wasn’t perfect. He turned flushed for being caught and grinned to Alfred who had opened soundlessly the arch shaped door.

“Master Bruce, I’m sorry to interrupt your daydream” he stretched the woolen black cardigan he carried and muffled his young master’s back.

“Alfred, we’re not in Gotham… Here the weather is too mild even in late October; I don’t feel any cold…”

His butler however wasn’t persuaded.

“The locals are calling it ‘the little summer’ yet you overexerted yourself in the gym and your body is still warm from the effort so even this sweet breeze could easily bring you down with the flu.”

His voice was composed, business like but for Bruce was easy to discern Alfred’s dread for his health; Alfred knew – even better than Bruce - how sensitive his organism was at this phase. He took his butler’s hand in his and shook it though his hand was a bit shaky from the exercise.

“You’re right, Alfred.”

But Alfred cocked an eyebrow.

“Thank God for that promise…” he mumbled and Bruce chuckled – indeed, the night he left Leslie’s clinic to find Joker at the factory had promised Alfred and Leslie to surrender to their treatment afterwards. “Sir, if I may… perhaps you should take it easy with the exercises?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I just want to feel something, Alfred” he looked at his butler’s eyes. “Below the waist … not that my upper torso feels entirely normal…” Alfred bit his inner lip. “Even now my lower body feels only Clark’s touch…”

Alfred cocked an eyebrow.

“It seems that Master Kent has magical fingers” he remarked shrewdly.

“That and he knows the few neurons that survived and focuses his efforts on stimulating them in hopes that they will develop synapses to cover the lost neurons’ functionality. Or their overstimulation will fasten the regeneration process.”
“Then, maybe you should let him and Master Anthony with Lucius do their work and just follow Jor El’s instructions? Since you don’t want any human doctors examine you…”

Bruce stared at him and blinked.

“Leslie examines me” he smiled “actually, she did it daily all these days she was here. And you know that if another doctor sees my body will realize that I was treated with alien technology."

Alfred cleared his throat.

“Dr. Eliot calls every day to learn your news despite the fact you rarely speak with him” he arched his eyebrows in emphasis. “And as Master Kent mentioned several times Dr. Elliot has worked with Superman again so the “alien treatment” won’t be a surprise to him. Especially when Miss Vale’s footage has been all this time – what you youths call it? – viral.”

The younger man struggled to hide a grin on the word and casted him an exasperated stare that made Alfred sigh.

“If I may, sir: It’s a very long time since little Thomas Elliot bullied you, Master Bruce…”

“You know it’s not that…” he licked his lips and didn’t elaborate on the subject. “And it’s not like I do anything, Alfred: the machines work my legs and I just train my arms so to not depend on you even to move my body” he arched his eyebrows. “And if I manage to feel some pain it will be better than feeling nothing” he took in Alfred’s shadowed eyes. “While under Falcone’s captivity my right arm was crippled, I couldn’t do any movement with it but” he inhaled deeply and his stare became more intense “it ached all the time… and the pain was horrible, unbearable and I hated it but now I realize…”

“You know, Bruce” Ra’s’ voice returned to his ears “pain reminds us that we’re alive…”

“What is it that you realize, Master Bruce?” Alfred squatted to his side, his voice low.

Bruce turned to him.

“That pain indicates that something is still alive…”

Alfred felt his young Master’s agony and the same pang pierced his guts. But Bruce upon seeing that touched his butler’s upper arm and pressed his lips.

“I don’t regret what I did that night, Alfred: I’ll do it again if I must” he shook his head. “And I’m not whining…even if I stay paraplegic all my life.”

Alfred cupped Bruce’s hand that held his upper arm.

“You won’t, Master Bruce” he widened his eyes in emphasis. “You’ll walk again and I’ll be the one whining as I’ll chase you trying to persuade you to stop climbing on rooftops…” he chuckled and Bruce laughed lighthearted. “But you need to be patient and careful because it’s too soon and in your current condition the slightest pain you may feel could be caused from a grave injury that will delay your recovering more.”

“I’m sorry, master” he said to Ra’s in the training room panting and covered with sweat “I just wanted to do some more to… to become better…”

“But if you don’t listen to your trainer, you’ll injure yourself” the Demon’s Head replied benevolently. “Your arm is almost healed, do you want that to be thwarted by a new injury, caused
“by your own stupidity?” he yanked gently his small head with a finger under his jaw.

“You’re right, Alfred” he smiled “as always…”

Alfred grinned, patted Bruce’s hand and stood up.

“May I ask what would you like for dinner?”

Bruce looked flabbergasted.

“I just finished the pancakes and the milk” he gestured to the small round glass table where a book lay forgotten “I don’t think that I’ll need any dinner…”

He was ready to say that he wasn’t hungry at evenings but Alfred scowled at him. He had many drugs to take.

“You promised, sir.”

Bruce closed his eyes amused.

“I did, right?” he chuckled. “Let’s leave it to Selina’s choice – she has a great taste…”

Alfred shook his head.

“If cat food could be concerned suit for humans too…Because your lady friend indulges Hero’s choices more than her own.”

Bruce laughed.

“She’s going to spoil the kitten, huh?” he asked and his eyes filled with love.

The butler cocked his eyebrow.

“As you do. However you are not going to evade the important subject of your dinner” Bruce shook his head. “All these days we are here you get Master Anthony or Master Clark to choose the meals.”

Bruce’s melancholy reached his eyes.

“And now both of them are not here…”

Alfred understood his young master’s feelings; this last fifteen days Bruce had all his friends around him filling his days and dragging his thoughts away from his temporary – Alfred was adamant about this – disability. Not that Miss Kyle or Hero didn’t do the same now but still he missed his old friend and the man he loved as he would have missed Miss Kyle and Hero. His young Master had lived almost all his life without his family and now that he got a family back he wanted its members always there.

He placed his hand on Bruce’s shoulder and was happy that the youth felt it immediately.

“They’ll come again, sir; it won’t be long. They can’t last much away from you.”

Bruce smiled and nodded, a white fur ball catching his eyes as Hero crossed the glistening tiled surface, his small feet slipping every now and then. The chair floated on his thought and brought him to meet the kitten. Yet he couldn’t bend to take him; while he was in the Fortress he could make such movements but that stopped as soon as he left the place since Fortress’ power didn’t flow inside him.
He still could move the damaged part of his body and even stand and walk using his other mental abilities but after there was a high toll to pay: pain, a killing exhaustion and days of wasted effort as his body’s condition deteriorated. So he decided to not do that since there wasn’t a critical situation.

“How did you manage to escape Selina?” he chuckled hiding his sadness.

Alfred’s lips became a tight line in bitterness sensing his young master’s craving to take the kitten and the crushing disappointment of his inability to do so. He walked there.

“And I had closed the door, young Master Hero” Bruce laughed on the pompous title “how did you come out?”

The kitten raised his head as if listening to Alfred and meowed as if replying and the butler nodded.

“Of course…You’re Batman’s kitten…” however his smart, perusing eyes didn’t miss an imperceptible shadow passing Bruce’s eyes on the mention of Batman – the young man inescapably faced with the comparison of his current disability, though he always hid it from the others.

But Hero as if understanding Bruce’s difficulty, jumped and fast climbed on his lap clinging on the quilt blanket that muffled his legs. Bruce’s eyes flashed happy and he beamed to Alfred who grinned relieved.

The young man petted tenderly the kitten’s small head and Hero purring stared at him with his big eyes.

“You smell exactly as the old Hero and your fur has the same feeling, buddy…” he smiled at him. “He is the most beautiful kitten in the world, don’t you think, Alfred?”

Alfred was absorbed in removing the few hairs that had fallen on the blanket and Bruce rolled his eyes making the kind butler grin.

“Can I say otherwise?” Bruce tilted his head looking pointedly and Alfred chuckled: young master Bruce as a child always wanted a pet but Ms. Wayne’s allergies didn’t allow it – and Hero although not the old kitten was more than a pet. “He is indeed the most beautiful kitten I ever saw…but I haven’t seen many, sir…” he teased his young master because he loved how this bickering made him relax.

“Alfred…” Bruce protested pouting and Alfred patted his shoulder laughing.

“You’re spoiling him…”

“And you spoil me” Bruce answered stubbornly “but you don’t have any problem with that!” he caressed the kitten that stretched on his master’s lap nuzzling Bruce’s chin to urge his friend to pet him more.

“Oh! He is a charmer, Master Bruce!” Alfred shook his head and relished the scene before him.

The kitten that now was almost three months old closed his eyes enjoying the caress and purred louder.

“You know, cat’s purring is actually healing for the cat and the human…”

Bruce raised his head to see Selina who leaned on the wall, her arms crossed. She was smiling fondly.
The kitten felt his friend’s distraction and annoyed jerked his small paw and touched Bruce’s hand that had stopped petting him. Bruce though the kitten never used his nails when playing with him twitched startled; it was something almost imperceptible but it began from his pelvis and that was new and pleasant. He resumed his brushes and Hero lay on his back showing his belly for Bruce to tickle as he was doing with his old friend – not without sorrow on remembering how unfairly that kitten had died…

“I guess, you know better, huh?” he winked to Selina.

Selina shrugged.

“Of course, sweetie…”

Alfred fixed the cardigan on Bruce’s back.

“If you’ll excuse me, sir and madam, I have to improvise with your dinner since Master Bruce doesn’t want to ease my work.”

He turned to leave.

“Hmmm….Alfred…”

The kind butler stopped at his heels, his intrigued stare meeting Selina’s, before turning to Bruce.

“Yes, Master Bruce?”

“I wonder” he laughed as he avoided playfully Hero’s paw and locked mischievously his eyes with Alfred’s “if you could cook that delicious food we ate at the restaurant Tony took us? At Chrisi Ammoudia?”

Alfred remembered that night: the restaurant was closed for the season but Tony made arrangements to open for them and only for them. It was a great location; the small outdoor restaurant was built on a hill invading the crystal sea and overlooking the beach that stretched on a range of over one kilometer and the mountains that circled the bay. The garden restaurant was decorated with trees and plants and beautiful secret light that played with moon’s shine exactly as the soft yet enchanting music played with the sound of the sea waves.

Master Anthony had no problem creating a portable ramp to the hill’s peak where the restaurant was. He understood that as much as they loved to carry Master Bruce in their arms, this was embarrassing for him who was used to do things himself. And although Clark’s throne-like chair could take Bruce wherever he wanted, they wouldn’t like for the staff to suspect the alien technology. So the ramp offered the best cover.

It was a splendid night, Leslie still with them and also Lucius who had come for the weekend. The moon was full and Master Bruce couldn’t stop going to the edge of the balcony to gaze at the view, Master Kent watching him hungry; sometimes followed unable to stay away from him and other times seeing Master Anthony’s disapproving stare stayed grudgingly at his seat.

“And which dish is that you desire the most, Master Bruce?”

The young man seemed unable to decide and then with widened eyes like an enthusiastic kid looked at Alfred.

“Mmm… ‘Pastitsio’ and some trigono dessert with ice cream?”
Selina giggled at his lusting expression and Alfred though an esteemed butler couldn’t avoid doing the same.

“What?” Bruce asked confused letting Hero mouth his finger and lick it like a lollypop.

They couldn’t say that his child-like greedy sparkle in his eyes were the best gift after those torturing last months and Alfred had his excuse ready.

“You don’t ask things often but when you do it compensates for all the times you don’t, sir” he mock grumbled. “Thank Goodness it’s still early and I’ll manage till dinner time…”

Bruce blushed.

“Alfred, I…”

Alfred smiled and patted him.

“I’m teasing you, Master Bruce…Miss Kyle, since Hero will accompany Master Bruce, would you care to help me with preparing the dinner?” he took the tray with the empty plate and glass and then the business administration book that rest on the small table. “I suppose you won’t need that, sir?”

But Bruce was busy communicating with glances and grimaces with Selina who mouthed the question: “Me? Cook?”

“Ummm…Yes, Alfred, I don’t think I’ll read.”

The butler walked towards the arch shaped door to the interior pretending that he didn’t notice the youths’ silent communication.

“Miss Kyle, are you coming?”

Selina widened her eyes… panicked, shaking her head to Bruce who just shrugged reassuring her that the kitchen wouldn’t explode.

“Mmmm… Yeah, I’m coming, Alfred…” she said and followed rolling her eyes to Bruce.

As he was left alone with Hero Bruce thought that things weren’t so bad and he was happy to have Alfred, Selina and Hero with him. But Tony’s and Clark’s absence was like a hole in his heart and he knew that Batman shouldn’t be like that and that his disability had started to ruin his spirit as well…and all in all he was acting like a spoiled rich brat…and that was unacceptable, shameful…yet he missed Tony’s cheerfulness and Clark’s touch…

He was seeing in Clark’s eyes that he couldn’t yield his heart and leave so he pressed his lips and formed a smile. He didn’t want Clark leave either and the supper they just had, became a tight knot in his stomach. He caressed Clark’s cheek.

“We know both that you have to go…” his voice wasn’t Batman’s growl but his determination and command was there.

“As soon as my working hours end I’ll come to you…” his voice dropped to a naughty whisper “to sleep with you…”

Bruce rolled his eyes; there wasn’t any need for the naughtiness since Clark didn’t make a move to touch him…intimately since the night he saved his life. He realized with awe that The Man of Steel was really scared that he could smash him crossing the lines during his climax.
“What are you thinking?” Clark asked him.

Bruce smiled.

“That Perry will berate you….”

Clark nodded understanding that he had to go but before taking off he cupped the back of Bruce’s head and captured his rosy, soft lips massaging, sucking and moaning with closed eyes, Bruce’s lips dancing with his.

It must have been minutes because Bruce realized that he was using the technique Ra’s taught him for lasting without air. Clark realized too and hastened to part their lips – he had strained Bruce’s battered lung… He scratched uncomfortably his nape blushing.

“Ugh! I’m sorry, I just wanted something to hold me till…” he sighed “…the next time but I overdid it…”

Bruce immediately took in Clark’s eyes staring his chest and knew that it had nothing to do with lust. The man was panicked trying to make sure that he hadn’t provoked some deterioration to his healing lung. And Bruce was both amused and upset.

“Off you go, Kent! The sooner you go the sooner you’ll be back…”

Clark nodded and touched gently his forehead to Bruce’s.

“You’ll listen to Alfred?”

Bruce shrugged and tilted his head helplessly.

“I promised, didn’t I?”

Clark’s loud laughter that made the world a better place erupted as he took off, his head always turned to Bruce.

“You’re busted, kiddo!” he yelled.

Bruce shook his head.

“Mind the electricity pillars!” he snorted cocking an eyebrow. “And the cables! And the planes!” – if you keep staring at me and not the sky, we’ll have accidents…

Superman winked grinning widely.

“Point taken!”

And that was the last glimpse he got of his face. He had tried to follow his body in the horizon but he soon lost him. He didn’t have a super vision after all…

Bruce’s gaze was lost in the pine trees and the peaceful blue horizon that was painted gold from the setting sun, some clouds glowed in mesmerizing shades of pink and purple; he was running his fingers absentminded to Hero’s rich fur, the kitten following his eyes. Clark didn’t return after his working hours – Bruce had stayed wake in his bed waiting…

He remembered the night at the restaurant. His gaze was snatched by the dark sea that reflected the silver moon’s glow and the sound of a small fishing boat’s engine reached him from afar. And then a magic melody of a sad song filled the warm night. It made a great impression to him drenching his
soul in sweet sorrow and the mesmerizing sound of the waves brushing the shore and hitting the vessels that were bound to the small anchorage made the melody even more charming.

He had asked the young woman who during the night was the head of their service. She smiled.

“The verses are from a poem of the ancient poetess Sappho; they speak of a woman who contemplates how fast the time with her lover has passed and her bitterness that she lays alone and forlorn. Then she ponders on love that spreads sufferings to people and concocts fairytales; she admits that love has grabbed her soul and rocked it same as the wind that blows from the mountains and surges and hits the oak trees blustering…”

He had asked from the girl to buy the CD and she gifted it to him. Bruce still felt the same shiver recalling the ambient melody and the verses… He felt like the ancient poetess as a rush of mountain wind shook the trees that surrounded the house and brushed his flushed face… He shuddered…

Hero climbed to his shoulder swiftly, touching his head to Bruce’s neck. Bruce giggled and took the animal in his hands.

“Batman in love…” he jeered himself and the kitten looked at him. “Even worse…” he snorted “Bruce Wayne in love… it’s ridiculous, Hero” he sighed and put Hero on his lap. “I mean it’s… beautiful but…unfitting for someone like me…odd…foolish…inappropriate…and I feel…” he shook his head “It’s not right and it can’t last for long. I can’t be happy for long, can I?”

The kitten meowed with his special way replying and Bruce took it from the armpits and hugged it.

“Like old Hero you always try to make me feel better, huh?” suddenly his eyes narrowed and darkened.

He sensed it before hearing it but it was futile to try anything to avoid it so he just cuddled protectively Hero and let the rush of air claim him…
A big thanks for your warm welcome of the first chapter. Also, I'm sorry about the delay but the last days were crazy...

Last but not least: Merry Christmas to all of you!

“Hey, hey…” Bruce chuckled wrapped in strong arms. He was holding tight Hero who wasn’t used to flying. “I thought that boy scouts didn’t attack their opponents when handicapped!”

He was looking at Clark’s beaming face but also gazed at the magnificent green scenery that ran smoothly under him to end in breathtaking cliffs and then crystal sapphire waters that sparkled under the golden orange rays of the setting sun. And then Superman brought them on the blazing pink sky between purple-blue clouds that crossed the burning yellow sun in its descent, blinding rays scattered to the sky’s upper layers that were still azure.

“Mmmm…I wouldn’t consider handicapped someone who makes Superman drop every other thing and run to him!”

Bruce brushed the kitten reassuringly to calm it.

“You make it sound as if I have a Kryptonite of a thousand miles range…” he cocked an eyebrow. Superman chuckled.

“It is proved that you’re my lucky Kryptonite” he captured Bruce’s lips.

“The latest events show that I’m the lucky one…” he deepened the kiss and then looked at the landscape under them: the forest covered mountain had given its place to a smooth golden beach. A very small bay with no access by foot. “Where are you taking me? You know that this is called kidnapping…”

Superman nuzzled Bruce’s neck sucking the intoxicating perfume that he missed so much.

“Not when the kidnapped enjoys it…” he whispered in a husky voice.

Bruce laughed and Hero as if imitating Clark nuzzled Bruce’s palm.

“Stockholm’s Syndrome…” Bruce retorted to Clark who grunted and landed gently on the fine sand.

“I was thinking - mmm… better dreaming - about some swimming in a deserted beautiful beach.”

Bruce frowned.

“You remember that even here is late October and the sun has almost set?”

“Don’t tell me that the mighty Batman is scared of cold water?” he smiled slyly with a mischievous sparkle in his beautiful eyes.
Bruce narrowed his eyes glaring at him but Clark laughed with his melodic way.

“My baby is cranky? Hm… you missed me so much then?”

“You’re so arrogant, alien!”

The younger man touched his cheek to Clark’s with effort that although he hid perfectly Clark sensed, his guts clenching. Despite the fact it was almost one month and a half since his Star woke from the coma he still faced great difficulties and hurdles in his mobility. Which was expected with the extremity of his injuries that would have killed every other human and had almost claimed Bruce’s life.

“The sea’s temperature is actually very pleasant” Clark said “if it was colder I wouldn’t have suggested it.”

Bruce snorted.

“Suggested? You dragged me here…” his eyes wandered to the scenery “and I’m glad you did: it’s so beautiful and quiet.”

The small bay was defined from a steep cape covered with dense trees and a bare cliff where rocks were almost hovering over the transparent waters. Opposing the open sea loomed the island’s inland with high mountains looking like giants covered in dark green curls as in a nature contest between earth and water. Seagulls’ cries sounded so relaxing in harmony with the waves’ soft melody as they crawled on the seabed that turned to a sudden splash as they crushed on the shore; along with the salty breeze the sensations made Bruce close his eyes to savor the moment.

“And I don’t mind evening swimming” he tilted his head to the side and shrugged, Hero stilling his eyes on his Master’s. “I doubt if I’d sense the temperature…”

The smile vanished from Clark’s face because although Bruce’s voice was indifferent he could discern the exhaustion and disappointment from the futile effort of all these days.

“It’s still early” Bruce said nonchalant seeing Clark’s change of mood; “it’ll take some time before you can threaten me with cold water.”

Superman kneeled on the sand and laid carefully Bruce down fixing the cardigan on his shoulders. Bruce let Hero jump from his lap to the sand and the kitten surged to the spot where two seagulls were standing causing the birds’ surprise and hasty flight.

“I think we’ll have an issue with the bats in the cave…” he chuckled “and if you consider that bats are mice as well as birds… Our fella is too lively…” he said with pride. “Thank you for finding and giving him to me.”

But upon turning his eyes back to Clark found the man staring at him, their faces too close. The Man of Steel was too serious and Bruce stopped smiling too only for Clark to touch his lips.

“How can dark bring light to sun’s life?”

Superman closed his eyes and caressed Bruce’s cheekbone.
“You’re the meaning of my life; I love you from the first time I laid eyes on you. I still jolt in my sleep having nightmares that you died that damn night…”

Bruce felt a pang.

“I’m right here, you saved me.”

Hero returned to them nudging Bruce’s hand to pet him and Bruce obliged to Clark’s amused sigh.

“Ugh! That kitten rivals me!”

“Don’t tell me Superman is jealous of a small kitten?” Bruce teased him and Clark grabbed his upper arms and claimed his lips passionately.

“We’re here for swimming…” he snapped releasing Bruce’s lips and the younger man looked him exasperated.

“But I’m not wearing my swimsuit!”

Clark tilted his head on the side regarding wickedly Bruce’s body, his eyebrow arched.

“Actually… I was counting on that…”

He pushed the cardigan off of Bruce’s shoulders and moved to strip him from the rest of his clothes but Bruce twitched causing Clark’s squinting.

“Not in front of Hero…”

Clark rolled his eyes.

“Because he’ll be traumatized?” he locked eyes with the kitten “Hero turn your eyes on the other side.”

But the kitten kept staring at Bruce and purring making Clark sigh frustrated.

“Like his Master he is stubborn and don’t take orders, huh?” he said watching Bruce caressing Hero’s head, the kitten closing his eyes clearly enjoying it – Clark couldn’t blame Hero for not obeying. “Good thing I brought that…”

Bruce looked with an amused smile at Clark who took out of his cape a take-out container. The Man of Steel grinned slyly to Bruce and opened the container watching eagerly the kitten’s intense reaction: Hero sniffed frantically and looked avidly to the source of the intoxicating smell – a fine piece of salmon fillet grilled slowly.

Bruce’s eyes widened in exasperation as Clark took the container far from him to a dry log washed there years or decades ago and lay dead on the beach. Hero followed him and Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose shaking his head.

“C’me, Hero, c’me” Superman called sweetly.

“He’s a kitten not a puppy!” Bruce tilted his head.

“Right! Ps, ps, ps…Here, kitten…”

He let the container there and the kitten surged heads on. Bruce crossed his arms and glared at Clark that in a blink was again clung to him, grinning smugly.
“You’re devious!” Bruce shook his head disapprovingly.

Clark erupted in laughter.

“I must eliminate the competition… even bribing!” he nibbled Bruce’s lower lip and Bruce bit him softly.

“You’re going to make him obese; he has put much weight.”

It was Clark’s turn to shake his head disapproving.

“Unlike you…”

Bruce rubbed his forehead.

“If I put much weight my body will have more difficulties in managing some mobility…” it was difficult for Clark to understand that he didn’t have much appetite.

“But if you don’t regain the muscle mass that was damaged by the crushing your muscles won’t be able to uphold your body. And with such exhausting training you’re putting yourself through the lack of proper and enough food will lead to your collapse…” his eyes locked with Bruce’s purring their worry.

Bruce sighed and turned his head towards Hero who feeling his Master’s eyes turned to look at him licking with his small tongue the food that had stuck to his muzzle. Bruce smiled fondly and looked at Clark who was watching avidly his eyes’ course to Hero and back to him.

“You talked with Alfred?”

Clark cocked an eyebrow.

“No… I just scan” Bruce rolled his eyes and nodded understanding “the levels of lactic acid in your muscles.” Clark sensed his Star’s grim mood and he didn’t want that to continue. “Now” he inhaled deeply “about that swimming…”

And in a second both Bruce and himself were bare naked: Clark took in Bruce’s impressed stare on Superman’s broad chest with the bulked pectorals that were covered with raven hair: Bruce had seen him naked again but every time was as impressive as the first. Clark blushed and beamed because he was thrilled that Bruce longed for him.

“You like what you see?” he smiled and caressed the pink shade over Bruce’s cheekbones.

Bruce locked eyes with him and smiled shyly.

“You’re perfect…” his awe for the man’s flawless beauty and the awareness of his own deformed legs and torso made his voice hoarse. Not that he ever believed that he was nice looking or that he cared about his appearance…

But Clark cupped his cheeks and claimed Bruce’s lips sucking as if finding water after days in the desert and caressing with his tongue the younger man’s cavity. Without unlocking their lips he lifted gently Bruce in bridal style and brought both of them in the water, he walked, his feet sinking in the soft sand and reached the point where the waters deepened their light emerald color becoming sapphire blue. He tested first the water’s temperature because even if he had scanned it beforehand he wanted to be sure before putting Bruce in. He knew how sensitive he was.
Bruce held Clark’s upper arms and released them as the Man of Steel lowered him slowly flat in the golden-orange hued waters that his upper body sensed that were pleasantly warm. His hands immediately stretched over his head to swim but Clark was holding gently his back with one hand while the other touched the younger man’s chest.

Bruce looked at him.

“Just relax, Star” he used his hand to stretch Bruce’s legs and held his body flat on the water’s surface.

“Easy for you to say…” Bruce snorted and moved his arms gently in the water to stay afloat but Clark touched his face and slowly lowered it more for the water to rinse his hair and reach his ears. He then smiled reassuringly to Bruce who kept his stare on his crystal blue eyes.

“You trust me, right? Close your eyes and focus on the sound of the sea…”

Bruce huffed.

“Do I have a choice?”

Clark chuckled.

“You’re Bruce Wayne, Batman: you always have a choice and the means to assert it but…” he kissed softly the place where Bruce’s heart beat so pleasantly strong “I think that you will consent…”

Clark’s lips on his flesh sent shivers in the healthy part of his spine and he closed his eyes though Clark felt still the tension in his body. Bruce breathed the way Clark knew that it was a relaxation technique.

“Jor El misses so much your games…” he said grinning, his eyes relishing the spectacle of the crystal waters on Bruce’s naked body. Despite the scars his abdominals was as attractive as ever and he wanted so much to kiss that cute belly button… yet he didn’t want to ruin Bruce’s relaxation.

“You don’t play with him?” Bruce inquired without opening his eyes.

The water was massaging softly his body and although he couldn’t feel anything below the waist he knew that it was good for him. Maybe because he projected the feeling from his upper body to the rest of his body.

Clark could sense his Star’s elation and resisted the urge to grab him and share his elation adding more… Yet he was afraid of causing new injuries to the slowly healing human body.

“Kryptonian chess is not my cup of tea…” he chuckled and his hungry eyes roamed Bruce’s naked body taking advantage of the man’s closed eyes though he was sure that Bruce knew.

“What a disappointment for Jor El…” a crooked smile sculpted Bruce’s face that had lost all the tense from the sea’s liberating treatment.

Clark giggled.

“Believe it or not I have disappointed him many times.”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow: the sea’s sound was brushing his ears mingling with Clark’s soft voice and established a really soothing feeling to his tired body that stayed lax on the surface.
“And why not believing it?” he mock sneered “You seem the type to disappoint a noble from Krypton…You’re a farm boy after all…”

Clark couldn’t stop himself with Bruce teasing him like this; playfully, carefree. He wrapped his hands around his armpits, lifted him and kissed roaring his abdominals as the salty sea water ran down. He had his eyes closed devouring the sensation of the wet taut flesh and the sound of Bruce’s heartbeat and giggles.

“So you can’t handle tickling, huh? Smart ass?” he growled unwilling to part with Bruce’s flesh. He had almost lost the man and that had left a tight feeling inside him that he fought all the time to ease.

Bruce took a deep breath to control his giggles.

“You wanted me to relax…” he chuckled “this doesn’t help, you know…” his eyes regarded longingly Clark’s head on his belly as ascended to his chest.

The Man of Steel was feeling Bruce’s back with his strong hands soothing the spots where it still hurt and then lower finding the paths where the neurons had sustained their functionality and rubbed desperately. He had learnt by heart those neurons and stimulated them with every chance because he wanted to encourage Bruce that he’d feel again.

Of course, Jor El had warned that these areas were oversensitive – since they were the only functional – and that made them highly erogenous so their arousal would lead Bruce in deep need since more than half of his body was deprived of any sensory stimulation.

Jor El hadn’t stated it clearly but Clark understood his hesitation if not disapproval for that kind of “treatment”. His father didn’t approve it because he read his son’s fear and unwillingness to engage the frail, healing human in the intense action of having sex. Thus his father as Clark himself considered the whole “procedure” cruel: lighting the fire inside Bruce’s body and then letting him unsatisfied, melting slowly from the oppressed heat.

That killed Clark every time…He wanted to be inside Bruce’s body, he wanted to give him pleasure and soothe his own body that cried after so much time to savor the human’s body… But he couldn’t. He heard the shy moans leaving his Star’s lungs as Clark’s lips sucked desperately his drenched breasts; he heard the frantic beat of Bruce’s heart; he felt the gorgeous body convulsing needy… Above the waist.

Bruce had wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck and nibbled slowly his strong neck. Maybe this time the Man of Steel would make love to him, would see him again as a normal human being and not a half alive thing. His hands slithered to Clark’s back, relishing the sense of perfect bulky muscles breathing power… His heart was beating crazily and his breaths became rasps from want but his groin remained dead; yet it didn’t matter because that was the case the first time Clark touched him and then Clark healed him. Maybe the same would happen again.

He locked his sparkling eyes with Clark’s and claimed his lips, caressing the endless layers of abdominals made of steel. He grinned mentally: if someone had told him few months ago that he’d lust so much for a man that would initiate their intercourse, he’d have snapped at him. But Clark was so beautiful and so kind and loving that Bruce could forget his horrible past in his arms – at least momentarily – and feel like normal people do.

Clark felt his oppressed length hardening and bit his inner lip. It was too soon; he could see how fragile Bruce’s pelvis was…unfortunately.

Bruce could read the signs of arousal and Clark was aroused, his groin twitching and his eyes dark
with lust. But then Clark’s eyes lowered and his arousal was gone like the flame of a candle and
Bruce searched his eyes frowning. And slowly unclenched his arms and let them touch Clark’s chest;
he pressed his lips forming a tight smile.

“I’m supposed to relax, right?” he said and Clark bit his lips.

“I just want it to be perfect for you as for me” Clark breathed staring at the depths of the younger
man’s eyes. “I want you to feel everything and be pleased as you deserve…” he touched his
forehead to Bruce’s.

“That doesn’t mean that you have to delay your pleasure” Bruce replied coolly. “Your afterglow will
be my pleasure as well” his eyes glowed solemnly.

Clark shook his head.

“I can wait, Bruce and, believe me: it’s my honor that you…” he inhaled deeply “you accept and
want me; I feel goose bumps right now… There’s nothing I’d want more than make love to you right
now” a sharp intake of air “but I want everything to be perfect…”

“And not shatter me…” Bruce laughed though it didn’t feel funny. Actually his guts felt a pang of
shame realizing that he was literary pleading to be fucked.

“From the first time, you like it. But you force yourself to feel only the pain because you don’t want
to admit that you’re a little slut…”

His cheeks felt hot and he lowered his eyes, Clark immediately felt that something was off and
frowned.

“What?” he whispered and rubbed soothingly Bruce’s back.

“How’s Gotham?” he looked him in the eyes.

Clark cocked an eyebrow and gave a crooked smile.

“Don’t tell me you don’t watch the developments through the net and your other…sources.”

“It’s not the same” his voice was cold but Clark knew how much love was hiding inside him. “The
last time I was in Gotham was that day almost forty days ago when Jim took my testimony about my
kidnapping by the League of Shadows and I had remained all the time in the Manor.”

Clark smiled and caressed Bruce’s wet locks that glimmered in the last rays of sun.

“Your city is unbelievably peaceful and quiet; the criminality rate has made an incredible dive;
people are hopeful…”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“But Harvey resigned and left; and that’s a blow: Gotham needed him. I can’t believe the disaster
that happened” he gritted his teeth. “I should have predicted that!”

Clark didn’t like the trembling of Bruce’s body which was emotional and physical; the water was
warm but outside the light breeze, though pleasantly cool, was able to bring down a recovering
organism like his. So he lowered smoothly the younger man in the warmth of the water.

“You predicted it, remember?” Bruce looked confused: Clark knew that Talia and Crane messed
with his memories and Bruce faced some minor lapses. “Rachel had called and warned about Joker
planning something and you put me guarding MCU. Yet Joker had ordered one of his goons to abduct Harvey’s father and he threatened to kill the man and blow up the Adam’s bridge if Harvey didn’t free him.”

Bruce nodded listening eagerly.

“I rushed to the bridge, I stopped the goon but Joker was already out.”

Bruce shook his head furrowing his brows; something didn’t fit.

“You heard Joker blackmailing Harvey and you didn’t notify Tony to change the codes Harvey knew?”

Clark chuckled on Bruce’s dark stare: Batman was still there. He tapped the younger man’s nose.

“Of course I did and Tony changed the codes but the safety wasn’t stable and when Stane broke down his armor, Tony’s cell dissolved and Harvey had already unlocked the common cell.”

Bruce’s lips formed a tight line.

“And of course Joker found the footage from police’s cameras and broadcasted it and Harvey’s dignity led him to resign…” he sighed.

“Exactly” Clark’s eyes were dead serious. “Bruce, please forget all these: you need to relax…”

But he hadn’t finished his phrase and Bruce tensed more.

“His cell in Arkham is secure enough? I don’t want him to escape again and threat Dick.”

Clark closed his eyes to calm himself because now he was tense too.

“You should ask Tony; the cell is his” he sighed “but I assure you that I always keep an ear there…” the hand that held Bruce’s back flat clenched and the younger man looked at him worried. “I almost wish he breaks out so I have the chance to bust him and…”

Bruce’s eyes widened. Not kill, he thought. And Clark could read his eyes.

“He almost killed you” Clark shook his head, looking at the horizon but in reality at nowhere “so I’d like very much to smash his bones like…” he stopped abruptly; like what happened to you because of him…for him to feel the excruciating pain you felt and still feel at times… but he couldn’t utter it.

Not that Bruce didn’t figure; he touched Clark’s upper arm and the Man of Steel focused again on him.

“He is a psychopathic criminal; you are not!” he said sharply and Clark pressed his lips trying to calm his enraged heart but in vain. “You don’t kill.”

On that Clark’s eyes darkened. Till Bruce began brushing his upper arm and Clark’s face became again his usual kind face.

“I read on the net about Superman saving people in that French nuclear reactor last night… It was a miracle that nobody died and thanks to you the radiation didn’t manage to pass to the air or soil.”

Clark smiled; of course Bruce knew how to erase any trace of hatred from his mind and remind him who he really was.
“You sneaky, sly… amazing man!” he kissed him passionately in the lips cupping the back of his head to keep him afloat.

Bruce’s eyes flashed when Clark grudgingly detached his lips.

“It was the reason I didn’t come yesterday as I promised; it took many hours to stabilize the reactor and contain the emission. When I finished I had to go to the Fortress to clean myself from the radiation – I may be impervious but humans around me aren’t… and then I had to go to the work…”

“So how come and you’re here so early? We’re still in your working hours…”

Clark leaned to his ear.

“I took the day off: I…got ill all of a sudden…” he whispered and winked.

Bruce widened his eyes in mock outrage.

“You lied?! The boy scout lied?!” he gaped.

Clark closed his eyes and nuzzled Bruce’s sharp cheekbone mumbling his pleasure and nodding.

“I think I deserved it after so much radiation…But don’t tell, Perry…”

Bruce narrowed his eyes as Clark’s nuzzling was tickling him. Superman’s arm was wrapped above his wet chest holding him afloat and bringing their breasts to touch. But Bruce shut out this contact because it wouldn’t lead to anything. Instead he chose to tease his “tormentor”.

“I believe I just found leverage on the Man of Steel” he growled and Clark muffled it with his lips.

“Close your eyes, Star; let the peace of the nature fill your body…”

Clark’s urge almost brought back Ra’s’ smug voice telling almost the same things but Bruce didn’t let the memory fully establish; instead he closed his eyes, and let the sound of the seagulls and the waves fill his restless mind, his heartbeat and breath following the calming rhythm; the injured muscles of his lower body felt like…No, it wasn’t like before neither a miracle brought back their sensory function but it was…different: like a soothing, numbing wave began from there up to his torso and his head. It was beautiful, like leaving the boundaries of his body and traveling out of time and space.

Clark was absorbed in Bruce’s body that glowed under the setting sun’s flaming reddish soft hue; Bruce’s features’ beauty was irresistible every time and under this light the younger man was transformed into a magical being – like his ancestor, Lilith. The salty odor of the sea blended with Bruce’s unique perfume turning Clark on again. But he shouldn’t… even if Bruce’s wet silky locks seemed golden in the sapphire waters and his eyelids seemed made of velvet and his lashes endless… He swallowed hard following the course of the last intake of air in Bruce’s body: the ethereal movement of his rosy lips, the slight rising of his throat, the slithering vein in the dimple between the neck and the sternum, the slow, seductive elevation of Bruce’s chest, his protruding rosy nipples calling him to lick and suck them. And between his taut breasts lay happy the Black Butterfly glimmering in its plain frame in a pendant made of rare black platinum Clark had found and molded. For a moment Clark’s eyes were lost in the multicolored sparkles the gem emanated as it was absorbing the sun’s energy.

His fingertips made gentle circles around Bruce’s cute belly button aware that his Star couldn’t fill anything so mild there – his spine above the waist wasn’t vastly destroyed like in his lower body but
still it was considerably injured to the level of the lower rib.

The Fortress had done everything that could be done setting of the process of neurons’ regeneration but Jor El said that time and physical therapy would do the rest since Bruce refused to take again the Immortality Water this time to heal the severe damage in his lower body. His concern was that using the pure form of Lazarus’ Pit would make him paranoid like Ra’s Al Ghul since his former mentor did use the medicine too often: for Bruce once was enough.

Human surgery was forbidden and Bruce was adamant in not letting Dr. Elliot examine him in hopes of using his method that utilized Superman’s super powers – this time Clark didn’t dare to attempt anything on Bruce’s injuries to not deteriorate them. The good thing was that Tony and Lucius were working fast to adjust their bionic body parts tech into replacing damaged neurons and manufacturing spinal parts.

He sighed because his eyes drove his mind out of the pain to focus on what he had in front of him; so much beauty was overwhelming…

“Damn, Bruce! You’re beautiful!”

It was a hot iron spear piercing Bruce’s heart but he didn’t open his eyes.

“Stop saying that, Clark” he uttered dryly.

Clark furrowed his brows: his Star’s voice was indifferent yet the content hinted something deep.

“Why?” he leaned over his face that was relaxed, the real turmoil deep inside.

“Because it’s not true! I mean, you flatter me and I’m happy you still say that but… it’s not true.”

“I beg to differ!” Clark protested and instinctively tightened his one arm hug around Bruce’s chest.

Hearing these things from a man who stirred insatiable passion to so many people, from the League of Shadows’ powerful leader to a demon was unbelievable but Clark could understand that someone who had been raped from his early childhood couldn’t regard himself as beautiful. And… Clark had endless, tormenting months to show to him how beautiful he was…

Bruce opened his eyes and moved gently his arms in the water to maintain his flat position though he could feel Clark’s arm holding him.

“I know I’m not good looking and I have no problem with that and actually it’ll be a huge relief when people stop being curious to discover the marks of abuse on me and cease staring at me” Clark wanted to sigh: his Star really believed that all these stares were due to the horrors of his past. He realized Bruce’s x-raying eyes were on him. “I know that your…”

Say it, Star! Clark pleaded internally.

“Your love is true and has nothing to do with the substance…” he chuckled “you got immunized after all. This love makes you see me pretty but… The fact I don’t feel or move below the waist doesn’t mean that I can’t see…”

Clark licked his lips uncomfortable and Bruce smiled sympathetic.

“My body is covered with lacerations, bruises, scars and swellings – even burnings and in some spots entire fragments of flesh are still missing. My muscles are deformed and although the Fortress’ stitches are invisible to humans I know that you can see them…” he widened his eyes. “I’m like
Frankenstein’s monster:: all seams and bad flesh. So don’t call me beautiful” he stretched his hand and caressed Clark’s cheek, his eyes sparkling “you’re beautiful” he pouted and shook his head “you’re perfect.”

Then he let his head sank in the water slowly keeping his eyes closed; the embrace of the water so pleasant and mind clearing.

Clark pressed his lips and blushed: the realization that he was the first being Bruce felt lust for made him shiver from delight and craving but unfortunately there was the nasty biting in his guts because he must deny satisfaction to this special being… And seeing Bruce’s face covered by glistening water glowing, lax and silken…

He cupped the human’s face and dragged him out of the water.

“First of all, I didn’t say you’re pretty but beautiful and for me the things you mentioned as disfiguring stress out your beauty because they were made when you saved people from certain death” he shook his head in denial ignoring Bruce’s snort. “You have to accept it, Bruce: you’re beautiful and actually I’m jealous every time someone looks at you…” he huffed and his face became too serious. “I wish your beauty hadn’t caused so much pain to you because it’s unfair…”

Clark’s eyes were heavy with emotion and frankly Bruce didn’t want for him to feel sadness. So as Clark touched their foreheads together and nuzzled his cheek Bruce turned his head to the shore and laughed on the spectacle trying to carry Clark’s mood with his.

Clark followed Bruce’s gaze and grinned broadly.

“So much for your bribe” Bruce snorted “Hero wants to come to us…”

The black and white kitten stood right where the wave splashed and stared at them. Clark smirked.

“But cats hate water!”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“However, this cat fights it…”

Hero ran backwards when the waves hit the shore but instantly as the waters ebbed chased them moving his paw aggressively. Only to retreat hastily when the wave came back at him to charge again as the wave moved inwards.

Clark watched Bruce’s eyes fill with love and warmth as he laughed with his kitten’s doings. Bruce realized and stopped abruptly stilling his eyes on Clark’s solemn ones.

“Promise me that you won’t stop laughing like this…” Clark sighed.

Bruce tilted his head on the side and blinked.

“If I laugh like this all the time, I’d be facetious…”

“No, you’ll be happy…” he touched feathery the wet locks that had stuck on Bruce’s eyes framing them; he leaned and captured the younger man’s lips almost aggressively.

But Bruce’s insides clenched: not the same game again… He understood Clark’s wariness of wounding him and he knew that Clark loved him and didn’t do it on purpose and he wasn’t angry but being aroused and then left was exhausting for his body even in this malfunctioning state – and
his heart wasn’t very appreciative of that either. Besides he knew that it was as much tormenting for Clark. So he touched Clark’s jaw and softly turned away his own head to unlock their lips.

Clark lowered his eyes and bit his lip.

“You’re right…” he huffed. “But the moment you’ll be healed, I swear to Rao that you won’t get out of our greenhouse for two months!” he blushed. “Wait! Did that sound like a threat?”

Bruce rolled his eyes.

“The sure thing is that it didn’t sound like a kind, moral boy scout as you promote yourself to the masses…” he quirked an eyebrow and Clark suddenly wrapped him in his broad chest.

“Did I tell you that your eyes are my lucky Kryptonite?”

“I think that Jor El would have used a different term but…yes, you did…at least a hundred times…” he snorted. “I just hope your enemies won’t learn that small detail – even if it’s more poetry than fact.”

Clark sensed that Bruce was shivering since the sun had almost vanished in the water, the sky had taken a dark orange-pink color and the temperature dropped. So he stood and took Bruce in his arms, the younger man slithered tenderly his arms around Superman’s neck.

Hero was jerking and twitching his leg nervously annoyed because the water had touched it and Bruce laughed resting his head on Clark’s hot chest, the exhaustion of the day finally overwhelming his body. Clark felt goose bumps all over because Bruce’s soft breath was brushing his wet flesh and foremost because he sensed the human’s trusting surrender.

“You know of course that Alfred will be furious…” Bruce remarked warningly, a yawn ending his phrase.
“What did you do to Bruce Wayne?” Jim calmly asked Jonathan Crane who sat opposite him handcuffed.

The police Commissioner had come himself to Arkham Asylum to interrogate the insane doctor who was staring at him with his faint blue eyes glimmering from jeer. His lips were the entire time twitching in contempt but now stretched in a full sneering smirk.

“Why?” he lolled his head on the side locking his eyes with Jim’s grim ones. “The genius Iron smartass couldn’t figure?” sarcasm vibrated his voice.

Tony was watching behind the one-way mirror with his arms folded. His eyes were sharp under the angry furrow of his brow and his lips were twitching nervously. Bruce had told him with details the procedure Crane was following in every session and he with Leslie had located the exact spots Crane penetrated his friend’s skull. And Lucius had extracted from the tools the evil doctor used the substances and then isolated and identified them: they were common psychotropic drugs, artificial neurotransmitters mimicking the natural ones and some unknown substances.

They consulted Leslie’s neurologists and the legendary Professor Hugo Strange who was a master in human psychology and function of the human brain. The man was inapproachable and unwilling to meet them at first but as soon as he learnt that it was about Bruce Wayne and some weird things Crane did to his brain, he agreed to meet them immediately and was very cooperative even friendly – well, in his own way...

Despite the fact he was a professor at King George’s college in London his interest was such that he offered to examine Bruce himself and Leslie had to explain to him that Crane’s “treatment” to Bruce was kept secret from the public and that the youth was too hesitant to trust psychiatrists after his traumatic experience with Crane.

Well, to be honest, Tony didn’t blame Bruce. He was watching the professor sunk in his big, Victorian type armchair in Strange’s office and the man might be the world’s top psychiatrist but Tony definitely would not want to be treated by him. He was Ironman and, well, he wasn’t afraid of anything and certainly not this weird man but he felt his spine freeze thinking his patients…or students – he was happy he hadn’t chosen psychiatry for his studies because as a genius he’d have accepted only the best professor and with Tony’s…extravagant history Strange would certainly have sent him to the loony bin...

Anyway, Strange told them with more details what Tony had figured without being a psychiatrist: that Crane had tried to cause a major turbulence in Bruce’s memory playing with the encephalic centers of memory and the neurotransmitters that define the brain’s function. Tony had asked him whether this had damaged Bruce’s stored memories and Strange turned his eyes on him benevolently but…well, Tony would have preferred it without any eye contact.

“I wouldn’t assume that Dr. Crane’s target was to erase Mr. Wayne’s episodic memory in its semantics; based on the list of substances you found in the tools Dr. Crane used and the geography of his insertions, I’d be certain to say that he targeted the emotional frame of these memories which combined with the simultaneous intervention to the centers where the semantic content is stored would have led to alienating Mr. Wayne’s memories either giving to them the aspects Dr. Crane and the people who hired him wanted or to a decapacitating confusion making the object – that is Mr. Wayne – extremely vulnerable to these people’s manipulation. Especially, taking account Mr. Wayne’s troubled past, this horrid confusion concerning the major events of his life would have
made him gullible to the people around him for a solid version of his life. Consider, Mr. Stark” Tony didn’t like the sound of his name in this person’s mouth and that made more intense his aversion whenever Strange uttered Bruce’s name.

Strange cleared his throat, as if he had read Tony’s thoughts, though the billionaire had kept his eyes blank.

“Consider, Mr. Stark that Mr. Wayne’s personality isn’t the most solid of personalities since at the crucial period for the built of a healthy personality he experienced traumatizing events and hideous abuse” this time Tony with his fingers knitted in front of his tense face didn’t care to keep down his eyebrow from jerking upwards in sarcasm: Bruce’s personality not solid? He didn’t know a person with a stronger personality than his friend’s… “And given” the doctor’s voice was indifferent though the shadow of a smirk fell on his face “that at 26 years of age…”

“You know Bruce’s age?” Tony used his ‘studies’ with Bruce’s skill to hide his dislike for Strange’s knowledge.

The professor smiled innocently but Tony saw Leslie frowning.

“Who doesn’t, my dear Mr. Stark? With all this hype? Well, as I was saying, Bruce’s personality in this stage would have easily undergone some small but crucial changes with the ingenious ministrations of Dr. Crane turning your friend to whatever was dictated by his kidnappers.”

Now the bulky doctor knitted his fingers leaning towards his two guests. And Tony hated the fact Strange insisted on praising Crane even indirectly.

“All in all, you and Mr. Wayne” Tony understood that Strange realized that his use of Bruce’s first name was a slip revealing his weird interest to the youth so he returned to the use of the surname “are lucky that Dr. Crane’s work stopped at its initial stages.”

“Dr. Strange, do you believe that Crane’s treatment though short may have a lingering effect on Bruce?” Leslie asked.

The doctor, whose eyes were like that golden android’s in Star Wars, - Tony smirked inside -, looked Leslie in the eyes and Tony admired her even more for not shuddering.

“I’m afraid, Dr. Thompkins, that I can’t answer that; you see, the procedure Dr. Crane applied is pioneering.”

Tony furious leaned towards Strange and pierced him with his dead serious eyes.

“Pioneering?” his eyebrows shot upwards. “Nanotechnology is pioneering; Wayne-Stark bionic body parts are pioneering; CERN project is pioneering. What that lunatic did was just plain sick, hideous, disgusting, cruel perversity!” he shook his head for the professor’s hidden acceptance to Crane’s methods – no wonder, Crane was his student at Harvard before Strange left US for Britain.

But Dr. Strange smiled appeasingly.

“Believe me, Mr. Stark: I do understand your loathing” Tony snorted “using the term ‘pioneering’ doesn’t mean I approve of this. What I wanted to underline is that there is no precedent of such procedure for us to make assumptions as to whether there will be a lingering effect or not; and if there is such lingering effect, about its development, the weight and the quality. Mr. Wayne is the one and only person who underwent such ministrations so we can only observe him” he turned his odd eyes to Leslie. “I expect that you take daily samples from Mr. Wayne’s cerebrospinal fluid and observe his brain’s activity.”
Tony tilted his head: well, that wasn’t so easy since Bruce as soon as reached the clinic left to save some children and almost ended up dead and now was under Superman’s Fortress’ ‘treatment’. That Fortress had saved his friend so Tony trusted that Bruce’s brain was also in good hands.

Leslie nodded without of course giving any details. Strange answered with a condescending grin which fought to hide his haughtiness.

“Of course, I could assume Mr. Wayne’s observation and psychological treatment even if that means coming to Gotham, since Bruce’s physical state doesn’t permit traveling.”

Tony wanted to kick, his entire existence shouting: IN YOUR DREAMS, PAL! Yet he wanted to keep appearances.

“We wouldn’t want you to leave your admirable academic career” he smiled.

“Hardly, Mr. Stark: United States is not so distant especially in the era of air transportation – as you know better than me. But even if it required stop teaching, I’d gladly do that. I love challenges and Gotham is every mental health professional’s dream.”

Tony cocked a sarcastic eyebrow.

“Try nightmare!”

Leslie sent him a scolding glare and turned to Strange.

“We surely appreciate your interest and kind offer, Dr. Strange” Tony rolled his eyes “but in this stage Bruce isn’t in a position to accept an…unfamiliar person’s close presence” especially his, Tony thought. “At the moment, I think that his loved ones’ observation would be more useful” Tony discerned a shadow in the doctor’s eyes; “and we’d be grateful if you could grant us again with your precious advice in case we notice anything odd or worrying…”

Dr. Strange smiled again to Leslie.

“Of course, my dear; I’ll give you my personal numbers and email to communicate with me for everything you want. However, I think that persuading Dr. Crane to reveal everything considering his treatment will be very helpful. Not that if I was granted the opportunity I wouldn’t decipher his doings…” he raised an eyebrow.

“Thank you for everything, Dr. Strange” Leslie said and as soon as she took his card followed Tony who hastily moved to the door.

“Mr. Stark” Dr. Strange stood up and smiled to the young man’s tense face “you must not misunderstand my avid interest in your friend. Bruce Wayne is the Holy Grail of every psychiatrist: he watched his parents being murdered, he lived almost his entire life under the cruel enslavement of his parents’ murderer suffering every kind of abuse there is; however, against all odds the youth not only managed to keep his sanity but also to regain his father’s company eliminating the hard competition” Strange gave a crook smile “it seems that everyone who tries to threaten him ends up in ruins… And to culminate all these, your friend is developing impressing entrepreneurial initiatives. And that’s incredible.”

Tony crossed his arms: imagine his reaction if he knew about Bruce’s other activities. He cocked an eyebrow.

“I know that: it was you who said that Bruce’s personality isn’t solid…” he stressed every word and the doctor pressed his lips for his inconsistency.
“An admirable, dynamic personality can have rickety foundations.”

The billionaire jerked his head proudly and clenched his teeth.

“Not Bruce!” he spat and stormed out of the room.

“The subject matter is that Bruce is for a scientist of the human mind and behavior a dream project. You’re a scientist, too, Mr. Stark: you can understand the eagerness of a scientist to study such a remarkable, one of a kind specimen.”

Tony crossed his arms and shook his head squinting at the man.

“Maybe dissecting his brain?” he asked sarcastic.

Dr. Strange laughed and Tony frowned.

“That isn’t necessary, Mr. Stark. Imagine the answers we would have taken by studying Bruce: his defense mechanisms, his cognitive processing, his reasoning, his emotional brain’s function, his subconscious…”

The bizarre doctor seemed lost in his thoughts and Leslie exchanged outrageous glances with Tony.

“We could have helped thousands of people facing the same situations with Bruce or trained our soldiers to withstand every kind of torture.”

Tony clenched his teeth.

“Or find ways to smash a human being’s resistance and personality!”

Tony was boiling even when they left Dr. Strange’s office in the College.

“I feel like I have stripped Bruce bare naked in front of this perv’s eyes!” he growled to Leslie and she stopped walking abruptly.

He could see in her eyes that she was unsettled too yet that woman had nerves of steel and composure that could compete with Alfred’s or Bruce’s.

“Tony, Dr. Strange might be…strange” she said calmly “but don’t forget that he isn’t a rapist but a psychiatrist.”

He cocked an eyebrow and nodded.

“Yeah! A mind rapist! You heard him, Leslie!” he stretched his hand. “And we gave all this info about what Bruce was been through for what? He just repeated the things we already knew and nothing more. Lucius and I will find everything that madman did to Bruce’s brain. We shouldn’t have come here and given him those data!” he slapped his thigh and kicked the air.

Leslie patted his back soothingly.

“Tony, your overprotectiveness leads you to paranoia: we just sought one opinion more and the data we gave him aren’t so crucial.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“He is the paranoid, not me! And he looked like the shark who tasted the blood of a delicious pray…” his eyes became slits. “Don’t tell me you intend to send him any new feedback…” his voice
was almost threatening and Leslie’s eyes got angry.

“Of course not” she answered scornful “though I don’t share your fears…” she seemed to be thinking hard “…entirely” she added and he realized that Leslie indeed didn’t trust the odd doctor.

“This is police investigation” Jim’s indifferent answer to his insult made the former doctor smirk.

Crane loll’d his head to the side.

“So…Stark isn’t watching us from the one-way mirror eager to take answers to save his puppy friend?” he cocked a smug eyebrow. “He brags around in his silly tin suit pretending the genius when in fact he is another ignorant, incompetent idiot like the doctors that replaced me here…” he chortled.

Tony hardly restrained himself from smashing the window and surge at him not for his insults against him nor for his arrogance but because he tortured Bruce and now let with that “save his puppy” the threat looming over his friend. However if he attacked he’d give him the satisfaction of being confirmed.

Jim stretched on the chair’s back and regarded him with squinted eyes.

“What makes you think that someone like him will waste his time watching the interrogation of the man who dragged his friend and conducted illegal experiments on him when he is deciphering what exactly you did to Mr. Wayne. To be honest” he shook his head “I wouldn’t allow Mr. Stark near you… The look on his face the last time I met him told me very clear that he found out what you did and wants nothing more than show you his opinion about that.”

Tony smirked satisfied for Jim’s collected answer and the reaction it provoked from Crane. The lean doctor flinched recollecting his encounter with Ironman in the base they were holding Bruce. However something shook Crane out of his cowardice and he smiled confidently.

“Then if he has already found out what are you doing here?” he inquired smugly, his eyes glistening with sneer.

Jim leaned towards Crane, putting his hands on the table between them. His solemn eyes were sincere when his eyebrows arched.

“Saving your ass. Giving you a last chance to confess everything about the experiment you did on Mr. Wayne, so your allegation that you were also a prisoner of the League of Shadows stands. If you cooperate and give every detail of what these people forced you to do” he moved his eyebrows suggestively “then the DA will be persuaded that you weren’t their accomplish or wanted to put Mr. Wayne through illegal experimentation and you’ll be treated with leniency.”

*Leniency my ass!* Tony jerked his head and pouted. He knew that this man enjoyed putting Bruce through that torture.

A nasty crook half smile carved Crane’s pale face and he arched his eyebrows arrogantly.

“Commissioner, do you really consider yourself smarter than me?”

Jim narrowed his eyes.

“What your…leniency will be? Transfer to another sector of this loony bin? C’me on, I know that you won’t get me out of here even if I told you everything – inferior people like all of you are afraid of my genius. And frankly, even in here I enjoy your fear.”
Jim stared at the man as if pitying him and Crane jerked towards him like an attacking snake.

“These idiots really captured me and asked me to apply my genius to that brat: they had even the audacity to use threats as if they could cause fear to the master of fear!” Jim arched his eyebrows emptying his eyes from his emotions. “Yet I... Ugh! I spit on your” he shook his head “leniency!” he hissed. “I did what I did to that petty thing gladly, with my free choice because if I didn’t want I’d have fooled those jerks using innocent, harmless substances and not the real thing.”

He squinted his eyes in malice.

“But I wanted. I wanted to experiment with that lucky bastard’s brain! I wanted to extract my power over him, to show him my superiority! I wanted to make him pain physically and emotionally and cry revealing at last how scared and ridiculous he is... and how worthless his mind is compared with mine!” he opened his mouth and delayed speaking showing off his real satisfaction “and I enjoyed every moment of his yielding to my ministrations: his childish ravings, his moans, his sobs, his pleadings…” he shook his head. “There’s nothing better than watching a mind disintegrating…”

Jim’s blank stare hid his disgust and aversion for the man but Tony from the other side of the window clenched his fist and jaw.

“But those stupid super heroes came before I managed to finish my brilliant work... Never mind... Even from this madhouse I enjoy your dread for the impact of my ministrations on that worthless brain. And this satisfaction is more important than any bargain you can offer me for saving the brat’s mind.”

Jim stood having enough of this shit.

“Have it your way” he spat and turned to leave. “After all, Mr. Wayne is tougher than your tricks.”

Tony frowned seeing the smirk on Crane’s face.

“Exactly, Commissioner” he said slyly. “He manifested extraordinary resistance to my fear toxin and other treatment...like...a hard trained man or a man of uncommon skills.”

Jim didn’t turn but had stopped on his heels and Crane though couldn’t see his face smiled certain that the commissioner listened interested.

“Even under my toxin’s influence he talked to me calmly and too clever for what someone would have expected from a victim like him.”

Tony’s nostrils flared; he could see that Jim was intrigued. Damn!

“You’re impressed” Jim turned to Crane.

The doctor shook his head laughing.

“No, not impressed...I’d have broken his mind if I had few days more. Just curious...” he knitted his eyebrows. “As you – I mean, the police – should be: why a powerful crime organization shows such zeal to capture a poor little victim” Tony’s eyes were still, stabbing the evil doctor.

Jim arched his eyebrows.

“What else? Ransom and leverage on Tony Stark.”

Crane cackled and shook his head in contempt.
“Oh! Commissioner! I believed you slightly smarter!” Jim’s brow creased. “The money they spent to organize Wayne’s abduction makes the ransom theory ridiculous. Leverage on the Iron Buffoon is a probability… BUT” his eyes flashed wickedly “the head of the organization was obsessed with getting back Wayne: she claimed that he was her property AND she was insistent on controlling his mind – she spent a small fortune to provide me the means to shatter and mend Wayne’s mind structures according to her wishes.”

Crane protruded his lower lip.

“Isn’t that odd? Shouldn’t that have intrigued the Police?”

Tony’s eyes widened: that scum!

Jim regarded Crane indifferent.

“She shared the same sick mind as you, Crane; Bruce Wayne’s strength and bravery drew the attention and the envy of deranged minds of villains such as you so who’s better ally in her insanity than you” he cocked his eyebrows, his eyes keeping their nonchalant and slightly indifferent hue. “So, as Mr. Stark has already figured out, your “treatment” aimed to control Mr. Wayne’s remarkable brain by – I’m using your terms – “shattering and mending his mind’s structures.” Crane’s face paled and his smirk vanished. “Thank you, Crane: you might not be cooperative but still you helped us a lot!”

The Commissioner’s eyes flashed under his arched eyebrows and Tony’s face beamed from satisfaction for Crane’s shitty expression. The billionaire watched Jim leaving the room, calling to the orderlies to take Crane.

Tony liked Jim’s response that dismissed Crane’s sly remarks that aimed to create suspicions about Bruce’s true character. However, he rubbed his chin deep in thought: Jim was a very clever man.

The door to the side room from where Tony was watching opened and Jim entered. His face was as calm and benevolent as ever.

“Mr. Stark, I don’t know if what you heard was of any significance…” he shrugged. “Crane is deep in his insanity and arrogance so I doubt we can get any more information than we did.”

Tony nodded.

“It was important, Jim: you drove him to admit and affirm our assumptions. To tell you the truth, I didn’t count much on his info to decipher what he did and the repercussions. And I think that he tries to terrorize us hinting that his very short treatment will have detrimental effects – of course, Bruce faces some difficulties but not what Crane implied.”

Jim pressed his lips.

“I’m glad to hear it, Mr. Stark; Mr. Wayne doesn’t deserve to suffer anymore.”

Tony lowered his eyes and nodded grinning at the man.

“Call me Tony, Jim” he said. “And thank you for everything you did.”

Jim shook his head and made a dismissive gesture.

“I only did my job, Tony…”
“Much more than this, Jim: much more…” he stretched his hand to a handshake that felt one of the few truly important handshakes of his life.

Jim left and Tony sighed, his mind on his duties: unfortunately, S.H.I.E.L.D.’s reshaping, the deciphering of Crane’s shit and the built of a new “spine” for Bruce thwarted him from being with his slowly and painfully recovering friend.

“Alfred will be furious, huh? Then I must cover my tracks…” Clark answered with a mischievous half smile as he came out of the sea, the water resistance crushed from his steel legs.

Hero ran to them meowing and rubbing to Clark’s ankles, sending stares upwards to Bruce who quirked an eyebrow to his lover.

“I hope that doesn’t mean you’ll dispose of my body…” he chuckled.

Clark’s eyes darted playfully to Bruce’s naked body in his arms and sighed.

“Believe me, Bruce” his eyes met with the younger man’s “your body is my whole world” he shook his head “having you in my arms is my greatest feat so I don’t think that disposing of it will ever pass my mind…”

Bruce’s eyes were solemn but then wanting to ease the mood snorted.

“Then you’re busted, buster!”

Clark mouthed the younger man’s lips to ‘punish’ him and Bruce moaned deepening the kiss, caressing his jaw. Clark felt his spine going numb by these fingers and without unlocking their lips kneeled on the spot where he had let their clothes. He placed Bruce carefully on his red cape, the kitten catching up with them rubbing on his master’s hand to get his attention and caress.

“Actually, I was thinking milder ways to…be spared from Alfred’s fury and save you from a cold…” Clark lolled his head on the side.

Bruce looked at Hero, petting him.

“Really now? And what’s that?” he inquired indifferently without looking at him.

Clark shrugged.

“Drying you…”

Bruce turned to him surprised and Clark laughing blew mild hot air to his face causing Bruce’s eyes to close and then began blowing all over the human’s body savoring the way Bruce’s closed eyelids trembled enjoying the feeling that made his mind paralyze. Clark smirked and blew extra tenderly brushing with the air the younger man’s left nipple. Bruce’s upper torso convulsed by the electric current that spread goose bumps to his healthy body, so Clark did the same with the right nipple smiling when the fair hair on the human’s breast erected.

Bruce’s fingers dag in the sand when the hot air lowered to his navel, a grunt accompanying a new violent squirm that made him lose his balance although seated.

Clark hastened to wrap him in his strong arms and their eyes locked. Bruce’s eyes were a bit upset for losing his balance but immediately found again his calm though his heart gave another kick. He
touched Clark’s lips that were a bit pressed; it was easy for him to figure that the Man of Steel felt guilty thinking that he had overdone it again.

So Bruce smiled happily.

“You’re the best blow dryer of the market” he laughed “and the most economical…”

Bruce’s eyes were sparkling and Clark knew that it was for his sake and he couldn’t resist: his lips dived in Bruce’s soft cheek, his nose relishing as well the velvet feeling of the wet cheek.

“I hope that doesn’t mean that I’m cheap…” he chuckled and Bruce closed his eyes as Clark’s hot, strong lips trailed his neck nibbling.

The younger man cupped Clark’s slightly square jaw and looked him in the eyes, careful to hide his bitterness for the absence of any arousal to his half body.

“I thought you were drying me?” he cocked an eyebrow.

Clark narrowed his eyes smugly.

“Maybe I prefer you wet…” he whispered in a husky voice.

Bruce bit his nose teasingly.

“Don’t make promises you can’t hold, naughty boy…”

Clark’s bulgy, stony breasts were brushing his aroused from the air nipples and intensified Bruce’s torture from the contact with this perfect flesh. His hips were already above Bruce’s unresponsive pelvis and he was ready to use his mental control to make his injured body respond appropriately raising to rub and welcome Clark’s body but the Man of Steel understanding, released Bruce’s hips and kneeled on the sand keeping some distance.

He licked his lips uncomfortably and kissed Bruce’s forehead because the human’s lips were pressed. There was no chance he’ll force his Star exhaust his body to satisfy Superman’s whims.

“I must save my hide from Alfred…” he huffed and resumed his blow drying to the lower half of Bruce’s body that didn’t “suffer” from his ministrations since it was unable to feel.

Bruce frustrated turned to his kitten that was looking at him sympathetically. A grim fog captured his mind however he didn’t want to form the thought and began wearing his T-shirt and the cardigan the same time Clark was drying the “dead” half of his body which he could acknowledge only through vision and not sense.

Clark stretched softly Bruce’s legs that the constant machine training helped them keep their fine shape despite the still deep scars, the burns and the missing particles of flesh.

When the upper level of the factory collapsed, the metallic parts had developed such a high temperature that they were red… Some of them pierced Bruce’s armor and either stabbed his legs or caused him serious burns…

Clark’s body shuddered violently as his hand on its own accord brushed a spot in Bruce’s thigh that carried both the mark of being pierced by a pipe and a nasty third degree large burn. He continued blowing gently not wanting for Bruce to understand his thoughts but his guts were clenched imagining the pain – no, he couldn’t even imagine…
“It didn’t pain that much” Bruce answered nonchalant and Clark choked with his own air causing a beautiful smile on the human’s face. “The damage to the sensory neurons was almost simultaneous with the crash.”

*Almost...* Clark thought bitterly because he knew that this “almost” probably meant much time in excruciating pain which his brave Star dismissed as not important.

He was ready to resume his work when he took in Bruce’s efforts to zip his cardigan: his right arm always faced difficulties with fine movements but now he couldn’t hide it. His both arms were badly broken and though they were mended quite fast due to the Fortress’ med and the hypodermic Kryptonian casts allowed Bruce a wide range of movements plus training, still the fine motor skills needed time.

Clark pretended not seeing not wanting to worsen things for Bruce but he noticed that the younger man simply abandoned the effort, petting Hero instead: thank you, Hero! Clark thought and opened Bruce’s thighs to dry the flesh inside, so embarrassed that his hands shook.

He sighed the air knowing that Bruce couldn’t enjoy the feeling; Clark knew the few healthy neurons and was avoiding them not wanting to stimulate them... Though Bruce’s flesh looked delicious and made him replay the moments of their first time in the greenhouse when Bruce’s beautiful body trembled from pleasure glued on his burning flesh. Clark’s body shuddered reliving the sensations Bruce’s writhing brought to him.

Damn you Joker! The evil bastard managed to take from them what he failed to snatch violently for himself... He pressed his eyes shut sending tender air to Bruce’s wet pelvis; he wanted for the younger man to think that he was only enjoying the moment and not boiling in hatred for the responsible for Bruce’s suffering.

Clark was so easy to read... Bruce thought as he was stroking absently his kitten. He could feel Superman’s emotions and figure his thoughts; he could read his eyes even when the Man of Steel tried to act because his eyes were so clear that he couldn’t fog them even if he tried. He felt a knot in his stomach: Bruce was used to cause pity to others: actually, while in Falcone’s clutches he struggled to be pitied but now... he hated it although enabled him to keep his secret safe.

But Clark’s pity though not ill mannered was torment and made him agonize and sweat out to be whole again. He loved the man so much that wasn’t angry... no... how could he be angry with Clark for feeling sorry? He knew that it was his deep love that made him so sad.

He cupped Clark’s hand as he was ready to put on him his black boxers; he smiled and saw Clark’s eyes taking new life.

“I can do that: I need some privacy, thank you very much!” he chuckled and Clark took a flaming red color so Bruce couldn’t do anything else than kissing him. No, it wasn’t pity... it was... sorrow and frustration because he was sure that Clark was as distressed as he for that disability. But Clark was happy too for saving him.

Clark scratched his hair embarrassed and instead began drying Bruce’s locks, combing them with his fingers relishing the softness. And then the distant echo of the village’s church bell reached them towering the sound of the waves and Clark felt like waking from a bad dream: he had Bruce alive in his arms, breathing, speaking, smiling, kissing him. And he could caress his beautiful body, comb his hair, smell his enchanting perfume; goggle at his eyes willingly drowning in their seas...

How ungrateful he was! Bruce was a miracle in flesh and blood and against all odds, this miracle survived and survived to gift him his love. So Clark berated and scowled at himself.
“He is still here; with you…you were given the greatest present of all: he almost died and then came back to you… Alive!”

His Ma’s eyes were sparkling that night seeing his sadness. It was ten days after Bruce woke from the coma and they went to Gotham for Commissioner Gordon to take his testimony. Clark was happy all these days his Star came back to him and was flying – well, he always could fly but his heart’s flying was something new; something that Bruce caused.

But that day, for the first time he registered Bruce’s paralysis, the fact that this dynamic human being, the full of energy, the never stopping youth couldn’t stand on his feet. Suddenly, the hundreds of cracks in Bruce’s bones flashed menacingly sneering at him; the energy casts uniting the many little pieces of his bones darkening his eyes.

And then the worst had happened: few minutes after Jim left and they were enjoying Alfred’s infamous secret tea, Clark felt it though Bruce tried to hide it: pain slowly flooding Bruce’s brain… And before he even formed the thought that they were too hasty to take Bruce out of the Fortress, Clark’s eyes bulged seeing Bruce slipping from the armchair and crushing to the floor, writhing from thousands different centers of pain in his upper torso because his legs were stubbornly dead.

The Man of Steel was paralyzed and Alfred, Leslie and Selina made it first to Bruce who was gritting his teeth to not groan but his face was pale and sweaty; his eyes tearful.

Leslie had painkillers and even sedatives with her but she was afraid to combine them with whatever alien medicine he was on. And then Clark had clenched his jaw realizing his inertia; rushed to Bruce, took him in his arms and brought him back at the safety of the Fortress. He was unconscious when they were there and Clark with his heart stopped from agony laid him gently on the medical bay…

From then Clark was morose, sad – of course not in front of Bruce but he couldn’t hide from his Ma.

“Imagine your life without him…The moments you lived together scratching your insides, stabbing you with the cruel certainty that you won’t see him again and won’t share your days, your petty humdrum routine…” she whispered and he jerked as if a Kryptonite knife stabbed him, his stare leaving the clear, starry night of Smallville to look panicked at his Ma.

Martha gave a tight lips smile and nodded.

“I know it’s not easy, honey; I know you’re burning with his pain, his agony twisting your guts…” she inhaled deeply “but he is here, close to you and your touch can offer him comfort; your smile can erase every hopelessness and give him strength and courage to fight…”

Clark felt tears running his flushed cheeks.

“He is braver and stronger than me, Ma…”

She brushed his upper arm sighing and Clark could see her melancholy remembering Jonathan, his father.

“With your love his bravery and strength multiplies… Together you can win every battle… This hardship will galvanize your bond and will be soon a memory: a nightmare that will make the rest of your life more beautiful. Remember, baby: he was almost dead and feeling your love fought and came back to be with you…to defeat every pain and disability with you.”

Clark nodded, feeling terrible for his cowardice.
“My Star almost settled to the sky among the other stars – the brightest of them all” he pressed his lips. “You know, Ma: he loves the sky…” he sighed. “And then took pity on me and came back…”

Martha smiled.

“And I’m stupid, Ma!” he stood from the staircase’s head step in the wooden porch and hugged Martha. “Bruce is a miracle! And that miracle is beside me and… and I… I can still hear his strong heartbeat, his breath, smell his body’s aroma…and all these could have been lost…Bruce could have been dead… My God! And he is only 26!”

The small tombstone beside the ones of Martha and Thomas Wayne terrified his mind eyes. And then he saw again himself blasting the cursed thing.

“And he’ll live many many many years!” he laughed. “With me! And he’ll walk again! I’m the luckiest man of the universe…” he mumbled.

Martha nodded and smiled with his happiness, her eyes having the deepest knowledge of someone who had lost that gift: her life’s love.

Clark hugged Bruce as tight as he could and searched his delicious lips, kissing and savoring. Only to realize that Bruce was… fast asleep. Clark chuckled.

“That means I’m boring? Huh, Star?”

Hero meowed as if nodding and Clark mock glared at him.

“Traitor! Our Bruce is just exhausted… And I entrusted you into not letting him exhaust himself…” the kitten rubbed his head on Bruce’s loose palm and purred at Clark as if apologizing.

Clark shook his head amused.

“You’re a seducer, little one…” he caressed Bruce’s dry, silken locks “we must return” his eyes regarded the sky that had taken a dark blue color, only a narrow lane of bright pink-red reminding that the sun was rising to the other hemisphere… “Alfred would be furious not to mention worried sick…”

Bruce had dressed the bottom half of his body before falling asleep.

“Hero, Bruce won’t be able to hold you so I’ll put you inside his cardigan and you will be a nice kitten and not move, okay?”

The kitten meowed and Clark took it as “yes”. He placed carefully Bruce on the soft sand and in a fraction of the second got dressed, tossed the empty food container to a bin and returned to Bruce. He zipped his cardigan and put Hero inside securing him by raising more the zipper.

Clark lifted Bruce in bridal style and his eyes were lost in his relaxed features, their beauty enhanced by sleep’s hue. Then he stared at Hero safely nestled in Bruce’s chest so calm that it was obvious he was enjoying it.

“I’m jealous, buddy!” he cocked an eyebrow and took off.

He tilted his head above Bruce’s face that was snuggled on the crook of his neck; Clark smiled touched.

“You like that, huh, Star? Sleeping in my arms…” he settled Bruce deeper in his chest.
And then the gratitude for having Bruce alive in his arms flooded him and the Man of Steel remembered something they were discussing before.

“I’ve killed, Bruce…” he whispered with pressed lips what he hadn’t the courage to admit then.

But then he felt hot, soft air brushing his neck.

“No, you didn’t…” Bruce answered him although he was fast asleep.
“Let’s talk about your life before the Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, Jack. You were referred there by the Boston police Department, which was the reason?”

Joker sat sprawled on the floor with his back touching his bed; there wasn’t any makeup on his face and his scars were covered with gauzes which annoyed him more than everything.

His psychiatrist was sat at a chair opposite him, a small journalistic recorder in the table taping everything they were saying; she was watching him with her cute honey colored eyes filled with honest interest – well, “ho-nest”, Joker smirked, as they were taught from the school: accept the patient-client as it is and show empathy keeping at the same time a safe distance so you can develop an impartial view of the facts in order to help him…

“Hehehe!” his cackle shook the space between them and Joker observed that his young therapist didn’t flinch just continued staring at him.

Joker could give that to her since there was no bars between them. He raised an eyebrow: of course, that scum, Stark, had did something devious and whenever he made a move to attack anyone he was knocked out without anyone needing to touch him. However, even if his attack was unsuccessful the first time the elegant psychiatrist stepped alone to his cell and he was out for 24 hours, still anyone else would have been unwilling to be again in the same space with the tiger.

At least, his “therapist” was pretty with her long, blond hair that was always tied in a ponytail, her oval glasses and the gym pants she wore under her white doctor robe. Every time she entered his cell with confidence that made Joker cock an eyebrow: he “fished” one of the orderlies and learnt that Dr. Quinzel had great experience with criminals and at the present she was at her third doctorate, this time on Criminology.

And he had felt so flattered…He was laughing with hysterics for hours thinking that he was going to be the subject of such a scientific paper, that he will help science’s progress. W-O-W!

“You’re toooooo young to be the Heeead of this fine estam-lishment” he squinted his eyes regarding her behind his dirty blond curls.

Harleen pushed the rim of her glasses and looked at her patient.

“What do you think about that?”

Joker rolled his eyes: those shrinks were so easy to predict: you meet one, you know all of them… And he had met so many psycho-something to get a doctoral degree on… shrink-o-logy. Hehe!

“No-thing, su-sugar…” he quirked an eyebrow and shook his head. “Oh! There’re ssssooo many delicious things iiin my mind keeping myyyy palm buuuussy…” he leaned towards her with his eyes stabbing her mischievously. “You’re a doctor – you know how the energetic men are wheeeen in the joint and a-way from their wife…” he waved his hand. “I can speak open-ly, huh?”

His cunning eyes caught the light pink in her lean cheeks when he mentioned his palm but she looked at him unfazed.

“Of course, Jack.”

He turned his eyes to the ceiling frustrated by the constant use of that name and Harleen hardly
covered her surprise when his angry eyes nailed her.

“Stop calling me THAT!” he hissed.

The woman arched an eyebrow.

“But this is your name.”

Joker lifted his head and furrowed his lips making his scars quite obvious despite the gauzes.

“I’m the Joker – that’s my name, you stupid broad!”

But the woman remained unfazed.

“If you tell me your surname, I’d use that adding ‘Mister’.”

Joker huffed and then giggled: so she was smart…like Bru-cey. He shook his head: no, Bru-cey was way smarter than everyone else…A sly half smile carved his face and he was lost for a minute: that little brat had fooled everyone except than him.

Dr. Quinzel seeing that her patient was absorbed in something else cleared her throat.

“Well, Jack?” maybe he was hallucinating and she wanted to drive him out of that. “What’s your surname?”

He looked at her pouting.

“J-O-K-E-R.”

“Is this your surname?” Dr. Quinzel inquired calm.

Joker laughed and shook his head pointing with his index at her.

“You’re same age as Crane soooo no sur-prise you took his place: same age, same loony bin, same…” he said slyly, his eyes with a jeering glint. “No offense for the comparison…”

“I see you avoid answering my question.”

Joker arched an eyebrow and cackled. When his giggling fit stopped he lolled his head to the side and regarded the psychiatrist with narrowed eyes.

“Surnames are overrated. The greatest people in history didn’t have a sur-name: Nero, Caligula, Jokey…”

“Who is Jokey?”

Joker shrugged a shoulder and flapped his eyelashes to Dr. Quinzel with self-pride.

“My dick: he is great, too…HEHEHEHEHAHA!”

The young psychiatrist stared at him poised.

“This is a common joke you can hear from every stand-up comedian” she commented indifferently.

And Joker would have killed her instantly if he didn’t know that Stark’s tricks would knock him out only with a fraction of aggressive movement. Also, he loved games and didn’t end them prematurely.
He sobered and leaned his torso towards her, his hands dropped between his legs.

“What a surname can offer? Huh?” he said as if conspiring. “What his surname offered to my Bru-cey?” he saw Dr. Quinzel draw some air. “Because of his sur-name Bru-c ey was kidnapped in a tender age aannd ‘cause of that name watched his parents murdered aaand was kept alive to be bruuuuutally humi-liated aaand ab-used. Cause Falcon-i hated his sur-name aaand wanted to pu-nish him for it.” He inhaled deeply “Phew! Good thing the hot stuff won’t have to worry about that anymore…”

Dr. Quinzel nodded: and here we go again with his obsession…

“What’s it ob-vious?” she inquired patiently.

Joker gave a broad Cheshire smile and opened his arms in the air.

“Isn’t it ob-vious?” he licked his lips. “He isn’t the Way-ne heir anymore buuuuut the Joker’s spouse.”

“You know that the…marriage you conducted isn’t legit.”

Joker snorted and rolled his head.

“It’s legit for MEEEE! And that’s what counts!” he rattled his teeth. “Iiif my Bru-c ey iiis at all…” he mumbled staring at his hands: Dent before leaving told him that Batman was alive and implied that Bruce was alright yet as the time went by and Batman’s appearances were obscure and Brucey’s nonexistent, Joker got antsy.

Quinzel leaned towards him interested.

“…is at all?”

Joker was staring at her with blank eyes not speaking and Harleen felt like being X-Rayed. Since he didn’t want to elaborate on what he meant she decided to take the initiative.

“What is it that draws you to Bruce Wayne?”

But Joker’s mind was elsewhere and other things were occupying his spinning brain.

“The last time I saw Bru-c ey” he said with unfocused eyes “it was in a video aaand he was wrapped in a red cape – baaaaare naked – aaand held by that Super-stalion in a way I didn’t like at all” his eyes suddenly flashed like he was ready to kill. “I’m the pos-sessive type, you know…”

“This is the reason you asked for Bruce Wayne that night you kidnapped the children from the Haven?” Joker hadn’t answered any of the questions police had made him after his arrest; actually, the man was almost catatonic the first hours because he learnt that the factory had collapsed with Batman possibly still inside. Of course, they didn’t find any body yet Joker didn’t trust that fox, Gordon: maybe he just hid the fact to prevent the criminals rioting.

Joker raised his sharp eyes on her amused.

“You’re the gossip type, huh?” he scratched his nose. “No, I hadn’t seen that fucking video then: I saw it here. Aaaand I didn’t ask only for Bru-c ey…”

Harleen narrowed her eyes interested.

“Exactly. You asked for Batman as well; is Batman getting Bruce’s place?”
On that Joker erupted in hard, loud laughter; his body was convulsing from the giggles and soon he was literally rolling on the floor from laughter.

Dr. Quinzel frowned but Joker couldn’t stop laughing: *Batman getting Bruce’s place…* Nobody could suspect what he was almost sure of… The reason why he asked for both of them aware that he’d get only the one… The reason why he had teeth biting his guts all this time after his jerk goon blew the fucking factory – he would definitely kill that bastard! He stopped laughing abruptly and sat crossing his legs; he kept his head lolled to the side and regarded the psychiatrist lopsided.

“Have you seen Bru-cey from the night that fucking factory collapsed?” he asked with a low really creepy serious voice and the fact that he stopped stuttering and playing with the words intrigued Harleen. “Really seen, not just heard about his doings…”

Harleen stretched her head and heaved a resolute breath.

“You must get over your obsession for Mr. Wayne. So I won’t share any information about him.”

Joker’s eyes darkened as became narrow as slits; the blue neon hue that was lighting his cell became blood red and his legs were ready to send him on the stupid shrink tearing her long neck apart. But then a soft half smirk loosened his face: there was no reason for him to be knocked out – there were other ways…

“Sooo…” he licked his lips “youuu haven’t seen him… sooooo: either he is licking his wounds – which I could glaaaaadly do foooor him – or is cheating ME! With that stuffed red and blue turkey” he made on his forehead with his finger Superman’s trademark curl “ooooor…” on that his voice lowered to a whisper only he could hear “he died that night…” he scratched his hair uncomfortable. He had to find out.

Dr. Quinzel leaned towards him and she was ready to ask when Joker jerked his head.

“I thiiiiink that socializing with the other kiiids at the play-ground will benefit me.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Huh?” he smiled like normal fools did.

Harleen considered it: keeping Joker all the time isolated might be safe but it didn’t change anything. And Mr. Stark’s “safety measures” made it sure that her patient wouldn’t hurt anyone. Also she wanted to observe him in other environments and in his exchanges with other people in conditions where he wouldn’t be his powerful murdering self.

Joker was watching her reading her inner pondering and estimations feeling the urge to let free another giggling fit for the petty doctor’s naïve calculations. But he decided against it: he didn’t want to raise her suspicions.

“I suppose we could do that” she said blankly. “Actually, the fact you expressed the wish to be with other human beings is a positive step…”

“Ow! How nnnnNICE of me!”

“And indicates an honest desire to change.”

Joker arched both eyebrows: *or kill again…* His laugh made his body jerk but no sound came out of his mouth. He shook his head.

“Oh! I’m soooooo hard trying to beeeee a good boy again….”

But Harleen’s eyes hardened.
“However, in the sad case that you just try to fool your therapist and want to cause problems to your co-inmates, Mr. Stark has taken extra care to prevent any negative behavior” Joker turned his fingers to himself mouthing ‘me?’ with puppy eyes. “And you’ll lose your right to be out of your cell. So, let’s say that you’re in a trial stage and it’s up to you that privilege to continue.”

“Pri-va-le-ge…” Joker mumbled.

And then jumped to his legs and gave her a deep bow.

“Thank you, Dr. Harlequin!” he sang and Harleen squinted.

“What?”

Joker made a gesture as if staring at an imaginary wristwatch and pouted.

“Iiiii think that oooour time is uP!”

Harleen lolled her head to the side.

“That’s my line, Jack.”

Joker regarded her with narrowed eyes.

“You have the copy-right?” he cocked his eyebrows suggestively and made a dismissive gesture.

“Naaaah! I knew you didn’t! HEHEHEHEHEHEHE!”

Dr. Quinzel decided that imposing more time on him wouldn’t have any result; she could discern that her patient would retreat to his usual nonsense. Besides they had made quite the improvement. She rose from the chair and Joker smiled like a really good boy hiding his smirk.

“Fine, Jack. Until tomorrow, think what we talked about today” she pressed the stop button on his recorder and tossed it to her pocket.

He nodded.

“Good After-noooon, Dr. Harlequin” he said mimicking some schoolgirl.

Harleen stopped at her heels and turned her head towards him just as a part of the bars vanished creating a narrow corridor for her to exit. Joker knew that trying to run out of that gap would lead to him being knocked out so he just batted his eyelashes to her watching his therapist taking her stern expression and crossing the temporary exit.

“You too, Jack” she said and began walking.

“Tell ya som’thin’, doc” her patient twisted his mouth like the cowboys in the old westerns.

“Youuuuu don’t want to call me Jooooker an’ I get rrrrrrrreally MAD hearing how you utter that Jack; sooooo in oooorder to be…mmmm…” he rubbed his finger to his chin “in speaking terms, I’ll propose a haaaappy medium: you Harlequin, meeeeee Mr. J! Huh?” he stretched his arms beaming.

Yet Dr. Quinzel just regarded him and left without answering.

Joker undeterred sank on his bed and huffed before a full laughing fit shook him for a few minutes. He lay and tied his fingers under his head.

“Har-l-e-quin!” he said. “Nice one! Aaaand fitting! Oh! Bru-cey…” his mood darkened “only you know how to make games fascinating…What I’m going to do if you died that night ooooor if
Alfred all this time had struggled with the urge to just stand on the balcony and wait because he didn’t want to upset Miss Kyle. Yet as the sun set and the sky became darker he returned to the balcony taking Bruce’s empty chair to the living room and stayed there so to be able to watch discreetly. And then when his eager eyes discerned a flying form approaching the house he ran to the balcony exactly at the moment Superman put his feet on the glistening tiles.

The loyal butler could see Bruce safely cuddled in Superman’s strong arms. His young master’s hands were on Hero holding him in his chest but Alfred’s brow creased as his eyes adjusted to the dim last light of the sunset. Bruce’s eyes were closed!

Clark was absorbed in watching Bruce’s sleeping face when Alfred rushed there and the Man of Steel could tell that the man was really worried, his heart beating rather fast.

“He is alright, Alfred” he whispered “he is just sleeping” he tried to reassure him but Alfred immediately touched his lips to the youth’s forehead to see if he was running a fever. “His temperature is normal.”

As soon as Alfred made certain that Bruce was indeed alright, realized his “misdemeanor” and looked at Clark unsettled.

“I beg your pardon, Master Kent, for my… rush and… welcome back” he had resumed his composed demeanor yet his palm was still on Bruce’s forehead and upon realizing that he hastened to remove them to take the kitten from inside Bruce’s cardigan.

Clark smiled reassuringly to him but Hero having lost his very comfortable nest meowed and jerked in Alfred’s hands.

“Master Hero, behave…” Alfred cast a stern glance at the kitten and the animal silenced.

Clark chuckled but then the butler looked him the same way and gestured to him to come inside.

“He is just tired…” Clark tried to earn again Alfred’s liking as he stepped inside the enormous living room.

Alfred’s sympathizing but a bit disapproving eyes weren’t what Clark had expected so the young man frowned.

“Master Kent, I quite understand that both of you are very young and the love between you is flourishing so it’s entirely natural for you to…”

Clark was already hot all over his face and he couldn’t understand how Alfred managed to say these things so calm yet Clark couldn’t let him finish his phrase. He shook his head in denial.

“No, Alfred, no…you…you misunderstood…” he felt like a teen being caught naked in his boyfriend’s room – at least he hadn’t uttered ‘it’s not what you think’; he wanted to rub the sweat from his forehead but he had Bruce in his arms. “We…we didn’t do anything” he lowered his voice to a guilty whisper “I’d never touch him” well, that was a lie “I mean till he’s entirely fine… You can…you can ask Hero.”

Alfred smiled and the kitten gave his own testimony for Clark’s innocence.
“Pardon me for my haste, Master Kent” he bowed slightly his head and led the way to the spacious corner couch.

“We just had a turn…” Clark continued “you know how much Bruce likes flying…”

Alfred stopped before the dark blue couch that was made from a special mix of velvet and silk that Tony created and released softly Hero on the floor but the kitten just sat on his butt and watched. The butler took away the smaller cushions and settled the big one into creating a nice nest for Bruce; Clark noticed that a folded blanket was close.

“Master Kent, if you please…” he gestured to the couch for him to lay Bruce.

But Clark was unwilling to let go of his warm, beautiful armload; his eyes caressed Bruce’s face which was nestled trustingly in the curve of his neck. He couldn’t part with this body, lose that warm breath that tickled his neck…

“Maybe I should take him to his bedroom?” each second he could win was precious.

Alfred smiled as if reading his thoughts.

“He must eat, Master Kent; he must take his medicine” Clark shook his head; he had memorized every single pill and substance along with its composition and possible side effects. “The food he requested is cooking.”

Of course… Clark finally registered the delicious smell that discreetly hued the house. So Bruce had food preferences apart from cinnamon cookies… He made his mental note.

“He can sleep here till the dinner: Master Bruce likes sleeping here.”

Clark already knew that from the fifteen days he managed to spend here with Bruce: every single hour, every precious minute, every unique second. He sighed and lowered very slowly, very carefully his arms to lay Bruce tenderly on the sofa under Alfred’s mock stern eyes. Clark fixed Bruce’s legs and then his head on the soft pillow and hastened to make room for Alfred realizing that the man was waiting patiently with the blanket.

He couldn’t get over his embarrassment and kept ruffling his hair watching Alfred muffling softly his young master in the fluffy white velvet blanket, taking carefully his arms and putting them under the blanket. Clark thought that Bruce must be really exhausted to not wake up by now; on the other hand, he felt very lucky for witnessing this tender moment.

Suddenly, he realized that Alfred was looking at him and Clark flashed embarrassed for being caught.

“Leslie called twice during your absence.”

“You didn’t send her the report about Bruce’s vitals?” he knew from the time he spent here that Leslie while here scrutinized twice a day the data from Bruce’s condition and she continued that even when she returned to Gotham.

Alfred raised an eyebrow.

“Of course but Leslie is adamant about speaking herself with Master Bruce; she has the belief that she can estimate some things better through hearing him.”

Clark scratched his nape feeling guilty.
“If by that you mean that you’re worried, I apologize, Alfred…” he looked him in the eye with all his honesty “but seeing Bruce on the balcony…” he surely couldn’t explain that to Alfred “I couldn’t resist.”

Alfred grinned sympathetically.

“I hope at least the sea water was splendid…” he said with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Clark was taken aback.

“Well, yeah…” he mumbled and ruffled his hair “but how you…?” he had dried Bruce and himself.

Alfred winked.

“Master Bruce’s hair has salt” Clark let his head drop “and Master Hero’s paws are wet and carry some sand.”

Clark’s eyes sparkled amused.

“Now I see where Bruce got his detective skills…” he chuckled.

“Finally!” both men turned to the entrance of the room to see Selina coming towards them her hands on her hips and her eyes angry.

She squatted by the sofa and caressed Bruce’s locks.

“Is he alright? Where that irresponsible alien took him?”

Clark knew better than get irritated by Selina’s words and frankly at the moment he could register only one thing: Catwoman wore an apron from the chest to the knees with frills and lace. He just couldn’t hold back his chuckle and she glared at him.

“What?” she spat “Anything funny, handsome?”

He raised his palms in surrender and shook his head in denial pressing his lips.

“Master Bruce is fine, Miss Kyle and after a nice, hot bath to wash the salt he’ll be even better.”

Her eyes widened glaring at Clark.

“You put him in the sea in the evening?!”

“The sun was still up and the waters were very warm: I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.”

Bruce writhed a little in his sleep and Alfred hurried to bring his index finger on his lips to silence them and moved his palms showing the balcony to the two youths.

Selina stood and grabbed Superman from the elbow dragging him outside but the young man followed only reluctantly keeping all the time his face towards Bruce. His eyebrows frowned seeing Hero after Alfred turned his back climb the sofa and cuddle at his master’s chest.

He sighed and Selina turned to see what Clark was seeing. She laughed and patted his back sympathetically. Clark looked at her and then gazed at the scenery that was really breathtaking from the hovering round shaped balcony: thick foliage and then dark blue sea stretching endlessly till mingled with the still lighted dark blue of the sky.
“I’m jealous of a kitten!” he huffed shaking his head in disapproval and leaned on the almost transparent glass and titanium railing that was already illuminated by the prototype solar lamps Tony had engraved.

Selina supported her waist on the railing, crossed her arms and lolled her head to the side pouting.

“Not an ordinary kitten…” she chuckled. “And you brought him to Bruce making him the most beautiful present.

Clark laughed and closed his eyes.

“Sorry I made all of you worried…I guess I’m irresponsible…” he said.

“C’me on, tough guy…Was Bruce happy?”

Clark looked at her friendly eyes and pressed his lips.

“It’s a bit complicated but…yeah, I think he enjoyed it.”

She half closed her eyes and shrugged a shoulder.

“Like everything he does with you…” she remarked slyly winking.

Clark felt his cheeks burning and Selina rolled her eyes.

“Oh! Give me a break… You weren’t so shy when you made love to him in the greenhouse…”

Clark’s eyes widened in panic and Selina giggled.

“He told you what we did there -...I mean, in detail?!”

Selina licked her red lips and raised her index finger.

“I could have tortured you… but… no, Bruce is shier than you to kiss and tell even to me. However, he didn’t run away that night and still is with you…” she nodded “so…you must be very good at this” she smiled seeing his eyes dropping “and very sensitive to his needs.”

“I wouldn’t have done anything that would hurt him in any way…”

Selina pressed her lips and swallowed hard; her eyes sparkled.

“You healed him…and I wanted to tell you that I’m grateful.”

Clark shook his head because he didn’t deserve this.

“He was the one who fought the battle and won the demons…He is so brave!”

The admiration and love in his voice warmed Selina’s heart that was always cautious when Bruce was concerned.

“You were the motive for him to fight the demons about…that. You inspired trust to him and… love…” she blinked thinking if she should tell the next. “Bruce is in love with you and that gave him the power to face the demons he just avoided till then” she finally said because Clark’s eyes were those of an innocent puppy and now the weight of her words made his shoulders of steel slump.

She cleared her throat breaking the silence.
“That doesn’t mean that you don’t need to be careful” she shook her index finger warningly and touched it to his lips. “The fact he loves you…” she closed her eyes “if you’re playing with his wounded heart, if you hurt him” she stabbed him with her eyes “I’ll kill you.”

Clark nodded: he was aware of his responsibility…And frankly he preferred to die than cause any pain to Bruce.

“I know…” he answered calmly without feeling any irritation for her threat. He gazed at the sky that wasn’t neither dark nor light blue; the stars that had already scattered everywhere. “When I carry him in my arms…” he smiled and his smile had all the sweetness he was feeling “he seems to enjoy sleeping cuddled in my chest nestling his head in my neck as if he wants to always listen to my heartbeat and feel safe” he gulped “it feels like I’m cuddling a vulnerable child…who trusts an adult to protect him from every danger, present and past…”

Selina’s features softened revealing her real caring self.

“I always feel like he’s my little brother though we have the same age…” she chuckled “I think he doesn’t like that we are so protective of him or maybe he does…subconsciously. But I think that under Batman’s muscle strength and Bruce Wayne’s adamant personality, he is still the child who seeks someone to save him and love him…”

Clark met her eyes and grinned.

“I guess it’s too complicated for him…” he turned abruptly his eyes away from Selina to stare at the trees under them.

“What?” Selina frowned because she felt that something bothered him.

Clark didn’t look at her.

“That scum Bane…” he fisted his hands but he was unwilling to continue.

Selina grasped his upper arm and though it was just a touch he looked at her.

“What?” she demanded.

“Although he’s still at Blackgate’s hospital he already has told every creep of Gotham what he and his mistress did to Bruce…Oh! He certainly would have liked to brag that he…” Clark couldn’t even utter it “did all that to Batman but I guess they don’t divulge their knowledge to strangers.”

Selina’s teeth rattled and her eyes snapped angry to the sky. Yet she looked again at him and patted his arm.

“It’s not your fault…”

Superman pressed his lips and shook his head.

“I didn’t protect him then and I fail to protect him even now from the humiliation…” he inhaled heavily “Bruce didn’t speak about Bane’s and Talia’s deeds to me” he turned to her “did he to you?” and seeing Selina shake her head in denial, nodded “and now Gotham’s scum will know everything in detail and revile him! Damn!” the thought that he should have killed that evil bastard crossed his mind: he had done it before and Bruce was worth it…

Selina licked her lips: she shared Superman’s wrath but he shouldn’t blame himself.
“You saved his life; we have him here with us, thanks to you” she chased his gaze and widened her eyes for emphasis. “I know we don’t show you our gratitude as often as we should…”

Clark waved his hand in dismissal.

“But we all know that without you Bruce would have died.”

He closed his eyes and after some seconds looked at Selina’s glimmering ones.

“He did die, Selina…” he whispered and the young woman narrowed her eyes. “I was holding him in my arms heading for the Fortress when he asked me to stop for him to see the lights of aurora” Selina’s head dropped. “And then he…he spoke to me…and closed softly his eyes as if he was falling asleep…and…and calmly everything in his body stopped.”

Selina’s eyes were tearful but filled with awe watching the Man of Steel trembling.

“It was pure horror…I never felt so scared in my life; I was floating to the void, nothing around me…or inside me… The nightmarish void sucking me…I had nothing in me except than pain, excruciating pain that I knew it won’t stop…ever…” he clenched the railing and heaved his head. “And then I sensed it and it was as if sun radiation flooded my cold body: Bruce’s brain was still alive…You understand?” he turned to her. “He felt sorry for me and came back…”

“All of us…” she mumbled and wiped her tears that flowed unchecked as the moments of the factory came to her mind. “But now he is alive and that’s what counts!”

Clark saw the joy sparkling in her eyes and pressed his lips.

“I know and I’m an idiot for being like this but…my heart is still clenched. When I’m with him it’s heaven but when I’m away the mortal grip returns and along the terrifying coldness and the dark void…and I’m happy like a schoolboy when I take the way back to him yet sometimes what he suffered occupies my mind and ruins everything…and Bruce senses everything. You know?” he asked for her understanding. “And it’s me that should give strength and encourage Bruce to his difficult path not the other way around!”

Selina raised a shoulder regarding him with sympathy.

“This is love, handsome…” she smiled.

“Give me that young man!”

Superman suddenly realized that Alfred was speaking on the phone with Leslie and the fierce doctor was pissed and demanded to speak with him.

Selina noticed his miserable expression.

“What?”

“Alfred is coming…He probably told Leslie about our excursion and now she is going to chew me out…”

Selina chuckled seeing Alfred coming with the phone on the hand and a commiserate expression. She bit her lip and just moved away from Clark.

Alfred offered the phone to Clark with a regretful expression.

“I’m sorry, Master Kent…”
Clark took the phone decisively hearing already Leslie’s uneven breath. He wanted to feel affronted by the doctor’s mistrust yet the woman’s deep worry for Bruce and the fact she believed him dead for 18 years didn’t let the emotion form.

“Leslie, I’d never do anything even remotely dangerous for him…” but she didn’t let him continue.

“Do you realize that the majority of his bones are cracked or multi-fractured held together by casts, his lungs were pierced and the one of them was dead for a considerable time and thus they are oversensitive…”

Clark inhaled and rolled his eyes but didn’t interrupt her because her voice was so husky that made Clark feel the woman’s feelings of agony and panic.

“His spleen has been removed and that makes him extremely vulnerable to bacteria, especially those who cause pneumonia” she stopped to draw a breath. “Pneumonia in this stage when his lungs are still recovering can kill him” her voice dropped and then rose to become reprimanding “young man! Not to mention how sensitive all his organs are after almost smashed…”

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

“I know, Leslie, I know… since I have learnt all these by heart being constantly by his side during the operations… I’m monitoring his vitals – no, I’m living on his vitals - even from the other corner of the planet sweating when a heartbeat or a breath is amiss…I realize all these, Leslie, since I’m anxiously X-Raying him for any growth of his mangled bones…it’s a win and a celebration every time a bone grows a millimeter…”

He heard Leslie’s sigh and it was as if seeing her regret.

“I’m sorry, young man” she said with her steady voice. “I know how much you love Bruce and how much you suffered all this time not knowing if he was going to live or...” an inhale “and I’m grateful to you for everything but when I heard you took him to the sea…” Clark heard her rubbing her temple “Both of you are so young and have suffered so much and of course you want and deserve to enjoy every pleasure this planet has to offer…I admit I was scared, Clark, and I overreacted taking it out on you…”

But Clark was already sweating from a suffocating feeling and realization: bacteria, pneumonia…

“It’s okay, Leslie, I’d have reacted the same way as you…or worse. I read that sea water can help people with paraplegia and I assure you that the waters were very warm and there were no harmful bacteria – I scanned the water. And Bruce had a really lovely time but…” his voice shook a bit “do you believe that he might have been infected?”

“Please, don’t panic, Clark and tell the others; Alfred gives him all the antibiotics that are needed and he’s been vaccinated recently; besides with you watching him so closely and Alfred sending me data twice the day I don’t think that he is at risk. Now, please, forget my hysterics and enjoy your night. Give a big kiss from me to the sleepyhead!”

Clark grinned.

“With pleasure… Good night, Leslie.”

Tony landed graciously on the living room from the roof that opened smoothly at his approaching. He looked frowned around.

“No welcoming committee?” he saw the company on the balcony and shrugged. “That alien
showing off again!” he rolled his eyes and let the bags he was carrying on the shining dark blue granite bench of his not-so-small bar.

He deactivated his armor and his eyes softened finding Bruce’s sleeping form with Hero nestled comfortably in his chest; the kitten’s fluffy head was touched in Bruce’s heart, the young man’s heartbeat lulling the cute animal that was purring fast asleep. Tony smiled.

“Even better…” he whispered and walked gingerly to his friend.

He squatted and caressed some stray locks on Bruce’s forehead back to his hair, his eyes glimmering with affection taking in the soft respiration.

“You need haircut, little guy… Looks like I finally caught you napping…” he sing-songed and then his brow creased “I just hope this alien dude didn’t do something to…”

“No, he didn’t…” all of a sudden Bruce’s eyes snapped opened and Tony was so surprised that fell on his butt.

Tony saw Hero open his eyes lazily and it seemed to him that he was grinning. He rose slowly brushing his butt and squinted at his friend who placed the kitten on the sofa.

“Don’t tell me… Your training allows you to sense enemies even when you’re fast asleep.”

Bruce’s grin was broad.

“And friends…”

“Damn that ninja training, again! You need to teach me…” he rose his eyebrows “it can be very handy, you know, and lifesaving when you have the fascinating love life of Tony Stark…” he winked but immediately rushed to help Bruce who using his hands tried to sit.

Bruce locked his eyes with Tony’s which were too serious.

“You know, Tony” he gave a tight lips smile “every paraplegic in the world can do that.”

But the Californian put carefully his one arm around Bruce’s back and the other under his knees and softly raised his friend in sitting position hurrying to place the big pillow behind his back for supporting. Bruce was rolling his eyes and Tony pouted and widened his eyes in surprise.

“What? You don’t trust Ironman’s arms made of…well, iron? Or you prefer arms made of steel?” he knitted his eyebrows.

Bruce sighed.

“I prefer arms of flesh and blood and specifically MY flesh and blood arms!”

Tony was looking down at his friend, one hand in his hips, the other ruffling his hair uncomfortably; he understood Bruce’s frustration yet he just couldn’t stop himself from helping him. As he was working on Bruce’s bionic spine part, he daily had to study his friend’s skeleton and every time the condition shocked him more.

Bruce pressed his lips understanding Tony’s feelings and decided to ease the mood: it wasn’t Tony’s or Clark’s or anyone’s fault that he felt suffocating – it wasn’t their help but his weakness that frustrated him.

“You run a multinational conglomerate” he cocked an eyebrow “how come and you’re here?”
Tony lolled his head to the side widening his eyes.

“T’m the owner of the pet-shop, little guy” he shrugged.

Bruce nodded with a knowing half grin.

“And Miss Potts once again will have to do everything…” he remarked disapprovingly with his arms crossed.

Tony raised his hands and jerked his head.

“I’m always misunderstood! She was given the day off and is with me.”

Bruce looked around.

“She’s coming with your helicopter?”

“No, she prefers Ironman’s lines: they’re not so comfy but the staff” he turned his thumbs to his chest “is hell hot! And it’s a subtler way to come here.”

Bruce’s stare was full of questions pointing at the living room which was empty of Pepper. Tony’s eyes bulged.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed.

“Master Anthony, mind your language” Alfred reprimanded him as he and the others came in.

But Tony was thinking hard under Bruce’s exasperated stare.

“No, I didn’t dropped her over Hungary and I had her over Albania…Oh!” he said and punched the air. “I stopped to the village here to buy souvlaki and gyros” he gestured to the bags on the bar-bench. “I couldn’t resist the smell – by the way, here smells delicious, too: Sel, dear, you cooked?” he regarded her apron twitching his eyebrows in amusement and she glared “Good thing I brought food…” he whispered cocking more his eyebrows and Clark chuckled.

“Tony, where’s Pepper?” Bruce asked.

Tony scratched his nape taking a guilty expression.

“It seems that…Hm…I forgot her at the village’s square…”

Bruce choked and his eyes narrowed.

“You forgot her?” his eyebrows almost reached his hair.

Tony shrugged.

“You know, I really like gyros” but seeing Bruce’s widened eyes “and it’s a beautiful, hospitable, peaceful village not Syria!”

Bruce lolled his head.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Tony slapped his thighs and shook his head defeated.

“Fine! I’m going get her…”
“Anthony Stark!” a wild Pepper Potts with disheveled hair marched the living room barefoot because she held her stilettoes which used to hammer Tony’s head.

Bruce cringed and Clark who in the meantime had sneaked beside him wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

“Ouch!” Tony huffed and began retreating through the vast living room to evade the lethal shoes.

Selina who had tossed the insulting apron on a chair watched smirking and Alfred crossed his arms unwilling to save his young master for a well-deserved lesson.

“You took a cab, darling, right?” he arched his eyebrows “the village is near…” Tony raising his hands in surrender tried to evade Pepper’s wrath. “I can pay… Ouch!” he managed to slip the hit to the head and instead had his shoulder hit. “Mind the head!”

“Because it’s already defective enough, ugh?!” she growled. “I’m sorry for the turbulence, Bruce” she said mildly keeping her stabbing glare at Tony who made her the puppy eyes. “How are you, dear?”

Bruce shrugged uncomfortable.

“Fine, thanks…I guess…”

Tony saw his opportunity and pointed with his eyes at Bruce.

“And he’ll be better if you stop abusing his best buddy…huh?” he flapped his eyelashes. “Such violent scenes are traumatic for kids…”

Pepper kept her shoe in midair indecisive and turned to look at Bruce but Clark cuddled his Star hiding his head in his shoulder and gave the thumbs up to Pepper who resumed her attacking stance glaring at Tony who rolled his eyes.

“That traitor! OK, babe, I’m sorry…I’m a bastard, sorry…Ouch!” this time he didn’t try to evade the hit. “I deserve that…but…wait! Wait! I’ll compensate you!”

She frowned and groaned.

“Cross my heart!” he made the gesture. “Whatever you want, babe, huh?”

Pepper seemed thoughtful.

“Don’t believe him, Pepper!” Selina snapped looking at Tony challengingly and playfully.

But Alfred uncrossed his arms and walked between them.

“I think he was enough punished, Miss Potts, although his…crime was grave” he lolled his head to the side to look sternly at Tony who cowered behind him for protection. “But we must have some dinner AND I’ll implement my extra punishment along with whatever you chose for him.”

Pepper smiled, an evil sparkle in her eyes but Tony looked at her fleetingly from Alfred’s shoulders, patting the butler.

“Washing the cutlery!” Alfred narrowed his eyes sternly.

“I know how the dishwasher works…”
“With your iron hands, Master Anthony!”

Pepper made a gesture with her elbow taken from the sport arenas and definitely unusual for her.

“That serves him right!” Selina said.

Tony stretched his arms in surrender.

“Bruce, help me…”

But his buddy cuddled by Clark pressed his lips and shrugged in weakness to help.

“It’s fair enough, buddy…” he huffed. “And better than a concussion, believe me” he shook his head.

Tony sighed.

“Okay, okay, guilty as charged” and as soon as Alfred moved he hugged Pepper kissing her lips. “Ouch!” she accepted the kiss but with a bite.

Alfred approached the sofa.

“Master Bruce, I think you need a nice bath to wash away the all this sea salt” Bruce looked surprised at Clark who shrugged.

“Detective No. two…”

“Master Kent, you need the same cleaning too and I guess you could assist Master Bruce?” he cocked a commanding eyebrow.

Bruce was ready to retort that he didn’t need help but Alfred had already turned his back heading to the kitchen and Clark placed his palm softly on Bruce’s mouth.

“Sure, Alfred! Thanks! I mean…” he blushed under everyone’s glances and Bruce forgot his objections already plotting.
Chapter 5

Luthor sat on his bed in the high security cell of Blackgate Prison smirking as he recalled the things Bane was recounting to everyone with ears about his nights with Bruce Wayne. That served right the spoiled brat! Even if he didn’t have the chance to do all these himself.

Suddenly his cell was drenched in pitch black and Luthor frowned: he didn’t hear any turbulence from outside so this…blackout – if it was a blackout – was exclusively in his cell.

He didn’t like that: he had too much experience with scum to know how they worked. Cold sweat slid to his back: he was stuck in a filthy joint in Gotham and Gotham despite the frontage was always driven by criminals…Locals or not since the local players were permanently out of the game.

And then as suddenly the lights were back and Luthor breathed easier only for a second; his frown became deeper.

“How you got here?” he asked coldly; his anger surpassing his worry.

“Easily” a sarcastic voice answered indifferently and a huge shadow covered Luthor who immediately stood to minimize the height difference impression.

Luthor’s eyes shone.

“You killed the guards?” he inquired slyly with a smirk.

His visitor quirked one corner of his lips; his thin mustache twitched.

“Bruno Mannheim doesn’t need to do such bullshit unless for his entertainment” he barked and strutted inside the small cell.

Luthor thought that Mannheim’s enormous mass made the cell look even smaller, suffocating, and this made him feel more outraged for his humiliation.

“You can get me out of here” he snapped though he hated having to resort to a stranger’s help.

Mannheim moved his square neck and sniffed at Luthor and the billionaire felt his face hot with rage: it was Wayne’s fault that he was humiliated before every worthless shit.

“Now...now...Why I’d do that?” Mannheim lifted an arrogant eyebrow.

Luthor gritted his teeth.

“Then why you brought your filthy hide here?!”

Mannheim’s enormous mass was on him at no time and his big hand squeezed his neck pushing him to the wall. Luthor felt his legs dangling and his air pipe constricted; sweat drops popped all over his face.

“I want what you promised me” the fine dressed gangster hissed, his growl only an undertone. “Your part of the deal!” he tightened more his grip and Luthor’s eyes protruded from the lack of air. “I hate those who break a deal...” Luthor could swear that Mannheim’s eyes became red.

The gangster’s fingers loosened a bit to let Luthor draw some air.
“I’d have given you your order” he said through clenched teeth “but LEMLABS have passed under the control of Bruce Wayne.”

Luthor had an established co-operation with the League of Shadows but his motto was never have all your eggs in one basket, so he was working with other not so legitimate but highly profitable ‘organizations’: one of these was this gangster’s bunch of outlaws. Of course Mannheim’s orders were very strange and intriguing which persuaded Luthor that this wasn’t a common gang and their plans weren’t mediocre. So naturally Luthor wanted to keep a key role to this as well…

Mannheim narrowed his eyes.

“I do not care” he stressed every word. “I made the deal with you and you’re obliged to deliver my order!”

Luthor drew a breath to calm his heartbeat and regain his undeterred demeanor.

“How can I?!” he yelled exasperated eyeing the cell. “I would, Mannheim! But he changed the security system and staff immediately setting his people guarding the premises in order to prevent any loss in the LABS’ material. The bastard wants to steal any tech know-how!”

Mannheim’s eyes were two pieces of ice, estimating Luthor’s angry face.

“Don’t tell me that you had my…order in official premises…” his hiss was filled with explosion.

Luthor showed his teeth.

“Of course not! Yet I was informed that the filthy brat knew already even the secret premises and immediately set his control there too!”

Mannheim roared and released Luthor; the gangster’s eyes were narrowed and dark, deep in thought under a crease. Luthor smirked and gathered his legs to rose from the floor.

“So…Wayne again…” the huge man mumbled.

“Let me out of here and I’ll help you get him out of the way…” he said slyly, his eyes gleeful.

Mannheim arched an eyebrow and cackled.

“I don’t need your help with Wayne” the man twisted his lips in disdain.

Luthor crossed his arms over his chest and straightened proudly his posture eyeing the gangster sarcastic.

“He isn’t an easy target…” he snapped.

Mannheim turned towards him and regarded amused Luthor’s orange prisoner’s outfit.

“I see that…” he cocked both eyebrows and let a snort finish the impression. “But I’m not you…”

Luthor lollled his head to the side disregarding the insult with a wicked smile.

“Perhaps…” he dragged his words. “But if you get me out of here, I’ll give you access to your… order…”

Mannheim’s narrowed eyes stabbed Luthor’s overconfident ones in a staring contest.
But suddenly the cell was again in complete darkness and before Luthor even looked around him the lights returned to reveal that he was again alone. He knitted his eyebrows; he knew that the area around his cell was under surveillance and even if Mannheim’s men had knocked out the guards the alarm would be set off. And even if they managed to extinguish the alarm system the central processor would have warned the authorities…and how this wretched gangster managed to get inside and out so fast and so silently? Like a ghost…

He pouted his lips: what mattered was that he could manipulate Mannheim into get him out of the prison and Wayne would be faced with him and everyone that pissed the gangster ended dead or worse – except of course than Luthor. So maybe that oaf would give him another satisfaction.

Mannheim’s enormous shadow strutted with ease the narrow corridors of the prison’s high security sector; it was afternoon but in there with the artificial lighting easily could be turned into night. As for the inmates who like Luthor had returned to their cells…they weren’t aware of his presence.

At the corner before the exit he met another shadow bigger than himself.

“You took from Luthor what you wanted?” the second shadow’s eyes shone yellow.

Mannheim gritted his teeth and cursed causing a snort from the second shadow.

“I guess you didn’t…”

The gangster yanked his head and his eyes pierced the yellow. He suddenly bulked till he became bigger, gigantic, towering the second shadow and his red eyes scowled at him.

“Bruce Wayne gets again in my way…” he relished the uneasiness in his partner’s face and chortled. “You finished off the guards?” mocked him even though killing the guards wasn’t his will as well – for the time being…

“Of course not, there wasn’t any need for that and would have raised suspicions.”

“I thought you are a demon with a thirst to kill humans, Bagdana…” the gangster jeered him. “Or your craving for a human softened you towards them?”

Bagdana roared.

“We don’t want them suspect; I know you don’t wish that either, Darkseid…”

The presence that replaced Mannheim shook his head arrogantly sniffing at the prison’s walls.

“I don’t care about them and their…suspicions. They’re just pests to be extinguished. But it’s a specific pest that will be smashed first” he fist his stone-like hand. “His death will bring despair to the Kryptonian and clear the path to my property.”

Bagdana’s face tensed.

“No!” he groaned and the holes he had for nostrils fumed. “He is mine…” but then he smiled wickedly “yet we still set the wheels in motion.”

Dr. Thompkins in her comfy, modern but not extravagant office in the free clinic was perusing the latest data about Bruce’s health that Alfred had sent her. She fixed the rim of her glasses keeping her eyes focused on her PC screen; she felt guilty about snapping at Clark and was glad she mollified the
impression she created yet her concern didn’t subside.

Only the recount of Bruce’s wounds’ extent and of the conditions that led to them was enough to make her cringe: as a doctor working at the Narrows she was used to horrid wounds however she was grateful she didn’t see Bruce immediately after the incident. Yet the reports Clark gave them were very graphic.

Everything came down to one thing: they, she was given back Bruce just before a couple of months and almost lost him again so the possibility of losing him again on her fault haunted her.

Discreet knocks on her door cracked her isolation yet she answered without looking. Maria, the head nurse, probably brought her the morning shift’s report. Light steps approached her desk and then a gentle clearing of throat.

She raised her head with frowned eyebrows and hastily minimized the window with the report on her PC. It wasn’t Maria but a young man impeccably dressed in a tailor made suit and shining leather shoes – being the son of a rich family added to his income allowing him the luxury.

He was around thirty and what made an impression to Leslie was that his haircut was exactly the same with Bruce’s – unlike the last time she saw him in a congress – and his cheekbones definitely were sharper than before. Or maybe it was just her agitation messing with her senses.

“Dr. Elliot” she grinned and offered her hand for a handshake.

The young man smiled dashingly.

“Please, Leslie; you know me since I was a toddler” he cocked an eyebrow “certainly we don’t need such formality. Call me Thomas.”

Leslie licked her lips thoughtful and nodded gesturing to the plain yet comfy chair in front of her desk.

“Have a seat, Thomas.”

But his smile became broader.

“I was hoping to have your company in a light lunch before continuing our shifts. Well?” he lolled his head.

Leslie shook her head.

“Gladly, Thomas, but I’ve so much work.”

Thomas pressed his lips, his eyes really sad yet Leslie had the feeling that this was overacting.

“C’me on, Leslie, I was hoping for some briefing on Gotham’s life – I have missed so much.”

Leslie took off her glasses and placed them on her desk.

“You’ll have plenty of time for that, Thomas, since you decided to return” her voice was a bit critical and the young doctor frowned.

“I detect some displeasure for that?” he asked almost hurt.

Leslie rubbed the bridge of her nose.
“Certainly not, Thomas: you’re a brilliant young doctor and Gotham will benefit from your presence here. Yet the last time you gave me the impression that your position at Metropolis’ General Hospital and the Neurosurgery chair in Metropolitan University was everything you ever dreamt.”

Thomas sat at the chair Leslie showed him and leaned towards her.

“People change, Leslie” and seeing her arching an eyebrow “well, you’re right…” he shook his head. “It was Bruce who inspired me to come back: his effort to offer to our city despite all the horrors he experienced made me rethink my indifferent stance towards Gotham and her people’s suffering and decide to attribute my tiniest to this valiant effort” he gave again his dashing but empty smile.

“Not ‘tiniest’ I’m sure.”

“And the position Gotham General offered me along with the chair of the Neuroscience in Gotham’s University is more than satisfying” he confessed and locked eyes with Leslie. “Well, will you honor me with your company?”

Leslie pressed her lips and huffed.

“I’d like to, Thomas, I really do but I’m too busy: Narrows still pose many demands.”

Thomas nodded knitting his fingers.

“You have data from Bruce’s condition on your screen, right?” he asked serious and on her questioning look smiled “you hastened to minimize the window upon seeing me. Can I have a look?”

Leslie bit her lip.

“Thomas, you know that I can’t.”

Thomas’ eyes darkened but he just pressed his lips and shook his head disappointed.

“So…you share Bruce’s dislike and mistrust?” he inquired in a low, hurt voice.

Leslie made to answer but he interrupted her.

“I’d expect that those torturous eighteen years would have set childish mischief in perspective for Bruce yet he seems to hold a grudge on me for” he snorted “bullying him when I was eight or nine and destroying his Tao-Tao toy…”

Leslie stared at him calculating.

“You seem to remember every detail…”

“Brucie has contaminated you with his paranoia: I understand that you have a soft spot for him and after believing him dead for so long it’s perfectly logical…” his blue eyes manifested interest. “But, Leslie, really? I know that all these horrid experiences have affected and distorted his cognitive functions and personality and I understand even his feelings against me but you? You agreeing with his unreasonable mistrust for the doings of a stupid brat - me?” he shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I was a spoiled, arrogant brat and I admit I was horrible to Brucie…and, yes, he was too young and I hurt him but…but my father’s death and my mother’s suffering after” he sighed “…changed me; I realized how dreadful I was to him and all my life I wished to have a chance to show him my regret and knowing that this was impossible since he was murdered was eating me
alive. But now that we have him back…” he smiled “I just want to help him…” he widened his eyes. “I matured, Leslie: you should help him mature as well, not clung to childish rivalries.”

Leslie made her eyes softer and understanding however her stare became steely when Thomas patronized her.

“Thank you for your offer, Thomas. But Bruce is more mature than all of us” she regarded the young man’s flash of irony. “Wanting his personal data handled only by me is not a matter of Bruce’s dislike or mistrust or…grudge, as you think: he just feels better with his family, that means the people closest to him. You should understand this, after everything he suffered.”

He huffed.

“I can offer my professional opinion, Leslie; and Bruce doesn’t need to know” Leslie tensed on that and Thomas realized his blunder.

“I’m sorry, Thomas” she said sharply “isn’t a matter of personal dislike or mistrust. It’s just patient-doctor confidentiality.”

Dr. Elliot realized that he had lost the game so he gave his most charming smile and stood.

“Fine, Leslie; you’re right. I was wrong to insist but I share your worry about Bruce. Two strange bullets in his spine are too dangerous even if removed: they might have left lesions or disabilities given the malnourishment our poor Brucie suffered. So if you need anything…don’t hesitate: you can always count on me and my confidentiality” his stare became sly as his voice “Superman who seems to be very intimate with Brucie can attest to that.”

He stretched his hand to Leslie and she shook it though she didn’t like his tone.

“May at least have the pleasure to be accompanied by the most charming doctor of Gotham tonight for a dinner?”

Leslie weighted the situation and nodded; Thomas Elliot was a brilliant colleague after all and wanted to observe him more to find out if Bruce’s feelings – and hers - had a solid base or they were wrong.

The young man smiled and left her office, Leslie watching him skeptical before opening again on her PC the window with Bruce’s data.

The chair Clark had made for Bruce floated from the corner where Alfred had put it to stop right before Bruce and Clark looked at him frowning. But Bruce ignored his almost hurt look and grabbed the armrests of the chair sliding with easiness into the chair.

Clark stood up.

“I can take you upstairs…” it was stupid, he realized as soon as he uttered it; of course he could.

Bruce holding the armrests eyed him smugly and caressed Hero’s back since the kitten had swiftly climbed on his lap.

Selina marched to Bruce and took softly the kitten grinning at Bruce.

“You’ll stay with me, Hero…”
Bruce turned to Clark.

“I know you can” he spat, winked and the chair floated to the lift Tony had adjusted to the main stair. Tony smirked satisfied for his friend’s reaction and Superman’s pout. Selina was chuckling.

“Are you coming?” Bruce turned to Clark. “Or do you need my help to climb the stairs?” he quirked a sarcastic eyebrow.

Now Tony laughed out loud and Pepper pinched him in the ribs.

“I don’t want to hear you laughing” she said through clenched teeth. “It gets on my nerves…” Tony shrugged.

“Okay, Peps; I’m officially in the corner standing on one foot…”

Clark narrowed his eyes locking them with Bruce’s sparkling ones: his Star was…challenging him? He gritted his teeth and marched to meet him causing Bruce’s satisfied smirk.

“Alfred…”

Alfred who was already on the frame leading to the corridor to the kitchen stood and turned at his young master.

“Yes, Master Bruce?” he asked hiding his eagerness to do whatever Bruce asked him.

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Is it easy to have dinner at the balcony? It’s a great evening…” Everyone eyed him puzzled because it was the first time Bruce expressed a desire. Clark’s eyes flashed and his joy turned his lips upwards in a big smile.

Alfred mustered his composed demeanor but his eyes glint revealed his contentment.

“Of course, Master Bruce; and if I may: it’s indeed a splendid evening.”

Bruce smiled to him knowing how happy his butler felt just by that small request and Alfred just couldn’t resist mirroring that smile before bowing slightly his head and leaving for the kitchen.

Bruce brushed the choice for ‘up’ in the lift’s rectangular screen and began ascending. Of course, Clark followed him flying never leaving Bruce’s playful eyes.

Selina sighed.

“You better be careful, Supes…” she whispered and headed to the balcony kissing the head of Hero who had perched on her shoulder.

Pepper turned to Tony who made her the puppy eyes.

“Shower time for us too?” he grinned hopefully but Pepper cast him a cold glare and sniffed at him.

“Shower for me: so much time holding on tin makes me smell like rust” she arched an eyebrow, her green eyes poisonous and Tony protruded his lower lip and narrowed his eyes hurt.

But Pepper smirked and stressed every word “you” her eyebrows arched “‘re gonna help Alfred with
the dinner. Go!” Pepper pressed her palms on his chest pushing him.

Tony stepped backwards towards the kitchen staring guiltily and pleadingly at Pepper whose eyes were stern. He blew her a kiss and ran to the kitchen; Pepper shook her head smiling.

“You’re not going to weasel out of this so easily, Mr. Stark…”

The door to Bruce’s bedroom opened on his approach and the same happened with the bathroom’s door – Tony’s apps to ease his friend’s life; Clark was following keeping one step distance.

The bathroom was spacious but not as vast as the one in the Manor’s bedroom; everything was made of light blue granite tiles that sparkled under the lights that were entirely powered by the stored solar energy. The bath tub was cream colored porcelain with plain, gold colored details, oval shaped and large, equipped with handles and supports on the wall and inside the tub.

Bruce turned his head to see behind him a serious Clark.

“Glad to see you managed to catch up…”

Clark covered their distance in one stride and held the younger man’s shoulders.

“There’s no other place I would be!” his eyes were locked with Bruce’s and that emerald sparkling star made his temperature blow. “I know you’re perfectly able to do it yourself” he said wanting to appease him but Bruce cocked an eyebrow “But am I allowed to…to strip you?” he felt his cheeks getting hot.

Bruce chuckled and smirked.

“You didn’t ask for permission at the beach…”

Clark’s mouth stayed agape.

“Well, I…I…”

Bruce rolled his eyes.

“OK, you have my permission!” and seeing Clark’s eyes glimmering hungrily “but slower this time…”

Clark nodded and lifted him from the chair. He took off his clothes slowly wrapping his torso with one arm having no problem to get rid of the clothes with the other.

Bruce regarded the pile of his discarded clothes on the bathroom’s floor.

“This is the slowest you can?” he asked amused but as he turned his eyes Clark was already naked.

Clark caressed the pink on Bruce’s cheeks.

“We’re supposed to get rid of that traitorous salt, right?” the Man of Steel said and his eyes traveled Bruce’s body safely embraced by his hands. “And, yes, this is the slowest I can when it concerns stripping you…- no clothe serves you justice.”

Bruce pouted thoughtful.

“Don’t tell, Alfred: it’ll be a great insult to his fine clothing taste.”
Clark couldn’t drag this chat with Bruce bare naked in his arms…because at any moment he would forget the purpose they were here and…He sighed internally: things he shouldn’t do would be done.

Bruce felt the movement and next he was in the tub still held by Clark.

“You didn’t ask for permission” he scowled and Clark’s eyes widened until Bruce’s glare loosened to amusement. “You’re such a kid…”

Clark touched his forehead to Bruce’s.

“Actually, you’re the kid here…”

The younger man snorted.

“Yeah, I’m…what? Six years younger?” he lolled his head. “When I’ll be eighty and you are exactly as now, I’ll look like your grandfather.”

Clark almost choked before his smile lit his face and he tightened his two arms hold on Bruce’s back, kissing Bruce’s hand that softly touched his shoulder.

“So you’re telling me that you intend on us being together for sixty years?! That’s great! That’s…”

Yet Bruce sobered and his eyes darkened; some sweat drops appeared on his forehead.

“I didn’t mean it that way…” he turned his head on the side to avoid Clark’s elated eyes and his hands dropped from Superman’s shoulders. “It’s too difficult to say something like this…”

Clark narrowed his eyes: of course, it was too difficult for Bruce to make such long plans concerning love and he didn’t want to scare him. So he cupped his face and smoothly brought it to meet his.

“You’re right, so we go one day at a time, huh?”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded: he understood that what he said might have disappointed Clark into believing that he didn’t want them being together for years. But this was not the point: what he wanted was never the point… He blinked and locked his eyes with Clark’s.

“With what I said I didn’t mean that I wouldn’t want that…but…”

Clark nibbled Bruce’s lips.

“Sssss…I know; don’t worry about anything…” he kissed him again. “Now let’s have that shower because I don’t want you catching a cold standing here naked.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side and regarded Clark.

“With the Man of Steel hugging me? I don’t think so…” he smiled “Leslie berated you, huh?”

Clark blinked.

“How you know?”

He shrugged.

“She always calls at afternoon and today I wasn’t here at the time she usually calls and she didn’t call since I woke up. So I gather that she called when I was sleeping and…hm…talked with you after learning from Alfred that we spent the afternoon at the beach.”
Clark pouted and nodded rolling his eyes.

“Of…course…But she was right and I’d have done the same thing in her place. I was irresponsible…I forgot how vulnerable you’re to bacteria.”

Bruce twitched his lips annoyed and played with Clark’s curl on the forehead.

“Leslie is overprotective: people who had splenectomy are indeed more vulnerable to bacteria but only the first months after the surgery;” he raised his eyebrows “more than two months have passed. And if I continue living in a bubble my organism’s defense will be very weak when faced with the real world. It was my decision.”

Clark smiled and Bruce grabbed the handles of the special support Tony had adjusted to the tub’s wall and led his back to rest to the titanium, leather covered curve shaped railing that held him upright. He touched an indication at the branches and pleasantly hot water began pouring on them from unseen heads.

Clark watched the water soaking Bruce’s locks and plastering them to his forehead and cheeks; streams were already running the younger man’s chest and Clark despite the fact he was also under the water felt getting hot. He took gently the bath cream and the sponge from Bruce’s hands, his Star eyeing him inquiringly but also playfully.

“Let me do that…” he breathed in a deep voice “please…”

Bruce just nodded and Clark tossed the sponge on the floor; he filled his palms with the cream that every time its smell dazzled him: the same cream Martha Wayne bathed her little Prince.

He applied the cream with gentle, round movements first at Bruce’s breasts, his eyes constantly on the younger man’s sucking the slight changes that indicated his pleasure. He brought his body closer to Bruce’s and lowered his palms slowly, smoothly to spread the cream to Bruce’s abdomens.

Then he kneeled and gingerly spread the cream over Bruce’s pelvis willing himself not get carried away and touch his thirsty lips on the younger man’s groin though he was constantly licking his dry lips. He sighed only internally casting a longing last glance before proceeding with Bruce’s hips, thighs, knees, calves and feet always extremely slow for Clark’s standards wishing to expand those moments.

Upon finishing his work, he stood sticking his body to Bruce’s and locking his eyes with his; he could hear the younger man’s heartbeat speeding. He nibbled Bruce’s lower lip, his hands resuming their round rubbing movements on his breasts teasing the pink nipples.

Bruce closed his eyes sighing and then stabbed Clark with his eyes.

“If you continue like this you won’t clean me…”

Clark closed his eyes and grabbed Bruce’s waist sucking desperately his collar bone.

“Maybe I like the taste of salt on your flesh…”

And then with a sudden but careful movement turned Bruce around, swallowing his ear.

“I have to clean you up, huh?” he whispered letting his rasps wet Bruce’s ear.

He poured some more cream to Bruce’s back and smoothly with massaging movements applied it first at his shoulders descending the length of his arms and then his shoulder blades and lower…He
could hear Bruce’s slightly uneven breath but when his hands reached the younger man’s glutes he could hear only his own rasps: applying cream to Bruce’s wet buttocks that regained their enticing shape after the incident was…torture…and Clark was sweaty without the water spraying him being of any help since immediately turned into stream.

Bruce chuckled obviously feeling Clark’s torment and his twitching groin over his buttocks and Clark bit softly the crook of his neck causing a moan which made the Man of Steel smile satisfied. Kneeling before Bruce’s back side was demanding and Clark’s running sweat was more than the shower’s water – not to mention how hot was in there… But Clark was responsible and would finish his job whatever the cost.

He had a triumphant smile on his face as he stood and turned Bruce to be again face to face. His Star was blushed too, his long eyelashes half covering his orbs longingly.

During Bruce’s long stay on bed at the Fortress Clark never let the androids wash him: he always washed his Star during his long sleep. And he kept doing that after Bruce woke from the coma but with the younger man watching him awed and uncomfortable but definitely not aroused.

Yet now things were different for Bruce…And for Clark who during the first days of their ordeal that seemed too far way bathed the sleeping man feeling as being in a thick cloud of sadness and weak hope, not able to acknowledge anything from the naked body except than aggressive bruises, lacerations, burnings and more that he didn’t want to remember. And even when Bruce woke from the coma his enthusiasm, his gratitude, his happiness didn’t let him to see beyond the miracle of this mangled body being alive – having returned to him.

But now that the miracle became his everyday reality he began acknowledging each and every single beauty this unique being had to offer especially since Bruce’s hard work out rapidly was restoring the tortured muscles back to their previous shape. So his struggle not touch him in order to not hurt him was getting more and more difficult.

Bruce was sensing the changes in Clark’s attitude…and his. When he first woke up the sedatives and painkillers were so many that reality seemed covered in a thin mist: his thoughts, senses and reactions were numb so Clark’s touch even to the unharmed areas of his body felt like a dream, pleasant, desirable but unreal – plus, his body, the healthy part, couldn’t or wouldn’t react to that touches. But now…as the fact that he was alive became his routine, his body began realizing the reality of those months’ deprivation and was thirsty…

The younger man locked his lips with Clark’s claiming the super human soft warmth of his body. But the Man of Steel detached to Bruce’s almost hurt frown and Clark hastened to caress his lips with his thumb.

“Your hair have salt…Is how Alfred busted me.”

Bruce kissed Clark’s thumb and snorted.

“It’s an amateur’s error…” he sniffed at Clark.

Clark tightened his grip on Bruce’s waist bringing him closer; his eyes shining fervently locked with Bruce’s.

“I had you naked in front of me…salt was connected with other things than covering my tracks…”

Bruce brushed with both hands Clark’s broad shoulder blades and pressed his lips.

“You’ve got me naked right now…What are you thinking?”
Clark felt that Bruce was trying to seduce him but... Rao! ... Bruce didn’t need to seduce HIM. He was struggling every second to restrain himself and Bruce’s desire that he had to deny made this nightmarish. He gulped: Bruce’s health was above anything else.

“To wash your hair!”

Bruce’s eyelids almost covered his sparkling eyes and Clark’s heart clenched. Yet he knew that it was for the better. He poured shampoo on Bruce’s locks and began massaging smoothly staring all the time at his Star’s closed eyes and feeling the younger man shaking a bit.

“We’re ready” he huffed.

Bruce’s eyes opened with a dark shine.

“No, we’re not” he growled and shook his head “your turn…”

Clark raised his hands almost panicked, shaking his head in denial.

“Oh, no, no, no…” he had retreated.

Bruce was looking him with the stare of a hunting wildcat and that stare was... just... irresistible. Clark’s eyes widened seeing Bruce’s hands approaching him.

“Please, Bruce... If... if your hands touch me I won’t be able to hold back... It’d be too much…”

Bruce smirked, his stare always predatory, the wet locks stuck on his temples framing his beautiful eyes.

“And I’ll shatter…”

Clark licked his lips and run his hand through his soaked hair which was a mistake because Bruce used the handles of the special railing to push himself on Clark’s chest. The surprise and his overall condition were such that Clark lost his balance and terrorized realized that he was falling. Terrorized not for himself – porcelain couldn’t hurt him – but Bruce was falling too. He grabbed the younger man’s upper arms to make sure that he’d have Clark’s body as a cushion.

The landing wasn’t too bad and Clark was happy because the oval shaped tube was spacious enough to contain him and the porcelain hadn’t cracked. He turned to look at Bruce, his body clang to Clark’s chest.

“What do you think you’re doing?!?” he cried exasperated. “Are you OK?”

And then he noticed two things: Bruce’s amused, smug look and that the water had stopped. Now Clark was pissed! He did it on purpose!

“You tripped me on purpose to fall!”

Bruce rolled his eyes and caressed the wet hair in his chest causing goose bumbs to Clark’s spine more so when he focused on the feeling of Bruce’s pelvis on his groin.

“Of course” he answered nonchalant “I think you forget that I’m Batman.”

Clark stretched his neck and sighed.

“I’m under a human so this human can only be Batman but…”
“No more _buts_” he retorted sharply and Clark felt with dread the thing he was most afraid of: Bruce’s body slithering on his driving each of his cells crazy; his bodily perfume enhanced by the fresh aroma of shampoo and cream mesmerizing his brain into ordering full surrender.

And what was that? Bruce’s fingertips touching feathery and moving on his ribs slowly finding his abdomens and brushing skillfully each layer which pushed his hips to move upwards; motion that became a violent writhing when Bruce’s hot, velvet lips touched his navel and then nibbled and sucked his rippled flesh. He gasped and raised his torso though his head was heavy with flooding stimulation.

“Wh…what you doing?!” he gasped almost panicked as much as his lungs.

Bruce was happy to see his agitation because he knew that unsettling the ‘’opponent’’ was the first step for the victory. He detached his eyes from Superman’s abdomens and locked eyes with him completely calm and determined.

Clark shuddered from arousal under this stare and his face became all hot which became even worse upon realization. And Bruce’s calm was so irritating.

“You’re afraid that you will shatter my paralyzed lower body…however my upper body functions perfectly…” he said slyly and Clark was reminded of Selina: those two could easily have been real siblings, he thought fleetingly.

“I doubt it!” he snapped. “Especially your brain!”

Bruce narrowed his eyes and – damn! - that look was a turn on…

“You’ve been suppressing your needs too long…and mine…” for the first time Bruce’s sharp cheekbones were colored pink.

“You don’t have to do this…” he almost pleaded. “I know how horrid this was…”

Bruce’s eyes flashed angrily as he realized what Clark wanted to say: his past.

“Exactly: I don’t have to do it – I want to do it. So: shut up…” he pressed his palms on Clark’s oversensitive breasts and pushed him down brushing his nipples that traitorously had erected; the most powerful being on Earth unable to stay up. “Let control to me!”

_You always had it, Star…_ he thought and sighed. But immediately his eyes protruded feeling feathery fingers trailing slowly and gently his pelvis’ V downwards to open slightly his thighs. Bruce’s fingers caressed the soft flesh at his inner thighs ascending to his hipbones sending electric currents to his spine.

“This is the way you must do it, child!” Ra’s’ face was distorted from anger.

_Ra’s was naked below the waist with a red faced Bruce kneeled between his legs. His eyes were tearstained realizing the rage of his master which was justified since they were half an hour here and Bruce wasn’t able to obey._

“I…” he mumbled lowering his eyes to the floor “I’m sorry, Master…I can’t…”

“I know you’re doing this all the time for Falcone!”

_Ra’s’ tone gradually increased and Bruce was shaking; his shoulders were slumped and his eyes tightly shut: his Master was right but it wasn’t the same what they asked and what Ra’s asked…_
A surprised moan burst out of Clark’s mouth before he could think about it and then his torso arched: his own body rebelled against him… He grunted and his heart gave a thud… Oh, my God! The softest sensation he ever had: lips made of velvet, hot lips were planting small kisses following the V of his pelvis making his groin twitch in hungry anticipation as the tender kisses approached his length only to continue with his pelvis’ other side.

“I’ve never done…”

“Stop lying!” he roared and Bruce squeezed more his eyes cringing.

“I…I’m not…They just put…” he gulped a sob “it in my mouth and I just…” he sniffed and his voice was drowned.

He felt his Master’s mass moving and his enormous hands grabbing his shoulders and shaking him violently till Bruce opened his red, puffy eyes and looked shyly at him. The lion-like man’s grey eyes stabbed his.

“You’re a whore, child, you always were; yet now I’ll make you a useful one. A talented whore who will seduce his opponents with his beauty and skills” his eyebrows jerked indicatively. “And you’ll learn, boy: whether you like it or not!” he roared but seeing the boy crying he softened his tone and his thumb rubbed Bruce’s chin “Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“Now use your fingers and lips on my inner thighs and hipbones to create desire…” Bruce’s eyes widened in panic because he didn’t have a clue but Ra’s’ glare was eloquent “Now!”

“B…Bruce…” Clark really didn’t know what he wanted to say and those lips that now kissed sucking tenderly his flesh cast his mind in a fog of pleasure and his length in derangement throbbing more madly every time Bruce let a puff of hot air from his lungs caress Clark’s hot flesh, denying the contact.

His loud whine wasn’t flattering for the Man of Steel but Bruce’s magic fingers – as if his lips working his pelvis weren’t enough – brushed not very softly, not very hard his testicles and then nibbling causing Clark’s eyes roll inwards and his fists clench. He was already huffing and puffing without Bruce having touched his impatient length; his slightly open legs trembled uncontrollably – causing vibrations to the tub - and he was afraid of hitting the younger man.

“Oh…Bruce…Please…” his voice was too husky, too weak and he meant to ask Bruce to stop so to not get hurt by his unchecked boiling body. But those rosy, soft lips began trailing with pecks his throbbing length and new waves of hot sweat ran his face, body and especially the inner of his thighs. “Ppplease, Star, MORE!”

His Master’s moans and grunts of surrender filled the semi dark training room.

“Do it, child!” he roared. “Already!”

Bruce could hear Ra’s’ teeth rattling.

“Superman will be your total victim…” he huffed a bit relieved as the tip of his length was engulfed by Bruce’s wet mouth.

Clark huffed and puffed supported in his forearms, his torso semi raised: how much more Bruce was going to torture his hurting member by just making small sucks and strolls through his throbbing length; he felt the big vein there ready to explode when Bruce’s slightly rough tongue licked the
“Star…you’re killing me…” he whimpered; the fact that Bruce’s breaths were calm as they burned his hot flesh pissed him.

Clark felt a smile on the soft flesh that tortured him and then his already hard member was welcomed in Bruce’s hot mouth and the Man of Steel just slumped on the hot porcelain, surrendering to his tormentor. His head lolled backwards and his eyes were closed, he sighed satisfied.

But then he jerked upwards, his back making an arch as Bruce’s lips were massaging in a steady rhythm strongly and then softly his sensitive member, the beating vein there bomed as his heart and lungs. Bruce’s tongue took action only rarely just to enhance the effect of his lips’ massaging moves; slowly upwards causing new streaks of sweat in every pore of Clark’s body – his face was stressed and his neck arched with its veins bulged giving loud rasps and sobs that became cries when Bruce’s nails brushed a bit rough his swollen testicles. Fire was breaking his bones…

Bruce’s heart was beating heavily; listening to Clark’s moans and cries was the only satisfaction he needed because he knew that he was making that man happy. He was hard trained to do this even without looking so he glimpsed at Superman’s sweaty, red face that gave the impression of letting out steam; his mouth was agape unable to close due to the waves of moans, sobs and saliva breaking his defenses; his eyes were closed but Bruce could see them moving under the eyelids; soaked locks had stuck on his face making him look even more beautiful. Clark’s fisted hands had relaxed in abandonment as his member became rock hard in his mouth.

And then Bruce felt it and as always dread flooded him: Clark’s hips were jerking upwards, thrusting in his mouth and Bruce had to recruit his training to not bite to escape. Clark couldn’t stop his hands from cupping Bruce’s hair but thankfully he managed to restrain them from dragging Bruce’s mouth.

“It ain’t my fault yar lips are made for blowjobs, prince…”

New cold sweat drenched his back as Chill’s hands grabbed his head to thrust deeper gagging him and that pleasant feeling of salty, delicious flesh was replaced by acid. His heart lost many beats as Chill’s enormous length surged deeper hurting his throat. He couldn’t draw a breath; he couldn’t escape, he shouldn’t escape…his legs were dead. His respiration became frantic and his fingers clenched sensitive swollen flesh on their own accord, causing a long groan of pleasure: no, it wasn’t Chill… Bruce closed his eyes: Clark, thankfully, couldn’t in his state sense his distress so he had to continue.

Bruce continued pumping with his lips the flaming flesh that boosted from the powerful hips thrust faster and more frantically almost desperate. His experience told him that soon his lover would reach his climax and braced himself. But then Clark’s gentle hands caressed his locks and cupped his face drawing him upwards to nestle in his safe chest just before Clark’s torso arched more and the Man of Steel cried his explosion.

Clark’s chest was heaving following his frantic respiration and heartbeat and he cuddled the younger man. Bruce clung to him still shaken from Chill’s scowl and snigger but not wanting Clark to figure, kissed lightly the older man’s broad chest, letting his cheek touch the bulged breast.

The first thing Clark saw as soon as he managed to persuade his eyes to connect with the world leaving their pleasant mist was Bruce’s soaked messy locks. He kissed the top of his head and tightened his one arm hold but Bruce didn’t lift his eyes. Clark caressed Bruce’s sweaty, cold cheek tenderly and sparkling eyes locked with his.
“Why you did that?!” Clark rasped out of breath.

Bruce’s eyes flashed and the healthy part of his body raised depriving Clark from his sweet heat.

“You didn’t like it?”

Clark’s heart was still beating fast as his soft member and Clark still remembered his moans, sobs and cries – thank goodness, that house was perfectly soundproof.

“Are you kidding me, Star?” he rolled his eyes. “I’m still boneless...paralyzed” really he didn’t have any strength to move except than for caressing or kissing Bruce.

Bruce smirked and lolled his head.

“I’m glad now we’re two…”

Clark chuckled.

“So revenge was your motive?” he teased and twirled with his finger a stray lock in Bruce’s cheek.

Bruce’s eyes narrowed playfully and his lips twitched slyly.

“Rendering Superman helpless is priceless…” he shrugged and placed his head on Clark’s chest.

“You wanted to give me the enjoyment you believe I was deprived…and you did it. But what about you?”

“I enjoyed it as much as you.”

“Star, you’re the bravest, strongest person in the entire universe…and I feel so lucky you love me so much…”

He knew that only endless love could persuade Bruce do what he just did. Yet his Star didn’t answer keeping his eyes closed.

They stayed silent, Clark caressed slowly Bruce’s locks wondering whether the younger man really enjoyed it or did it only for him; he felt elated, revived as every time they made love, however now he was calm pondering. Bruce’s breath on his skin was so soothing yet he couldn’t stop himself from speaking.

“You never spoke to me about what Bane and Talia did to you…” he bit his lip as soon as he uttered it realizing that he just ruined the moment.

Bruce opened his eyes but didn’t look at his face.

“You told me that you smelt it” he said dryly, indifferently.

Yes, he had…He closed his eyes and sighed.

“I know but you should talk about this.”

Bruce tensed and Clark felt it and rubbed soothingly his back wanting to calm him yet at this very
moment Bruce hated that.

“Any luck on finding Talia?” Bruce asked to change the subject.

Clark understood his effort.

“No but I hope she died…” his voice was dark. “She raped you and stole your semen…”

Bruce jerked in his arms and Clark sensed even his Star’s lower body rising which meant that Bruce’s mind ruled his body into moving. The younger man’s eyes were widened, flashing menacing.

“Bane spilt everything! OK, I was expecting that from him but not you repeating it!” he clenched his jaw.

Clark pressed his lips and brushed Bruce’s back willing him to lay again on him and stop exhausting his body that wasn’t able to carry his mind’s power and will.

“Easy, Bruce…Relax, please…Let your body lay down now…” but his Star was too tense and Clark cupped his face planting soft kisses all over. “It’s OK…My fault…I’m losing it every time I think again of everything he…they did to you.”

Bruce freed his own body and lay on the porcelain but Clark rolled his body and met Bruce’s wild – so sexy – eyes with his puppy ones.

“Alfred would kill me if you get a cold while under my care…” he pouted.

Bruce shook his head.

“I don’t want him turned to a killer…”

He brought his body close to Clark’s and Superman lay flat on his back so that Bruce’s body wouldn’t touch the cold material. However he was feeling the younger man’s reluctance and hesitation so nuzzled his cheek like he saw Hero doing.

Bruce realized Clark’s effort and smiled which gave Superman the courage to lock their lips.

“Nice way I return the favor, huh?” Clark whispered.

“There’s nothing for you to return” Bruce almost snapped. “And it wasn’t your fault: it was my decision.”

Clark sighed and his mouth dove in Bruce’s wet locks.

“You counted on me to be there on time and to find you immediately even if they captured you but I failed you in both… I wasn’t there and they took you and then Selina was who found you and you saved yourself and us all.”

Bruce pecked Clark’s throbbing heart.

“I know that Bagdana delayed you…” he said decisively.

Clark searched his eyes.

“How?”
“I saw it when he was talking to me…”

Clark felt fire exploding inside him.

“He tormented you while you were captive and vulnerable!”

“He couldn’t approach physically because Talia had Ubu set repellants all over the place yet he was communicating with me spiritually. He offered to save me…”

Clark raised his head to eye better his Star but Bruce didn’t meet his eyes keeping his head on Superman’s chest.

“And you preferred to be tortured than accept his help?” he asked awed.

Bruce mumbled indifferently but didn’t make a move and Clark kissed his shoulder where the scar from a stab wound stood.

“I’m glad you sent him back in the Hell where he belongs!” Clark gritted his teeth.

But then his stare became blank because he saw again the bed where Talia had Bruce and then Bane’s words transformed into scenes. Bruce flat on the mattress completely paralyzed below the neck due to Talia’s bullets. Bane bounding crudely his hands on the headboard to make his suffering graver and then stripped him violently and… Clark gulped the big knot in his throat that formed again as he imagined that giant monster thrusting with malice, with all his power to Bruce’s sensitive body; he shuddered imagining the pain, the hurt, the humiliation, the despair of being unable to resist…

He returned hastily to the bathroom’s reality because those feelings were too painful and he couldn’t bear them. Bruce’s narrowed eyes were there, watching his and Clark touched his lips on Bruce’s forehead without managing to soften the younger man’s angry eyes.

“It wasn’t your fault!” Bruce repeated and Clark just cupped the back of his head and captured his lips kissing passionately to erase those images.

He stopped the kiss only to not exhaust Bruce’s lungs yet his hand continued cupping Bruce’s head and Clark’s lips stayed a thread from the younger man’s.

“I should have killed Bane for what he did to you and to stop him from bragging…” he whispered looking at Bruce’s sweetened eyes.

“No, this is not you!” Bruce breathed “You’re not a killer.”

Clark closed his eyes and shook his head; his hands touched Bruce’s neck and then trailed tenderly his shoulders, upper arms to take his hands and kiss them.

“You have idolized me, Star; I’m not a Saint” he inhaled. “I’ve killed” Bruce made to protest but Clark silenced him with a peck on the lips. “I want you to have the right impression of me; to know everything: when I had just started my action to protect people, the last survivors of my planet tried to invade Earth. They almost defeated me but I managed to overcome their superior forces and fight back” Bruce’s sparkling eyes were watching him avidly and Clark licked uncomfortably his lips blinking. “In the end, it was their leader, General Zod and me… We fought for hours endangering the humans around us and then I was able to overcome his resistance and subdue him…” Clark’s voice cracked.

“Clark…”
But Clark kissed him again and shook his head.

“Let me finish, Bruce…I gripped his neck and tightened my arm hold…I knew that I was choking him but I also knew that if he lived he’d attack again and threaten innocent people…” Bruce’s eyes were so sympathizing that warmed him and encouraged him to admit “And I tightened more and more…till he died in my arms…by my hand…”

Bruce caressed Clark’s cheek and his stare became more decisive.

“Listen to me, Clark: you didn’t kill him. General Zod is alive” Clark closed his eyes and shook his head exasperated. “Yes! You tightened your chokehold enough to knock him out but you didn’t finish him off. You couldn’t kill him off even if you decided to do it.”

Clark was shaking constantly his head and finally opened his eyes which were almost angry.

“You don’t know anything!” he snapped but seeing the frown on Bruce’s brow softened his tone. “And how would you know? When that happened you were – what? – fourteen? Falcone was holding you prisoner: you don’t know the facts!”

Bruce took his hands from Clark’s face and that really hurt Clark but Bruce inhaled.

“You took his ‘corpse’ to the Phantom Zone, right?” he asked confidently.

Clark’s eyes narrowed: nobody knew that.

“Have you ever checked after?” Bruce stressed every word.

The Man of Steel was speechless and his hands on their own accord cupped Bruce’s cheeks.

“No, Bruce, I didn’t: my conscience was and is heavy for that deed so I didn’t want to return to that” his blue crystal gaze became intense. “How you know all these, Bruce?” Clark saw Bruce’s strong eyes tremble. “How do you know about the Phantom Zone and that Zod wasn’t dead but only unconscious?”

Bruce turned his gaze elsewhere: he knew all these were true but he didn’t know how he knew it.

“I…I don’t know…” he mumbled and looked at Clark’s knitted eyebrows. “I don’t remember…maybe Ra’s told me…but I’m sure you didn’t kill him: you don’t have it in you to take a life.”

Clark read Bruce’s uneasiness for being unable to remember and wrapped his arms around him planting soft kisses to his locks.

“I’ll check it, Bruce…”

He nodded.

“Yes, because we should make sure that he won’t escape.”

Clark chuckled and cocked an eyebrow amused.

“Nobody can escape Phantom Zone, Bruce…”

Bruce tilted his head on the side and looked Clark challengingly.

“If Ra’s Al Ghul found a way to reach it, then someone else could achieve it too…” his eyes darkened and Clark nodded.
“Point taken!” he didn’t know if he should feel relieved or worried from Bruce’s revelation: if it was true… because the youth didn’t remember where he learnt all this and Crane had tampered with his memory, so all these could just be Bruce’s willful thoughts; Clark accepted it to not upset more Bruce but made a mental note to check this out.

Bruce had settled his head on the crook of Clark’s neck and the Man of Steel glued him more on his body because he felt him shivering; he rubbed his upper arms and sucked the younger man’s aroma weighing a thought. The mention of Al Ghul’s name brought something else in his mind.

“Star…” he finally decided to go ahead and Bruce murmured, his lips brushing the crook of his neck. “When I entered the League’s hideout I scanned the place and…I sensed something…strange.”

Bruce tensed and his eyes that until now were half closed widened staying completely still as his hands that caressed Clark’s granite breasts. Clark licked his lips sensing how uncomfortable the younger man was.

“It was a mummy…a mummifying corpse…” Bruce thrashed in his arms trying to detach without looking at him but Clark cupped his face and brought their eyes to lock. “You never talked about your captivity, Bruce…I mean, except some general stuff and answering Jim’s questions…” Bruce’s face was stony and his eyes frozen but Clark swallowed hard determined to continue. “This mummy was of Ra’s Al Ghul…” Bruce tensed more and Clark’s gaze became piercing “and the thing had your smell on it…” Bruce jerked his head away but Clark held him “and you had that disturbing smell on you…”

Bruce convulsed again to escape that gaze but Superman’s grip was unyielding, forcing him to meet his eyes.

“We must get cleaned…we’re late…” Bruce growled coldly and Clark sighed.

“What they did to you, Star?” he almost whispered, his voice deep. “What other torture they made you suffer?”

Bruce’s heart froze on those words more than the memories. Clark saw his eyes emptying from any emotion and his own watered because he wasn’t stupid; he could imagine what they did to Bruce.

“Did you find the mummy?” Bruce asked throaty, his eyes still blank.

“No; when I returned to search the place it was gone…”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded.

“Someone took it – maybe Talia…And Lucius told me he found strange things in LEXLABS…”

“What did they do, Bruce?” Bruce’s underground pain hurt him as much but if he took it out maybe it hurt less.

Bruce’s eyes flashed and glared at him.

“They strapped me in a coffin, Crane injected me with a highly hallucinogen drug and put Ra’s’ mummy on top of me to make me feel as if he was using me again” he snapped with steady but emotionless voice.

Clark’s breaths became uneven: that was preposterous, horrid! His eyes leaked but upon seeing Bruce piercing him with cold, still eyes appraising his reactions, sat on the tube and cuddled him on his lap tightly nestling his head on his neck kissing his locks.
Bruce was tense in Clark’s arms and would have jerked away if didn’t feel drained like Ra’s’ mummy. His eyes remained stubbornly open and unmoving; his heart thudding tired. He knew that Clark was feeling sorry for him…again: he didn’t want to make anyone miserable especially Clark; he had caused them so much pain and now he wanted to give them only happiness…But it was pointless…

Clark felt Bruce completely lax in his arms and heard how strenuous his heartbeat had become; he panicked. He cupped again Bruce’s face and looked at his eyes smiling and kissing desperate.

“I’m stupid, Star! You know how stupid I am! And how weak; I mean, they call me the man of steel but I’m shit” Bruce’s eyes began warming.

“No, you’re not!”

“They thought that they could break you with that shit” he laughed. “The idiots! They didn’t know with whom they messed and you smashed them: Selina told me that you sparred with Talia even though wounded and paralyzed” his eyes were enflamed. “You realize how happy you make me?”

Bruce didn’t answer and Clark captured his lips passionately, desperately.

“All these months my heart is flying… my body is glowing with energy as if I make love to the sun…” he pressed his lips. “You’re that sun! But I always do the wrong things…”

Bruce hesitantly caressed his cheek meeting his eyes. He smiled shyly.

“You don’t…”

Clark relieved lolled his head and smiled.

“So… you forgive your jerk alien worshiper?” his cheeks were red.

“There’s nothing to forgive and you’re not a jerk” he replied matter-of-factly. “Now, we must get clean, dress and go downstairs or else everyone will know what we did…”

“I think that they know anyways…”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah…I guess you don’t have to be a detective to figure this…”

It took only five minutes before Bruce found himself freshly washed, dried, muffled in his dark blue bathrobe and sat on the bed; even his teeth were brushed. He blinked to get over the…hurricane and saw Clark staring at his closet’s inside with only a towel covering his wet body from the hips through the calves.

Bruce followed the streaks of water that slithered slowly the perfect body to get lost inside the pelvis’ V that he worshipped a couple of minutes ago. He felt the urge to drink that water drop on Clark’s still erect dark nipple or the other just above the slope to his groin…

Clark scratched his freshly washed hair and the broad grin in his face as he turned to him told Bruce that the Man of Steel knew that his lover was constantly gaping at his body.

“Huh…Bruce, what do you want to wear?”

“I thought that no clothing serves me justice?” he arched an eyebrow and crossed his arms “or that was before you got what you wanted?” he added slyly.
But then a storm tackled him gently and he was under Clark’s half naked body, his mock pissed eyes piercing Bruce’s.

“You…you…”

“Yeah?” Bruce challenged him narrowing his eyes and then chuckled.

Clark nuzzled softly his cheek supporting his body on his arms, Bruce’s body trapped between them.

“I wish I could keep you naked all the time” he whispered in Bruce’s ear grazing the soft earlobe with his teeth relishing the waves of goose bumps shaking the younger man’s body. “Yet your naked body is only for me to admire…”

Bruce wrapped his arms around his neck and Clark plunged his lips in the crook of Bruce’s neck sucking causing his Star’s moans.

“So…” Clark yanked his head, sweat already moisturizing his face, his heavy eyelids betraying his inner desire; Bruce cupped his face. “What do you want to wear?”

Bruce let his torso slump on the mattress keeping his arms locked around Clark’s neck. He closed his eyes and sighed. Clark brushed with his thumps Bruce’s cheeks.

“My black T-shirt and black jeans” he answered defeated.

Clark kissed softly his lips and tapped the tip of his nose.

“Too Batman-ish…try something lighter. And definitely something long sleeved…The temperature outside has dropped – we’re in a mountain albeit on an island” he was already in the closet searching.

“Yeah…” Bruce snorted remaining flat on the mattress with closed eyes. “Why not a furry coat?” he added in a snarky tone.

“Someone is grumpy: you’re showing your emotions…” Clark teased him in a singsong tone and then his eyes flashed. “Mmm! Nice…Alfred has made his programming! There!” he said pulling it out and showing it to Bruce. “Nike ace pullover, blue with red details!”

Bruce didn’t open his eyes.

“You’re joking!” he snapped. “Blue and red…”

Clark’s eyebrows frowned slightly, he pouted.

“Why? I wear red and blue…”

Bruce snorted.

“Exactly! You wear it! It’s better than walking around with your…RED underwear in common view…” he sniggered and Clark realizing the teasing mood of his Star squinted his eyes and lolled his head.

“No lady ever complained…” he arched his eyebrows suggestively and Bruce’s swift opening of the eyes told him that he felt his grimace.

Bruce realized that his cheeks were hot and surely red; plus, without his awareness he was supporting his torso on his forearms.
“I’m sure their focus wasn’t on the wrapper but on the candy…” his eyes were narrow like a prowling cat’s and sparkling.

“Which candy you’re the lucky to unwrap!” Clark licked his lips and watched with speeding heartbeat Bruce lolling his head backwards letting his neck stretch begging to be kissed and sucked, his closed eyes urging Clark who was ready.

“Someone is freakin’ cocky!” Bruce snorted but then smiled. “There’s a dark brown Nike Ace pullover and dark blue jeans” Bruce’s indifferent voice reminded Clark of his…difficult mission: dressing Bruce.

So despite his own words Clark began dressing himself in order to postpone covering Bruce’s body. But the younger man to make Clark’s duty more difficult relaxed his body flat on the mattress and untied the bathrobe’s belt to push the fabric on his arms leaving his body completely exposed.

Clark sighed: Bruce’s even breath was making his breasts and abdominals move slowly, sensually, the cute belly button dancing seductively dizzying the Man of Steel. Ugh! This was the most demanding job for Superman…yet he had promised Alfred. So the only way was getting it done as fast as possible.

His gratitude for his super speed was greater than ever when in just half a minute Bruce was perfectly dressed and groomed without any incident.

Clark heaved him in his arms in bridal style and his nose and mouth were drawn to Bruce’s neck to suck that intoxicating smell; he had his eyes closed, his teeth grazing softly but a knock on his calves drove him out of his haze. He turned surprised and then looked inquiringly at Bruce.

“My transportation…” he said quietly and Clark settled him feathery on the chair aware that although Bruce liked being in his arms he didn’t want that due to his disability.

Dick was heading to the building where his granny’s apartment was. He was carrying his school bag and his face was morose: last year he was returning home by bus with Brian sitting next to him and then held Brian’s hand as they walked from the stop to their home, carrying his brother’s bag along with his – Brian’s school bag was always too big and heavy for the eight year old.

His granny insisted on him taking the school bus and waited him at the pavement under the building to pick him up: she was still scared that Joker would snatch him again. Dick twitched his lips annoyed: the scum was rotting in Arkham and he wasn’t afraid so every day returned on foot.

A bike was moving on the side of the road following him yet Dick had no mood to acknowledge the asshole so kept his pace without raising his eyes.

The horn startled him and he turned ready to snap but upon seeing the driver goggled.

“What’s up, man?!” Jason tittered. “Yar such a stroppy-ass! I’m followin’ ya for half an hour and ya stare the cement: ya sniff at me?” a cigarette was stuck in his mouth and Dick rolled his eyes.

“What are you doing here, Jason?” he asked exasperated.

“Getting’ ya to yar granny safe an’ sound!” he answered pompously. “Ya know that a good boy like ya shouldn’ walk alone?”

Dick jerked his head annoyed and frowned.
“Give me a break, smartass! Your school is far from here…”

Jason patted the handles of the bike with pride.

“No problem, babe!”

Dick clenched his teeth.

“Stop playing the big guy! You’re only ten, for fuck’s sake!” Jason’s jubilant face became grim and Dick regretted his words because when his friend laughed he reminded him Brian… “You came to show off your bike” his frown became deeper “your mother bought you a bike?” he inquired disbelievingly.

Jason loll’d his head backwards and crossed his arms over the leather jacket he wore.

“Naaaah! She has her own needs…I thought yar sayings about Batman being dead an’… I played upon…” he grinned broadly with self-pride.

Dick widened his eyes in disapproval.

“You stole it?!”

Jason rolled his eyes.

“What a dork! And I’d been strollin’ with it in daylight?! I know Gotham’s pigs aren’t the smartest but still… I worked hard to buy that babe! For months I’ve been stealing tires an’ sellin’ them.”

Dick looked away and shook his head exasperated.

“And they sold a bike to a ten year old?”

Jason shrugged.

“I love Gotham, dude! Comin’?!” Jason asked impatient. “That bag looks too heavy…”

Dick licked his lips for a second indecisive and then mounted the bike.

“You’re going to kill us…” the older boy said grudgingly.

“Naaaaah! I’m a responsible rider, babe” he wore the helmet he had hanged from the handle.

“There’s a spare in the case” and after Dick wore it started the engine “hold on!”

Dick clutched Jason’s waist just a second before the bike gave a jolt and surged forwards. He rolled his eyes: he was stupid for trusting the driving skills of a littl’ punk who wanted to play the adult… creep. Yet it was a nice feeling the world blurring around you giving the impression of escape…

“Stop! Stop!” he cried to his driver’s ear and pinched him in the ribs for emphasis – something caught the corner of his eye.

Jason halted abruptly and Dick bumped into him holding the younger boy to not fall.

“Wha’ the fuck?!” Jason snapped. “You want us killed? Ya stupid brat?!”

Dick pinched him harder in the same spot because the helmet thwarted him to slap the back of Jason’s neck.
“Ouch!”
“I saw something, you dumbass!”
Jason lolled his head to the side.
“So what?”
Dick gritted his teeth and pulled off his helmet exasperated.
“I saw two guys with ski masks threat someone in the alley we passed!”
Jason took off his helmet too and smirked.
“It’s afternoon, man…Robbery at this hour?” he rolled his eyes.
Dick punched him in the shoulder.
“Gotham to Jay, remember! A briefcase always draws attention and crooks…”
“Who cares?” Jason pouted. “Yar granny waits!”
“I care! What if they kill the man?”
Jason crossed his arms.
“What if ya saw wrong?”
But Dick had already dismounted and hanged his school bag at the bike’s handle.
“I’m going to make sure whether you coming or not!”
Jason rolled his eyes and dismounted too.
“Wait!” he called at Dick’s back and he halted turning slowly to him. “Call the police.”
“It’ll be too late! Come!”
He grabbed his pal’s hand and dragged him along.
“I don’ wanna ruin yar heroic fantasy but we’re kids; what we’re suppose do?”
Dick smirked at him.
“The grand thief is scared?” he jeered him and then made him a silencing gesture as they reached the entrance of the alley.
Dick was right: two men in ski masks held a man at gunpoint barking to give them the briefcase. Thankfully, they weren’t bulky and their voices indicated teens.
He turned to Jason who was fuming.
“Put on your helmet and stay here” he whispered and wore his, grateful that the helmet glass was dark.
The crooks didn’t have a clue on what hit them when Dick with two summersaults reached them and kicked the gun from the hand of one tackling his leg into tossing him on his partner; they formed a
mass on the cement, their guns clinging some feet away and Dick grabbed the victim’s hand.

“Let’s go, sir!”

The well-dressed man ran for it without looking back and Dick did the same but suddenly his feet stuck on the cement dragging him down: one of the crooks had grabbed him from the ankle and now was on him.

“Ya mess’d our job, asshole! Ya be sorry, bastard!” his hands grabbed the helmet to remove it but a deafening click stopped him.

Dick rasping from his heart’s stampede saw Jason holding one of the guns, the other on his waistband, and pointing at them; the helmet made him look strange and threatening and Dick smiled more so since the crooks looked really scared.

“Get off, ya lousy horseass sonovabitch!” the younger boy changed his voice and his usual slang made an impression.

The crook on Dick stood trembling, his hands as his partner’s on the air. Dick kicked the crook that caught him on the balls and with an elegant jolt stood next to his friend.

“Nice work, J! Let’s go now!”

Yet the younger boy seemed not listening brushing the gun in his hand, his breaths swallow with excitement. Dick pulled his elbow gritting his teeth.

“LET’S GO!” he stressed every word and his eyes widened seeing Jason’s finger hardening on the trigger. Dick felt sweat.

But then police sirens suddenly were fast approaching and Jason seemed to wake which Dick took advantage of to pull his friend backwards till the exit of the alley. But as the boys were walking backwards something stopped them.

“Give me the guns!” someone spat at them and the boys looked at the stranger startled.

The man clenched his teeth impatient, snatched the gun from Jason’s hand and the other from his belt, wiped their grips and threw the objects at the bags of garbage that were piled there. He grabbed the boys from the collars and dragged them towards Jason’s bike.

Dick turned his head and saw police officers swarm the alley. He raised his eyes to the stranger’s face while Jason thrashed in his grip.

The man released them in front of the bike and Dick noticed that a small Ford was clumsily halted there. Jason patted exasperated his leather jacket and pulled his helmet fuming.

“Ya fucker!” he spat at the stranger who smirked at him.

“I get you’re the new Avengers? Gotham edition?” he jeered and Jason kicked him in the calf. “Easy, boy, easy!” he cackled. “What you would have done, badass, when cops arrived?” he shook his head seeing the two boys goggling. “Your friend is a tough nut, huh, Dick?”

Dick frowned not only because the man knew his name but also because he seemed familiar with his black a bit receding hair, his blue eyes and thick eyebrows.

“Are you both OK?” he asked concerned kneeling before the boys.
Jason cursed and spat at the cement but Dick was looking intensely at the man.

“You were watching us: who are you?” he demanded coldly.

The stranger licked his lips and nodded.

“You’re right; you don’t know me. Tony Zucco.”

Dick’s eyes widened.

“My father’s coach?!”

The man smiled and his eyes warmed.

“I’m glad you know this… I had the honor to work with your father… You look a lot like him.”

Jason rolled his eyes: he didn’t like that man and Dick’s amazed look was annoying.

“Ya got to be kiddin’ me!” the ten year old fumed.

Zucco stood up and walked to the car next to the bike and opened the door.

“C’me on, boys, I’ll drive you home.”

Jason put his foot on the cement, crossed his arms and set his jaw.

“I ainta go anywhere with ya, dude! C’me, Dick!” he mounted his bike.

Zucco cocked an eyebrow.

“Aren’t you a bit young to drive a bike?”

Jason showed him his middle finger and the adult laughed. He saw Dick ready to wear his helmet.

“I’d like to see your granny again, Dick, and share memories from the days with your father…If you want of course”

Dick lowered his helmet and gave it to Jason; then he took his school bag determined despite the younger boy’s rage.

“Yar kiddin’, man! Ya don’t know that punk!”

But Dick was already in front of the open door.

“Jay, you know his name in case I get lost” he looked at the stranger’s smiling face. “Which I don’t believe…See ya!”

Zucco grinned at Jason and waved at him as returned to the driver’s seat. Jason shook his head disapprovingly.

“As if we’re sure this is his real name…” he wore his helmet determined to follow them. “Jerk!”

Dick had his elbow on the car’s window and watched the street to their apartment building; Zucco was casting glances at him smiling warmly.

“You know, Dick; I wanted to come earlier…” he huffed. “To the funeral…by the way…I’m sorry for your family. It was horrible…” he shook his head.
Dick lowered his eyes and stared at his palms.

“Why you didn’t come?”

Zucco turned to him and gave a crooked smile but didn’t answer, just looked at the side mirror.

“You know that your badass friend follows us?”

Dick nodded.

“To make sure you won’t do anything amiss.”

Zucco chuckled.

“I wouldn’t dare! With two blocks that fight criminals” he made his voice grave. “One with impressive athletic moves and the other with his ease with guns…” he shook his head. “I’d be completely stupid, huh?”

But Dick had stayed at the ‘impressive athletic moves’. He turned staring at him eagerly.

“You mean that?”

“What?” Zucco asked pretending ignorance.

“You saw my movements and found them impressive?” the boy asked hungrily.

Zucco nodded.

“Uhu…You have your father’s style and I detect his talent…” he locked his fervent eyes with Dick’s moved ones.

Jason seeing that the Ford was slowed to park in front of Dick’s building remained a bit far but didn’t leave till he saw Zucco opening the door for Dick and Ms. Turner approaching the car.

Dick saw puzzled his granny frowning at Zucco and grabbing her grandson from the hand as if afraid of the man. Zucco half closed his eyes amused and grinned.

“Hello, Ms. Turner! So glad to see you again after all these years.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked aggressively her grip on Dick’s hand tightening.

Zucco blinked innocently and pouted.

“See my nephew, of course…My cousin’s boy” he smiled to the boy and shrugged as if saying to him that this was the reason he didn’t come to the funeral. As they turned to the building entrance, Zucco smirked at Ms. Turner back as she dragged the boy inside. “It was a pleasure for me too!”

“What’s the matter?” Dick asked his granny as soon as the doors of the lift closed.

Ms. Turner took some breaths and rubbed her forehead.

“I don’t want you near that man AND I told you to take the school bus” she realized from Dick’s frown that she was yelling and closed her eyes; she cupped her grandson’s cheeks. “I’m sorry, sweetie…”

“He’s my dad’s cousin?”
Ms. Turner rolled her eyes.

“‘Yes, he is’ she huffed desperately.

The boy narrowed his eyes.

“And his trainer. He just wants to see me: why is that so wrong, granny?”

The lift clinked and the doors opened. Ms. Turner looked Dick in the eyes.

“After twelve years?” she pointed to him and led the way to their apartment.

The alarm clock on the nightstand read two in the morning.

Bruce was ‘trapped’ in Clark’s hot body in a tight cuddle, one arm of steel wrapping his back and the other his chest, making his breast the pillow for Bruce’s head.

Clark’s relaxed, slow breaths brushing Bruce’s lips as the younger man watched his closed eyes in sleeping. He knew that Clark wouldn’t sleep unless he slept first and lowered his vitals in sleeping mode and then Clark succumbed and fell asleep. Bruce knew that Superman didn’t need much sleep but he cherished sleep when happy; on the other hand, Bruce couldn’t sleep for the same reason…

Joy… Or anyway good mood, a flying feeling in his chest and… he liked to watch the night sky from the large rectangular balcony door of his room. The sky was covered with heavy clouds but Bruce loved it as much as the clear sky they enjoyed during dinner and afterwards. He couldn’t sleep because he replayed that evening.

The gathering of his friends around the square glass table on the great balcony. Apart from the secret solar lighting in the titanium-glass railing Tony had set floating rectangular lanterns of many colors.

Tony… Bruce hardly muffled a laugh seeing again Ironman – yes, Ironman, the red and gold metallic armor – entering the balcony holding a large platter with sternly positioned pieces of pastitsio and… an apron covering his torso through his thighs.

“‘Ladies are suckers for DAT hot body in apron…” he winked to him. “Only apron… And poor Tony thought that apron and super sexy Ironman would melt a cruel, punishing heart…”

Pepper had arched her eyebrows.

“You’re in the right path, cowboy… keep trying”.

Alfred had served them and took Hero from Bruce’s lap to put him on the floor where a bowl with cat food awaited him.

“No petting while eating, sir” he had pointed to him firmly and poured some antiseptic to Bruce’s hands.

“You’ll eat with us, right?” he asked worried that Alfred’s butler training would take him away but the kind man grinned.

“A good butler never disobeys his young master, right?”

The night was magic: the deep blue sky was cloudless and filled with cheerful stars that surrounded the slim slice of the moon. A light breeze made pleasantly cold the environment and more intense the...
scent of the pine wood that covered slope. The tittering of birds and the distant sound of the sea reached their balcony. Bruce closed his eyes rejoicing but returned hastily to his surroundings when felt Selina’s sly eyes.

“I hope you enjoyed as much as he…” she winked.

Despite his training Bruce almost lost his fork.

“What?”

“You’re still flashed, kiddo and he glows…”

Bruce let his fork and brought his palms over his cheeks which indeed were still hot. Selina chuckled.

“He always glows…” was the only remark Bruce made glancing at Clark who was talking with Alfred hopefully about other things than that.

Selina twitched her lips and snorted.

“Yes…” she raised an eyebrow smugly. “I sensed some vibrations earlier…” she whispered slyly.

“Greece is a country of earthquakes…” Bruce answered nonchalant and Selina’s eyebrow cocked more.

“Centered in your bathroom…” she stressed each word and Bruce gulped, his face red hot, and his friend winked and nodded. “Go, kiddo: give the super-hunk a run for his money…”

Bruce’s eyes remained widened in embarrassment and Selina grinned broadly rubbing her friend’s back, Superman eyeing his Star as much flashed having overheard.

When the food on the table was finished Alfred stood to bring the dessert when Tony suggested have their dessert on the beach. During their stay almost every night went to the beach to eat ice cream.

“I’ll take Bruce!” Clark hurried to stand beside Bruce.

Tony widened his eyes.

“Nooo kidding! That’s a surprise!”

“I’ll take Hero too!” Clark reddened and Bruce took Hero.

“No problem…I’ll have the two lovely ladies for myself…if I’m not stabbed on the road…” he rolled his eyes.

“Or you ditch us on a tree branch…” Pepper snapped with her arms crossed.

As many nights as Bruce had spent on the beach always found them magical...

Tony gathered logs and Clark lit a nice fire with his heat vision. They savored their triangle shaped desserts and then Tony did something to his wristwatch and music played in crystal quality.

The sly billionaire took Pepper and began dancing, winking at him.

“Mr. Stark, I think you brought us here on purpose to avoid your punishment!” Pepper remarked and Tony widened his eyes in mock hurt.
“What punishment? You mean the one including a pair of handcuffs and blindfold?”

Pepper punched him in the shoulder.

Bruce chuckled and urged Clark to dance with Selina who was tickling Hero’s belly trying to evade the kitten’s paws. For a couple of minutes he watched them dancing but soon Hero bored of chasing Selina ran to him to resume his game.

And then he heard it although Superman was floating to him. Selina took Hero in her hands and Clark stretched his hand for Bruce to take. He wanted to dance with him and Tony with Pepper had stopped their dance to see.

He had shaken his head smiling.

“I can’t walk, Clark…”

Clark pouted and cocked an eyebrow.

“I’m not walking either…” he gestured at his floating feet and Bruce gave him his hand.

Clark pressed him on his body and twirled them in the melody; Bruce was staring constantly in Clark’s adoring eyes, his smile making his eyes sparkle cheerfully. But Bruce couldn’t relax his face because he didn’t want to lose any detail from Clark’s beautiful face that the reflections of dancing flames on it made him think of a powerful god whom every man and woman loved so desperately that killed themselves for his sake.

Clark had frowned as if suspecting Bruce’s thoughts and Bruce hastened to loosen his intense stare and smile, brushing Clark’s raven locks that the sea salty breeze slowly waved. He felt Clark’s arms tighten more on his waist and let his head lean on his shoulder as the sound of the splashing waves accompanied ideally the song’s melody.

A lightning cracked the horizon followed by a faint thunder…the storm was on the other side of the sea but would come to them soon…

Bruce looked at the sleeping man-god: so beautiful!

A sudden wind shocked the trees and Bruce saw the sky webbed by lightning. The open window was already bringing the smell of rain in his nostrils before sparse tap-tap announced the coming of the rain. Bruce loved the sound and smell of rain; exactly like when it rained in the Manor.

The temperature dropped very fast and that woke Clark who pecked and nuzzled Bruce’s cheek before hurrying to close the window.

“Leave it” he said and Clark complied: he knew other ways to keep his Star warm.

Clark was very glad to return to the bed resuming his cuddling tighter this time capturing Bruce’s lips.

“You love the rain, huh?” Clark smiled. “Me, too, I remember in Smallville when I was a kid I loved to stand under the rain relishing the smell of wet grass; my Ma was calling me inside despite the fact I couldn’t get sick…” he smiled.

Bruce remained silent looking at Clark’s face and the older man cupped his face searching his eyes for answers.
“When I was under the debris in the factory” he said calm “when I knew that I had only some seconds of life…”

Clark couldn’t listen to this, it pained so much and the rain raised so much his spirits that he didn’t want anything to spoil it. He kissed Bruce’s forehead.

“Don’t think about that, Bruce…”

“The only think I was regretting was that I wouldn’t have the chance to see my loved ones again… You… see you a last time to explain…to tell you…”

“Sssss…”

“Clark” he whispered determined “I… I think… I love you…”

Clark nestled Bruce’s head in his chest caressing his locks. He knew how hard was for Bruce to say that… and that was a feat for that man to open his battered heart to a stranger, Clark, and break the chains into loving him. Clark closed his eyes and sighed realizing the risk for Bruce: how disastrous would be if his emotions were betrayed. No…Clark definitely, absolutely could promise that he’d never betray that love.

“I think you should strike Bruce Wayne…” Bagdana said slyly approaching Darkseid who was sitting at his throne having returned to his real appearance.

The dark god raised an eyebrow disbelievingly.

“You argued that attacking him wouldn’t serve my goal; you claimed that revealing myself to Superman by killing his mate would lead to…” he cackled “failure.”

Bagdana looked at him unfazed from his irony.

“This assault, believe me, will serve your goal perfectly…” his eyes glimmered red for the first time since his fall and Darkseid sniffed intrigued clenching his throne’s armrest.
Chapter 7

“Ooooh! Haaaaalllooooo, my fine fellow loo-loonies!” Joker made a deep bow in front of the cafeteria bench where a sturdy orderly gave the trays with the inmates’ breakfast.

Most of the other inmates goggled at him with uninterested, blank eyes and just continued their breakfast eating mechanically like robots. They were chronic patients who didn’t know Joker.

Joker giggled.

“Uuuuuuu! I…LOVE an intelligent audience!” he winked to the Afro American orderly and pouted his lips to the offered tray.

However there were some who knew him. Victor Zsasz who after his unfortunate encounter with Batman was brought to Arkham, twitched his lips in disgust and took his toast chewing it glaring at the clown. Jonathan Crane who had chosen an isolated corner in the cafeteria frowned hearing Joker’s voice but didn’t make any movement trying to stay unnoticed.

He knew that the insane criminal was in Arkham but he didn’t believe that there would be an idiot who would let the mad dog out. He smirked: leave it to that incompetent bitch, Quinzel, to do the blunder. His eyes rolled on their own: where they found that cow? He cast some sideways glances at the jester: he looked different without his make-up, more normal, yet Dr. Crane knew better.

Crane saw with the corner of his eyes some other psychos, Joker’s former goons with history of mental illness, approach their boss and that was preposterous! They couldn’t seriously permit Joker socializing with his goons preparing who knows what!

Thankfully, the orderlies came and took the goons to another section of the cafeteria and Crane was happy for Joker’s downcast lips.

“C’me ooooon, good people! It’s a reeeeunion: have a heart!”

But the African Americal cafeteria employ glowered at him and without a word stuck the tray on his hands. Joker giggled and lolled his head towards the man.

“That’s myyyyyy guy!”

He hopped and danced crossing the cafeteria holding the tray and sniffing the air.

“Mmmm…the smell of freedom…” but then he pouted and frowned. “Naaah! That’s air freshener, disinfectant aaaaaand loony deodorant!” he lolled his head to the side. “Nice!”

Crane continued chewing his food indifferent yet cold sweat washed him as with the corner of his eyes saw Joker’s asylum shoes approaching his table. He knew about Joker’s nonsense with Wayne and the clown’s obsession – who didn’t learn this shit? Also, he was aware of the way this madman reacted when someone touched his “spouse” and he was the only one in here who did that…

He felt a cold shiver running his spine as the jester stopped right at his table. Surely, they must watch that dangerous scum; they couldn’t have just unleashed him and let him unchecked? Could they? Something inside him smirked and snorted for his panic: you don’t have to fear that stupid clown, Jonathan; you’re extraordinary after all – and even if you’re not I’m here…

“Is this seat taken?” Joker asked playfully and looked around; he raised his eyebrows and jumped on
the seat. “I hope I didn’t sat on your imaginary littl’ friend, huh?” he gave an innocent smile that
didn’t fool Crane.

“Go away…” Crane hissed without looking at him. “You’re not wanted!”

Joker jerked to the back of the chair and barked.

“Dat’s a waaaarm welcoming!” and then though he was laughing his eyes glowed menacingly.
“Nooow…” he smacked his lips “cut the buuulshit, Craaany!” he began chewing his toast
nonchalant.

Joker knew that his cute shrink’s eyes were on him watching his every movement from the one side
mirror of the interior window – the stupid paintings there were a really pathetic front. And Stark’s
stupid tricks would knock him out as soon as he stretched an aggressive finger on anyone. So he
chewed noisily his food – he needed to be sly as a viper.

Crane felt the hostility emanating from Joker’s body and shrank in his chair. However Joker quite
casually as if speaking with an old friend leaned on his elbow and stabbed him with his icy cold
eyes.

“I know you were with those motherfuckers who took Brucey” he addressed him, his nasal voice in
business matter and looked at the reinforced glass window seeing at the yard. “Niice view, huh?” he
exclaimed cheerfully and lolled his head to the side glaring at Crane. “Youuuuu” he took a forkful of
scrambled eggs “del-icious food, huh? Wayne reaaaaally cares fooor pooooor looooonies, huh?
Mmmm…” he squinted “one loooony” he pointed his plastic fork to himself. “Youuuu” he hissed
suddenly though his lips were upwards in a broad smile “helped them torture my babe: youuuu
tortured him ‘n’ I knoooow you enjoyed it…”

Crane’s eyes widened in fear, hearing the rapid changes of Joker’s tone and sensing the imminent
danger.

“You haaaaad MY boy defenseless at youuuur whims…Mmmm…tied ‘n’ unable to move ‘n’ naked”
he licked his lips, his eyes lost in a dreamy expression. “And that del-ICIOUS spectacle is only for
my charming eyes!”

Crane clenched the rim of his chair but the terror he was experiencing cast him in a thick cloud from
where something unfazed came out.

“I didn’t fuck your boy, if that’s what bothers you” he answered leaning towards Joker with eyes
filled with glee.

Joker giggled lolling his head backwards.

“I liiiiiike good jokes, budyyyy!” he yelled for the guards who were watching clenching their guns; he
smiled at Crane. “If you had, you’d have been already dead meat” he twitched his eyebrows
suggestively and Crane realized that something sharp was pricking his groin under the table.
“Yooouuu see, ‘geeeenius’ Starky believes that he can stop me before killing by monitoring my vitals
– yeeecet why on Earth should something change when I kill?! GOOD ONE, huh?” he cackled
aloud “Laugh before I rip your filthy guts out…” he whispered and Crane obeyed. “I was sure you
didn’t fuck him ‘cause you’re too pervert for that…” he lolled his head to the side and rolled his eyes
“you’re a shrink after all!”

Crane frowned; after his initial shock from feeling the sharp object on his groin he was calm,
calculating the audacious mad worm who dared to ridicule him.
Joker took his juice and sipped.

“Then what do you want?” Crane asked enraged.

Joker placed his foam cup on the table and tapped his fingers.

“Buuuuuut what else? Hmmmm… I don’t have anything to lose anyways: hundred or hundred one doesn’t make a difference, right?” he made a short council with himself and shrugged “Kill you!” Crane opened his mouth to shout but Joker hushed him. “If you scream you’ll die before they move a finger – look at them…” he pouted gesturing at them with a lopsided glance and nodded with sympathy “they’re worth-LESS.”

Crane got the message: they were indeed pathetic. And they letting Joker approach people like this made it more evident. So he had to play it cleverly.

“You said that if I had fucked Wayne I’d been already dead” he pointed with his serious voice drowning his trademark scorn. “I didn’t.”

Joker scratched his hair and leaned his head.

“Right” he nodded thoughtful. “But the other things you did to him are sicker so…we end up to the same” he laughed. “Only I do sick things to Brucey…” his eyes flashed.

Crane felt the sharp edge already ripping his skin yet the strong man inside him stared nonchalant at Joker and smirked.

“Then you’re not interested to learn what I’ve learned about that curious boy-toy…” he dragged his words arching his eyebrows suggestively.

Joker narrowed his eyes: of course he was interested. He was suspecting his spouse’s big secret but he wanted to learn everything concerning Brucey’s mystery to be sure: why that whacko lady, Morticia, did all these to get him? Fine, the lady with the gravedigger style might have wanted ransom as Stark and Freddy testified but this didn’t explain Crane’s part in all this… He wanted to unravel the mystery, possess the knowledge and then gain control of the game imposing his rules.

Crane smiled wryly even though the sharp object still grazed him; he could read the madman’s interest: Joker wasn’t stupid after all. He definitely smelled that something wasn’t right… Scarecrow yanked arrogantly his head as the pricking feeling left his groin.

Joker took his tray and stood stabbing Crane’s smug eyes; he didn’t want anyone to suspect from a prolonged stay with Crane. He had planned to gut him in a blink of the eye yet…he was a man of improvisation not plans…

“We’ll talk soon, Cran-y…” he leaned to him. “Word to anyone about our…neighborly chatting an’ my…boys” he gestured with his manic eyes to his former goons “will tell you my newest jokes…” he winked and walked away.

Crane twitched his upper lip in disgust and contempt but he was elated: with his genius could easily use both Joker and Wayne to his benefit.

“You know Alfred is watching us?” Selina mumbled to Bruce and he nodded.

“From the living room’s window…” he didn’t turn to not embarrass Alfred who always taught him
that it wasn’t kind to stare at people.

“He’d prefer to take you wherever you wanted with the jeep” she petted Hero who lay on Bruce’s lap.

“I know but I needed to stroll” he shook his head “even with the chair: Clark was to call him an hour ago but he didn’t and that worried him: maybe some emergency occurred or…he forgot him or got fed up with him…no, that wasn’t a possibility… He blushed from his arrogant thought and seeing Selina’s suspicious stare added hastily: “And…Alfred needs some rest from taking care of me and you too.”

Selina rolled her eyes.

“You’re kidding me, right? These are the best vacations I’ve ever had!”

Bruce smiled slyly.

“And the most boring…”

Selina narrowed her eyes and put her finger on her lips.

“Hm…I wouldn’t call Kostas or Argiris boring…” Bruce laughed and Selina shrugged. “Handsome, cheerful boys eager to be hospitable to a lone tourist…Though things got more interesting with Argiris…”

Bruce winked.

“That explains your sudden interest in fishing and beekeeping; the hours you were spending cleaning the fishnets and beehives…”

Selina pouted and widened her eyes innocently.

“You know how much I like helping my fellow human beings…”

Bruce snorted.

“Especially the handsome ones of male gender…”

She twisted her lip.

“…and learning new things!” she added exasperated and then rolled her eyes. “What’s a girl to do?” she shrugged as they followed the path inside the forest. “You found your mate, now it’s us, singles’ turn…”

Bruce nodded and grabbed her hand.

“You’re right…” he smiled looking up at her. “Do you think Hero will start looking too?” the kitten stared at him puzzled and Selina grabbed the animal from the armpits and kissed him.

“He is too young for that!”

Bruce lolled his head at the side.

“Imagine Alfred having 3-4 little Heroes rubbing at his legs!” he chuckled and Selina did the same returning Hero to his lap.
“Oh! That will drive him nuts! Not that he doesn’t love Hero…” the kitten meowed his agreement.

Bruce closed his eyes and inhaled deeply the cool, clean air of the forest that had the pleasant scent of the recent rain. It was so refreshing!

“It’s cold after the rain – it began looking like serious Fall… And just two days ago we ate at the balcony…” Selina said and patted Bruce’s light jacket. “Are you warm enough with this?”

Her friend tilted his head looking exasperated at her.

“Not you too, Sel… You know that I spent all my life in the cold in only a shirt.”

She nodded with blank eyes.

“A ragged, dirty, bloodstained shirt…”

Bruce gave her a tight lips grin and took her hand in his.

“Exactly; so with that jacket I’m more than warm and Alfred wouldn’t have sent me out unprotected, huh?” he slightly tightened his hold on her hand and blinked. “Sel, why you hid it from me?”

She narrowed her eyes, truly surprised.

“I don’t understand.”

He shook his head and pressed his lips.

“When you were 10 years old a nice couple was to adopt you…”

Her eyes bulged and she jerked her hand away.

“You’re wrong!” she snapped but she knew that it was futile; Bruce always double checked things. “How you know?” she demanded in a low voice but snorted. “Of course…We should have taken your PC: you’re really dangerous with that!”

Bruce took again her hand and Hero rubbed his head at Selina’s palm purring; Bruce looked at her encouraged by Hero’s help.

“The paperwork for your adoption was ready, they adored you but then you ruined everything being aggressive to them and misbehaving and they adopted another kid” he locked his eyes with hers despite her effort to avoid him.

“Why were you researching me?” she demanded coldly, really pissed with him. “Is it again that stupid obsession to find my parents, right? I told you: I don’t care! Why you don’t respect my wish? Stop poking your nose into things that aren’t your business!” she withdrew her hand and turned her back really fuming.

Bruce closed his eyes; the ‘aren’t your business’ part really hurt but he understood that Selina was trying to divert the discussion.

“Aren’t my business?” he asked calmly. “They lived in Metropolis and would have taken you there so you misbehaved to fuck up your adoption…” his eyes pierced her back taking in her head’s slight motion to turn to him. “Because if they took you there you wouldn’t be able to see me…” he concluded softly.

His chair moved closer to her and he touched her forearm.
“They were really nice people: the girl they finally adopted has a perfect life with them…” his voice was cracked “and the reports say that you as well were happy in their company” he huffed and shook his head. “You could have had a happy childhood, Sel” he lowered his eyes and petted Hero who was licking his palm to prompt him. “A good, loving family…”

Selina let a growl and turned swiftly squatting before him; her eyes were flashing angrily.

“You were the only family I ever needed and I need! And I wouldn’t ever choose a childhood without you, even perfect as you imagine it! I’d never abandon you…” her loud voice dropped “alone…to suffer alone…worse from my absence…” Bruce closed his eyes and Selina cupped his face “everyone knows that you don’t separate two siblings…” she pressed her lips.

Bruce opened his eyes and kissed her palm: they weren’t real siblings but their bond was as good or better.

“I wouldn’t exchange a night behind our garbage bin watching you eating your sandwich…smiling at me… with a life as their kid.”

He nodded: the truth was that he didn’t know how much he’d have lasted without Selina there every night yet it was too big a sacrifice…

“Still…”

Selina placed her fingertips on his lips to silence him.

“I know you wouldn’t abandon me either…whatever the price.”

Bruce’s eyes sparkled: once he did, for two years – two horrible years.

“Only to protect me from that asshole, Al Ghul…” she answered to his thought and widened her eyes “and I know it was painful for you too.”

“You’re more than I deserve, Sel…” he gazed at the green scenery “If I knew then I’d have urged you to forget me and go with these people and live a beautiful life because, honestly, what you did, what you sacrificed for my sake, was too much…” he locked eyes with her and caressed her cheek “incredibly great, unbelievable, remarkable, awe inspiring…” he kissed her cheek.

She gave a crooked grin and lolled her head.

“I didn’t want anything to change…I couldn’t imagine my life without you, I couldn’t leave you behind because…it hurt” she squinted. “Only the thought hurt…my chest…my mind” she bit her lips and huffed “I was bonded with you from the first moment…”

Bruce closed his eyes and touched his forehead to hers; he inhaled because it was difficult to say what he intended to.

“The alley behind the Opera House…The anniversary of my parents’ murders when I sneaked out to lay that withered white rose…” he felt Selina’s eyes bulge: it was her secret and till now he didn’t want to reveal that he knew. “You saw what Chill did…and for that you killed him.”

Their eyes locked again.

“I thought you didn’t figure…” Selina whispered and laughed. “Stupid girl…You’re a detective after all…”
Bruce hugged her and rubbed her back.

“At first I thought that you saw me at the alley behind Dolcetto but slowly I connected the dots: we met a night after the incident and you knew who I was – my face was known yet in the state I was then I wasn’t recognizable so only if you had seen me in the alley you would realize. Also, your eyes when you were looking at me…”

Selina coughed.

“I was too obvious, huh?”

Bruce shrugged.

“Or I was prone to attribute every sign to what Chill did since it haunted me…” he pressed his lips and his stare became more intense. “I’m sorry you had to see that…”

But Selina tightened her grip on Bruce’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t the Catwoman yet to break that sonovabitch’s bones and save you…”

Bruce laughed and Selina followed.

“We’re still those helpless, stubborn, desperately-loving-each-other kids!” he chuckled.

Selina closed her eyes and shook her head huffing.

“And I still love it, kiddo!” she exclaimed. “Mmm…and this year we’ll get the best Christmas ever!”

“No…” Bruce replied serious. “No Christmas will be better than those you gave me that year in your attic…”

Selina looked at him and kissed his cheek.

“Alone against the whole world…” she smiled; her heart beating heavily on the memory. “And then the stars glowing after the miraculous black out…”

“Alfred’s food you brought me without knowing…”

Hero meowed and rubbed his head to their chins purring.

“Hero will be celebrating with us again…” Selina said tipping the kitten’s pink nose.

Bruce caressed the animal’s head and the purring became louder.

“It’s like a friend came back… I know he’s not the same kitten…yet…”

Selina nodded.

“It’s like we started from where we left it…”

All of a sudden Hero jolted and upon landing on the dirt ran through the bushes. Selina startled jerked up and Bruce turned his chair towards the bushes worried.

“There might be foxes lurking…” he said and Selina ran at the same direction.

“I know!” she replied and seeing Bruce following: “stay here! I’ll be right back with the fugitive!” her smile was radiant and Bruce reflected it though it felt bad for staying behind.
He tried to follow her with the eyes but in an instant she was lost. He frowned and punched the armrests huffing irritated. He growled and made his chair move following the path to the glade opposite the way his friends went: Selina would find him easily there or he would hear her returning and meet her.

It was beautiful there, so peaceful...Of course, it wasn’t the first afternoon he was coming here with his friends. His entire body felt elated and calm; the bushes, the trees with their intertwined branches, the loud birdsong, the humid smell the rain had left over the nature...

He was happy and calm here but he knew he had to return to Gotham...He wanted to return to his city. He yanked his head and gazed at the clear blue of the sky, a few fluffy clouds lazily slithering to meet the sun that was still shining though the evening wasn’t too far. He closed his eyes and let the sun caress his face and the clean air strengthen his injured lung...

He heard the echo of Clark’s crystal laughter as he had taken him in his arms and lifted him to a branch to see a nest fool with young birds. Bruce had touched gingerly with the tip of his finger one of them and chuckled when the bird bit him.

"Their mother will be scared seeing us here” he said to Clark and he arched an eyebrow.

"Not to mention attacking us!” an angry bird flew frantically around them and Clark covered him from the aggressive beak.

He had grabbed him again but hadn’t returned him to the ground but placed him in another, uninhabited branch. Superman dressed in loose pants and a white T-shirt captured his lips passionately, sucking and caressing his mouth with his tongue. He was floating around him and Bruce couldn’t hold his laughter even through the kiss because their spectacle was so funny...Like two bizarre, oversized, ugly birds – literally, lovebirds...

He chuckled even now on the memory. It was far better than remembering that video Vale had published almost three months ago and since was reposted everywhere; everyone learning Superman’s soft spot for him. He wasn’t afraid of facing the relentless gossip or Superman’s enemies but it could endanger the people around him and jeopardize his secret: having to defend himself and others might force him to reveal his true skills and identity.

He frowned without tensing visibly; he sensed a change at his surroundings. He yanked his head supposedly to gaze at the trees but in reality to scan the area.

Though Bruce already knew it, jolted from surprise seeing a lean man sprawled on a tree branch. The stranger was dressed in forest green old style leather leggings and a loose tunic of the same color; he lay on a thick branch supporting his back on the tree trunk and having one leg upon another; he held a pine needle and chewed it. His black eyed stare was on Bruce and a devilish smile carved half his face.

Bruce held his heart and rasped trying to calm his breath from the supposed surprise but inside he was calculating the sudden presence that felt so odd: it was ridiculous but he felt like the nymph Daphne when she came across Apollo in the forest; only the God of Sun was blond and this man had black greasy hair that reached his shoulders reminding more of Pan and...

He mentally shook his head for his thoughts: he read too many ancient Greek myths during his staying and...well...he was strolling an isolated Greek forest.

“Kalispera” he greeted the stranger who regarded him with a cocked eyebrow and interest but without changing his lax demeanor.
“The Greek word for ‘good afternoon’…” the man frowned. “Mmm…how ‘bout sticking to English?”

“So you’re not a local” Bruce remarked and the stranger gave a broad grin and regarded him more interested.

“So you’re a clever boy, huh? Why asking directly when you can snatch your answer, right? Of course, I wouldn’t consider it clever strolling alone in a forest, especially with your history…” Bruce frowned. “Except if you hoped to meet one of my Greek counterparts…” he chuckled.

“I’m not alone” Bruce answered.

The black haired man propped himself up with a swift movement and let his legs dangle from the branch.

“Yeah! You had that hot stuff with you and your cute kitten but they left you alone and that’s bad…”

Bruce pressed his lips not bothering to hide his concern: Clark had equipped his chair with some defensive measures just in case and he could use them without betraying the alien origin of the chair since Tony Stark, the inventor was his friend.

“You know who I am and you’re watching me…” he narrowed his eyes giving a slight worried and angry tremor in his voice – he wanted to appear frightened but irritated as well.

The man shrugged his shoulders and looked around playfully.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of me, Bruce…” he huffed amused raising his upturned palms to the air.

Bruce squinted, lolling his head to the side.

“Should I?”

The stranger pointed his index at him laughing and Bruce couldn’t help but imagining him with white paint all over his face.

“Interesting specimen, you are…Ummm…I start understanding them now…”

Bruce on his part didn’t understand and that annoyed him, which had no problem showing; he turned his chair towards the clearings’ exit using the control screen to not betray the mind control aspect. Although he had his back turned to the man, Bruce could sense his frowning and… He jolted startled as if he hadn’t expected the man’s reappearance in front of him, again on a branch: really odd things, Bruce frowned: a ninja assassin sent by Talia?

But then Bruce heard it before the branch crunched and the bizarre man fell on a bush: he chuckled and saw the man’s lips twitching upwards.

“I’m glad I’m entertaining you…” the man spat in his strange accent that Bruce could connect with only another one’s and with a thud his not-so-random acquaintance vanished to reappear in another branch.

Although Bruce had already spotted him, looked around puzzled till the man cleared his throat revealing where was he. He patted the branch where he sat.

“Better now…” he muttered and turned his eyes to Bruce. “Nice chair! Superman made, huh?”

Bruce knitted his eyebrows and narrowed his eyes.
“Who are you and what do you want?”

The man scratched his nape and tilted his head to the side staring lopsided at Bruce who sensed that the stranger was puzzled from something – maybe the odd presence tried to do something because Bruce felt the Black Butterfly on his chest slightly vibrating.

“I touched a sensitive spot, huh? Humans are so strange…” he hunched. “Sorry, I didn’t think you’re keeping your affair with him a secret!”

The Black Butterfly vibrated again and Bruce discerned again a frustrated grimace in the strange man’s face.

“Why I can’t penetrate your mind?” the man asked completely casual as if saying the most common thing.

“What?!” Bruce exclaimed. “How dare you!”

The man tipped his lips puzzled.

“Ooops! The ‘penetrate’ was a wrong choice of word…” he raised his eyebrows “understandably…” he shook his head “with your penetration history…”

Bruce didn’t reply just pressed his lips, set his jaw and steered the chair to move to the opposite direction.

“You know a relative of mine!” the stranger hastened to yell reemerging once again in front of Bruce this time standing with his hands crossed, ‘startling’ him.

“Stop doing that!” Bruce exclaimed. “And I don’t know any relative of yours” though he could think of someone…

The stranger was dead serious now piercing Bruce’s eyes with his, enhancing Bruce’s awareness that he was trying again to read him.

“Because we aren’t truly relatives so we don’t have any resemblance.”

Bruce closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose shaking his head tired.

“I don’t have time or mood for this game, sir…I’ve got to return.”

“You know Thor!” the stranger said. “He is, let’s say, my brother.”

Bruce huffed: what was that now? He looked at him.

“I don’t know him” he stressed each word “I just happened to see him once or twice with Tony – nothing else” he shrugged. “So, I don’t know why you came here but I’m afraid that it was fruitless.”

The man walked casually to him and Bruce withdrew in his chair that reading his will moved backwards. The man’s black eyes flashed focusing intensely on Bruce’s face.

“If I wanted to hurt you, you wouldn’t have the chance even to blink…” he hissed quite serious and Bruce snorted inwardly. “So don’t flinch! You say that you met Thor once or twice yet my dear” his eyebrows arched sarcastically “brother is fascinated with you as the entire Asgard – and I know it’s not due only to your sex appeal…”

Bruce gritted his teeth.
“So why?” the man narrowed his eyes. “What is it that makes them so charmed by you?”

Bruce rolled his eyes and ran his hands through his locks.

“You’re kidding me… I don’t understand what you’re saying but if you’re Thor’s brother you can ask him” he shrugged.

The man smiled wryly.

“Let’s say that neither big ol’ Thor nor the other Asgardians trust me much…” he chuckled. “Fancy that…my dear Bruce.”

Bruce nodded, pouting.

“So you came here to…” he squinted “how you said it? *Penetrate my mind* to solve the mystery and then?” he frowned. “Do what?” he paled as a victim of so many atrocities would have done.

The man crossed his arms and touched his lips thoughtful.

“I’m not a pure evil God…” the man answered and Bruce arched an eyebrow. “You see” he smirked his lips “I like to cause…quality turbulence…stirring the waters and spoiling the perfect lives of the bulgy and handsome Asgardians.”

Bruce could easily discern the grudge and the scoff of the strange man – possibly because he was quite different from Thor and by extension the other Asgardians; maybe he was mocked for his appearance?

“You’re Loki…” Bruce regarded his acquaintance with collected eyes. “The God of mischief and fraud…”

Loki turned his eyes upwards huffing frustrated.

“Why not of cleverness, unconventional beauty, resourcefulness? Even Hermes enjoys better handling and he stole his brother’s cattle when just an infant! And I in fact was an adorable infant!” he arched his eyebrows.

Bruce shrugged and pouted.

“Sue the authors of Norwegian mythology…”

The sly God turned slowly his eyes to Bruce and cackled.

“Nice one, boy! Maybe I will…But where’s my manners?” he made a deep bow. “Flattered you know me, after all I’m not a diva as my muscular, hunk ‘brother’.”

“Are we done with the ceremonies? Because, sorry, but I’ve got things to do…” he looked eagerly to the exit of the clearing: Selina probably was looking for him by now.

But Loki was rapidly on him grabbing his chair’s armrests and Bruce gasped.

“I don’t see anyone missing you…” he protruded his lips mockingly but Bruce didn’t bite his bait to make him feel bad.

“What have you done to my friend?”

He shook his head and brought it closer to Bruce’s.
“Hmm…Nothing from all the fascinated things I thought when I saw her” Bruce breathed easier. “Yet I… - you said that I have the fame of mischief – so…I distorted somewhat this lovely forest into making her job difficult. But…” his lips almost grazed Bruce’s “I was referring to your Kryptonian boyfriend and your red and gold buddy…”

Bruce snapped his head on the opposite side to avoid Loki’s lips who grinned.

“It’s stupid and criminal of them to leave the littl’ red riding hood alone in the forest while the big bad wolf…” Bruce gasped seeing the lean God transforming into a big, black wolf that licked his cheek and returned to his initial form “roams around. I was hoping to see him or Stark-y…”

Bruce swallowed.

“So you came for them not for me…they’re not here so you can…leave?”

But the cunning God in a blink took the form of Hero, nestling in his lap and purring, his head rubbing at Bruce’s breast.

“Hmm…Nice boobs!” Hero remarked with Loki’s voice and Bruce grabbed him from the nape of his neck and threw him on the forest floor, the God taking his normal form before landing, giggling.

Bruce brushed the screen on the armrest, crossed his arms and his chair turned in the other direction heading for the exit only to almost bump on Loki who smirked.

“Stubborn mortal…And I thought we had a good time…”

Bruce huffed really pissed and rolled his eyes.

“Are you not going to threaten me with what Supes and IronStarky would do to me for harassing you?”

Bruce let his head roll to his shoulder.

“What do you want, Mr. Loki?”

Loki cackled.

“I like that ‘Mister’…I’m having much fun with you, Mr. Wayne” he narrowed his eyes and pouted his lips thoughtful. “Imagine the fuss if I took you with me…” Bruce’s eyes widened but inside he was fuming. “Gods, semi-Gods, mortals and…demons – am I right? - trying to find you…Mmmm… that has happened again, huh?” he leaned to him. “But why, Bruce? What’s your secret?”

Bruce sensed that something wasn’t right – something new - but didn’t show any sign although readied himself. He saw Loki frowning too regarding the sky suspicious.

And then Bruce heard it coming before seeing it: he could drive the chair away with his brain but with that man…God…whatever… he didn’t have much freedom to act; it’d be very suspicious. He clenched his teeth: clumsiness wasn’t suspicious…

Yet as soon as he tricked the chair towards the ground, Loki grabbed the chair and jolted few feet away just a second before a yellow-blue beam hit the spot where the chair just stood. Loki giggled seeing the white light that instantly enveloped the chair to protect Bruce from the danger.

Lois walked to Clark’s desk with a cunning smile on her face. She stood right next to his chair
leaning to see what had gotten Clark’s attention on the computer screen.

“Hm…You’re one of the fans of my newest interview, huh?” she asked thoughtful and a bit disappointed. “I had my fingers crossed for something more interesting.”

Clark who had heard her coming turned to face her.

“You’re not a fan of your own interview?” he arched an eyebrow. “I thought you always choose very carefully the people you interview.”

Lois crossed her arms staring lopsided at the pictures that accompanied her interview.

“Of course and I’d be quite crazy, not to mention stupid, to not take that interview…”

Clark smiled.

“But?” he prompted her understanding that there was a ‘but’ coming.

Lois tapped her lower lip with Clark’s pencil.

“I have the sense that this time I was used…you know? Chosen because I’m Superman’s favorite journalist?”

Clark frowned.

“That’s good, right?”

Lois pouted.

“I don’t know: I’d prefer to be chosen for my worth as a fighting reporter and not for my… connections or unknown reasons…” she shrugged. “Anyway. How’s Bruce?”

Clark’s eyes bulged and Lois narrowed her eyes.

“Damn!” he exclaimed and some of their colleagues looked at him surprised, so he lowered his voice, fumbling with his Smartphone. “I forgot to call him; I should have called him” he eyed the clock at the bottom of his PC screen “two hours ago! How could I?”

Lois placed her hand on his shoulder.

“I know you go to him every day; you were there – what? – four hours ago? And you’ll see him again in a couple of hours.” she sighed. “Ow! Lovesick puppy…” she shook her finger patronizingly. “Let him miss you a bit…”

Clark squatted beside him so that nobody could hear them: her friend’s paleness and eagerness to stand worried her.

“What?”

“The sensors from Bruce’s chair indicate danger” he grimaced “an attack”.

“Are you sure?” she whispered.

He shook his head and stood.

“Krypton’s technology it’s never wrong…I must leave immediately!”
She nodded and stood too.

“I’ll find an excuse for Perry” she said and Clark nodded already heading for the exit.

“Tell him I had a lead on Intergang…”

Tony was supervising with evident pride the construction site in New York. He wore a constructionist’s helmet and was listening to the head architect’s report. He beamed as the man assured him that the skyscraper would be ready in one month.

“The Avengers’ Tower!” a deep voice said and Tony turned to acknowledge Fury who just approached him.

Tony dismissed the architect.

“My inspiration, my money, my tech! Avengers need headquarters, something to reestablish the people’s trust to them after the revelations about S.H.I.E.L.D”

Fury shook his head with a thoughtful expression.

“You’re the director now so you decide. But open hours for public isn’t too much?” he sneered.

Tony tilted his head on the side and locked eyes with Fury’s sole eye.

“Now that’s a good idea! Especially, female public with bikinis!” Fury shook his head exasperated and Tony laughed. “C’me on, chum… We” he stressed the word “decided to make moi the head director but you still are the stuff director with our participation of course. We won’t let S.H.I.E.L.D. become again a shady organization.”

Fury brought his hands behind his back and gazed at the impressive skyscraper.

“Really impressive and at New York’s center to advertise the honesty of the new scheme…” Tony nodded, grinning satisfied. “I offered you my resignation when old S.H.I.E.L.D. was uprooted: I still think that maybe it would have been better for the new organization if you had accepted it.”

Tony patted him patronizingly on the back and Fury frowned at his hand.

“You still feel guilty for not suspecting S.H.I.E.L.D.’s true nature but who could?” he shrugged. “Even I” he arched his eyebrows “THE genius didn’t smell anything funny” Fury rolled his eyes and Tony nodded. “I know, I know… I don’t like you either but I trust you and your skills…and…you know too much about us to let you out of my sight!” he shrugged. “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer’’

“I’m not your enemy” the tough veteran grimaced but he frowned seeing Tony staring at his StarkStell worried. “What?” he demanded so casually that nobody would suspect anything.

“Bruce…”

Fury yanked slightly his head and Tony looked at him lopsided sensing the man’s regret and inner question.

“I’ve got to go” Tony’s armor began enveloping his body.

“Want me to call reinforcements from our local agents?”
Tony winked and Fury could hear his thought: *nice try, Fury, but I won’t bite and reveal where Bruce is.*

“I’ll do it myself if I need to” he answered as the face plate covered his smug face.

“Of course…” Fury twitched his lips and watched him vanishing rapidly at the horizon.

“How touching! He still protects you even when afar!”

Bruce glared at him but then frowned at the clearing seeing bizarre creatures flooding the space; a fence of bushes kept them hidden but Bruce was sure that the curious creatures would soon locate him because whoever sent them surely had programmed them to follow his vitals.

He found the key deactivating the shield and crawled away from his chair to the bushes to see them clearer: they were green, human sized with small wings and their jaws were covered with hundreds of sharp, needle thin teeth. Bruce frowned: they were probably androids of unregistered technology or… He inhaled thinking of Bagdana: demons… But the demon was trapped in the depths of Earth so he couldn’t be the culprit.

“I’d bet that this shield wasn’t supposed to disappear before the cavalry came…” Loki whispered cunningly in his ear having crawled along.

“Good thing you didn’t bet…”

A new blast was launched towards Bruce as a creature turned his flashing green eyes on him and Loki raised his palm in front of Bruce’s face and the beam bounced hitting the one who sent it. Both he and Bruce saw that the thing just stumbled.

“They don’t want to kill you” Loki cackled. “That’s good news! Huh?”

Bruce rolled his eyes wishing the irritating God left and indeed Loki disappeared but before Bruce even considered moving he felt strong hands grabbing and flying him under an avalanche of beams behind a wide fallen tree trunk. As soon as he was placed on the soil Loki reemerged lying beside him.

“Sorry for the start but I’m incognito here…” the God chuckled and touched Bruce’s lip that had a small bleeding scratch. “Seems like someone had the same plan as me: great minds think alike…”

Bruce was fuming: damn! That idiot!

“I wouldn’t consider your mind great!” he bit Loki’s finger and the odd God waved it laughing.

“Oh, boy! I didn’t imagine you so aggressive…” Bruce was looking at the creatures which were fast approaching them. “I like it!” he smacked his lips. “Mmmm…Superman surely has great hot times in his bed…” he blew at a creature which made to override the trunk and sent it to crush between the thick, intertwined branches of a treetop.

Bruce turned to him pissed.

“Can you just shut the fuck up and go to…Asgard?!” he spat gritting his teeth.

Loki laughed and raised his eyebrows.

“I’m on your side, babe” he turned swiftly and only his stare frozen a flying green thing. “And it
sounded like ‘go to Hell’…not that Asgard is nicer than Hell!’ he shrugged. “At least at Hell you have better company!”

Bruce huffed.

“Go wherever you want but leave me alone!” he used his elbows to drag his body away from the tree as ten beams at once hit the trunk that immediately went ablaze.

“You’re quite fast with your arms…” Loki followed him mimicking his moves with difficulty. “I wonder if you’re as skilled with other members of your body…”

Bruce grunted, rolled his eyes and…rolled his body over a cluster of nettles to avoid being punched by the hammer-like fist of a creature that dived on him from the sky. Loki’s transparent head yanked and the creature was launched again to the sky blowing up.

“Those nettles really got you!” the God said serious; he was again visible since nobody was looking “not to mention those rocks…”

Indeed, his face hit on a couple of small rocks and now some blood dripped but he didn’t have time for this as two creatures surged on him. Thankfully, the forest was thick and as those two were ready to snatch him from opposite directions he grabbed a tree trunk supposedly from panic, dragged his body away, and the things hit each other.

Loki who was hitting the green guys from behind a bush heard the commotion and made a rapid swirl sending power waves to the two who had attacked Bruce.

“Even I can’t abandon you defenseless…” he raised his eyebrows sarcastic. “What Thor would say?!?” he shook his head and Bruce squinted.

“Give me a break, will you?”

“You motherfuckers! You don’t like that, huh?”

Bruce looked to the spot where that voice came from. Selina was back kicking one creature, punching another on the chest sending both to crush on the others who surged. He gritted his teeth, the desire to stand up and fight burning inside him…but that…God was there…

No, he wasn’t: obviously, the sneaky God left when he saw Selina. Bruce pressed his lips and focused on his paralyzed legs exactly when his friend seeing three green things heading to Bruce made an impressive somersault and catapulted them with her glued together feet.

An impressed whistle stopped Bruce before getting on his feet and stared upwards at a branch where a squirrel was staring at the fight and then at him.

“Fuck!” Bruce spat because now he couldn’t participate in the action and the squirrel frowned disapprovingly; his black eyes sparkling.

Though Selina had engaged in battle with most of them thwarting their charge at Bruce, five of them landed around him. Selina turned her eyes at the place where their attackers landed; she was scared and determined.

“I’m coming, Bruce!”

But one of them grabbed his upper arms and heaved him in order to hold him to be hit by the stunning beam of the opposing creature. Bruce frowned really pissed hearing the squirrel snigger
enjoying Selina’s frantic and desperate effort to reach Bruce and save him.

“Some protection…” Bruce mumbled raising an eyebrow at the squirrel and let a yelp of terror to make his thrashing in the creature’s grasp seem caused from panic but in reality slipping just before the beam hit him. The thing that held him staggered and tackled another one in his fall.

Bruce slumped on the soil having braced himself for minimizing the impact. Selina gave him a bright grin and punched with the back of her palm a creature that surged to catch her finishing it off with a kick launching it into a tree.

However Bruce couldn’t wait for Selina because the creatures that remained were ready to attack him so he rasping scared crawled backwards stumbling one of them with such camouflaged force that it collapsed.

Selina was now ready to engage the ones threatening him when new ones from the sky blocked her path causing her frustrated curse.

Bruce maneuvered his body on his elbows dodging the stunning beams in such a manner that some of them hit other creatures, his fuming eyes casting glances at the sneering squirrel but suddenly it was Bruce’s turn to sneer: a black and white fur ball climbed rapidly the tree and jumped with a wild hiss at the odd rodent that squeaked and vanished.

“Well done, Hero!” he exclaimed really proud of his kitten but immediately he was forced to roll on some fallen branches to avoid the beams ending up behind a tree.

He was in pain though it would be much worse if someone else was in his place. He was hearing the green things coming for him but now there was no Loki so he could do what he wanted to help Selina who was pounding their attackers.

He frowned, hearing a new sound: someone was landing and simultaneously real blasts not stunning beams shook the trees blowing up the creatures. Bruce looked at the newcomer.
Chapter 8

It wasn’t the first time Bruce saw the person who was floating at the middle of the clearing hitting wrists together causing fire waves from her bracelets that blasted the creatures swarming there. But obviously she preferred to smash them with her bare fists because immediately began pounding them with a broad grin that revealed pearl white teeth flashing more than her bracelets.

Bruce narrowed his eyes estimating, cuddling protectively Hero that ran back to him after chasing away the odd squirrel. She was exactly as he saw her in the pictures that accompanied Lois Lane’s latest interview: Princess Diana of Themyscira, the leader of Amazons, the one that brought Oliver Queen back after two years he had been stranded in an uncharted island.

She was tall, in his height, lean but strong built with rich curves and blue-black waist length hair waving in the Fall’s light air. A gold tiara with a ruby five-pointed star adorned her perfect locks advertising her royalty and demigod nature. Her blue eyes glimmered resolute and...seductive. The setting sun behind her back made the woman breathlessly impressive as the golden rays highlighted her athletic body and her feminine beauty.

Bruce cocked an eyebrow: well, she didn’t need the sun to boast her beauty: her clothes or better… the lack of them was enough. Her bulky breasts were dressed in a shining red skin tight breastplate which pressed her breasts letting half of them out of the golden rim in her long cleavage. The breastplate let her taut, buff belly naked till the start of her pubis’ slope which was dressed in blue bikini-like panties embroidered with golden stars. Skin tight red boots covered her long calves leaving her bulky thighs naked and glistening.

Yet Bruce forgot all about her his concern for Selina surpassing his puzzlement for the Princess’ presence. He looked at his friend who continued her battle amongst a pack of charging creatures; Bruce cursed because now he couldn’t stand and help her. His eyes widened as one of the things surged from behind at Selina who was dodging her opponents’ punches.

Even if he called her to watch out it’d be too late so he grabbed a big stone and threw it to the attacking creature, hitting it square on the chest and sending it to crash on a tree.

Selina surprised looked at Bruce and grinned to him before resuming her fight. But there wasn’t much to fight because the newcomer having ended with her opponents turned to Selina’s blowing them of with beams launched from her bracelets.

Selina’s wild face snapped to her ready to attack but the woman in front of her smiled benevolently.

“I’m on your side, warrior” she raised her palm peacefully and Selina relaxed her posture realizing that at last their enemies were defeated, slumped around on the clearing, some knocked out and some blown apart.

Relieved Selina turned to see Bruce but to her ultimate horror two of the creatures that have escaped jumped on him, the young man covering Hero with his body and crawling behind the tree using his elbows.

“Bruce!” she cried and jolted to reach him already aware that she wouldn’t make it on time.

However, Selina saw a glowing lasso jerking to the air wrapping both the creatures at once. She turned surprised to the Amazon who flipped her lasso in the air and once the creatures were away from Bruce she pointed her bracelets and blew them up with such force that nothing was left. Her
face was tense with ire.

Bruce’s eyes widened and immediately frowned seeing the Princess pointing her bracelets at the creatures that were dispersed around the clearing flashing her flaming lasso to lift their bodies and hitting them with the beams of her bracelets, wiping them out completely.

Bruce was outraged, on the verge of yelling at her: how was he to find who sent the creatures when she destroyed all evidence? His hands clenched in fists and Hero meowed confused, looking at his Master’s angry frown.

Selina couldn’t reach Bruce as she was forced to stay dodged to not be hit by Diana’s firepower; however her eyes were on him reading his wrath and as soon as the onslaught stopped jolted to her feet to run to him. But the Princess landed before her and Selina stopped abruptly, huffing frustrated, her eyes looking at Bruce above Diana’s shoulder.

“You could be an Amazon!” the Princess told her smiling broadly and Catwoman rolled her eyes clutching her waist. “You’re a brilliant warrior and you could have a prestigious position among my sisters in Themyscira.”

Selina tilted her head exasperated for the delay.

“What’s the fun in a world without boys?” she snapped slyly and passed her.

Bruce was already crawling towards his chair holding Hero and Selina bit her lips because she should have been helping him instead of chatting with that…Princess. But then a familiar whoosh waved slightly the peaceful now clearing and Selina’s hair rose from the air wave.

Bruce knew that wave but didn’t look up; he pressed his lips to reach his chair without anyone’s assistance but all of a sudden two arms of steel enveloped him and a strong chest supported his torso stopping his movement.

A second similar sound announced another arrival: Ironman who hovered over the clearing. He noticed that there was no sign of attackers though the clearing had the characteristics of a battlefield: half burned branches all over, burnings on the tree trunks, dust twirling and the heavy smell of explosions; on his way, he had spotted another presence in the clearing apart from Bruce and Selina but the Amazon Princess in flesh and blood was a sight much more stunning than in paper or electronic screen.

He frowned because she was staring with a strange smirk at Superman holding Bruce, without sending even a glance at the newcomer – him - yet Tony’s ego didn’t hurt because he was too worried to let this shit get to him. So he rushed to Bruce deactivating the faceplate at landing beside Selina.

Bruce thrashed in Superman’s arms feeling totally embarrassed with all these frightful stares at him. Clark pressed his lips, his agony making him angry.

“Damn, Bruce! Calm down, I want to scan you!”

But Bruce cuddled more Hero and raised his wild eyes to Clark who took in the scratches and bruises covering Bruce’s face along with dirt.

“I’m alright, Superman! Selina was fighting them – she needs scanning: she might be wounded or have broken something…” he rattled his teeth.

Selina squatted by his side and their eyes locked.
“I’m fine, Bruce: let Superman scan you.”

Clark smiled at him.

“I’ve already scanned her: some bruises, nothing worrisome. Now…”

“I’m fine too; they didn’t touch me…”

Tony shook his head.

“They didn’t have to touch you…” he said gravely and Bruce glared at him.

“I don’t feel any pain…” but he followed their joint stares at his pelvis and legs and realized huffing that his pants were torn and there was some blood from lacerations.

“Understandably so, since under the waist you don’t feel anything anyways!” Clark snapped.

“We’re not alone…” Selina whispered pointing with the edge of her eyes at Diana who in the meantime had approached.

Tony floated ready to fly and Bruce narrowed his eyes at him inquiringly.

“I’m bringing Leslie…” the billionaire said grimly and Clark had to strengthen his hold on Bruce who jerked towards his friend.

“There’s no need for that, Tony!”

Tony shook his head exasperated and rolled his eyes.

“You have a lung that is still healing” he made to say more but cast a sideways glance to the Princess “…among other things” he raised his eyebrows suggestively “and you just suffered an attack so I want to be sure! Thank you very much!”

Bruce gave Hero to Selina and inhaled deeply.

“He scanned me and I know you did too without finding anything!” he cocked his eyebrows. “And I’m not coughing so there’s nothing wrong with my lung…”

But Tony was already on the air, his worried eyes at Bruce.

“I want you monitored!” Ironman said behind his faceplate and was gone to Bruce’s total disfavor.

Clark had had enough: Bruce in this sensitive condition had been attacked; he obviously had avoided his attackers by rolling in a ragged terrain which led to many bruises and scratches that Bruce under the effect of adrenalin and…stubbornness didn’t feel. He couldn’t tolerate more delay to his Star’s proper treatment so he rose holding him in bridal style already floating.

Selina followed his ascend sharing Superman’s concern but had her eyes locked with Bruce’s wanting to calm her agitated friend. And that enabled her to register what Bruce was seeing: Princess Diana’s odd smile.

“Let me sit on my chair, Superman!” Bruce said to Clark. “Please…” he hastened to add because someone saved by Superman couldn’t just pose demands.

But Clark didn’t care about facades; his face was tight.
“We don’t have time for that” he said sternly looking straight ahead and not at him. “I must get you somewhere comfier to be examined properly.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes pissed not only from Superman’s sharp denial but also from the fact he didn’t look at him. He tensed and only then Clark turned to him surprised by Bruce’s broody mood.

“I told you I’m fine…”

“Superman is right, Mr. Wayne” Princess Diana interrupted him rudely with an eyebrow cocked. “You’re just a human after all…” she pointed out.

Selina’s eyes widened from surprise and irritation, Superman for the first time acknowledging the Amazon Princess who smiled at him and he nodded respectfully. But Bruce locked eyes with her and tilted his head to the side.

“Thanks for the info!” he spat raising an eyebrow, taking in her smile to Clark which smile became a smirk when her eyes met Bruce’s.

“Princess Diana” Clark said kindly “I’d like to thank you for your lifesaving intervention” he cleared his throat realizing Bruce’s scoff. “And I’m sure that Mr. Wayne would like to invite you to come at his house for a tea but his adventure has upset him so much that he failed to mention.”

Bruce didn’t let his outrage show but Clark felt how tense his body was: he knew that if they were alone Bruce would have hit him.

“Oh, I’m sure” Diana grinned. “But I have some obligations demanding my attention so we have to leave it for another time. And you don’t have to thank me: it was my duty and pleasure to stop those bastards!” she clenched her fist in the air and closed her eyes flapping her endless eyelashes. “I hate those who attack weak, disabled humans.”

Selina was ready to say one or two things to that arrogant lady but Bruce cast a calm glance at her communicating that this obviously was the Princess’ purpose.

“And I’m sorry this lack of tolerance urged me to blow them up in front of Mr. Wayne’s terrorized, unhardened eyes…” she gave a hollow grin to Bruce and another respectful to Clark and took off.

“You can let go off me now” Bruce told Clark when the Amazon was out of sight.

But Clark tightened more his grip.

“No freaking way!” he took off towards the villa, Bruce grinding his teeth; Selina trying to appease him with her eyes.

“What happened, Master Kent?” Alfred hurried to meet them on the balcony, his worried eyes searching Bruce’s battered face.

Bruce huffed.

“Nothing serious, Alfred; don’t worry. Superman exaggerates!”

Clark was angry because throughout the short way to the villa Bruce didn’t even looked at him and continued that way even now – he so much wished that the obstinate human had just wrapped his arm around his neck and nestled his head on his shoulder as he was doing during their flights either at North Pole over the icebergs or here over the endless sea. He wished that Bruce had let go but… he guessed that it was too much for that man!
He knew that the younger man was pissed for his overprotective attitude in front of Diana but that only made Clark’s vexation bigger: Bruce had a nerve to be angry with Clark’s agony when he managed to be attacked once again!

“Yeah, Alfred…” the Man of Steel scoffed without looking to anyone but the corridor in front of him, hurrying his steps to the med room. “Nothing serious!” he mocked Bruce’s voice and the younger man fumed. “He was just attacked in the forest and he fell from his chair, rolled his recovering body on stones and branches and was hit…”

“I wasn’t!” Bruce jerked in Clark’s arms, his face hot.

Alfred who was following suit took in his young master’s rumpled and torn clothes that were drenched from the last rain’s humidity and stained with dirt and a little blood. He shared Master Kent’s worry and exasperation for the new adventure of Master Bruce yet the clever man could sense the tension between the two men and his Master was so agitated that Alfred feared for the consequences on his healing organism: his uneven breaths weren’t the best for his recovering lung and overall agitation was an aggravating factor.

So he decided to not address the matter of the blood on Bruce’s face nor worsen the situation with questions about how he was feeling. The priority was on restoring Master Bruce’s tranquility and Alfred though sympathetic towards the man, couldn’t understand why Superman didn’t just drop the issue for now.

“Where are Miss Kyle and Hero?” Alfred asked composed as ever.

Bruce turned his flashed face at Alfred.

“They are fine, Alfred” he answered calmer realizing his butler’s effort to restore peace. “But Superman here preferred to leave them back there…”

“They’re perfectly able to return” Clark decided to lower the tone but still couldn’t look at Bruce, the bleeding wounds and the bruises on his face waking up nightmares. And his eidetic memory repeated monotonously what the Amazon had said “Mr. Wayne, you’re just a human, after all…”

The door to the med room opened automatically at their approach and Clark entered, the sight of the room bringing him relief and eroding fatigue at the same time.

“And I’m not?” Bruce demanded with his beautifully shaped eyebrows frowned looking directly at him for the first time.

Clark was happy to lock again his eyes with his Star’s mesmerizingly sparkling eyes; yet he didn’t change his set jaw neither softened his scowl.

“Why you deactivated the shield?” it was his turn to demand and Bruce’s eyes narrowed. “Huh? Nothing can get you in there AND you wouldn’t have to roll on the rough ground! Your elbows are skinned and bleeding!” he couldn’t yell seeing Bruce’s beautiful, so fragile face but his voice was still cold from the boiling wrath inside him. “What were you trying to prove?” shit! His voice got loud again and he couldn’t stop it. “That you’re brave? Fearless? A self-sacrificing fool?!”

Bruce’s eyes widened shocked: Clark couldn’t be saying those things, Clark couldn’t believe those things…

“I have nothing to prove!” he retorted and his intense stare collided with Clark’s angry one.

And suddenly Bruce’s arrhythmic heartbeat filled Clark’s mind and he cursed himself for making his
Star’s condition worse; his hand cupped tenderly Bruce’s jaw and his lips almost on their own locked with the younger man’s that immediately began sucking him desperately, fighting his lips either from anger or love or both. Clark closed his eyes and left Bruce command him, feeling goose bumps as Bruce’s arms at last wrapped his neck to gain more control over the kiss.

Alfred was satisfied that the tension melted yet he also felt embarrassed, an intruder to something very intimate so cleared his throat.

“Master Kent, the bed is ready” and blushed realizing how his saying could be interpreted “the examination bed” he hastened to add and he heard Master Kent laughing.

Clark didn’t want to part Bruce’s lips that – of course! were slightly burst! – and touched his forehead to the younger man’s.

“Indeed…” he said softly “you have nothing to prove, Star…”

He laid Bruce carefully on the bed and stayed leaned above him, his eyes unwilling to leave the star sapphires of Bruce’s orbs, his fingers touching gingerly the bruises on his cheeks.

“Tony left to bring Leslie” he told Alfred to fight off his spell and Bruce took his arms off his neck sinking Clark in icy water without this contact but the message was clear: Alfred was there.

Bruce raised his head to look at the doorstep where Selina riding his… chair made a triumphant entrance. Hero jumped off her lap and ran to Bruce climbing swiftly on the bed to take his caress. Selina stood yanking her head.

“Mmmm… This thing” she gestured to the chair “can be really entertaining! Soon, when you won’t need it any more, can I take it for some rides?”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“Be my guest!” he beamed at Selina and Clark felt jealous for her ability to make Bruce smile like this so easily.

Yet the Man of Steel couldn’t share her certainty that Bruce would walk again ‘soon’ and that made his guts clench.

Hero was licking Bruce’s fingers while Alfred took off his young Master’s battered jacket and pullover because staying with wet clothes would certainly lead to a cold and also he wanted to assess the damage.

There were already formed bruises and Alfred was sure that some more would pop gradually. Clark’s lips twitched to end up in a tight line as he felt the previous irritation returning. He noticed Bruce eyeing him and Clark closed his eyes and inhaled: it wasn’t Bruce’s fault, he reminded himself.

Alfred used to seeing his Master’s body injured continued opening Bruce’s jeans causing the youth to support his torso on his elbows and yank his head.

“Alfred!” he brought his hand over his fly, blushing.

Alfred huffed and just put Bruce’s hand aside to lower his jeans.

“Sir, you managed to tear your jeans which are wet and dirty: if we don’t want you down with a cold” or worse was the common unsaid thought of the three bystanders “we must get them off you
and dress you with something warm. Not mentioning assessing your wounds…”

“I don’t have…WOUNDS” Bruce protested “only superficial scratches!”

Alfred understood that his young Master was feeling suffocated being again under so much attention after things began normalizing. However he couldn’t cherish his need for independency especially when Alfred’s serious stare began regarding the gashes over his young master’s pelvis.

Selina who in the meantime had approached, pressed gently Bruce flat on the mattress and placed Hero over his chest. She wanted to keep her friend occupied and calm.

“Hero, don’t let him move” she tapped the kitten’s pink nose. “As for you, kiddo”, she arched her eyebrows, “no need to be shy on me: there’s a boy in the room with his briefs at display so your boxer isn’t as exciting…”

Bruce chuckled and caressed the head of Hero who sat on his chest like a tiny lion, his paw protectively resting on the glowing Black Butterfly.

Alfred was thankful to Miss Kyle for entertaining Master Bruce because he could share glances with Master Kent who had his arms crossed and was inhaling deeply as the jeans left Bruce’s body revealing more bruises to add to the healing old wounds.

“Master Kent, do you know if the internal casts are intact?” he whispered.

Clark nodded grim.

“We were lucky…”

Alfred grinned tightly and went to the cabinet to take the stethoscope to listen to Bruce’s heart and lungs; Leslie had instructed him on how to read the signs but the kind butler felt better knowing that Master Anthony was bringing Leslie.

“Miss Kyle, would you be so kind to get young Master Hero from Master Bruce’s chest?”

Selina giggled as she always did upon hearing Alfred addressing the small kitten with such a pompous title. She took him off Bruce.

“C’me, young Master Hero…” she teased the kitten and he licked her cheek; Selina was worried as the rest but she knew that showing that only made matters worse for Bruce.

Alfred touched the stethoscope’s edge to Bruce’s heart and the young man sighed.

“Alfred, please… If something was wrong Clark would have seen it: you know he’s monitoring me all the time…” but then closed his eyes defeated when he heard the distinct sound of Ironman coming and then landing.

“A second examination never hurt anyone” Leslie replied with her firm voice and upon landing marched to the bed to Bruce’s evident exasperation. “I take over from here, Alfred” she took the stethoscope and sat.

She touched the spot where Bruce’s lip was torn and caressed his cheek causing Bruce’s sigh: he enjoyed his loved ones’ tenderness yet he didn’t want that to be due to unreasonable concern and tormenting agony.

“They upset you without a reason: Clark and Tony both scanned and X-Rayed me and didn’t find
anything” he sighed. “You didn’t have to be put under all this trouble…”

Leslie pressed her lips and shook her index disapprovingly.

“No trouble at all and I’m happy they didn’t find anything yet I wanted to examine you for some time now so this is a nice opportunity.”

Bruce frowned tilting his head to the side.

“How you returned so fast?” he asked suspiciously Tony who stared at the new and old scars on Bruce’s legs rubbing his chin. “Even with your new double sound speed it’d have taken you more time than you did.”

Tony yanked his head not wanting his friend caught him staring.

“As soon as I took off I called Captain America and he carried Leslie till we met at midway.”

Bruce’s eyes widened and Leslie sighing stopped her effort to listen to his heart.

“You’re kidding me, right?” he demanded. “You rang the red alert and recruited the Avengers for this?! You’re unbelievable, Tony!”

Despite Bruce’s very real irritation Tony just raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, yeah, little guy, your buddy is un-fucking-believable! Everyone says the same…” he answered nonchalant and Bruce shook his head.

Yet Clark couldn’t be as calm as Tony; he couldn’t understand Bruce’s attitude neither tolerate it.

“What’s your problem, anyway!!” he snapped at Bruce and his voice’s sharpness made everyone look at him. “You almost exploded on Princess Diana!”

“He was just attacked, Master Kent” Alfred said smoothly trying to stop a new quarrel.

Bruce shook his head and stared right at Clark’s once again pissed eyes.

“She blew up the creatures that attacked me literally erasing them completely and simultaneously depriving us from any possibility to find out who sent them.” He was puzzled on Clark’s indifference about learning the attack’s details. “And I wanted to stay there in hopes of finding something despite this woman’s efforts but you grabbed and dragged me here because you couldn’t listen, could you?”

For some reason Clark felt obliged to defense Diana’s deeds rather than his own.

“She explained that it was outraged by their cowardly act to attack someone weak” Clark took in Bruce’s tiniest flinch on the word and couldn’t help it but feel satisfied “she apologized, didn’t she?”

Bruce clenched his jaw.

“And you bite and…”

But Clark interrupted him approaching more the bed.

“Maybe because I felt the same and I’d have done the same thing!”

Leslie stood up with an annoyed frown on her face: her patient didn’t need that right now. Bruce shook his head disapprovingly.
“Since when you approve of killing?” he inquired calmer.

Clark crossed his arms and stabbed the younger man with his cold stare: really Bruce didn’t know? Really Bruce showed off his disapproval of him?

“Since I met you and you insist on challenging every scum on the planet to kill you!” he snapped and Bruce narrowed his eyes; he was flabbergasted. “You cause that, Mr. I-m-not-weak! Because every time you need to advertise that, you almost get killed by a sonovabitch and we have to go through all this terror and dread of losing you!” he inhaled deeply “killing them is the only way to keep you alive!”

Bruce just shook his head.

“But you’re ungrateful!” Clark hissed and Bruce jerked as if hit by a whip.

Selina bit her lip enraged, Hero looking puzzled at her.

“Not only reprimand me in front of everyone but also you behaved like an ass to that fine lady who saved you! You would have died there weren’t for the Princess and you didn’t have the elemental politeness to thank her!” Clark realized how harsh his words were yet he knew he was right and that Bruce needed to hear that for once.

Bruce sensed that Clark’s concern had pushed him out of his usual calm, kind self and tried to decrease the tension if not for the two of them for the others’ sake. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Selina had the total control” he said tranquil and Clark felt the boiling inside his body easing “and I was ready to assist her.”

Now the fire in Clark’s body spiked fiercer than before and he rubbed his forehead in an effort to calm himself.

“Assist her?” he sneered. “How?” he asked quietly to not explode like a nuclear bomb knowing the answer already.

Bruce opened his mouth to answer: he knew the hurricane of feelings raging Clark and now he had the suspicious glares of the others presuming the answer and taking Clark’s side on that. He let his head roll on the side for an instance closing his eyes and turned again to them huffing and ready to reply yet Clark’s eyes were above him.

Clark’s lips were almost touching his with a gleeful smirk and Bruce for the first time wanted to bite and not kiss him.

“You meant to stretch your body’s limits into forcing it to stand and fight under your brain’s power!” Bruce’s eyes were blank and Clark relished because he was right and everyone was staring dumbfounded except from Selina who clenched her teeth. “That’s the reason you were so mad at Diana because she thwarted you from being again the hero! You’re mentally disordered in your obsession of being a hero even if that kills you!” his enflamed eyes almost touched Bruce’s blank ones and Clark jerked upright and took some distance.

After all, he had passed his message and now everyone justified him.

“I don’t want to be a hero” Bruce retorted solemnly and completely calm seeing Tony ruffling his hair, Alfred staring at him poised, Leslie having her arms crossed and Selina cuddling Hero. “I’m not a hero but I couldn’t let Selina fight alone…Neither I can be indifferent to my city’s needs now that I’m returning but this doesn’t mean that it will kill me…” Clark shook his head exasperated and
Tony pressed his hair on his head; yet Bruce continued unfazed. “I’ve already thought of some adjustments to my armor that will enable me to move efficiently without stretching my body’s limits.”

Clark slapped his fist on his thigh and raised his hands in the air.

“You’re insufferable! Tony is your friend and won’t assist you to commit suicide! Huh?” he jerked his head towards the billionaire who didn’t answer but locked eyes with Bruce, his disapproval evident.

“Not before the bionic structure for your spine is ready and definitely not before your mobility is perfectly restored” he said grimly.

Bruce huffed.

“Fine!” he snapped.

Tony bit his lips and shook his head, clenching his waist with both hands.

“Bruce, it’s madness even considering the possibility before…”

Bruce turned his eyes to the other side: his chest was in turmoil.

“And neither Lucius will contribute to that” Tony added calmly. “C’mere, little guy” he almost pleaded with his friend who didn’t look at him. “You’ll have more interesting things to do with your spare time so you’ll forget all about Batman…” he said grinning.

Everyone in the room looked at him interested except for Bruce who stared at the wall fuming inside because even Tony didn’t want to understand him – he didn’t like to admit it but it hurt.

Tony inhaled deeply gulping Bruce’s unwillingness to look at him and continued.

“It’s time you chased your dream!” he stated enthusiastic fighting the cold feeling from Bruce’s stubborn indifference. “Princeton has arranged to examine you in order to be enrolled in their undergraduate program” he saw Bruce’s bulged eyes turning to him and thought it was awe. “Princeton is the best university in the States and they have a Neuroscience Program!” he arched his eyebrows beaming. “And is near Gotham and Wayne Enterprises and given that your evenings and nights will be free, you’ll be well rest, able to attend the courses and run the company…” he stretched his arms in the air under the fascinated eyes of the others “it’s perfect, littl’ guy! Like your father…”

Yet Alfred, Leslie and Selina saw clearly Bruce’s dread. The young man inhaled to calm his increased heartbeat and beginning headache.

“You arranged that…”

Tony nodded.

“Yeah, buddy!”

“Without asking me!” Bruce snapped and Tony’s smile froze. “Surely, you made a huge donation to the university to make sure that they’ll enroll me.”

Tony knitted his eyebrows and shook his head in denial.

“No! I just showed them the official documents from your school and they were interested…” Bruce was shaking his head rubbing his forehead. “They’ll examine you as they do to their underage gifted
students and if you succeed…Which is certain with my lessons…” but Bruce’s pressed lips stopped
him.

“I’m not underage, Tony” his voice was cold and bitter “and I’m not gifted” Tony attempted to say
something but Bruce didn’t let him. “And don’t know anything to base college or university studies
on.”

Tony’s shoulders were slumped and he just shook his head helplessly. However Clark wasn’t put off
but enraged from Bruce’s refusal.

“And of course they were interested in me: a way to be advertised having as their student America’s
most known ‘poor thing’, not to mention monitoring a curious specimen. Plus they know that they’ll
have Tony Stark’s gratitude and funding.”

Leslie shared a look with Alfred and decided that it was enough and that Bruce needed some rest.

“I think that discussion must be done another time” she remarked firmly but calmly.

But Tony licked his lips and huffed; he just couldn’t accept the failure of what he believed was the
greatest opportunity and gift for Bruce, what he expected to make his friend beam not brood.

“C’m on, littl’ guy…You sound as if you’re afraid…” he chuckled “and everyone knows that fear
doesn’t suit you” he blinked. “I understand you’re overwhelmed” he continued soothingly “but I
assure you that you’re already fully conversant with most of their subjects due to your extraordinary
activity and intelligence – I tell you, buddy: you’ll amaze them! And I’ll help you with everything!
We have plenty of time till January, littl’ guy; you don’t need to worry…You’ll see!”

Bruce closed his eyes: even Tony was plotting to deprive him of what it was so important to him,
what gave his life purpose – even he didn’t understand… Selina as both Alfred and Leslie realized
that he had had enough.

“Master Anthony, I would suggest…” Alfred interjected.

But Clark didn’t let him; he marched towards the bed with his eyes ablaze. Hearing Bruce fighting
off stubbornly every attempt of Stark to push him to normality and salvation was enraging him.

“However enrolling to studies won’t let him the space to play the hero, right, Bruce?” he cocked an
eyebrow. “And if he doesn’t play the hero he’ll feel weak, right? And he is scared of feeling weak
because then he’ll feel exactly as when he was enslaved to Falcone; he doesn’t want even to consider
what you propose because playing the hero offers him something to cover his weakness” Bruce’s
eyes narrowed spitting fires. “He can’t stand feeling weak and he is willing to die instead of adjust to
his nature! He thinks that pretending the strong fools us into not seeing his weakness but the only one
who fools is himself!”

Bruce felt his blood boil and his heart beat madly; all of a sudden his waist hurt along with his ribs
adding to his headache as if agreeing with Clark’s rant. To make things worse Leslie’s eyes regarded
him with the inner knowledge of his suffering.

“I’m not feeling any weakness!” he retorted defiantly.

That was the last straw for Clark’s patience. This human was so stubborn! And he was just a human,
for fuck’s sake! He surged at him and grabbed his upper arms pinning him chokingly to the mattress
making the bystanders gasp from shock. However Bruce locked his eyes with him defiant as ever.

“But you’re WEAK, damn it! Only your stupid stubbornness doesn’t let you admit it!” Bruce’s eyes
sparkled narrowed like an angry wildcat’s under a tight frown and Clark grunted. “Your pigheadedness sends you every time to risk your life while you know that you can’t cope; your idiocy to prove that you don’t need anyone made you use that stupid suicidal technic to force your disabled body to fight Joker…”

Bruce gritted his teeth.

“I couldn’t wait for you: he’d have killed the kids and it was me that he wanted!” he tried to rise but Clark put more strength forcing him back to the mattress.

“And you succeeded in almost dying!” he yelled having heard nothing seeing only Bruce’s unyielding eyes not even flinch by his roaring.

“Nothing would have happened if Joker’s goon hadn’t shot…” he growled tensing more the muscles of his arms. “Would you prefer it if those children had died because of me while I was lying in my warm bed?!”

Clark couldn’t reply to that but still couldn’t accept Bruce’s recklessness; he fumed.

“That stubbornness…You’ll never admit your mistakes, huh? Even though they make all of us sick with agony and running desperate to save you! As when you surrendered yourself to Talia…” that subject nudged Clark constantly.

“I didn’t!” Bruce growled and prepared himself though Superman’s grip was bruising.

Clark’s lips were over his, as his eyes to mute him.

“If you weren’t so stubborn to admit your weakness and protected yourself staying behind Bane and Talia wouldn’t have raped you!”

If Bruce’s eyes had Superman’s laser vision would have burned him: he hated the word ‘rape’ and Superman spitting that before his loved ones was outrageous! Not that they didn’t suspect but confirming it so crudely was preposterous!

Yet he just gritted his teeth, knowing that his calmness had a stronger effect than any growl – his intense, flashing eyes hiding the cruel punch Clark’s words delivered to his throbbing head.

The Man of Steel as if suspecting that he’d try to escape tightened more his grip which would have caused the intervention of the others in the room if the scene wasn’t so surreal that shocked them to numbness.

However Selina couldn’t tolerate anymore; she let Hero on the floor and rushed to face Superman: she wouldn’t let this ass hurt Bruce.

“Stop it, you asshole! You’re hurting him!” she didn’t attempt to hit him but her voice and her glare’s fierceness shook Clark.

“Exactly!” Clark said calmer. “That’s the point! He could be so easily harmed because he is WEAK!”

But all of a sudden Clark didn’t feel the tensed muscles and the arousing defiance under his grip. Along with the others he saw amazed Bruce standing on the side of the bed, Hero staring at him feeling the vibe.

“The fact that you walk and I don’t doesn’t make me weak and you strong!” he stressed every word
Clark was staring agape unable to utter anything under the realization that he achieved exactly what he wanted to condemn and thwart: Bruce using his brain’s power to give mobility to his disabled body. He clenched his waist and licked his lips knowing that everyone in the room made exactly the same thought: instead of tending Bruce’s wounds all this time they were constantly, relentlessly nettling him.

Leslie couldn’t stand watching Bruce doing what he shouldn’t.

“Both of you: OUT!” her strict and powerful voice cracked the awkward silence and Bruce made a step towards the door to her dismay. “Not you, young man! Tony, Superman!” she snapped her head towards the door.

Clark walked like a robot realizing with a pang that he messed things; he turned his eyes guiltily to Bruce: seeing him standing was a blessing, his deepest wish all these months but not like this: not abnormally. To intensify his guilt and his words’ wrongness, the younger man even dressed only in his black boxers and having lacerations all over his muscled body he was anything but weak. He emanated strength and resolution, and Clark felt the familiar ripple of desire in his heart till he caught the bruises in Bruce’s upper arms, red and shaped after his fingers and his entire existence sank.

Tony yanked his head surprised and looked at Leslie hurt.

“But I didn’t do anything!” he protested but the doctor’s sharp look sent him to the door following Superman.

“And close that door!” she added and Tony obliged. “Alfred, turn on the heat: it’s cold in here.”

Tony ran his hands through his hair sighing.

“I don’t get why I’m exiled along with the bad boy?” he spat without getting an answer from Clark. “Come…” he said sympathetic to the Man of Steel understanding his turmoil and regret.

Clark followed him to the round shaped balcony, the breathtaking view of the peaceful under the twilight Aegean sea, soothing a bit his throbbing head.

Tony inhaled deeply and looked at him.

“Sometimes I also lose control with Bruce…It’s not easy…” he shook his head “…it’s damn hard! With which, I want to tell you that I’m the last to condemn you…”

Clark clenched his teeth determined and made to go back inside: he needed to explain, to apologize to everyone…to Bruce…to make sure that…

But Tony grabbed his upper arm and Clark looked him inquiringly.

“You better leave him some space” he said solemnly but understanding. “Let Leslie and the others calm him down and…” he arched his eyebrows “and get a grip yourself – I think” he shook his head, his sharp eyes never leaving Superman’s “you should leave.”

Clark’s eyes bulged: Tony was exploiting what happened to get rid of him once and for all. He fisted his hands and saw Stark twisting his lips.

“That’s exactly what I meant!” he said gesturing to Clark’s fists. “You’re still ready to explode at the tiniest: you think that another rant will help your position with Bruce?” he arched his eyebrows in
emphasis and seeing the realization in Superman’s eyes, nodded. “I suggest you should leave…for a bit, …till things get normal again.”

Superman stared at the shut door of the med room fighting the urge to use his super sight to see inside.

“If I leave now Bruce will believe that I don’t care…”

Tony patted his shoulder.

“I’m sure Bruce doesn’t believe that…even now. But staying here and continuing the pressure would prove otherwise.”

Clark locked eyes with him and Tony nodded completely serious. Clark knew that Stark was right: at this moment, he could only hurt Bruce and their relationship and he didn’t want that. He stretched his fist in the air and took off.

Tony pursed his lips shaking his head and sighed. It wasn’t supposed to go that way: he felt his arc reactor thudding with disappointment for his failed surprise.

Superman hovered over the forest where some bastards almost killed his Star…again! And instead of manifesting his joy for Bruce being safe, he stupidly quarreled with him…He turned his slumped head towards the blindingly white villa that seemed small now…Leslie was examining Bruce now… Was everything normal or Clark’s foolishness lost them valuable time? He wanted to rush back, hold Bruce tide and kiss him in every wound, in every scratch… Apologizing…

“So… it’s true what they’re saying…”
“I hate failure…” the cold voice with the quality of screeching metal snapped and a fist punched the air.

“Who doesn’t?” Bagdana answered almost amused looking at Bruno Mannheim. “I didn’t imagine that you like so much the human form…” he raised an eyebrow.

The impeccably dressed sturdy gangster was descending the made of stone stair leading to the great hall. Bruno Mannheim possessed an impressive, gargantuan mansion at Metropolis’ outskirts yet the master of the house preferred the underground facilities which were under the basement. It was the place where Bagdana dwelled: a mammoth round site with ancient stones covering its floor and pillars of fire at its perimeter. At the far end a plain throne made of roaring granite waited the great God when his affairs with the mortals ended.

Darkseid grunted annoyed from Bagdana’s comment and immediately the prestige clothes of the human gangster ripped as the human body bulged to be replaced by the god’s bluish gargantuan form.

Bagdana who had settled to his bronze-colored, gigantic body watched the bigger god marching to his throne to sat hitting his fists together in front of his face. A smile carved Bagdana’s face and Darkseid’s red ablaze eyes stabbed him: Bagdana was so much entertained by the terrifying dude’s easily manipulated nature.

“You cost me an embarrassing defeat” Darkseid stressed every word menacingly and Bagdana approached his throne, his bare feet echoing on the stone tiled floor. His body was dressed in black leather leggings and black leather vest.

“Sometimes a defeat is necessary before a great victory” he replied slyly, his spikes of hair glowing in the flames that danced in golden vessels shaping the corridor that led to the great throne.

Darkseid punched the armrest, his gritted teeth sending sparkles.

“I don’t like procrastination! The Kryptonian’s whore should have been here now to be mutilated before my enemy’s eyes!” Bagdana’s eyes narrowed and his nostrils fumed.

“You keep ‘forgetting’ that Bruce is mine and for that he is to live…” he rattled his teeth and stabbed him with his eyes.

“It was your idea to attack him!” he barked.

Bagdana gave a crooked smirk.

“Attack not kill him…”

Darkseid half rose threateningly.

“To humiliate me…” he hissed and his eyes became two flaming lines. “It seems that you’re not here to serve me after all…That you’re also my enemy…” his stone-like face filled with cracks of ire.

Yet Bagdana wasn’t intimidated; he yanked his face and his straight horns glistened.

“Intimidation isn’t effective with me: I’d say it’s rather ridiculous” he scoffed. “You know I’m not
your enemy or else you’d have already tried to dispose of me…”

Darkseid stood on his spread legs; his eyebrows in a deep frown.

“Not just tried; it’s easy for me to kill you!” he roared.

Bagdana smiled and nodded.

“As it is easy to kill the Kryptonian, huh?” he arched his eyebrows seeing his partner’s fists clenched. “I’m your ally…”

“Minion!” he roared.

Bagdana crossed his column-like arms.

“Whatever brushes your egoism…What matters for me it’s that we have common goals: you want the Kryptonian’s destruction” his eyes got lost and his voice deepened “and I want Bruce…” he returned to his surroundings feeling Darseid’s sneering stare. “Yet you know that direct approach isn’t the best method, otherwise you wouldn’t have been scheming with Intergang, pretending the businessman – gangster: a human, a life-form you hate above all…”

Darkseid sat again in his throne and clutched the armrests listening interested and Bagdana’s cat-like pupils dilated with content.

“You could have had already your human-pet if this attack hadn’t failed.”

Bagdana shook his head.

“But you wouldn’t have exterminated the Kryptonian and that it’s important for me as well: I don’t want acquiring Bruce and then him being taken from me again. More importantly: Superman must be punished for claiming what’s mine!”

Darkseid rubbed his square chin thoughtful.

“What is it about that lame human?” he demanded from his minion but Bagdana didn’t answer, just turned his back and stared into the blue fire fountain in the middle of the hall. “He had protection even before his friend and the flying woman came – parademons sent data before they were destroyed.”

Bagdana looked again at Darkseid.

“Bruce always has protection” he remarked dryly: he hadn’t any intention on revealing to his partner that Bruce was able to protect himself since he was Batman.

Darkseid’s eyes pierced him wanting answers.

“Divine protection…” he stressed. “The data I took from the parademons indicated the presence of a God near the human before the Amazon intervened. But that deity remained invisible.”

Bagdana cocked an eyebrow and smiled wryly: the pang of jealousy for the new presence near Bruce smashed by the wave of admiration for his Lilith’s irresistible charm.

Darkseid squinted, intrigued by the demon’s stupor on the human’s mention. Every time he witnessed that he was more certain about Bagdana’s servitude: he’d do everything to gain the human.
“You wanted this attack to fail…” he croaked and Bagdana nodded.

“The failure of this attack was necessary yet I didn’t imagine that Bruce would get unknown divine protection.”

“It is why you settled the weapons into stunning not hurting or killing?”

“Exactly: I want Superman know that his mate is threatened but not from whom…Of course” he cocked a thick eyebrow “I expected Bruce unconscious till help reached him – it’d have made a more dramatic impression yet this human is full of surprises…”

Darkseid furrowed his brow.

“His death or capture would have been very efficient since this annoying pest stands between me and my machine, being the new owner of LEXLABS.”

Bagdana looked at him dead serious.

“His death wouldn’t have helped you gain access to the LEXLABS and neither his capture.”

Darkseid yanked his head and cackled jeering his minion.

“My tortures would have made the pitiful being give me everything to stop his misery of living!” the bigger God saw gleefully the drops of sweat on the demon’s face: were the demons supposed to get sweaty?

He shook his head in expectance.

“I can’t wait making that bitch squeal begging for mercy and the Kryptonian getting insane by his inability to save him – or he won’t be the only one?”

Bagdana rasped and fumed.

“Forget that! You won’t harm him!” he grunted and the hall echoed; the fires flaring up. “And…” he lowered his voice under Darkseid’s cold stare “your tortures wouldn’t have any result…”

Darkseid sniggered.

“Your appreciation of that pest is ridiculous… as your own powers…So doubting your success and assuming your failure Bruno Mannheim has set off his own means of getting the machine…”

“What are you going to do?”

Darkseid smirked smugly.

“LEXLABS aren’t difficult to find… and with the right people in the job it’s easy to get what you want” his eyes flashed. “What about that Amazon?”

“Are you afraid of her?” Bagdana chuckled and Darkseid snorted flames bursting from his nostrils indicating his contempt and anger.

“You know that your pet apart from the deficiency of his human nature is also gimpy?” he raised his eyebrow sarcastically, dragging his words satisfied for the human’s disability and his minion’s displeasure.

Bagdana stared unfazed at his collaborator: he wouldn’t give Darkseid the satisfaction of seeing his
emotions.

“I got the same data from the parademons as you” he replied indifferently burying his sadness causing Darkseid’s irritated growl.

“And that doesn’t disgust you?” he shook his head and twitched his fat lip. “That human’s only worth is being killed to hurt the Kryptonian or tormented for my court’s entertainment – his life is a waste of space!”

Bagdana’s eyes became red spitting fires and his already gigantic body bulged more, impressing and intriguing Darkseid. The demon’s mind filled with the images and the sensations from the burning factory and Bruce’s body being smashed sliding towards death.

“Mind the plan and not Bruce…” he snarled and lowering his head left the vast hall, the fire columns on the two sides of the room flaring up at his passing.

“So it’s true what they’re saying…” an amused voice called behind him and Superman turned abruptly forgetting the white villa where the solar lights began sparkling deem on the decreasing of the daylight.

A blinding smile greeted him as Clark’s eyes met the gorgeous face of the Amazon who hovered approached him, her hands clenching her juicy hips.

“Princess…” he addressed her, a bit startled though he wasn’t sure if it was because he didn’t except to see her there again or because of her staggering beauty. “What it’s true?”

She focused her dazzling blue eyes towards the white villa and the wind waved her locks which glowed like blue silk.

“That Superman, the mighty God of the Earth, fell for a human…” her rich, deep red lips moved slowly.

Clark followed her gaze and shook his head flushed.

“Oh! No…” he chuckled uncomfortable because they didn’t want people know the truth about him and Bruce.

The Amazon turned graciously her head and locked her eyes with Clark’s, cocking an eyebrow.

“I watched that video the first day I came to the Man’s World” she lolled her head to the side. “I admit that your glory had reached even my isolated island and when I brought Oliver Queen back the mentioning of that video by various people ignited my interest…” she sighed. “And it was rather informative!”

Clark licked his lips.

“Listen, Princess…That video is bullshit” he took in her sly smile and playful eyes. “Mr. Wayne had been kidnapped, badly injured and…it just happened that I found him first and brought him to the hospital” Diana had crossed her arms and was nodding all the time amused and disbelieving. “I only did my duty to…”

Diana yanked her head and her eyes filled with seriousness and something else Clark couldn’t discern.
“A poor, tortured human being who his only hope in surviving is through cowering in the arms of powerful entities. He knows this is his only chance to survive and exploits it… in every way he can” she smirked.

Clark felt a pang but he just couldn’t feel irritated with her. Diana smiled to him.

“Though it didn’t seem like simply an act of duty… maybe it was your red cape cuddling his naked body or the way you were looking at him or your unwillingness to part with his body and place him on the hospital gurney…”

Clark felt sweat dripping his body as if he was embarrassed and ashamed (!)?! The Amazon Princess smiled.

“The video must have distorted the facts…” he stated solemnly.

She pouted.

“That’s what I thought: a mighty warrior like you can’t fall for a being like him…” she shrugged.

“But then I saw it with my own eyes just a few minutes ago in the forest: the way you rushed there distraught, oblivious to everything else except him; the way you cuddled him protectively, scared – someone like you can’t get scared –, your eyes when you took in the blood on his face… The way you heaved him in your arms, hasty to take him to safety…”

Clark crossed his arms and tilted his head looking her lopsided.

“Mr. Wayne has suffered some very serious injuries and as you saw he is a magnet for villains due to his friendship with Stark” it was evident in the way her eyes glimmered that she didn’t believe it. “So I keep an ear to him just in case.”

She nodded.

“You mean that Ironman doesn’t have a system alerting him about his friend being in danger and relies on your super hearing to keep his weak friend safe…”

Now Clark was pissed; he didn’t like being interrogated.

“Is it my impression or you watched the area waiting me? How did you know where to find Bruce? I mean Mr. Wayne…” he asked frowning.

She shook her head and gazed at the sun’s disk that was slowly descending in the sea.

“I won’t deny that I was eager to meet you yet I didn’t know that your… love interest was in Thasos and even if I knew I wouldn’t have watched him to get a chance to meet you – it’d be rather boring for me. An Amazon Princess has many responsibilities that demand her full attention. One of them paying tribute to the Gods’ of my people whose temples just happens to be in the area and as I was heading there I heard the noise from the fight and I rushed to help.”

Clark bit his lip: he spoke as an arrogant fool.

“Of course… I’m sorry…” he smiled “I sounded like…”

She inclined her head towards him and grinned.

“No need to apologize; I understand…” she cocked an eyebrow and winked. “You’ve been through a great agony: your boyfriend was just attacked and he is so fragile and weak…”
“That’s the point! He could be so easily harmed because he is WEAK!” He heard again his wild voice, his fingers feeling again Bruce’s taunt flesh sinking under their pressure.

“He isn’t my boyfriend” he repeated again flatly.

At last, Princess Diana seemed convinced and nodded.

“Thank the Olympians! I’m glad he is only your charity case!” she said and turned her eyes towards Stark’s villa.

Superman frowned and Diana realizing looked at him under stray glimmering locks.

“I mean I never fell for that nonsense of Superman being in love with that human; not because he is a human” she tilted her head and closed her eyes grinning. “Well, that too…But even if a Warrior God like you chose a human being” she clenched her waist and stabbed him with flared up eyes “I’d expect a dynamic, fierce presence like Lois Lane and not that lame, pitiful existence” her lips showed disgust.

Rage pierced Clark’s guts: he couldn’t listen to these things about Bruce. It was unfair, it was preposterous! And Lois was right that the Princess asked for her to do the interview because of her connection with Superman. But he just couldn’t get mad at the Amazon Princess who gazed at him amused.

“Of course I admit that he is gorgeous and as even Almighty Zeus many times copulated with mortals, you could be drawn to him to satisfy your bodies’ needs” she sniggered “though I doubt whether he’d even last taking you inside him…” her eyebrow jerked up and her eyes shone gleefully.

Clark couldn’t help it but remember the dread he felt every time Bruce’s body stirred desire in him, desperate lust and he had to struggle with himself to not succumb and hurt the vulnerable human. Suddenly he realized that Diana was appraising his body shamelessly and cleared his throat.

“Mr. Wayne isn’t lame; in fact, he is very brave.”

Her perfect lips twisted.

“Your kindness and generosity is surpassed only by your beauty and bravery!”

Clark could easily discern flattery and sycophancy and he detested these more than anything but from Diana’s lustful mouth these words sounded honest and made his insides squirm with pride.

“But, please Superman…” she snorted. “He crawls on the soil like a worm to save his hide, he cowers behind the trees waiting better men and women to save him risking their lives…” she huffed and shook her head disgusted. “When I reached the clearing and saw him realizing that he was your supposed ‘mate’, I felt awfully: Superman deserves more than this! But, thank Almighty Zeus, you didn’t fell to the trap!”

Superman was hearing dumbfounded: somewhere inside he was aware that he should be annoyed but it didn’t seem important enough.

“Trap?” he frowned.

She made an impressive dive to the sky and flew to stop and float surrounded by the sun’s disk; Superman followed charmed by the spectacle of her perfect, hot body illuminated by the golden orange disk.
“Your good heart’s trap: a benevolent God of the Light like you would certainly be touched by that man’s past, his suffering, his beautiful eyes taking their saddest and helpless sparkle…”

“You know his backstory?” he inquired puzzled.

She smiled and it was so beautiful.

“Who doesn’t?” she arched an eyebrow. “The poor child that grown up in the hands of his parents’ murderer constantly tortured and sexually abused” she sighed. “I can see why you’re so protective of him: pure mercy! But it’d be disastrous if you mistook mercy for love.”

Clark crossed his arms and looked lopsided at her, his trademark curl waving from the faint wind. He knew that what he felt for Bruce wasn’t mercy but deep love yet the way Diana put things made him recount the first time he saw Bruce at Falcone’s party and then apart from the attractiveness of the young man it was his willingness to save him from his cruel fate that dragged him to the young sex toy.

He took in the Amazon’s self-confident, smug smile and slapped himself internally: how could he even think that it wasn’t love that immediately bonded him with Bruce?

“You don’t like humans much, huh?” he asked coldly and her eyelashes trembled, her eyes shining sad for his coldness.

Her rich lips upturned in an innocent shy grin.

“I’m afraid you misunderstood me, Superman. I like humans very much; I feel for their pains and misery. If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t have bothered when I came across a dying Oliver Queen after being attacked by a gang of smugglers – as happened with you and Wayne - I wouldn’t have saved him from them and taken him to Themyscira though men are not allowed there; we healed him and I brought him back to his world deciding to not let evil people do again what they did to Oliver. I already began stopping terrorists from killing innocent people.”

Superman knew that he had covered with articles her feats and followed Lois’ work on the “Wonder Woman” as people already called her. “Beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, stronger than Hercules, and swifter than Mercury”…Clark pondered slithering her gorgeous body with his eyes – exactly, as the Greek Mythology described her.

“Yet I’m fully realistic about humans” she knitted her eyebrows, hiding her satisfaction from Superman’s gaze. “We love them, we protect them, we guide them but they are inferior” she shook her head resolutely. “They aren’t for us: even if someone of them got the attention of someone of us, he/she won’t be enough for long – humans are good for one or two couplings, afterwards they become boring, uninteresting.”

She pointed with the corner of her sneering eye towards the villa.

“Especially, when he is a defective, weak specimen as Bruce Wayne…”

Hearing again the word he also used just some minutes ago had a strange numbing effect on him. Bruce was weak, truly… And then he saw again the human standing beside the bed: proud, resolute, having evaded his bruising grip, his chiseled body’s powerful aura causing Superman even now goose bumps… Bruce was stronger than both of them. And that arrogant Princess not only insulted Bruce but also Clark’s human parents! Humans might not have super powers like them but their kindness, love, self sacrificing nature, their cleverness, their willpower made them stronger than any God!
He took in her confused and inquiring stare for his silence and he was ready to berate her…politely but then scared cries reached his ears accompanied by nightmarish sounds of collapsing metal. He made a steep dive and flew in full speed.

A teen girl just walked out of the examination room and Thomas was more than happy that at last he would be able to think without any nuisance.

“Dr. Elliot, do you want me to stay and assist you?” the nurse, Kelly, asked him.

“No, that won’t be necessary, dear, thank you” he treated her one of his stunning smiles and the girl blushed causing his internal smirk. “You must be tired after your shift so the sooner you get your rest the better…” he placed his hands on her shoulders amused from her shiver.

Kelly looked him shyly.

“But you must be tired, too: working at Gotham General, teaching at the University and volunteering here at the free clinic!” her voice was filled with admiration.

Thomas rubbed her upper arms.

“It’s my duty as a doctor, Kelly and I assure you” he shook his head and raised his eyebrows for emphasis “it’s more pleasing than tiresome, especially when I collaborate with a dedicated girl like you” he hardly silenced his chuckle on her deeper reddening.

He lolled his head on the shoulder brushing with his finger a brunette lock that had escaped Kelly’s ponytail.

“It’s not like I am Bruce Wayne and people surround me eager to pamper me, huh?” he grinned and the young nurse smiled. “Speaking of which, three months have passed since the last time we saw him” he frowned. “It was here, at the clinic, that he was last seen, right?” she nodded. “Did you happen to do your shift then?”

He already knew that she was working that night yet he didn’t want to reveal that he had made his research and that was the reason he cajoled that stupid girl. She was so obviously flattered and enthralled with the supposed interest of the young, rich doctor that Thomas wanted to snigger.

“Yeah, I was working that night – I remember it very vividly because it was a night filled with events.”

Thomas’s eyes took a fake shine of fascination that made Kelly float: she liked it when that important man goggled at her as if she was the most intriguing person on Earth.

“Mmm…Definitely” he remarked. “Seeing Superman carrying in bridal style someone wrapped in his red cape it’s a very rare spectacle…” he took off his medical robe, enjoying the nurse’s appreciative gape at his expensive suit; he sat on the stool right by the examination table.

Kelly hastened to follow him standing in front of him.

“Actually, I didn’t see that” and taking in Dr. Elliot’s disappointment hurried to add “Dr. Thompkins didn’t let anyone on the rooftop with her: she and Mr. Pennyworth dragged the gurney” Thomas narrowed his eyes. “I saw the video along with the others in the nurse station – I had helped Dr. Thompkins take Mr. Wayne to the MRI but then she dismissed me because another nurse came…” she pouted her lips. “Actually I don’t remember having seen her before or after…”
A crook smile carved Thomas’ face: so mystery surrounding Brucie was amusing if not annoying: superheroes, secrecy, strange people, Joker, he, the acclaimed Dr. Elliot… – Brucie shouldn’t be so interesting. That pampered brat ought to have died the night his parents did.

“He must have been really scared…” he looked her lopsided and Kelly shrugged.

“I don’t know…” she pressed her finger on her lip thoughtful “I guess he was in a state of shock… but surely he was agitated especially when he saw the video with Superman and then Joker threatening the children.”

Thomas beamed: that Kelly was precious! So stupid and so babbler that he didn’t even have to try to get info.

“I imagine how terrifying was for him to see Joker after his kidnapping” he cocked an eyebrow and his eyes widened with innocent pity.

Kelly put her hands in her robe’s pockets.

“Leslie took him to his room and nobody saw him after that; I heard that they transferred him to his Manor for more safety and then Stark took him to a special rehab center because his condition deteriorated.”

Thomas nodded, pouting: that’s how they explained his humiliating dismissal.

“Did Leslie speak at all about Bruce’s condition?” he asked concerned, sure that the tough doctor wouldn’t have shared anything with the clinic’s personnel but hoping that Kelly had heard something accidentally.

She shook her head in denial clearly distraught for not being able to be helpful.

“No; I’m sorry, Dr. Elliot…”

Wanting to soothe her distress and win her over, he raised his palm.

“Call me “Tommy”, dear…”

The young nurse beamed, her cheeks turning a deep shade of red.

“Dr. Elliot” he mumbled “I couldn’t…”

Thomas rolled his eyes and fought the urge to snort but instead he widened his eyes.

“You’ll make me very happy, Kelly…”

She smiled.

“OK, Tommy” he scoffed inside. “Well, no, Dr. Thompkins never mentioned anything – of course, she certainly will have discussed matters with Dr. Smit or some other doctors she trusts but all of them are very strict and careful with patient info…”

“So honorable!” he sneered but the nurse didn’t understand it. “Ummm…Kelly, I haven’t seen Leslie from the moment I started my shift” he squinted. “You know if she is ill or something? I know how responsible and commited she is so her absence worries me…”

Kelly waved her hand and giggled.
“No need to worry, Tommy: she is fine. Dr. Thompkins was here since really early but Captain America came and took her with him. He was really cute and very polite – I told him where to find Dr. Thompkins.”

But Thomas wasn’t listening to her foolish babbling: the arrival of Captain America ringing several bells.

“When?” he demanded with a firm frown that surprised the young nurse.

“Mmm…I think around 11 o’clock…”

Thomas’ icy eyes were blank staring at nowhere, occupied with his thoughts and that frightened Kelly. Yet the young man realizing softened his stare and smiled.

“Thank you, Kelly – I feel awful for keeping you from your rest” he stood up announcing her dismissal. “See you tomorrow, dear!” he said hastily and watched eagerly as she left the room closing the door.

Once left alone, he slumped on the stool and intertwined his fingers together on the bench with the medical stuff. His eyebrows frowned deeply, covering his narrowed sharp eyes.

It was the reason he volunteered to work at the clinic: he didn’t give a damn about Narrows or Gothamites but this was the only way to be near his ‘friend’ and if this was impossible – as it was the case – be close to Leslie, gain her trust and snatch information. Because his several attempts to hack the clinic’s records to find Bruce’s file failed: It seems that Stark had established a very complex and impenetrable firewall.

Well…Leslie wasn’t a fool and unwilling to trust anyone with info about Brucie which served only to increase his determination and obsession. So he volunteered to the clinic seeking access to patients’ handwritten files… Frustratingly, no Bruce’s file there… But thankfully the clinic had many people who weren’t as clever as Dr. Thompkins and could feed him with useful intelligence.

Captain America came and took Leslie… Thomas smirked and brushed his tablet’s screen browsing the latest news. No emergency around 11 o’clock with Captain’s or the Avengers’ intervention. And even if something had happened Thomas doubted whether Leslie’s urgent transfer and presence was necessary even if she was an esteemed doctor…

Which led Thomas’ reasoning to a much more interesting association: Captain America was an Avenger; Tony Stark was also an Avenger and the team’s new director; Bruce was Stark’s friend and Leslie’s favorite patient; so Captain America taking Leslie meant only one thing: Leslie was needed to offer her treatment because no other doctor was trusted and Stark asked from his colleague to fetch the doctor because either he was far to come himself or he wanted speed or both. In either case, that led to one conclusion:

“What new suffering you brought to yourself, Bruce?”

Alfred given the opportunity of the two men’s departure approached his young master who seemed lost in his thoughts or self-concentration. He knew that the youth would be very sad if he hurried to support him yet his legs dragged him on Bruce’s side without even thinking about it.

“Can you sit down now, Bruce?” Leslie asked calmly patting the mattress.

Bruce looked at her as if he hadn’t heard, his mind relishing the triumph of spirit over matter, muting
Clark’s angry words…that stung. He was standing again after three months and was a great feeling: during his stay at the Fortress thanks to the pyramids mighty energy he could make some soft moves but not stand. And now managing that without the assistance of a foreign energy force was incredible! He knew he could do it all this time yet he hesitated to try because the damage was too devastating and he believed that upon standing his fragile, ragged bones would shatter… But they didn’t!

“Bruce…” Leslie muttered her widened eyes on him reading the youth’s internal battle.

Selina had her palm over her mouth, numb.

But Alfred knew that this was bad. As much as seeing his young master standing was a balsam to his heart and willing Bruce to sink again to his chair was wrenching his guts, he bit his lips, as he had done so many times before, and wrapped Bruce’s back with his arm.

“Master Bruce, if you please…”

Alfred’s trembling hand touching gingerly his back and the butler’s soothing voice shook Bruce. He looked at Alfred who smiled affectionately: and then it dawned that this was wrong and it scared his loved ones. He nodded and Alfred slowly, carefully led his young master’s body flat on the mattress as the physiotherapist taught him.

Bruce reluctantly let his body free of his mind’s powerful tyranny and weakness returned along with immobility. Weakness… Alone the word with Clark’s snarly tone uttering it could make his body more dead than it was now.

Leslie placed her palm on Bruce’s chest pressing her lips. Bruce raised his eyes to her face.

“It’s better now?” she asked benignly.

He gave a tight lips smile.

“Yeah…I’m sorry…for that… for everything” he nodded. “Do what you want.”

Leslie wasn’t satisfied from the answer; she didn’t want Bruce blaming himself for what happened or feeling bad. She was sensing the muscles of the healthy part of his body very tense and turned her eyes at Alfred communicating without words her need for help.

But Bruce taking in their uneasiness caught them on the act.

“You won’t examine me?”

Leslie cupped his face.

“I need you to calm down first …”

That felt as an insult for Bruce even though he knew that Leslie said it from concern yet it was another blow to Bruce’s self-esteem hinting that a mild stimulus as an argument made him lost his calm. He immediately willed his heart and body – the part that still felt – to relax.

“I’m perfectly calm, Leslie – nothing happened” he grinned.

“I’m glad to hear that: now, tell me where it does hurt” and before Bruce managed to utter his protest “I know you from the first minute you open your eyes to this world so I can distinguish the signals of your pain as much as you hide them. I’m your doctor, boy – you tell everything to your doctor” she
pressed her lips reprimanding.

Bruce blinked uncomfortable but then he felt a warm, rough tongue licking his fingers and his face loosened immediately upon looking at Hero who had climbed the bed. He caressed the kitten whose purring filled the room. Selina smiled mirroring Bruce’s wide smile because it was obvious that little Hero was the best tranquilizer for her friend.

“My ribs hurt a bit and…my arms” he added hesitantly because he didn’t want the last pain being connected with Clark’s grip.

“And your head?”

“I didn’t hit my head; the scratches and bruises are superficially. I have a mild headache but it’s nothing.”

Leslie nodded and began palpating Bruce’s torso carefully, not leaving an inch and keeping her keen eyes on her patient’s face for any minuscule indication of pain because she knew Bruce’s immense pain threshold and tolerance and didn’t want to risk losing even the most insignificant looking symptom.

The fact that Bruce was occupied in petting his kitten and Selina had sat beside the bed and participated to the game gave Leslie the asset of getting honest reactions from him. Once or twice he grimaced slightly but it was because she touched some bruises that fortunately weren’t connected with his healing organs.

Alfred watched poised hiding his concern, his eyes meeting often with Leslie’s for reassurance, not wanting to ask aloud to not ruin the mood of the two youths who were chuckling tickling Hero’s belly and playing with his ‘attacking’ paws. His old friend had the stethoscope in her neck yet Alfred understood that she wanted first to feel the organs and then listen to them.

Leslie was palpating calmly as ever the empty space in Bruce’s body where his spleen used to be; the truth was that she was afraid because the lack of the said organ could have implications on infections on the lungs especially the one that had collapsed entirely. Thankfully, neither the empty space nor the lungs were hit so no swellings or bleeding there: her eyes beamed to Alfred’s.

Alfred finally gulped the knot that had formed in his throat and watched encouraged Leslie listening the young man’s heart and lungs with her stethoscope.

“You see?” Bruce protested. “I told you I was alright.”

Leslie smirked and narrowed her eyes playfully, her relief having lifted her mood.

“Mmm… However you don’t have a good record in the assessment of your body’s injuries, do you?” she winked and began feeling each muscle of Bruce’s legs. “Or better” she cleared her throat “minimizing your body’s injuries to achieve your sneaky goals…”

Nothing menacing in those new bruises and no deterioration to the old, she communicated to Alfred. But to Bruce’s sigh it wasn’t over because Leslie stood and brought the portable ultrasound gadget to examine the organs and the state of the internal casts. And even after that she had to bring the spirometer.

“C’mee on, young man” she said looking sternly at her displeased patient. “You know the procedure…” Bruce rolled his eyes to Selina and she shrugged sympathetically. “Stop rolling your eyes…” Leslie mock berated him.
Bruce blew in the spirometer which was of course not a common spirometer doing much more detailed examination than the usual Pulmonary Function Tests.

“I’m not feeling any discomfort during respiration and I’m not coughing” Bruce remarked to Leslie who was perusing the gadget’s screen.

She grinned.

“I’m glad to hear that, Bruce, yet we must be sure, right?”

“I wasn’t hit on the chest and I protected it while on ground.”

“That’s good! But still your lungs need regular observation and since I’m here…” she frowned. “Don’t tell me that you’re unhappy to see old Leslie because of these petty exams?” she narrowed her eyes mocking angrily as she was doing when Bruce was a toddler and the kid was giggling every time. “And… should I suspect that you swear me inside?”

Bruce’s eyes widened and his cheeks reddened which made Selina laugh and Alfred smile.

“Of course not!” the young man protested affronted and Leslie shook her head.

“I know how much you love me…though that hue of pink on your already rosy cheeks” she brushed his cheeks “isn’t very convincing…”

“I’m embarrassed you thought this for me!”

But Leslie didn’t need Bruce’s words to know that. She kissed his cheek.

“The red color on your cheeks” she looked at Selina “of both of you shows that your staying here has benefited you.”

Selina yanked her head.

“My cheeks were always rosy” she said smugly and Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“With or without the tons of rouge?” he sniggered and Selina clenched her teeth and pinched his nose causing a light hearted laugh. “Thasos was famous for her healthy climate from the ancient times” he said to Leslie.

“I see you exercise your mind as much as your body, huh?” she arched an eyebrow.

“And along with the climate, we have the fresh local butter, milk, eggs, olive oil to thank…” Alfred added and Bruce looked at him grinning.

“Alfred has made his stock of local products for the Manor” Bruce commented and the butler arched an eyebrow “and also I made a deal of supplying the Haven and the clinic with local products as an addition to those from American farms.”

Leslie smiled.

“The businessman never rests, huh?”

“And, please, don’t forget my contribution on providing fresh fish” Selina added “and honey I, myself, gathered from the hive rising my life…” upon that Bruce choked from his chuckle.

“Yeah!” he remarked. “Selina took very special care in finding the best…looking providers for
that…” he laughed and Selina bared her teeth and heaved Hero from the armpits bringing him to Bruce’s face.

“Eat him, Hero! Eat him!” she urged the animal but the kitten just nuzzled Bruce’s cheek causing the young man’s giggles. “Ugh! Males always cover each other’s ass!” Selina fumed and began ruffling her friend’s disheveled hair.

Leslie shook her head in mock disapproval and turned her eyes to Alfred who struggled, like her, to hide his smile.

“I don’t know how you manage with these two…” she said walking to the cabinet to take some needles.

“Neither do I, Leslie…” Alfred sighed but it was from delight not complaint.

Leslie sat again to the chair next to the bed and Alfred who grasped immediately her intention brought her a chunk of cotton drenched in alcohol. Bruce turned to her catching the smell.

“One last ordeal” Leslie told him. “I want a blood sample.”

He closed his eyes but stretched his arm.

“And all these because I crawled in the dirt?” he asked exasperated. “Alfred sends you detailed reports on my health every day!”

But Leslie unfazed pierced the vein in the elbow, drew blood and filled the small different vials Alfred gave her.

Suddenly knocks on the door made everyone look there except from Leslie who was absorbed in putting the samples she took in the rectangular blood test machine on the metallic table.

“Hmmm…” a clearing of throat “I was wondering if my detention is over now so I could join the fun?” Tony said in a tone of the cat that spilt the milk. “Huh? Little guy?” Bruce could see Tony’s puppy eyes and pout even behind the heavy door.

“Come and save me!” Bruce said and Tony needed nothing more to enter beaming with wide arms.

“Heeeere’s Toooony!”

Bruce smiled upon seeing his cheerful friend, happy that his bad reaction before hadn’t ruined much Tony’s beautiful attitude. Yet his heart sank not seeing Clark with him as he had hoped: so, Clark was pretty angry and…disappointed with him. All this time, Bruce was hiding his bitterness and upset from what happened yet a dull pain had settled over his chest.

Tony sniffed it and scratched his nape.

“Sorry, missy” he pushed gently Selina to take her place next to Bruce “but you had him for yourself all this time…” Hero turned his round, glimmering eyes to Tony’s and the billionaire twisted his lips. “OK, you can stay, fur buddy.”

Hero purred and brushed his head to Tony’s stomach.

“Listen, little guy, I told Clark to let you some space to calm down – both of you. He wanted to stay…” he pressed his lips and locked eyes with Bruce. “I made it again, huh?”

Bruce shook his head.
“It’s OK, Tony…”

Tony raised his eyes to Leslie who was holding gently Bruce’s elbow clearing the grazed skin.

“It’s everything alright?” he asked.

“It seems so: in a couple of minutes I’ll have the results from the blood tests and the PFT. And I’ll monitor him for 24 hours to have also a detailed cardiograph for Dr. Attkins.”

Bruce snapped his eyes at Leslie.

“What? Don’t tell me I’m not welcome here?” she inquired teasingly.

“Yes but I know how reluctant you are to leave your clinic…”

Leslie took off her glasses and placed them on the table.

“That’s true but we’re not living in Falcone’s reign anymore so I can take a leave, right?” she took his other elbow to treat; a suspicious frown on her face. “Unless you’re afraid that with me here you won’t get Alfred’s indulgence in your mischief… You know, endless hours of exercise…”

Alfred bit his lip and shared a complicit glance with his young master. Yet Bruce pouted and widened his eyes in innocence.

“Without exercise I’d have gained too much weight… I’m just trying to stop my muscles from degenerating and keep them in good shape. And I think that I can start attempting small steps. Slowly, of course and with the physiotherapist’s guidance” he took in how the others shared meaningful stares.

“You know it’s too early for that, Bruce” Leslie told him resisting the urge to bite her lips for the disappointment she knew that was bringing to him. “Your bones haven’t mended yet and your damaged neurons haven’t recovered – how on Earth you expect to walk when your neurons are unable to carry motor orders from your brain?!” she rubbed her eyebrow calming herself registering Bruce’s blank eyes. “And even if we solve the mobility problem, you know how dangerous it is to walk around unable to get sensory information from your body?” she was speaking in professional matter but she wanted to sigh at the darkening of Bruce’s eyes. “As a matter of fact” oh, this would be difficult “after what happened, I suggest no exercise for three days.”

“What?! No, Leslie!” his eyes narrowed defensively and stubbornly. “It’s not that I’ll force my body stand and run!” he protested and saw Tony’s eyes shut in frustration. “That’s my punishment for even thinking to stand and move, right? It happened only once: I’m not doing it all the time, do I?” he turned to Alfred to confirm his argument. “I know that it’s bad to do it in my current condition and I admit I was ready to do it for assisting Selina: I couldn’t abandon her fighting alone while they were swarming from everywhere and had weapons! But other than that I didn’t use this ability to dance or play or swim or stroll around or whatever… All these months I just sit in my chair or lie on the bed just watching, waiting others to take me in their arms… And I know that you agree with Clark: that this is my fault, the result of my decisions and deeds so… I asked for it” he inhaled deeply. “And I’m not complaining or whining… I only want to try…”

He shook his head and rolled it to the other side without looking at anyone: nobody understood anyways. They loved him, they took care of him without complaining and even happy because he survived yet they couldn’t understand his feelings, his wish to begin at least trying to walk again…

“Little guy…” Tony’s husky voice began saying reluctantly but he didn’t want to hear words of consolation – as a matter of fact he was tired of all this argument: he remembered Clark and
something screamed inside him.

Bruce turned his eyes to Leslie who had remained inert from the punch of Bruce’s outburst, resumed cleaning his wounds swallowing her deep compassion for the youth.

“Actually, you should examine Sel too: she fought all alone and might have taken nasty blows she didn’t admit. She is as stubborn as me.”

Selina cocked an eyebrow.

“So it’s my turn for punishment?” she said wryly.

Bruce stabbed her with his eyes.

“It’s time we stop neglecting you” his voice was tired and Selina pressed her lips. “You gave a brave battle and we should make sure you didn’t get hurt” he stretched his hand and took hers.

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“Nice… Some girlish boobs at last!”

Selina punched his shoulder and Tony chuckled.

“What?! I can take off my T-shirt too if you’re shy…”

“The boys will go out” Leslie ordered.

“Damn!” Tony exclaimed.

“Master Bruce, your bath is ready” Alfred said consulting the control panel, no bigger than a smart phone, from where he could inspect and start or shut every appliance in the house.

Tony grinned smugly: his favorite Englishman was at first skeptical and unwilling to use his high tech tricks but in the end he mastered them.

Alfred brought the chair, a fleece blanket resting at his forearm and gave Hero to Selina. With Tony’s assistance he placed Bruce comfortably on the chair tucking his young master with the blanket; the kind man felt with a pang his young master’s buried dismay yet they just couldn’t stop themselves from soothing things for him.

“Thank you” Bruce said softly to both of them in a hoarse voice and took again Hero in his lap. “I’m grateful to all of you for everything…” Clark’s accusation of him being ungrateful still biting his guts.

“You’re not ungrateful, Master Bruce” Alfred replied reading his thoughts “and if I may utter my humble opinion: nothing from all these is your fault.”

Bruce locked his tired eyes with Alfred’s and gave a pressed grin.
Chapter 10

Superman knew what was happening before he arrived: his super vision and hearing had sketched already the scene. So he didn’t need to stand and think what to do: in super speed he put his body in front of the high speed train that had lost its rail and was heading to dive in the canyon. What Clark also knew was that a second train was coming from the opposite direction.

The location was just a few miles outside the city of Zurich in Switzerland and people on the train yelled ready for the dive to the canyon that surely would kill them; Clark could hear kids shrieking and babies crying as their parents cuddled them protectively.

His biceps and triceps bulged under the train weight but he gritted his teeth and returned the train on the rail over the bridge easily yet the other train was coming. His raging mind thought of just heaving the train off the rail but they were on a bridge where the rails leading to opposite directions became one. The derailed train wasn’t supposed to go on the bridge but turn at the intersection a mile before yet some sudden breakdown to the system made it continue without turning, constantly losing its route into finally breaking the railings and falling off the bridge.

The view of the cliff over the bridge was breathtaking but at the moment Clark wasn’t in the mood to appreciate it; on the contrary it frustrated him. Because the only solution he had was stopping the train with his back – which was already happening, the high speed train slowly losing impetus under Superman’s tremendous power. People in the train were cheering and shooting videos of their miraculous rescue with their tablets and smart phones, unaware that another train was fast approaching to collide head on with them.

Clark knew that he had to stop the other train with his hands since even though he sensed that the other driver was struggling to stop it, the train still had great impetus.

He heard the cheers turning to new shrieks and cries when the first people saw the coming train. Superman clenched his teeth determined to stop the train even if he had to die in the effort. He thought of Bruce: what would Bruce do if he wasn’t able to use all his power?

The pang was awful seeing again Bruce confined in that chair…powerless…He roared: Bruce would have compensated his lost mobility with his other skills.

Superman blew at the coming train slowing down a bit its speed and pressed his lips satisfied because now, at a slower speed, his odds were better. He plunged his feet in the ground, his back emanating real flames from the friction with the other train that thankfully had almost halted. He positioned his hands ready to stop the second train, clenching his eyes and jaw preparing for the collision.

That didn’t come. Superman heard the second train halt with a long screeching sound and the scent of metal on metal friction burnt his nostrils. But the most exhilarating was the cheers from the two trains: and to make his exhilaration greater another pleasant perfume distinguished in the air. He opened his eyes.

Princess Diana was standing in the middle of the rail: her one leg slightly bent the other stretched firmly rooted to the ground and her arms put on the headlights of the train that stopped under her resolution and mighty force.

Superman appraised her body: the effort had drenched her with hotness but not sweat because she was a demi-goddess and as he, such activity wasn’t demanding enough to make her sweat.
Nevertheless, the effect was breathtaking: the hotness emanating from her lean, strong body highlighting the tension, the tautness, the beautiful way her muscles bulged lined by throbbing veins…

Diana turned her head graciously to him, her waving locks blinding him; but her eyes’ sparkling was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. She smiled loosely and released the train now that it was secured.

Superman did the same and walked to her with determined eyes that locked with hers as they approached each other. The saved humans on the trains were cheering and capturing the scene.

Diana stood before him and hit her fisted hand over her heart as a sign of respect and Superman stretched his hand. The Amazon pierced him with her blazing eyes and shook his hand causing the crowd’s raving cheers.

“When you left in such haste I figured that something really urgent occurred and followed…just in case. I hope you don’t mind…” she purred.

Superman registered how her even breaths made her rich breasts move slowly, mesmerizing, wanting to escape their leather confines. That wasn’t proper, he berated himself, and focused again on her beautiful eyes.

“Not at all, Princess” he made a respectful, slight bow and pierced the air with his fist hoisting his body to return at Metropolis.

The very soft sensation was slithering his chest: it was velvety and silky and feathery as if the softest breeze was touching his flesh, like all the love of the world was caressing him. Bruce knew that it was something sponge looking but it was nothing like any sponge he used, even the natural sponge that Alfred provided him even under Falcone’s tyranny.

He closed his eyes and inhaled carefully because although the Fortress monitored and controlled his body’s functions, eliminating much of the pain and the discomfort, Bruce didn’t want to test his long suffering lungs, especially the right that he had felt it collapsing just a few seconds before he… died in Clark’s arms.

And now after a month – as Clark told him – he was lying on that bed that gave the impression of being made of clouds in a room made to look exactly as the master bedroom in the Manor.

“I want you to tell me if I’m hurting you…” a voice smoother than the alien sponge whispered to him – Clark’s voice.

He had a sweet, happy smile lightening his face yet Bruce could discern apart from his elation for getting him back, the pain and fear of all these days he was in a coma and his agony that his ministrations could hurt him. All these in his crystal, clear eyes.

“I’m fine…” he answered, smiling for additional reassurance unable to speak more due to his fatigue and to the sensations Clark’s ministrations caused to his oversensitive, naked body.

The painkillers and the other medicines he was given made his body feel…strange…constantly in a pleasantly numb state as if it wasn’t tied to the earth but in a medium level between earth and heaven, existence and non-existence: a trance. And that made Clark’s tender ministrations so pleasant, enhancing the feeling of wings flapping in his chest…Maybe more because he came back from the dead and wanted to suck every pleasant experience life could offer.
He moaned as the too soft material touched his nipple and Clark stopped abruptly scared that he had caused pain to his fragile lungs.

“I hurt you…” he licked his lips cursing himself.

He barely shook his head and since he couldn’t make the move as he wanted, he grinned.

“No, it felt nice…” he closed his eyes and Clark chuckled.

He saw through his eyelashes Clark drenching the sponge into a column of light neon blue light that the Fortress conjured obviously because the Man of Steel thought it. Now the sponge brushed velvety his abdominals, slowly, meticulously and Bruce could hear his savior’s rasps; he wondered even in his mind’s drug induced daze how Clark could find breathtaking a mangled body…

Yet…he relished on that: the perfect man’s love and desire. He breathed carefully, synchronizing his respiration with Clark’s movements, since he couldn’t do anything else more encouraging for the man who loved him. But even that was enough for Clark to understand… Bruce knew so well those lips that barely touched his belly sending tender hot air to caress his flesh and ripple his skin with goose bumps…

“Mmmm…” Bruce sighed – damn! His powerlessness shouldn’t be so…erotic.

He could sense Clark’s amazed eyes watch him flapping his eyelashes as Clark continued nibbling his abdominals with only the edge of his lips. And then Clark caressed Bruce’s left hand because the right was strongly encased.

“I’m here to bath you…” he said regretful.

Bruce smiled without opening his eyes in an effort to make the sensation linger.

“I prefer your lips than the sponge…” he answered slyly.

Clark rose and his face was above his; he had still his eyes shut but he could understand the concern just from Clark’s breath. Bruce opened his eyes and Clark’s eyes confirmed his assumption.

“Is the sponge harsh?” the Man of Steel inquired really distressed.

Bruce smiled and wished he could move his left hand to touch Clark’s cheek.

“No, it’s soft like velvet, silk and cotton together – yet your lips are even softer…”

Clark cupped his cheeks and locked their lips almost sobbing from suppressed craving that at least could be let out; yet as soon as Bruce felt the first imperceptible pang in his lung, Clark stopped. Bruce realized that the Man of Steel after all this time was perfectly tuned with his vitals.

Clark nuzzled his cheekbones and then his temples keeping his eyes closed and fighting his complaining whines.

“I must continue…” he pressed his lips and Bruce nodded.

Clark was bathing him every day, twice; though the environment in the Fortress was perfectly clean, healthy and sterilized, the Man of Steel never let go of this routine… Bruce understood that Clark needed that; he loved to wash him and never let his androids do it: he suspected that Clark wanted to bath his body to persuade himself that Bruce was alive. At first, when he was in a coma, and then when he woke up, to persuade himself that it was true and that he hadn’t dreamt that…
Bruce knew that Clark was washing his legs because he didn’t feel anything; only his eyes could inform him that Clark’s gentle touch was still his, taking care with adoration leaking from his eyes - flesh that ungratefully would ignore everything. So he was watching eagerly Clark’s every ministration as much as his inability to crane his neck allowed him – he didn’t want to miss anything because he felt that it was unfair to that wonderful demigod who humbled himself so much as to wash him.

Clark realizing Bruce’s watching eyes was raising his head every now and then to smile to him. Bruce mirrored that smile not only because Clark always caused that reaction to him but also because the bed was drying his body instantly and made him feel like laundry…

As soon as he finished applying carefully the healing and painkilling alien balsam, Clark let the sponge suspend inside the blue neon light. He wrapped carefully Bruce’s chest with one arm and used the other to raise carefully, gingerly his torso.

Bruce almost purred from Clark’s gentle rubbing but stopped when he sensed Clark placing something around his neck: a pendant. He opened his eyes and saw the black diamond hanging in the middle of his chest, near his beating heart; it was wrapped in a plain but beautiful oval shaped frame made from black platinum. It glowed like a dark star.

Clark brushed Bruce’s locks and kissed tenderly the corner of his lips.

“I thought that I ought to the Black Butterfly give her an appropriate frame” he smiled uncomfortably. “At least, I think it appropriate: what’s your opinion?”

Bruce wanted to touch it but his hands wouldn’t make him the favor so he settled for the feeling of the mystic diamond over his heart and the beauty of the black, rare metal.

“I think it’s beautiful…” he locked his eyes with Clark’s.

“It reminds me of you…” he mumbled and cleared his throat determined. “Let’s take care of your bed sores now…”

Bruce nestled his face in Clark’s shoulder: his numbing powerlessness made him so prone to find refuge in Clark’s hot body, nude as his; maybe because his body remembered who saved it; who taught him love…

“I don’t have any…” he mumbled letting his lips graze smoothly Superman’s naked shoulder that its hair raised and Clark shivered. “You’re a perfect nurse” he chuckled “a nurse of steel: I’m thinking of recommending you to Leslie…” he smiled knowing that Clark felt it since his cheek was sunk in his shoulder.

Clark’s fingers ruffled his locks as he did a few minutes ago when shampooed him. The Man of Steel was beaming as their eyes met.

“We are in good cheer, huh?” he cupped Bruce’s face and mouthed the corner of his lips sucking the feeling of the soft flesh and the unique perfume.

And he was looking at Clark’s closed, trembling eyes as his lips massaged tenderly his lips, his cheek, his neck, groaning, sniffing desperately.

“Cinnamon, orange, hibiscus, defiance, bravery, kindness: you…”

He could hear Clark’s affectionate whispering but his eyelids were too heavy and discerning the words was impossible and then exhaustion won him over and as much as he didn’t want it
nothingness hid Clark's voice...but not his love.

And then all of a sudden:

“But you’re WEAK, damn it! Only your stupid stubbornness doesn’t let you admit it. Your pigheadedness sends you every time to risk your life while you know that you can’t cope; your idiocy to prove that you don’t need anyone made you use that stupid suicidal technique to force your disabled body to fight Joker…”

Bruce brushed the indication on the railing around the chair inside the bath tub and the water stopped. His “wheelchair” reading his wish reached the tub that slightly inclined permitting Bruce hoist himself using the titanium supporters and slide into the warm chair. He immediately took his bathrobe and wore it.

Upon approaching, the door opened to the bedroom and Hero ran to him, climbing swiftly to his lap. Bruce laughed and caressed his head.

The huge room was pleasantly warm and the built in fireplace opposite the king size bed was on creating a wonderful atmosphere as outside the window night was gradually settling. A discreet aroma of pine wood twirled in the room, relaxing Bruce’s body.

“You’re too gushy, eh, buddy? To make up for your friend’s introversion…” the kitten was staring at him and Bruce ran his hand to his wet locks. “Or you’re just hungry…” he willed the chair towards the cabinet. “Good thing I stash food here for you…” he locked eyes with the kitten and raised his index finger warningly “but don’t tell Alfred I hide your biscuits here…”

He opened the marble-wood cabinet, pulled out a metallic bowl and filled it with biscuits under Hero’s greedy stare that followed the bowl till the floor. Yet the kitten didn’t jump and Bruce chuckled.

“You’re loyal: I give you that – you don’t sell your friend for some biscuits…”

He took a biscuit from the bag and brought it to Hero’s mouth who gulped it greedily licking Bruce’s fingers. Bruce took him from the armpits and lowered him to the floor next to his bowl.

“Help yourself, littl’ one – Bruce must get dressed.”

Alfred had set his clothes neatly on the mattress: he brushed the soft fabric. Dark blue long sleeved fleece pajamas. And, of course, Alfred’s love and overprotectiveness readied even underwear and socks; he wore as fast as he could the underwear and took the socks but then the memories that accompanied him during his bath returned and his stare was drawn to the clock on the nightstand.

He hastily looked at the bedroom’s door a second before polite knocks announced Alfred’s arrival; the kind form emerging after Bruce’s answer carrying a silver tray with a white porcelain bowl, a milk jug, a sugar jug, a glass of orange juice and a rose.

Alfred cast a sideways glance to Hero grinning and Bruce cleared his throat.

“Hero” the kitten turned to him licking his muzzle “remember what I told you about Alfred and the biscuits?” he pressed his lips guiltily looking at Alfred. “Forget it: we’re busted!”

Alfred chuckled relieved that his young master’s spirits were high again and placed the tray on the small, rectangular table in front of the oval shaped window that covered the center of the external wall in its entire length.
“Master Hero will be happy to have table company” he winked to the kitten who turned upon hearing its name. “I brought you a snack, sir.”

He approached Bruce and gave him the orange juice taking the socks from his hands.

“Please, leave that to me, sir” he said and crouched under Bruce’s uncomfortable eyes. “And drink your juice before it loses its nutrients.”

“No, Alfred, no! You won’t do that…It’s too much!” he protested, moving his hands to take the socks but Alfred was adamant.

“Sir” he mock scolded him “I have the suspicion that you intend on firing me...” Bruce’s eyes widened shocked.

“Of…of course not!” he protested again.

Alfred took carefully his young master’s unresponsive foot and raised his playful eyes to Bruce’s face.

“Then let me do my job! And please do drink your juice” he began dressing Bruce’s feet gulping his sadness from feeling how dead these young legs were.

Bruce drank obediently his juice staring at him so intensely that the butler felt it and looked back fixing meticulously the socks on the calves.

“It’s only temporary, Alfred: don’t be sad…I’ll walk again…soon…” he pressed his lips in a determined grin – he wanted to comfort his wonderful butler who was exhausted accompanying him through his entire journey in Hell.

“I know, sir…” he replied a bit embarrassed for being caught “please, forgive an oversensitive old man for being a coward…” he absent mindedly caressed his master’s feet.

Bruce’s eyes sparkled and he shook his head.

“You’re not old, Alfred, and definitely not a coward…”

Alfred stood grinning.

“Thank you, sir, yet you can’t deny that I am an idiot succumbing to sadness while I’m so proud of you!”

Bruce raised his eyes to meet his butler’s affectionate stare.

“You’re not pissed I brought that on me?”

Alfred couldn’t fight it: he kneeled before the disabled young man and touched his shoulders locking their eyes.

“Nobody is pissed at you, Master Bruce” he said solemnly. “We know you did the right thing, the noble thing, an unbelievable sacrifice… Everyone, even Master Kent, knows that weren’t for you, things would have been very difficult for the children. Yet, you have to understand that…” he gulped and sighed “we love you so much and that night we almost lost you again due to your…annoying altruism and sometimes – how youth calls it? – we lose it…And you’re a really bad boy who makes his butler broke his code of conduct!” he coughed with dignity to cover his emotions and stood, taking in his young master’s grin.
He took the pajamas from the bed and placed them carefully over the back of an armchair.

“Can you untie your bathrobe, Master Bruce?”

Bruce looked at him astonished: Alfred was helping him dress the first days of his return from the Fortress but now he was more than able to dress himself. However he didn’t want to spoil his mood so he obliged believing that Alfred would just offer him his clothes.

But Alfred took his magical first aid kit (that probably had brought while Bruce was in the bathroom) and began cleaning the scratches over his torso and legs – Bruce was relieved that he had at least worn his boxers… In less than fifteen minutes, Alfred was fixing the last sticking plaster on his forehead and Bruce seeing him standing thought that he had finished and hastened to wear again his robe.

Yet Alfred held the pajama shirt open and Bruce rolled his eyes.

“Alfred, for pity’s sake...!”

“Please, sir, stretch your arm” he said unfazed and Bruce did it although grudgingly.

“You realize that I’m not eight years old…” the young man narrowed his eyes as Alfred lifted the pajamas’ pants over his legs – he was blushed glad that he had worn his boxers before his butler came in.

“Is it too bad that a butler wants at times to make up for the lost years?” he asked in a casual tone yet Bruce sensed the underline emotion.

“No…” Bruce answered quietly and Alfred grinned.

“Thank you, sir” he buttoned up the pajama shirt and registered Bruce’s hand brushing the fabric.

“It’s exactly like my favorite pajamas back then…” he said and Alfred nodded. “I thought that I had forgotten the sense of the fabric…”

Alfred moved to the dresser and took the comb that belonged to Martha Wayne. He began combing Bruce’s hair incredibly softly and carefully and the numbness overtaking his mind reminded Bruce of the days at the Fortress when Clark was dressing him and combing his hair. His eyes on their own volition glued to the clock on the nightstand.

“He’ll come, Master Bruce” Alfred said. “If you pardon my lack of discretion: I think that Master Kent can’t wait to come back to you. He wouldn’t have gone if he didn’t believe that his presence made things worse for you” he shook his head. “And I’m absolutely sure that he already regretted what he said.”

Bruce closed his eyes shaking his head and let it loll to his shoulder.

“But he believes what he said.”

Alfred pressed his lips, his eyes taking their warmest hue.

“Master Bruce, you’re inexperienced in arguments…”

Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Alfred, you know that I am more than experienced in that field…”
“If I may beg your pardon, sir: your experience is scarily vast in verbal abuse not arguments” Bruce licked his lips uncomfortable. “People say things that they don’t necessarily believe: in intimate relationships like the one you have with Master Kent feelings may get too hot and blur the reasoning. Master Kent cares so much for you” he searched his young master’s eyes to see if he was convinced.

Yet Bruce’s eyes were lost for a bit before turning to Alfred.

“From the day I woke from the coma till I returned to your care, Clark looked after me every day: he was washing me twice a day, he dressed me, he fed me because my hands were disabled; he treated my wounds and massaged me” he said staring at Alfred’s face and the butler smiled.

“Such admirable devotion is scares even in old couples…”

“I owe him my life…”

Bruce’s steady but hoarse voice from hidden emotion made Alfred once again screw his butler code of conduct and kiss his young master’s soft locks. And Bruce realizing how great a misdemeanor that was for an esteemed butler like Alfred took his butler’s wrinkled hand and kissed it.

Alfred’s heart writhed in his chest upon understanding the deep emotions his boy had for his butler – no, no butler…

He opened the door for his masters, craving to follow them but knowing that it was impossible, so he just wished everything would go well and at the end of the night they’d have Bruce with them.

Martha stood in front of him before she followed her husband to the car. She brought out of her coat’s pocket a key and gave it to him.

“This is the key to my vault in Switzerland; this is to secure Bruce’s life if anything happens to us” Alfred opened his mouth to say that nothing will happen but Martha stopped him. “You’ll keep Bruce and raise him and with this key you and him will go to the bank and open the vault – it needs Bruce’s right thumb fingertip to open. I know you love him like your own child and that he will be happy with you, so the money is my gratitude to you…” she smiled.

“Mrs. Wayne, everything will be fine and Bruce will be with us in a few hours and if... if ever Bruce needs me to…” he just couldn’t say it “I’ll do it gladly with my own money…”

“I know, Alfred; for that, I give you the key and my only son’s guardianship: you know where we keep the papers…”

“Alfred?” Bruce inquired with a small smile in his tone.

The butler kneeled again before him and held his shoulders, his stare serious.

“Master Bruce, I beg you to promise me that you won’t stretch yourself in your effort to walk again: you’re a brave young man; strong, determined with willpower that surpasses every super power Master Kent has” Bruce smiled. “But you need to be cautious because a wrong move could damage again your legs or pelvis and then we’ll be again at the start or worse.”

Bruce nodded.

“I know, Alfred.”

“I understand how difficult is for a dynamic youth like you to be in this position and I share and feel your eagerness and impatience to return to your old life…” Bruce inhaled and turned his eyes to the
window before looking again at Alfred. “Yet, Master Bruce, do you remember the first time you came to the Manor through the caves? Or later when Falcone moved to your parents’ house? When I was eager to address you with your rightful title?”

Bruce shook his head understanding what Alfred meant.

“Wisely you were insisting that I should not be hasty and be patient as you were patient all these years under Falcone’s brutality. You were insisting that patience is crucial; that we should suppress our readiness and our exploding emotions for the sake of the final victory. And we were both patient although it hurt…” Alfred lowered his eyes remembering the cold sweat running his spine every time he heard Falcone abusing his young master. “But in the end” he raised his eyes and smiled “all this patience was worthy…You’re an incredibly wise young man, Master Bruce, and you know that the same patience is demanded from you again. So promise me, Master Bruce, that if you feel any discomfort, any tiny nuisance or pain, you’ll immediately notify me or Leslie or your precious friends.”

Bruce smiled.

“I promise”  it’s the least I can do for all of you…

Alfred stood and bowed gesturing to the table where the tray waited and Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“Your cereal wait for you with thyme honey Miss Kyle harvested” Bruce chuckled “and fresh milk: or perhaps you’d like something different?”

Bruce made his chair move to the table and purred milk from the jug in the porcelain bowl, adding a teaspoon of honey.

“No, Alfred; I love cereal for snack.”

“I’m glad to hear that, sir. Now if you’ll excuse me I’ll tidy up the bathroom.”

“OK, Alfred; thank you for everything.”

Alfred grinned.

“My pleasure, Master Bruce.”

However he didn’t move to the bathroom till Bruce took the first spoonful of cereal. Hero having already eaten his snack was rubbing at Bruce’s legs purring.

Bruce followed Alfred with the corner of his eyes and as soon as the butler was out of sight he let his gaze wander to the darkening sky from the big oval window. Waiting…

Clark Kent with his trademark slumped posture entered the Daily Planet building, fixing his square, ugly glasses and working in his mind what would say to Perry. It was almost 14.00 and he was gone for almost three hours!

He greeted Mr. Avey, the doorman, and the old man grinned.

“Mr. Kent, I didn’t see you leaving the building” he remarked under his presbyopic spectacles.

Clark cleared his throat: of course, he didn’t because Superman used the bathroom window.
“Mmmm…There were many people at the foyer at the time so you missed me…” he grinned shyly and the old man scratched his hair.

Clark hastened to reach the lift before Mr. Avey asked more but upon pressing the button to call it, he frowned. You’re kidding me! He huffed: it was only an hour since he stopped two high speed trains from crushing getting some friction marks in his back and feet: OK, the marks were so insubstantial that had already vanished but…still. A burglary at noon? Metropolis was turning into Gotham?

He rolled his eyes; he couldn’t let it pass because what he heard wasn’t the common alarm that would notify the police – the common alarm was obviously deactivated. It was the silent alarm Lucius Fox had established to every LEXLAB after Wayne Enterprises got their control. Clark immediately thought that the burglars must be overconfident to strike during daylight and the possibility that their overconfidence was well based made him hurry to the exit.

“Mr. Kent, where are you going?” the doorman shouted confused.

Clark turned his blushed face to the old man.

“I just remembered that I parked illegally and I don’t want a fine or being towed…” he grinned uncomfortably “salary cuts…”

He surged outside and in the first empty alley changed into Superman taking off for the LEXLAB he heard the alarm from. For a couple of months, Metropolis was plagued by burglaries: not usual burglaries but breaks into labs and gun storages; also, some of these burglaries were accompanied by massive killings of the guards who in most cases were members of local gangs. So Clark came to the conclusion that those hits could not only aiming to add infantry or illegal drugs to the draft of the culprit gang but also weaken the others. His reluctant informants whispered one name: Intergang.

Superman had managed to intervene on time in some of the cases but either the culprits killed themselves on the arrest (that shocked him) or didn’t know anything about what they were doing there. He was concerned about that new gang because gradually it eliminated with cruelty its rivals and was gathering weapons and chemicals whose grade of danger nobody could estimate with certainty since they were illegal or clouded in secrecy.

And now it was LEXLABS’ turn and that sucked because Luthor was the greatest…in illegitimate, dangerous, secret experiments that very often concerned Superman. Clark knew that this was one of the major reasons Bruce gave his priority into gaining the control; he also knew that from the first day Bruce changed the security system and the staff with his own and began registering in detail whatever it was found there. But LEXLABS were too many and some of them in secret locations that the new owner had to elicit from the division’s files.

If this was again Intergang’s doing, maybe Luthor had some kind of collaboration with them. The imprisoned tycoon didn’t hesitate to join forces with shady organizations and outlaws when the interest was common and grave – and, of course, the League of Shadows wasn’t enough. On the other hand, it could be just a scavenging attack to loot the luxury lab’s equipment and any other goodies they would find. Probably they believed that the transitional phase to Wayne Enterprises’ control would have let some void in safety.

He clenched his teeth already seeing the vast premises in Metropolis’ outskirt and the human forms inside. The guards had fought – his super vision told him – because they were slumped on the floor gathered in the middle of the ground level and bleeding; the attackers ready to execute them with semi-automatic guns and AR-15, all from the last warehouse’s robbery: Clark had covered that and read meticulously the police’s report.
Clark clenched his fists and collided with the reinforced wall which collapsed startling the criminals who turned to see the Man of Steel emerging as the clouds of dust settled down. As soon as his impressive posture became visible they began raining him with bullets which were unable to pierce his body.

When they ceased fire and looked curious for the result Superman gazed at the layer of hot bullets at his feet and then at his assailants before he surged against them shattering their guns and knocking them down with just a slap because if he punched them they would shatter.

The guards encouraged stood up, helping each other, as Superman finished with the last thug. They approached ready to handcuff the criminals beaming at Superman who however frowned; footsteps on the upper level were coming to the balcony overseeing the ground floor. Sixteen pairs of feet.

“Take cover!” he said calmly to the guards nodding to the big containers around and flew to meet the thugs.

He was ready to attack them but he stopped abruptly realizing that the thugs who wear ski masks held hostages, guns and knives pressed on the scientists’ and other personnel’s bodies.

“Stay back, boy scout!” the head goon barked. “One finger on one of us and the others will kill the hostages!” even if Clark didn’t have super vision the guy’s sneering stare was enough. “You don’t want this, huh?” he sniggered. “We blow now and you, as a good boy, won’t do anything…”

Clark clenched his fists and his jaw, his eyes reddening.

“No, no, no!” he pointed with his eyes at the other thugs who armed their guns causing scared screams from the hostages. “See ya, Supes!”

“No way!” Superman hissed and the head thug narrowed his eyes.

“Kill some stuff; maybe he’ll think it over then…”

“No!” Superman said but he didn’t attack because hitting some of them would simultaneously hit the hostages and the other thugs would kill the rest.

“Too late, dude!” the head thug croaked and Superman’s eyes widened.

But then a golden line hissed ripping the air and the thugs on the back found their necks wrapped and their heads slammed together not leaving them the time to harm their hostages. Before the others realized what had happened a hurricane embraced them dragging them away from the hostages and breaking their weapons.

Superman didn’t let the thugs on the front think but took advantage of their instant turning of the heads to melt with his heat vision the guns they held giving the opportunity to the hostages to run away. And then he tackled them as he wanted all this time.

The criminals were down in less than a minute and as soon as Superman straightened his posture regarding the faces under the ski masks, he saw with the corner of his eyes his unexpected ally walking proudly to him.

Superman couldn’t suppress the wide smile that grazed his face upon seeing the Amazon Princess gathering her lasso and dangling it to her hip with her eyes always on him. A wild shining lock hid her eye but she yanked her head proudly and Superman was excited. She smiled.

“We meet again, Man of Steel.”
He nodded.

“You saved my hide again, Princess” he placed his palm over his heart. “I’m obliged.”

But she shook her head and cocked an eyebrow.

“You could have managed but… I couldn’t resist the chance to fight again alongside a noble warrior like you” her smile became wider and her teeth’s shine dazzled Clark.

“Som’ne kill me already! Find a room, ya fuckin’ superheroes!” the barely conscious head thug grunted from the base of the railings he was slumped.

“Good evening, Mr. Wayne! What a pleasant surprise! How are you?” Lucius Fox’s cheerful face appeared on the screen of Bruce’s laptop.

He had come out to the living room’s balcony and combined the work he had to do with the splendid night view he so much loved. He had already studied carefully the logs with everything they had found in LEXLABS looking for something that would resemble his attackers. In vain. But every day new findings were added and maybe they weren’t registered yet.

It felt so good to be engaged again in this kind of activity especially since nobody seemed to remember that an attack just happened.

“Good afternoon, Lucius; I’m fine, thanks. I’m so glad to see you even through sat connection.”

Lucius laughed.

“I guess the two days since our last Tele-conference with Mr. Fredericks is enough time to miss me, huh?” the scientist squinted regarding Bruce’s face more carefully. “Mr. Wayne, you had a fight?”

his voice became dead serious, concerned and a bit reprimanding.

Bruce smirked: it took for Lucius less than he expected to take in the marks on his face – besides Tony’s sat connection were of high definition. Bruce made a mental note to schedule the building of such satellites for Wayne Enterprises; Falcone didn’t care about modern technology.

“It’s nothing, Lucius” he saw the man’s eyebrow arch. “I was attacked” he added casually and Lucius leaned closer.

“By whom? Nobody knows your current residence.”

Bruce nodded and pressed his lips.

“Unfortunately, I can’t tell and I’ll need your help.”

Lucius tilted his head on the side, his eyes playful.

“But you are the detective, Mr. Wayne...”

Bruce rolled his eyes.

“With Alfred, Leslie and the company around guarding me?” he huffed. “Hardly…”

Lucius chuckled.
“They were very scared, huh?” he asked compassionately and took off his glasses “Understandably…”

Bruce just pressed his lips and didn’t comment.

“What are your thoughts?” Lucius prompted him.

“Princess Diana’s intervention ruined our chance to capture the assailants and get useful info… Selina was fighting them but Princess came before Superman and Tony.”

Lucius eyebrows rose with interest.

“Princess Diana as…”

Bruce nodded.

“Exactly: the Amazon who rescued Oliver Queen.”

Lucius chuckled.

“Seems like she made her life’s goal to protect billionaires…”

Bruce huffed not so amused.

“The fact is that she blew up the creatures that attacked me and now we can’t find their source.”

“Creatures? You mean that you weren’t attack by humans?” Lucius’ eyes widened.

Bruce shook his head.

“No, anything but human and the question is if they were creatures or robots… I’ve already searched the databases of many labs around the world but I didn’t find anything similar. Of course, I searched the logs with the stuff we found at LEXLABs however I know that the registration continues.”

Lucius tilted his head and tapped his fingers on the desk.

“Indeed. There are facilities in remote, god-forsaken locations and even those easily accessed have top secret sections that are hidden quite efficiently. But tell me about those creatures.”

Bruce felt his heart flapping in his chest from excitement because finally he could discuss the attack’s details.

“Approximately human height and weight, human-like arms and legs, but they were green with small wings and they had hundreds of thin, needle-like teeth covering their jaw; their eyes were very small, black dots, and they had only nostrils that steamed. They used guns.”

Lucius brought his fist to his mouth and coughed deep in thought.

“You have a ‘friend’ who is related and has access to strange, unseen before beings” he cocked his eyebrows suggestively, sure that Bruce’s confused expression was only a pretense. “A demon” he added widening his eyes.

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

“I stabbed him with the Knife and that sent him to the Tartarus – Thor confirmed that. But, to be honest, I considered that possibility too…”
Lucius gave a teeth revealing smile.

“Of course you would, Mr. Wayne.”

“If those strange creatures were demons or something related to Bagdana, they wouldn’t need guns.”

Lucius pursed his lips and nodded.

“You’ve got a point there… What kind of weapons they were carrying?”

Bruce pressed his lips and grimaced.

“I’ve never seen anything like this… They were the size of shotguns, their form something between Kel-Tec KSG and P12 Bullpup, yet the material was like crystal and they shot beams. I sent you a rough sketch but I didn’t find an exact match in my research.”

“League of Shadows?”

This had crossed Bruce’s mind too.

“We have a very detailed database with League’s and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s infantry, including Dr. Banner’s breakthrough technology, and there’s no match. If the creatures were in their army, we’d have known. And they’d have preferred sending humans for the job…”

Lucius crossed his arms.

“That approach failed horribly before so maybe they decided to test something new. And we can’t rule out the possibility of them having secret hideouts that weren’t in Al Ghul’s database.”

“Still it’s too early for them to make a move, Lucius…” yet Lucius’ suggestion made Bruce’s healthy spine shiver reminding him of something Talia had told him:

“You don’t need a womb to give me the offsprings of yourself and Bagdana! I’ll summon him, he’ll fuck you, your body will absorb the seed and my scientists will have fresh material to create my new army of demon soldiers with extraordinary human DNA!”

Maybe Ra’s had already done that?

“Mr. Wayne?” Lucius asked concerned, noticing the young man’s widening of eyes.

“We’ll definitely not cross that probability but for now I’m focusing on unregistered, illegal experiments…”

“What about…aliens?” he inquired arching his eyebrows and Bruce closed his eyes.

“I’d rather focus on Earth…”

Lucius tapped his fingers.

“But Superman has many extraterrestrial enemies, Mr. Wayne” their eyes met with shared understanding and Lucius nodded. “That video of Superman being extra tender to you while carrying you to the clinic has millions of viewers” he pressed his lips. “And certainly the video fascinated Superman’s enemies.”

Bruce shook slowly his head.
“So they attacked me – the weak link – to gain leverage against Superman: their beams were set to stun not kill.”

Lucius nodded.

“However, concerning Superman’s enemies we don’t have to leave earth’s stratosphere to find them: there are many of them very much Terrans and highly dangerous and one of them hates me as much as Superman.”

Lucius smiled.

“Of course: that brought you to search Luthor’s secret activities. But he knows how to hide his traces and we need to search meticulously LEXLABs. However, we have to take into account the fact that he is in jail – not that this would be an obstacle for him…”

“I know and I’m not convinced that it’s his doing… Batman could interrogate Luthor but…at the moment he is unavailable” he pressed his lips.

“We’ll figure this out, Mr. Wayne. I’ll speed the procedure of registration and I’ll keep you updated. Yet what concerns me most is that they knew where to find you: I know that Mr. Stark travels there in stealth mode and Superman knows how to evade tracking; also, the villa is invisible to satellites. And the deal you made for local products hasn’t been publicized yet and even so I was the one who signed it not you, so the locals know my name not yours.”

The man was in deep thought.

“Anyway, what matters is that your safety is compromised.”

Bruce nodded.

“And not only mine: during my staying here I used to go to the village for strolls and having coffee in the square – imagine if the attack had happened in the middle of the village with so many innocent people around… The village doesn’t have a police station and even the entire island’s police force makes for Gotham’s one hundredth of officers!” he shook his head and shrugged. “The people here don’t know about villains or super villains and I want to stay that way… So I must leave this peaceful place soon before I ruin everything.’’

Lucius tilted his head on the side.

“It’s not your fault, Mr. Wayne…”

Bruce shrugged.

“You can’t deny that my presence is a damning factor” he narrowed his eyes. “Lucius, there’s an article in Gazette that seems to have an effect on our shares…”

Lucius closed his eyes exasperated and shook his head; he knew that article but he hoped that Bruce wouldn’t read it but of course the young man was daily watching his company’s activity and that damn article was mentioned everywhere.

“It’s some stupid speculation that was confuted by Wayne Enterprises. And the shares are stable.”

Bruce gave a crooked smile.

“Speculations that I’m probably dead and the company’s claims that I’m recovering in some
rehabilitation center are lies to maintain the stability and rising course of the shares?"

Lucius frowned in such deep seriousness that was unusual for him. Lucius always, even in the most crucial situations, kept his undeterred and loose mood.

“Mr. Wayne, your company functions perfectly, you have the absolute trust of the board and everyone wants you to have your recovering time forgetting the insubstantial matters” Lucius leaned towards the screen. “Mr. Wayne, you need to rest and take care of yourself: your only concern should be your healing and recovery. You have people you can trust with trivial things. We want to see you returning but not hastily because of some exploiters.”

“Thank you, Lucius.”

However as soon as their discussion ended Bruce opened the site of Gotham Gazette to read again that article but a popped up ad for the ranking of the best universities in US filled his screen. Bruce’s fingers rubbed his lips unconsciously and he touched the link to open the article.

Clark sank at last in his chair at the Daily Planet; he was flustered, feeling uncomfortable for being absent for so many hours but at least he had a good time with the Princess and he gave an exclusive to the newspaper; the sneak preview already on the site promising a full article. The burglary in the LEXLAB gave him the best alibi.

Indeed, almost the moment he sat down, Perry rushed out of his office probably informed by one of his colleagues and hurried to shake Clark’s hand the man uncomfortably straightening his askew glasses, flushed.

“Well done, Kent! It seems that this is your year! Your source was a good one” he patted his back. “Use it wise!”

“Mr. White, I…”

“I’m waiting your full article and coverage from Superman and Wonder Woman’s battle!”

He let Clark with his mouth gaping unable to utter what he wanted and returned to his office. Clark twitched his lips and sat again, sighing.

“Hey, Smallville, how’s Bruce?” Lois whispered to his ear and although he knew that she was coming he looked at her with wide eyes blushed. “What? It was something serious?” her face fell.

Clark bit his lips: he totally forgot Bruce… He slapped both his cheeks and gazed with blank eyes at his PC screen. Yet Lois lolled her head and nudged his ribs.

“Well?” she widened her eyes demandingly when her friend eyed her.

“I…I don’t know; he seemed fine but…” he closed his eyes and sighed. “I’m not sure…”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Clark lolled his head to the side.

“We had an argument and I left to help him relax…to not deteriorate things and…”

Lois put her hands in her hips and rolled her eyes exasperated.
“And in all these hours you didn’t go back to speak to him, to learn? What the heck? Even calling?”

Clark snapped his hands in the air.

“So many things happened – it was a very busy day, Lois - and I…”

Lois rubbed her forehead.

“You forgot him…” she shook her head disappointed.

Clark jolted on his feet to protest and in his clumsy haste upturned the foam cup with the stale coffee he bought the morning. So he frantically took the keyboard and the mouse off the desk and tossed a handful of tissue papers over the liquid. His colleagues giggled entertained: usual Kent.

“I…I’ll go see him” he said to Lois holding his computer’s parts. “As soon as I deliver that article…”

Lois crossed her arms and gazed at him disapprovingly. Clark raised his eyebrows frustrated.

“What?”
Lois scrolled a video on her smart phone’s screen and started it showing to Clark who sat on his seat sweeping his desk and placing back the keyboard and the mouse. He knew what the video was about: the rescue of the two trains in Switzerland: what Lois wanted to say with that?

She cleared her throat.

“You’re not interested? Funny…”

Clark lolled his head on the side and cast a fleeting glance to the video appreciating the fact that even in an amateur video Diana was breathtaking. He blushed and looked hastily and indifferently at Lois.

“What?”

Lois jerked her head, huffing irritated.

“That was the real reason you didn’t care about Bruce… You forgot him goggling and drooling for her…” she clenched her teeth “everything!”

Clark’s super vision enabled him to read the comments under the viral video: the comments were enthusiastic about Diana’s body with expressions that… Well, Clark would never use such vulgar vocabulary though he agreed with the meaning.

Lois understanding what he was doing pushed his shoulder. Clark saw that her eyes were widened and very angry.

“Typical male!” she groaned. “The moment someone shakes an ass to you, you forget everything!”

Clark closed his eyes.

“You’re wrong, Lois! And…what? You’re making me a scene on Bruce’s behalf? Please! Princess saved Bruce before I arrived” Lois’ eyes widened more and Clark shook his head. “And when I heard that the trains were to collide and rushed there she followed me to help.”

Lois pursed her lips and nodded.

“So, I got it right: she really is trying to get to you – she has you on her target!” Clark rolled his eyes. “And she was again at the LEXLAB…”

Clark raised both his hands appeasing.

“Let’s get reasonable, Lois. She isn’t stalking me…It was a coincidence she was in the area when Bruce was attacked and of course he helped someone in need. And then she just wanted to help me.”

Lois wasn’t convinced and was huffing and puffing.

“Who attacked Bruce?” she asked frowning “And how is he?” she asked calmer.

Clark pressed his hair with both hands.

“He had some scratches but thankfully he wasn’t hit. Stark brought Leslie and I’m sure she’ll check everything…”
She nodded relieved.

“As for the attackers…Diana had blown them up before I reached the place – that must have passed the message across.”

Lois narrowed her eyes on that but didn’t push it more.

“That means that you are not wondering about who ordered the attack?” Clark looked her exasperated.

“Of course I am, Lois!” he protested and then scratched his nape uncomfortably. “I guess someone from my enemies.”

“Who?” Lois demanded and Clark squinted frustrated.

“How the Hell I am supposed to know that already?!” he shook his head.

“OK” Lois relented but in a rather reluctant way. “And what happened? I mean you said you had a spat.”

Clark sighed and narrowed his eyes at her.

“Are we a bit indiscreet?”

“Because I care about you, farm boy…”

Clark pressed his lips.

“His condition makes him irritable…”

“Understandable” Lois spat and shook her head. “He spent his entire life being terribly abused; then a gang of nut jobs kidnaps him” she jerked her eyebrows “tortures and almost kills him rendering him paralyzed. And now some cowards attacked him AGAIN!”

Clark arched his eyebrow: solidarity among humans…

“… and he’s already too stubborn” he remarked pointedly.

“And?” Lois looked at him demandingly.

“I talked a bit harsh to him…” he sighed and ruffled his hair uncomfortably.

Lois crossed her arms and yanked her head.

“You almost lost him three months ago…”

Lois of course didn’t know what happened at the factory and that Bruce was dead in his arms for one or two minutes. But she knew, as he had told her, that what the League did to him led Bruce to coma and left him paraplegic. He locked eyes with her and nodded.

“Make sure you remember that!” she raised her eyebrows in emphasis and moved to leave for her desk. “Finish that article fast and hit the road, buster!” she shook her index.

Clark just couldn’t understand why Lois was so pissed with Diana: thanks to her on time intervention hundreds of people were saved. And she saved Bruce, as well!
He threw the soaked tissues in the garbage basket and opened the program to write his article. Yet his hand was twitching to open YouTube to see the video with Diana…A crooked smile carved his face: he had another one from LEXLAB to accompany his article.

Princeton, as Tony had said, was ranked first among the US universities. His hand moved to close the screen with the article but instead his curiosity or something else won and he opened the link to the university’s official page.

There was a welcome message and links to several sections. Yet Bruce opened the one about the campus, silencing the self - scoffing inside him for indulging childish whims. He opened one photo after the other submerging to the peaceful scenery with smiling students strolling or heading to their courses. The amphitheaters, the buildings, the labs, the library, the parks...

He pressed his lips: those things were so strange for him yet his eyes were fixed there.

“The campus is more beautiful than the pictures…” a cheerful voice said and a friendly arm wrapped his shoulders making Bruce tense.

“You went at MIT” he took his eyes from the pictures and looked at Tony’s happy eyes that gazed the pictures.

“Yeah…well, I had some great parties there…” he cleared his throat and arched his eyebrows, sighing “and not only parties…”

Obviously, Tony believed that he was intrigued and fascinated from the photos and the prospect of being there – which was ridiculous. He shut abruptly - almost violently - the site and Tony frowning looked at Bruce puzzled.

“I was reliving my youth, little guy” he shook his head “and some veeery pleasant moments: you had to close it?”

But Bruce wasn’t affected by his friend’s playfulness; his stare was dead serious.

“I know what you’re doing.”

Tony narrowed his eyes and squatted to be in the same height; he brushed the narrow crystal board hosting Bruce’s laptop; the sleek board wasn’t there but had emerged obeying to Bruce’s wish.

“He thought everything, huh?” he looked at Bruce’s serious eyes and his friend gave a nod. “So what do you think I’m doing, little guy?”

Bruce stabbed him with his intense stare.

“Trying to make me so intrigued with the university that I enroll” Tony blinked “and for four or five years forget anything else.”

Tony cupped with both hands Bruce’s neck and pressed his lips.

“Is it so bad?” he said in a low, serious voice locking his eyes with his friend’s. “You deserve it, Bruce.”

Bruce shook his head and hastily took his eyes from Tony’s puppy eyes. He knew it! He gazed at the night sky, focusing on the slice of moon that felt like calling him. He drew a deep breath closing
his eyes, the prompting returning to his ears without his will:

“*I can give you back your own wings...*”

His fingers dug into the armrests of his confinement and Tony placed his hands on Bruce’s shoulders frowning: since Superman brought Bruce back to them, his friend was happy to be among them, smiling, accepting their care but even then sometimes his eyes became lost like he was travelling to another world – a world that constantly tempted him to abandon his loved ones and spread his wings… And Tony hated those moments because they reminded him that Bruce almost died and maybe nonexistence lured him since that world gave him only pain.

“Bruce?”

Bruce focused his eyes on Tony.

“You want me to forget everything about Batman – you don’t believe” he shook his head “no, you don’t want me to resume my mission.”

Tony gulped and lolled his head on the side.

“Guilty as charged!” he replied but his tone was anything but loaded with guilt and saw that Bruce’s eyes narrowed.

Tony didn’t feel guilty; on the contrary he knew that this was the best solution so he wouldn’t leave any space to Bruce to manipulate him into feeling bad.

“I want my little guy to be recognized for the genius he is, astonishing those smart asses at the university; and I want you to follow your dream.”

Bruce felt like boiling inside, ready to explode: of course, weak, littl’ Bruce should stay behind!

He shook his head exasperated.

“Stop evading the subject, Tony! You don’t believe that I’ll manage to be again the Batman and you want to thwart me from trying!”

Tony ruffled his hair with both hands and yanked his head sighing. Then he stabbed Bruce’s wild eyes with his serious ones.

“That’s right! I don’t want you absorbed in Batman; I don’t want you return to that every night suicide mission spending yourself in fighting bad guys. And I believe that your current condition isn’t suited for this stuff anymore…” he watched Bruce’s eyes bulge and he knew that his buddy felt punched.

“So those five or six years in university would be the bait…” Bruce smirked. “Engaging me in studies for that amount of time to let behind my training so when I end my studies, it’d be impossible to establishing again the required skills. Or even better losing entirely my appetite for the ‘sport’ and do whatever else.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You’re the detective…But I don’t see why is so bad. It was your dream!”

“When I was eight years old, Tony!”

“And what’s your dream now?”
Bruce shook his head and didn’t say anything. Tony sighed guessing.

“I don’t need dreams, Tony… It’s not time for dreams.”

“But you’re still too young, Bruce, to say that…”

Bruce’s eyes were scolding and annoyed when stabbed Tony making him cut his phrase short.

And Tony knew that it wasn’t a matter of need or age: after all these years in Hell, his little guy had lost the ability to dream; it was another thing his torturers extinguished.

“If you accept to try and set yourself in an environment as normal as the university, I’m sure you’ll begin dreaming again. You need just to change environment.”

Bruce gritted his teeth and slapped his laptop closed willing the chair to move towards the railing and away from Tony who was crouched and the abrupt lost of support crashed him down. He watched his friend from the floor letting his arms slump on his knees.

Bruce grabbed the railing that sparkled in the night and let the cool breeze hit his face; his heart was throbbing, his arms trembling from the power of his grip. He was breathing heavily and his lungs burnt.

“I just don’t want to lose you again…” Tony said approaching caressing his butt. “I only want to…”

Bruce snapped his head towards him.

“Don’t even utter it! Protect me: that was what you were ready to say, right?” Tony pressed his lips. “Slyly taking me away from what I am!”

Tony clapped his mouth.

“Please, calm down, Bruce: it does no good to you.”

Bruce arched an eyebrow.

“I’m not pregnant” he sneered “or you consider finding a way to manage that too in order to keep me away from being Batman again?”

Tony licked his lips.

“That’s ridiculous!”

Bruce shook his head exasperated.

“Thank Goodness!” he turned his gaze to the starry sky. “So you won’t help me do those adjustments to my suit?”

Tony exhaled and looked at the sky as if asking for help. He stood right next to his friend and crouched again.

“Listen, Bruce – here” he cupped his friend’s head and turned it gently to look him in the eyes. “You know that these adjustments are not enough – don’t roll those eyes, buddy. Look at me” his stare was intense and deep in affection as their eyes met “there are millions of people around the world that are paraplegic” Bruce bit his lip “and they adjusted to their condition and live with it. So, as when the world learnt that you survived Falcone’s brutal abuse and won, you can once again be the role model for all these people who feel depressed and defeated by their disability. You can be once again the
beacon of bravery and willpower!” his voice emanated the warmth his eyes had.

Bruce closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

“I won’t ever be the role model for all these people because these people are much braver than I’d ever be. I can’t be compared with all these people because they cope without having any of the luxurious things and conveniences I enjoy” Tony rubbed Bruce’s upper arms. “But even if the press’ spotlights make some people look up at me expecting, that will be Bruce Wayne, not Batman” Tony lolled his head closing his eyes. “They have different roles…”

Bruce regarded his friend’s closed in frustration eyes.

“So you won’t develop the bionic spine parts…” he said flatly, dryly.

Tony opened his eyes, cupping again his friend’s face.

“Oh, Bruce… Of course, I will; everything will be ready soon” Bruce’s eyes sparkled with such joy that Tony bit really hard his lips for the impact his next words would have. “Yet” Bruce’s eyes began already narrowing “implementing some bionic parts in your damaged spine and restoring the normal neuronal activity” Bruce frowned, his eyes hungrily and maybe angrily waiting the next and Tony sighed. “All these don’t mean that you’ll be able to do what you did before…” Bruce’s eyes widened and Tony tightened his grip on his friend’s face. “Littl’ guy, every paraplegic in the world has to make compromises and…”

But Bruce yanked his head evading Tony’s hands, the billionaire tilting his head on the side huffing.

“Every paraplegic in the world is encouraged to continue doing what loves and is praised for managing to do that despite the disability! Don’t tell me that your bionic parts won’t be as perfect as to enable a paraplegic dancer or an athlete resuming her/his career? Why you want so much to confine me?”

Tony stood up, clenching his waist and letting his head slump on his chest.

“There aren’t many paraplegics in the world whose ‘love’ includes jumping from rooftops, flying, exchanging punches with really dangerous guys and being hit… Dancing and sports are vast differently. The dangers in what you do are unaccountable…”

“The times I was hit are really few!”

Tony jerked his arms in the air: why his stubborn buddy didn’t want to understand; why was refusing to accept reality? And those blazing eyes made Tony really sad because he could see and feel inside this angry shine the formidable hero being caged inside roaring and despairing to be freed… And he wanted so much for that to be possible yet….

“Exactly…” he replied throatily. “Before you were able to avoid blows but the bionic parts although very effective and with almost perfect functionality, are not able to stop blows or bullets: and if you’re hit again…Even a mild blow could render you completely unable to resist your enemies! For fuck’s sake! Can you think for a second what will happen if you collapse in front of your enemies?!! My hairs stand on end only on the thought!”

“That won’t happen!” Bruce protested and Tony closed his eyes sighing. “I know how to protect myself!”

The blood was bursting Tony’s veins and the billionaire surged on the chair, his eyes flashing madly.
“You’re in that damn chair, aren’t you?!” he almost yelled. “And will the need to be more careful stop you from covering an innocent with your body to save him from a bullet or anything?” he lowered his voice. “You almost died and your lower spine was almost shattered because you shoved out of the way a boy” he blinked “can you say that you won’t repeat it?”

Bruce’s eyes were widened stabbing Tony’s: the answer was written there and Tony bit his lips and held tighter his friend’s upper arms. But Bruce’s heart was drumming in protest and only his will make his heartbeat calm.

“You’re convinced I’m not the warrior I used to be” he stated so calmly that Tony wanted to scream. The billionaire from Malibu stood abruptly and submerged his fingers in his locks clutching them.

“But you’re not!” he said almost desperate. “You’re a paraplegic!” as soon as he uttered it he regretted; Bruce was exactly as if he was just backstabbed.

Bruce swallowed and locked his eyes with Tony who felt exactly as if he was looking at Batman’s lenses.

“Every paraplegic in the world” he said pointing every word separately “has a name, has a personality: paraplegia doesn’t define them. And as every paraplegic in the world, I’m still Bruce, not a chair with a man on.”

Tony’s shoulders slumped and he lowered his head.

“I’m sorry…” he whispered and then kneeled and hugged his friend. “Of course, you’re still Bruce: my buddy, my little guy but I’m afraid” he looked in Bruce’s eyes that had softened.

Bruce rubbed Tony’s back.

“I know you love me but, Tony, my temporary disability won’t dictate the rest of my life and change me – I’m sure it’s temporary and with the help of you and Lucius it’d be over soon.”

“Yeah but still being a vigilante…”

Bruce licked his lips.

“For pity’s sake, Tony! You were half dead when you made Ironman and smashed your enemies!”

“It’s not the same, buddy…”

“Everyone has his/her own ways to compensate” he shook his head. “I assure you that I don’t want to die so I’ll return to the streets only when I’ll be ready.”

Tony held tightly his friend’s hands, her eyes resolute.

“And if that time never comes?” he whispered.

“Never isn’t in my vocabulary, I thought it wasn’t in yours either…” he pressed his lips. “But I suppose this is the case when you are concerned…”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose: it was so difficult to defeat Bruce in an argument.

“Don’t try to push me into mutilating what I am: my body was damaged by my enemies” Bruce cocked his eyebrows “I don’t believe that my best buddy wants to amputate my personality, too…” Bruce’s eyes were something between puppy and pure power and resolution.
Tony closed his eyes: he was a sucker for his buddy.

“I’m just trying to show you that there are other options to consider: I didn’t want to press you” he inhaled: he’d prefer Bruce in a university rather than in Gotham’s rooftops. “What you want is what matters” Bruce smiled but Tony raised a warning index finger “but! You’ll take your time: even after the operation for the implementation of the bionic parts, your body will need time to regain the strength and the skills you had before. And Leslie will tell us when you’ll be ready.”

Bruce nodded and Tony felt like crying seeing him beaming because personally he doubted that his friend would be ever capable to resume his mission. But for now he preferred to feed his friend’s hopes – he just couldn’t demolish Bruce’s hopes: that man had survived so many calamities with incredible strength and now Tony with his words fought to push him to despair.

As much as Tony thought that hid his true feelings and beliefs they were so clear for Bruce… And it was like a demolishing punch in the guts: pain and anger together. Yet he was used to taking punches… After all, he wouldn’t wait for Leslie’s or Tony’s or Clark’s permission to don again the cowl and cape: this was his life and his creation so they had no saying in that. Besides if he let them they would keep him forever in that chair…to protect him.

“You need to notify Thor” he said without betraying anything from the feelings inside him. He wanted to change subject.

Tony frowned.

“Why?”

Bruce arched his eyebrows and twitched his lips.

“If your main concern wasn’t my…academic career and had asked about the assault, you’d know.”

Tony scratched his nape.

“Whoa! We definitely forgot about this, huh?”

Bruce shrugged one shoulder and snorted.

“What has Thor to do with this?”

“Before the creatures attacked I was separated from Selina” Tony’s eyes bulged.

“Then how…” he stopped himself just before saying ‘you protected yourself’.

Bruce swallowed that too, licking his lips.

“You know Loki?”

“Thor’s brother?”

Bruce nodded.

“I met him in the forest and he protected me from the attackers.”

Tony frowned.

“He isn’t a nice guy, Bruce… I mean, I don’t know much about him but he isn’t the protecting-the-innocent type; he probably wanted something…” he rubbed his chin thoughtful.
“No kidding…” Bruce crossed his arms. “Yet I think you should thank him for helping your helpless friend…”

Tony looked his friend exasperated; he could sense his buddy’s frustration.

“What he said?”

Bruce brushed the armrests without looking at Tony.

“He was just intrigued about the interest Thor and his kin show in my case: I hope your teammate didn’t mention anywhere my secret.”

Tony lolled his head on the side pressing his lips.

“I’ll let Thor know…” suddenly he frowned. “Wait a minute: you said that you were assaulted by… creatures?”

Bruce smirked: finally, Tony noticed. He nodded.

“What creatures?” now Tony’s worry became stronger, his mind racing: both he and Superman had bizarre enemies – it could be their enemies that found Bruce’s current location and decided to strike him? He felt a shiver running his spine.

Bruce saw his friend’s paleness and forgot the frustration Tony caused him. He was ready to describe the things that attacked him yet the StarkStell’s song stopped him.

“It’s Pepper” Tony said. “I left hastily and she must be worried…”

“I don’t believe it that all these hours you didn’t call her!” Bruce shook his head and Tony smiled guiltily. “Go speak to her…”

Tony nodded and began heading inside.

“I’ll call Thor too.”

Bruce opened his laptop and typed the address for Gotham Gazette’s site. He not even looked at the video in the right of the page that had remained permanently there for three months: Superman brings Bruce back home… Instead something else got his interest: Impressive dive in Gotham’s criminality rates.

He brushed the screen and read Gotham’s Police official report and his immense, long time activity in the field gave him the skill to realize immediately the truth of the statement. Surely, it was impressive and very un-Gotham: it was the criminality rate of a custom city, a hopeful city. Commissioner Gordon who presented the official report praised his officers’ self-sacrifice and devotion to their duty.

Bruce knew that the massacre at Gambol’s restaurant was a key factor because Gotham’s remaining small organized gangs were too scared to be active in the city and had already expanded their activities in other cities. Of course, that didn’t take away the credit Gordon’s new GCPD deserved just made Bruce’s sense of haste more pushing: he wasn’t sure how much would take for new players to come to the fore, taking advantage of the empty field – he should be doing field work spying… And Joker?

There was also something that raised Bruce’s hopes: Mayor Garcia commenting on the decrease of criminality rates spoke about Harvey Dent’s great contribution and hinted that after his suspension
penalty ended, they could do a referendum asking the citizens about the former DA’s return. The author had made a poll in the end of the article asking the readers to vote Yes/No to Harvey’s return. “No” was leading but with a few votes and Bruce smirked because Gothamites could easily change their minds.

A subtle beep notified him for a new e-mail. It was from Lucius’ secret address.

“I received your sketches and I’m on to make my search. Also, I’m delighted to inform you that your high tech gift for Mr. Grayson was delivered to Ms. Turner with your instructions to presented as her gift.

Sincerely,

Lucius Fox.”

And then he opened the article he wanted to read:

Super arms not enough to save Bruce Wayne?

By Vicky Vale

It’s been three months since our beloved sad Prince (Bruce cocked an eyebrow) was rescued from the hideous League of Shadows having suffered once again extreme abuse. And who was the best candidate to save the 26 year old billionaire than Superman who was obviously overemotional to hold again the young man?

From that night and the publication of the revealing video people are excited about the secret love story that came to the light under such dramatic circumstances. So everyone – most of all the author of this article – is eagerly waiting for a chance to see again Gotham’s Prince and his Guardian Angel together.

Yet although since then we have seen many times Superman saving the day with his heroic way, Bruce Wayne remains elusive as ever. Of course, from that night the video was taken we heard from various sources that the young man is recovering to a special rehabilitation center. However as the days pass and we don’t get a glimpse of Bruce, things became odd…

The night Joker kidnapped the children from the Haven to demand that Bruce Wayne goes to him witnesses say that the young billionaire was transferred from the clinic to Wayne Manor due to the danger. Yet after Joker was arrested Tony Stark, 32, informed the Gotham Police Department that he took his friend to a special rehabilitation center because his condition had deteriorated; also, Dr. Thomas Elliot, 30, a specialist in complex injuries, was called to operate the Wayne heir only to be oddly called off to Dr. Elliot’s puzzlement.

“The explanation I was given was very vague and I never learnt anything about my childhood friend’s condition” the doctor, chair of the Neuroscience Faculty in Gotham’s University told the Gazette. “I feel a very awkward atmosphere of extreme secrecy surrounding Bruce – I just hope all this reluctance to share information does not hide anything…bad for my friend.”

Bruce snorted on the “friend”.

Indeed, why denying the professional genius of an acclaimed doctor as Dr. Elliot? Could this ‘odd’ denial to share information hide something ominous for our Prince? Could the secret be the opposite of what happened 18 years ago? Maybe this time instead of declaring the Prince dead, they ‘keep’ him alive in order to avoid panicking the shareholders and bringing a terrible collapse to the newly stabilized Wayne Enterprises.
We recently talked to Lucius Fox, 60, who is the head scientist in Wayne Enterprises, an important member of the board and one of the major allies of Bruce Wayne in his battle to establish himself to the head of his father’s company. The likeable Mr. Fox was reassuring.

“Mr. Wayne is very much alive; he is just having his time recuperating from his latest adversity and he’ll be with us as soon as his doctors approve it.”

However, Mr. Fox’s charming smile can’t be sufficient to make the clouds of doubt disperse: where is Bruce Wayne? And in what condition? Is he alive or the company tries to hide the truth to maintain its shares’ racing course?

The sure thing is that until Gotham sees again her gorgeous Prince questions and uncertainty will cloud Wayne Enterprises and the very city.

UPDATE: Is Superman already trying to heal his grief? A new SuperRomance in the making?

Dick was absorbed reading something in his fancy new Tablet and Jayson rolled his eyes exasperated and took a big sip of his Irish coffee. They sat on a secluded booth in a small cafeteria.

“Yes!” Dick clenched his fingers and punched the air causing Jayson’s bored eyes fix on him.

The younger boy pouted puzzled on the way his friend’s eyes glimmered with enthusiasm.

“Wha’? Gotham Knights lost last night…”

Dick showed the screen to him and his face was beaming.

“They say that Wayne might be dead!”

“Wow…” Jayson answered completely untouched and shook his straw.

Dick disappointed by his friend’s lukewarm reaction put down gingerly his new toy and grabbed his hand.

“That asshole might have finally gotten what he deserves! Don’t you get it?!’’ his eyes were fervent and Jayson pretended for his sake that was interested. “My family finally gets justice; Brian will be finally rested…” his voice dropped on his brother’s name and remembrance.

Jason patted his upper arm.

“I know how ya feel, chum…”

Dick pressed his lips and looked at the table because he didn’t want Jason to see his eyes tearful.

“If Wayne died then there’s one left…” he whispered. “Mom, Brian…I went to their graves yesterday with granny – you knew that Wayne had the nerve to come to their funeral?!” his eyes jerked to his friend’s and the younger boy shook his head. “The bastard!”

“Maybe he cares, mate…” he shrugged.

“No way! He just wanted to…” he huffed. “Damn! To play the good guy to us! They died a horrible death because of him!”

Jason drank again from his coffee.
“Joker kill’ ‘em, buddy…”

Dick yanked his head and groaned: why Jason didn’t want to understand him?

“He wouldn’t, if Wayne had stayed dead!” he crossed his arms and scorned. “Of course, you defend him ‘cause your mom works at the Haven!”

Jason frowned and his eyes narrowed menacingly.

“Cut it already, ya dork! I told ya: I hate the asshole but I don’t like ya wasted in that shit! An’ I’m not the one with that fancy, brand new toy!” he sneered eyeing the Tablet.

Dick touched it.

“My granny gave it to me yesterday…”

Jason smirked.

“Ya know that this toy isn’t on the market?”

Dick cocked an eyebrow.

“You’re an expert on high tech?”

Jason leaned closer to no be overheard.

“Only on snatchin’ it…An’ I tell ya, mate, that thing isn’t anywhere in Gotham’s stores…” a crooked smile carved his child face. “Wher’ ya granny finds the bucks to get all these?”

Dick looked at the shiny, white gadget: indeed, now that Jay mentioned it, Dick hadn’t seen it anywhere. He shrugged.

“I guess my dad left some fortune: he was very popular, you know…mom told me…” his voice cracked and Jason pressed his lips. “He made much advertising for many companies – everyone wanted him!”

Jason felt uncomfortable from his buddy’s emotion; he had never met his dad too yet he was sure that he just dumped his mom after screwed her and never gave a shit about his kid. While Dick’s dad was decent and died before getting to know his kid.

Dick though deep in his sorrow realized the younger boy’s uneasiness and shook himself. He cleared his throat and pointed his finger to the glass of Irish coffee.

“Jay, alcohol is forbidden to minors.”

“Not when they wear a helmet and order in a husky voice…” he winked “and I’m sturdy for my age: tall an’ such…”

“Bullshit!” Dick huffed. “They just don’t give a damn since they get the bucks…” he took a sip from his hot chocolate slightly envious for Jay’s forbidden coffee.

Jason sniggered and pompously took a big sip from his glass.

“An’ how com’ an’ yar granny permit ya stayin’ out after school?”

Dick rimmed his cup.
“I told her that I’ll go for a chocolate with my classmates.”

Jason clapped and hopped in his seat causing curious stares from the other booths.

“Mistah nice guy lyin’ to his granny!” he said in a singsong manner.

Dick ruffled his hair with both hands blushing, the feeling of guilt getting to him.

“I didn’t lie!” he protested. “I did go for a chocolate” Jason widened his eyes sneering “and though you’re not a classmate, you’re…” he searched for something “a peer.”

Jason chuckled.

“An’ isn’t like ya met that Zucco guy…” Dick nodded with a perplexed look upon remembering his granny’s angry and almost desperate order to not approach that man who so much intrigued him.

“Mmm…Why yar sweet granny becomes so battleax” Dick cast him a really nasty glance “eh…strict when it comes to him?”

“Search me…” the older boy shrugged. “Speaking of granny we must get going” he put his hand in his pocket bringing out some money and Jason did the same.

“Those are on me, boys!” a cheerful male voice invaded their space and they both saw Tony Zucco approaching their booth smiling cordially.

Jason sniffed and twisted his lips not caring to hide his disliking. Yet Dick seemed interested.

“Thank you,… eh… – how am I to call you?”

The man shrugged a shoulder.

“Tony sounds perfect” he said and sat by Dick.

“We’re leavin’, dude!” Jason stood, looking with widened eyes to his friend who didn’t share his hastiness.

“That goes for you, too, Dick?” Zucco asked the older boy smiling slyly.

Dick shrugged.

“I guess I could stay a bit more…”

Jason grunted and slumped in his seat.

“How are you doing, champ?” the adult looked affectionate at Dick.

“Fine, I guess…” he said obviously without believing it.

Zucco cocked his eyebrows.

“Down at the gym everyone is impressed from your talent!” he beamed and Jason watched him angrily.

Dick’s eyes flashed.

“Really? How’d you know?”

Zucco tilted his head on the side.
“I have some old buddies there and I just couldn’t stop myself from asking about my nephew – I hope you don’t mind. And I watched you myself some times.”

Jason now crossed his arms and pouted fuming – he didn’t like that man and fell for Ms. Turner. But Dick’s eyes widened.

“And?” the boy asked interested.

Zucco shook his head.

“You’re a great talent, kid! Your late dad would be very proud of you!”

Jason rolled his eyes seeing how touched his friend was from the guy’s words.

But Zucco’s attention was drawn to the Tablet-like gadget.

“Yours?” he inquired Dick and when the boy nodded: “I haven’t seen anything like this in market or in magazines – it must be pricy…”

“My granny’s gift” Dick answered and the man grinned with a glint in the eyes that Jason didn’t like – littl’ Jason could definitely tell when someone was interested in money or expensive toys.

“How’s dear Ms. Turner?” he asked Dick but his hand was already stretched towards the expensive gadget. “May I?”

“Of course” Dick replied. “Granny is fine.”

Zucco was staring at the screen where the Gazette article was still on, rubbing his chin thoughtful.

“Glad to hear: but I know she doesn’t want me near you so I can’t send my greetings… You read about Wayne, huh?” he narrowed his eyes. “It’d be justice served if it’s true – that nutcase killed your family for his sake.”

Dick pressed his lips and nodded: finally, someone who saw the truth and shared his feelings. Someone who understood him.

“Yeah…If Wayne had stayed dead, my family would be alive and this world wouldn’t be such a shitty place…”

Zucco rubbed the boy’s back soothingly, gulping.

“I know, son; it’s so hard…Losing your loved ones because of a filthy brat who doesn’t give a shit. I hope he really is dead so that your family finally finds rest.”

Dick’s eyes were tearful remembering the day they dropped his baby brother’s body to the grave and covered it with dirt. He remembered how they were playing cops and thieves only a couple of hours before Brian was tortured and killed; his mommy bringing them milk and cookies.

“Mom says that Vale is a stupid cow that croaks bullshit!” Jason spat wanting to shake his friend from that man’s influence.

Zucco smiled to him patronizingly and turned to Dick.

“I went to their graves…” he said in a hoarse voice. “And John’s…” he shook his head biting his lips. “I can’t believe so many years have passed…poor guy! He didn’t have the chance to meet his son: he was so excited for your arrival…”
Dick devoured every word the man was saying: his mother spoke hours and hours about his father and his granny too, but it was never enough. He was thirsty for every tiny new detail that could make him feel like having known his father.

“You were there when he died?” he inquired in a low voice and Jason was pissed: Dick was slipping to this man’s grip.

Zucco lowered his head and sighed.

“Yeah…It was nightmarish, awful…” he sighed again.

Dick’s eyes bulged.

“Tell me!”

Jason had had enough and stood.

“Yar granny will be sick of worry – let’s go!”

And as if confirming, the tablet-like gadget began ringing with Dick’s granny’s number flashing.

“Shit!” Dick exclaimed and blushed.

Jason noticed Zucco almost cursing and grabbed Dick’s elbow.

“If ya not move yar ass, I’ll tell her where are we to come an’ snatch ya. Dork!”

Dick answered the call mumbling that he was on his way back and followed Jason.

“Bye, Tony” he hastily addressed the man. “And thank you…”

Zucco smiled.

“My pleasure, kid. If you want, after the gym, we can talk about your father and some movements he loved and that I believe you can master!”

Dick smiled nodding and Jason dragged him.

“Not even think ‘bout it, ya dumbass!” the younger boy gritted his teeth to Dick.

But Zucco staring at their retreating forms smiled confidently.

Selina pulled off of her the special garment for beekeeping, placed it on the wooden working bench and breathed easier staying with his form fitting short sleeved T-shirt and jeans. She gazed around the wild landscape made of weeds and late autumn flowers where a raw of small, square beehives were lined up – butterflies were still flying around as various insects. Selina sucked the smell of grass and salt from the sea that brushed the shore at the roots of the hill; she closed her eyes and yanked her head letting the bright sun caress her skin that had tanned after her staying in the island.

She turned smiling hearing Argiris approaching.

The young man approximately at her age – but who cares? – was caring a small vial and a tub. Selina smiled.
“What are these?”

Argiris gave her the tub.

“From my mom – cream mpougatsa: she knows your friend likes it very much and she sends him some. Just out of the oven.”

Selina took it and smiled.

“Yeah! She always treats us some when we drink coffee at the square’ cafe. Her bakery sends such tantalizing smells…and Alfred loves her bread! Please, give her our thanks – Bruce will be very happy!” she chuckled. “He can’t resist!”

The raven haired man showed her the vial.

“Royal Jelly: it’s really precious and enhances the organism” he licked his rich lips “it’s for your friend. It will benefit him – galvanizes the immune system and generally strengthens a recovering body.”

Selina hesitated to take it.

“I don’t know, Argiris… He already takes many drugs and I don’t know if he should mix them with this…”

“It’s an entirely natural product but of course you can ask his doctor first for allergies.”

Selina nodded and took the vial, placing it on the tub and then at the working bench. She cocked an eyebrow and smiled slyly eyeing the tall young man with the beautiful black eyes coming closer to her.

“So, Selina” Selina loved the accented way he uttered her name. “That man, Bruce, is…your fiancé?”

On that Selina choked and laughed; she shook her head in refusal.

“Then mother was right that you’re brother and sister” he shook his hands. “I mean: same age, same beauty and such bonding: you love so much each other – it’s obvious…”

Selina clenched her waist and tilted her head on the side smirking.

“You’re too observant, handsome…”

Argiris blushed.

“When I’m interested in someone…”

Selina cocked an eyebrow.

“In me or Bruce?” she demanded flatly because she was also very interested…in Argiris.

The man widened his eyes and blushed even more.

“You!”

Selina rolled her eyes.
“Thank Goodness for that!” she remarked slyly. “No, we’re not siblings but it’s as good as that…”

Argiris placed his hands on her shoulders and came even closer, his eyes locked with hers.

“I’m so happy to hear that…” he breathed and Selina relished the hot air that brushed her naked neck. “Because I really like you, Selina…”

“I like you too, Argiris, but you know that my time on the island is limited…I’ll return to the States at some point.”

The young man brushed his lips on Selina’s and she closed her eyes sucking the different smells from the wild plants of the field flavored from Argiris’ raw, so male scent.

“So let’s make good use of that time…”

Selina shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“It was about time, handsome!” she wrapped her arms around his neck as he cuddled her.

Their lips locked in a passionate, hungry kiss and cuddled together fell on the grass rolling between the wild plants.

Selina stood before the window in her room, Hero’s purr loud as he rubbed at her leg. She sighed and squatted taking the kitten in her lap.

“Let’s find our Bruce!”

Bruce brushed the link that led to a video on YouTube. As it played he watched Superman stopping a train taking position to halt another train that was heading to crush with the first. And then an impressive woman landed swiftly on the rail and with pompous ease stopped the coming train.

His eyes were still but his heart jolted when Superman walked slowly towards the Amazon who saluted him with a gesture of respect and they shook hands. The video ended abruptly with Superman’s departure but Bruce saw at the related videos’ section a new video.

Some guys attempted to rob LEXLAB in Metropolis – Bruce pressed his lips many questions and thoughts already forming as his mind assessed the information yet he continued watching. The burglars held hostages and Superman hesitated to attack; the thugs were ready to flee with the hostages when a half-naked hurricane engulfed them giving Superman the chance to attack ending fighting side by side with the Amazon…

For the second time in a day, the two heroes shook hands and locked eyes…

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking?” Bruce inquired indifferently knowing that Selina had come in the meantime and watched silently the video.

The young woman sent a kiss to Hero who was following her.

“Mmmm…That she looks more like a cheerleader than a crime fighter or that she must have some super power holding that kitsch corset on her boobs while fighting?”

Bruce looked at her and smiled.

“Do you think that ancient Greeks knew about silicone boobs? Because those are not real!” Selina
added in a matter of fact way.

Bruce chuckled.

“Everything is possible. Yet I wasn’t thinking that.”

Selina rolled her eyes.

“No kiddin’!” she slipped in Bruce’s hand two cinnamon biscuits and winked. “Alfred just served them…And Tony is already savoring them!”

He took a bite.

“The whole house smells deliciously…”

Selina rubbed her shoulders.

“It’s cold here, do you want a cardigan?”

“No, thank you” he eyed his robe. “Alfred wouldn’t have let me out unprotected.”

“Of course…” she looked at the screen with the paused image of Superman and Princess Diana. “Well, what were you thinking?”

Bruce bit a biscuit and pointed at the screen.

“Superman has found a new ally and comrade – and he is impressed” his voice was totally emotionless as if commenting in a council. “And who can blame him? She is powerful, indestructible, a formidable warrior and…gorgeous…” his sparkling eyes were fixed on the two heroes completely still.

Selina snorted: Bruce was a master in hiding his feelings but not from her.

“She’s mediocre” Bruce looked her lopsided, arching an eyebrow and Selina shrugged. “What? I’m objective…and she is so clearly fancying Superman that I want to throw up…”

“Why not? Superman is beautiful…”

That scientific tone in Bruce’s tone was getting on her nerves. She scoffed.

“Give me a break, sweetie! Because he put a spell on you taking advantage of your innocence” Bruce choked on that and laughed making Selina frown and pout “and love-blinded you into not seeing around that doesn’t mean that he is THAT beautiful!”

Bruce lolled his head on the side looking at her disbelieving.

“I can count many humans who are more beautiful than him: Argiris for instance” she said proudly crossing her arms.

Her friend arched his eyebrows and smiled benevolently.

“How who’s love-blinded, dear?”

She punched him gently on the shoulder.

“As for superboys, for me, Captain America is DA hunk!”
Bruce’s eyes widened and he looked at her mock-shocked but definitely amused.

“I don’t believe it that you’re Captain America’s fangirl!” he teased.

She clenched her waist and pouted deep in thought.

“Well…I like burly boys yet Hulk is oversize for me and green isn’t really my color…”

“Poor Tony will be heartbroken hearing that you prefer someone else from his team.”

“The competition is merciless, babe!” she followed Bruce’s eyes back on the screen and crouched leaning at his ear. “I know how you’re feeling…you may be hiding from the others but I know that your previous fight with Superman still stings you” Bruce stilled his eyes on hers and she sighed. “His words burn inside and those awful videos and that bitch makes it more painful…”

“She isn’t a bitch, Sel” he said calmly.

But she smirked.

“I know a bitch when I see her… Anyway, the important for me is you. That dork spoke like an ass but maybe he understood his fault and regretted what he said and with the first chance he’ll apologize…”

Bruce gazed at the sky thoughtful.

“I don’t know, Sel…I don’t want him to apologize or something…He believes what he said…and to tell you the truth, I understand his fascination with the Princess…”

Selina grunted and grabbed his shoulders. Bruce stared at her nonchalant.

“Clark is attracted to strong, brave, proud individuals.”

“He fell in love with Falcone’s helpless toy – he didn’t know you were Batman then” Selina retorted.

“He might have felt sorry for that being and wanted to save him but it was Batman he kissed first. Without knowing that I was Batman.”

“Instinct…”

Bruce shook his head.

“Batman was the one he wanted…He felt pity for poor, miserable Bruce and wanted to protect and save him – as a good-hearted hero would do – but Batman’s strength and defiance, the feeling of danger and adventure that he carried was that fascinated Clark: knowing that Bruce was Batman kept his interest alive. But now he sees only a battered, weak being in need of care and protection and though his nature is protective and kind” he shook his head “that doesn’t mean that he’s still attracted to someone who is no longer the Batman he fell for: he said it plain and clear – for him, I’m weak.”

Selina gritted her teeth.

“You’re not weak! You’re always Batman because strength and bravery is in your core. And if he can’t see that then he is super-idiot!”

Bruce grinned to her.
“You heard him. Compare the way he was staring at me and how he goggles at her.”

Selina definitely didn’t like Superman’s stare and she couldn’t persuade a detective like Bruce that wasn’t true. She caressed her friend’s shoulders and took Hero who was at their feet and let him on Bruce’s lap.

“It’s only a crappy video, Bruce…”

Bruce nodded and caressed Hero’s head with his fingertips.

“From the *Daily Planet* by Clark Kent – he wants to inform the world about the Princess: he is excited.”

Selina cupped his face and brought their eyes to lock.

“You know he loves you: he looked after you all this time; remember all the days you spent together here – how happy you made him. He is still proud of you, Bruce; as all of us!”

Bruce nodded smiling; the knot in his guts wasn’t dissolved but he didn’t want to cause distress to Selina neither to act like a jealous kid. Besides there wasn’t a point in all this…

“I know” he caressed Selina’s cheek.

Leslie popped her head from the door.

“Kids, dinner is ready. Come!”

Bruce turned nodding and Leslie left.

“Well?” Selina inquired standing.

“Go! I’ll shut my laptop.”

Selina looked at him suspiciously but chose to not insist.

“C’me, Hero” she took the kitten from Bruce’s lap. “Don’t be late, handsome” she shook her index finger. “You know Stark: he can’t hold himself from eating everything!”

Bruce grinned and waited to be alone before playing again the video from LEXLAB, his lips so tightly pressed that they lost their color.

He could sketch Batman’s every move during the fight: how he’d block the thugs’ every attack. His mind burnt from desire to set his body in motion but his members didn’t obey – they shouldn’t obey his bossy and cruel mind’s orders neither succumb to his mind’s destructive power; that was what everyone said, that was what everyone wanted from him. Because he was weak, just a wreckage lucky to have people loving it.

He inhaled deeply and his burning eyes gazed the sky. The thought of the Immortality Water came torturous in his mind. Many times he was tempted to drink it again to force his injuries heal faster… He could feel for his old mentor, Ra’s, who drank the powerful elixir to heal his injuries and maintain his power… He had experienced the strength of the pure form of the elixir when he cut his carotid, trying to die: the Water stopped the bleeding and revived him. And Superman…Clark had given him the same elixir to keep him alive after the building collapsed on him.

He rubbed his temple feeling hammers. He was lucky to survive that, he reminded himself; lucky to be still breathing and having his loved ones around happy to have him with them; lucky for having a
chance to try and regain his life… No, everyone wanted to stop him from even trying.

He bit his lips: if he drank again the Water and his body healed completely they would have to accept it: they wouldn’t have any argument to retort. His heart beat excited: the Water was his after all – he deciphered the ingredients and the procedure. They couldn’t deny him taking it…

His eyes estimated the railing and then the slope underneath; the whim to open again the wings of his armor and fly was more than dictating, urging, demanding – it was tormenting, stabbing his insides. And the chair felt not just confining but choking him…

It was just some gulps of the miraculous liquid and then everything would be like it used to be…

Suddenly, his eyes stopped at something he had months to see: two emeralds shining in the dark. Bruce’s heart missed some beats and he held his breath as his sight adjusted to the dark discerning the body of a bat: his bat, that wasn’t afraid of the owls that filled the night cool air with their sounds. The emerald eyes locked with his and reached his heart saying in silence so many things – things that stung and soothed him.

He pressed his lips: no, he couldn’t and wouldn’t take the Water… That was the sloppy way Ra’s Al Ghul followed to his fall: he used the Water to make himself a God, a demon, to fool and violate his nature into kneeling his enemies, gaining immense power and taking advantage of others for his pleasure.

All the times Ra’s used him, all the times he tortured him flooded his mind. The man was corrupt to the core and maybe the constant use of the Water contributed to that: like everything, the Water’s effectiveness was a matter of wise use – when used to heal people was a blessing but using it to make yourself a God and invincible into achieving your ambitions led to your own fall and destruction.

And Goddess Nemesis punished Ra’s for his arrogance and his corruption and blasphemy: the emerald eyes flashed as if confirming his thoughts. The Knife of Justice used Bruce’s hand to serve justice to the man who killed so many innocents and took advantage of a priceless gift to indulge his ego…

Drinking the elixir to just relief himself from the turmoil and soothe his desires would send him to follow the same road to total corruption as Ra’s Al Ghul. And Bruce wouldn’t do that: his eyes gave that promise to the emeralds watching him. Even if that meant months of waiting and painful training and disappointment and frustration from being regarded as weak and using techniques that would exhaust his body and mind: this was the human way, his way. Because he was a human and frankly he wouldn’t change that with anything.

“Master Bruce?” Alfred’s soft voice addressed him from the balcony door.

Bruce looked a last time at the odd eyes and turned to Alfred.

“I’m coming.”

It was already dusk when Clark left Metropolis and that meant that in Greece it was past midnight. Yet he couldn’t leave the office sooner: after he published his article, Perry called the entire team to a meeting and Clark felt that any attempt in finding an excuse to flee would be too much. After all, the last months he exploited too much Perry’s gratification for the hit-exclusives he brought to the Planet.
However Lois was glaring at him all the time – that is when she didn’t ignore him completely – as if he had done a crime!

He shook his head even now travelling midair. He wasn’t totally convinced on the usefulness of this transatlantic swift trip: Bruce probably was already asleep and even in the morning the stubborn being would be still pissed at him. So Clark was sure that his mood was going to be in shreds not only by Bruce’s sullenness but also… He sighed. He didn’t want even to let the thought form but the pang in his guts every time he thought or saw him it was eloquent enough.

Every time he was flying to meet him, Clark felt excited, happy to see him but always a hidden pain was there. That night however there wasn’t any excitement only that hidden pain magnified and transformed into irritation and exhaustion. He was so elated after so many days, so many hours of agony and despair he felt again hopeful, carefree, relieved from every burden…

Stark’s white villa sparkled like an earthly star imprisoned in the mountain. A star… He sighed remembering his Star: his trapped Star… He inhaled deeply, the cool air that brought the revitalizing scent of the sea refreshing him. If at least Bruce wasn’t so pigheaded…

And then he saw it and his calm was again gone replaced not from gloom as before but anger. That man was going to drive him crazy!

He dove swiftly at the forest near the villa and landed to the spot where he had seen it. That obstinate human didn’t hear anything from what he said; he was taught nothing from their quarrel and now wandered to the forest after the rest fell to sleep. Clark pressed his lips and clenched his waist: Bruce was mocking him – showing off his stupid defiance, his disrespect for Superman.

And now not only Bruce forced his body to stand and walk but also hid from him, jeering him. He gritted his teeth.

“Bruce, this is stupid!” he used his super vision to scan the forest and found him again.

But this time Bruce’s body didn’t arouse him but made him mad; he clenched his jaw and surged there. Obviously, the overconfident idiot thought that Superman wouldn’t find him because he didn’t try to hide again.

Superman grabbed his upper arms and pinned him on a tree letting the human’s legs dangle. He didn’t care if he hurt Bruce: maybe if he felt pain would get a grip. His eyes were almost red and his breathe a rasp, as their faces came too close. Clark could hear his heart drumming in his skull.

But Bruce was totally unfazed; his beautiful face brushed by a faint smirk, his eyes glimmered mockingly and regarded sarcastic Clark’s distorted from anger face.

“Why you did that, you stupid man?!” Superman growled and shook almost brutally the human body. “You want to drive me mad?! You want to spit in my face your contempt?!”

However the mesmerizing eyes became more gleeful, the eyebrows forming a full sarcastic arch and those rosy lips opened slightly to let out a horrible snigger – so much unlike Bruce.

Clark’s self-restrain shattered on that and his mouth opened and rushed to punish those jeering lips; his hands freeing Bruce’s shoulders to cup with both hands his face and shake it in his pace, sucking and devouring with his lips that bruised the soft human flesh before his tongue licked them angrily.

He kept his eyes closed lost in the tornado of his anger, his frustration, his passion for these unmarred lips that just let him do whatever he wanted…
Wait! Bruce’s lip had a cut from the adventure at the forest and the smell was nothing like Bruce’s. He frowned and opened his eyes.

Whatever he was pinning on the tree evaporated; Clark’s eyes widened and looked frantically around. Maybe he was already crazy?

And then he heard a man cackling from the sky above. There was anything there but Clark used his super vision and saw enraged a man floating with folded legs. He had raven, greasy hair and a nose pointy as his ears; his attire was green with a long leather vest. He looked at Superman’s glare knowing that the Man of Steel was seeing him but this didn’t deter him at all, on the contrary his cackling snigger became louder.

Superman launched his laser vision against him but it slithered on an invisible barrier; Clark clenched his teeth and stretched his fist surging at the stranger that mocked him that way. Yet as soon as he reached the man and unleashed his fist to smash him, the raven haired man snorted, pointed his middle finger at him and just vanished leaving his hair-raising cackle behind.

Clark inhaled deeply and shook his head: what was this man? And he knew about Bruce… Concern bit him hard: if he had attacked Bruce before playing with him? He couldn’t hear Bruce’s heart or respiration and he didn’t know if the man did something to block the sound in order to fool Superman to believe that Bruce was in the forest and not in the house or it was the brutal reality.

He changed his body’s direction and rushed to the villa.
“Oooooh! You kept me a seat, Johnny boy! I’m touched!” Joker made a dramatic gesture patting his heart and jumped into the seat opposite Crane.

Crane rolled his eyes and stabbed with his fork the chicken fillet that was his dinner.

“And I hoped that I would enjoy my meal…” he snorted with a voice quite fierce; so much different than the lean doctor’s.

Joker placed his arms on the table and leaned towards Crane.

“Buuuuuut you can’t enjoy a meal without good company!” he licked his lips missing the taste of the brazen lipstick he used.

Crane raised his glistening eyes and stabbed Joker who giggled amused from his obvious distaste.

“Exactly!” Jonathan spat.

But Joker unfazed grabbed his chicken fillet and took a big bite.

“Mmmm…Soooomone thinks that loonies are humans tooo… That meat is as soooft as Brucie’s boody!” he let his eyes take a reminiscent expression and licked his lips. “Speaking of which” he hissed suddenly too serious. “There’s soooome catching up you owe me, doc!”

Of course…Jonathan thought and left his fork on his plate. As a matter of fact he had no problem of relaying his knowledge to this clown – on the contrary, his knowledge would make that fool consider him useful and Jonathan would gladly exploit it.

“What do you want to learn?” he locked eyes with Joker and the jester flapped his eyelashes cutely.

“Pleaaaaaase…Don’t look me like this: I’m getting all wet…” he made his voice girlish and Crane looked frustrated around at the cafeteria. “Now…” Joker’s voice though low became cold as his stare “take back your fork, eat normally aaaaand start talking; I’ll intervene whenever I want some-thing.’’

Crane rolled his eyes and swallowed his wrath: he hated being ordered around but he couldn’t do anything else than obey. For the moment.

“Those strange people…”

“The Leaaague of Shaaadawws” Joker interrupted never letting Crane’s eyes from his.

“Yeah” Crane nodded. “Can you stop looking me in the eyes? It’s really annoying: if this is your version of truth test, there’s no need – I have no reason to lie” he sneered.

Joker shook his head spasmodically.

“Hehehe…There’s at least ooone thing that you would want toooo hide…” he licked again his lips.

“If you mean violating your…wife I’m not interested…”

“Gooooooood for youuuu, docky! Con - tinue…” but as soon as he opened his mouth to resume his narration Joker sprawled in his seat. “You know that schizophrenics caaaaan’t stand eye contact?” he smirked with the hint he let. “Taaaalk it with your shrinky” he shrugged a shoulder.
Crane snorted and closed his eyes: how much more he’d have to tolerate those fools?

“Those jerks organized an entire breach to the Asylum to take me out.”

Joker jerked towards him with his mouth agape.

“W-O-W, doc! I’m imp-pressed!”

Crane shook his head and smirked.

“You should because I’m an expert in human behavior, psychology and psychopharmacology…”

Joker giggled aloud and some inmates looked at their table.

“Obviously, it’s theeee brain youuuuu missed on the rooooad…”

“They wanted my skills for your…wife” he scoffed unfazed and his eyes shone gleefully at Joker’s interest. “They gave me everything I asked in order to achieve their purposes…”

Joker’s eyes became two glistening slits.

“Purposes?”

Crane lolled his head to the side and smiled.

“Make the brat her obedient slave; enslaving his mind to her.”

Joker nodded, every trace of the maniac goofy gone. He took a roast potato and chewed it.

“Morticia.”

Crane jerked his head backwards and leaned towards Joker taking a forkful of salad.

“Talia Al Ghul, the daughter of Ra’s Al Ghul: the former leader of the League and partner of Falcone’s” he cocked his eyebrows suggestively.

Joker took his fillet and dag his teeth ripping a big chunk.

“Youuuuu were working for Falcone…” he said between chewing.

Crane nodded and took a sip from his juice.

“Yeah…He had asked a pill to cause extreme arousal” he smirked and looked at his tablemate suggestively. “He used it for his toy…I’m sure he had a spectacular time as the lady of the Shadows did using a similar substance on dear Brucey…” he sniggered but his grin froze when his length was squeezed by fingers stronger than pincers.

Joker smiled innocently.

“A bone stuck in your throat, dear?” he asked sweetly to be heard by everyone.

Crane coughed.

“I’m fine…” he said throatily, drops of sweat flooding his face.

Joker smiled, patted him friendly in the shoulder and squeezed more; Jonathan gasping.
“The bitch raped him?” Joker asked smiling but his voice was metallic.

Crane nodded clenching his teeth to not scream.

“Not only she…” he huffed. “That oaf she dragged with her too…”

Joker lolled his head to the side.

“I dooooon’t like killing animals buuuuut I might make an exception… Why the bitch wanted you?”

“She…she said that Wayne belonged to her father but he escaped…she wanted him back…but this time wanted to control totally his mind to not escape again” Joker squeezed more and Jonathan whined. “She…she thought very highly of his mental capacities.”

Joker arched an eyebrow, his mind racing. That suited perfectly his suspicions: that stupid League trained assassins – as if killing needs any training… he rolled his eyes – and its leader believed that Brucey belonged to him. His daughter believed that the ‘poor thing’ was her heritage and was desperate not only to get him back but also reassuring his blind obedience. He pouted. Maybe Brucey’s use wasn’t only the obvious? Maybe the ‘poor thing’ was taken under the Ra’s – something – wing for more things than a fuck?

“Aaaand youuuuu?” he clenched Crane’s testicles more chewing indifferently a potato.

Crane was holding the table to fight the pain and not cry but Joker shook his head disapprovingly.

“Eat…” he hissed smiling and gave him his fork with a potato. “And speak…”

Crane mouthed the potato and began chewing.

“He…he definitely had…more endurance than expected” Joker nodded with a knowing shine in his eyes. “And…and…he resissted to my fear gas…”

Joker huffed and sighed.

“Myyyyy Brucie!” he said with pride, his mind racing crossing Crane’s information with his own. “Soooooo the sweet angel wasn’t only Falcone’s slave but this Al Ghul’s too…Ugh! I’ll find that guy and tell him sooooome things…”

“I don’t think you’ll find him…I mean, she told me that her father died and wanted Wayne because he was her heritage…”

Joker snorted.

“Soooooo Morticia was nuts even before contaminated by youuuu…HuHu!” Crane’s eyes from scared became angry. “What youuu did to my boyyyyy?”

Crane swallowed hard hesitant to answer but Joker twisted cruelly making his heart beat faster.

“I began to distort his memories into confusing him about what was true or false so that gradually he’d stop considering Talia as his enemy and trust her to guide him through his fogged past and present.”

Joker frowned: that was very interesting…and useful. Morticia had failed but that didn’t mean that he would too… His methods along with those of the loony doctor were a sure recipe.

“Can you repeat the procedure?” he inquired in business-like tone and released a bit Crane’s balls.
“Stark took my tools and drags…” he barely gulped his scream as Joker clenched his genitals.

“That won’t be a problem for you, riiiiight?” he asked with his nasal voice becoming a sly purring.

Crane felt Joker letting go of his genitals and managed to see an orderly approaching.

“Dr. Quinzel wants you.”

“And she’s not the oooooonly one” Joker winked and licked his lips. “See ya soon, Johnny boyyyyy! Seeeeex boooomb, sex bomb, I’m a sex bomb…”

He stood up and followed the orderly dancing and singing.

Crane watched him with his eyes half closed.

“Of course I can repeat it, you fool…”

“It’s not bad at all that you are weak, Master Bruce: we all love you. You don’t need to try return to your previous life because we all know – most of all, yourself – that you would never manage to be strong again. But no need to worry, Master Bruce: we love you despite your worthlessness…”

Alfred was kneeled before him and held his hands but his grip wasn’t encouraging but detaining: his baby blues were affectionate as ever yet mocking. And that hurt as if he wasn’t more than a child. And what hurt more was that in Alfred’s irises he could see his own reflection...And his face had deep wrinkles, his hair was grey and his eyes were dead from years of wasted efforts and constant disappointment.

“You don’t believe that I’ll be able to be like before?” he showed with his eyes his laptop’s screen where his 3D sketches of the new bat suit were displayed.

Alfred cast a fleeting glance and his eyebrow cocked sarcastic.

“For Goodness’ sake, Master Bruce… Only an idiot would believe that these ridiculous adjustments would allow you to be Batman again” the baby blue eyes locked with his in disbelief. “You should have learnt by now, sir...Are you so stupid, Master Bruce?” he got the impression of a hidden snigger. “I’d suggest you get comfortable in that chair of yours and indulge in our care.”

This should have hurt more yet he clenched his jaw: he’d never yield to that chair or anyone’s discouraging words. But he was old, his youth had passed and he really didn’t manage to come back...

The sound of the cape waving in the air made his heart jolt and his spine get goose bumps. And then the distinct complex noise that was Gotham’s night. The familiar feeling... the familiar landscape of the illuminated city above him – the polluted air that he loved so much giving life to his lungs. It was exactly the view from the tallest gargoyle on the City Hall building: exactly, as when he was standing there, watching, lurking...And his body felt good, in its best shape, young.

So, it was just a nightmare...

He was standing and everything was normal. He was Batman and Batman never smiles but he was deeply satisfied because his adjustments succeeded; his new suit was perfect and despite everyone’s doubts he had returned to his mission, to his city, to himself...
“…Can you think for a second what will happen if you collapse in front of your enemies?! My hairs stand on end only on the thought!”

“You’re not the warrior you used to be…” the caring voice of Tony whispered honestly to his ear.

But Tony was wrong. He was fighting with Zsasz. Evading his lethal punches easily and delivering swift, almost invisible round kicks that made the giant stagger. His mind was coldly estimating and predicting his opponent’s moves and self-confidently blocking them to counter strike. Batman never wasted himself in enjoying fights but this time he could permit a slight content.

“…the bionic parts although very effective and with almost perfect functionality, are not able to stop blows or bullets…” Tony’s exasperated voice warned him.

Two stings in his nape and waist made his blood run cold and his body grew completely numb carrying him down without being able to stay erect. Cold sweat ran his entire body and he realized that his armor was gone and he wore only a ragged shirt and weathered jeans.

He was unmasked and Bane who anyways knew his identity walked pompously at him; he could sense his smirk, his eyes were sniggering.

“…Can you think for a second what will happen if you collapse in front of your enemies?! My hairs stand on end only on the thought!”

He raised his eyes to stare without any fear at Bane yet he knew that he was defeated; he was doomed.

And then Bane squatted and his enormous hand got a fistful of his hair and heaved him like a small child; a helpless child – that was what he’s always been after all…

“And if he doesn’t play the hero he’ll feel weak, right? And he is scared of feeling weak because then he’ll feel exactly as when he was enslaved to Falcone; he doesn’t want even to consider what you propose because playing the hero offers him something to cover his weakness. He can’t stand feeling weak and he is willing to die instead of adjust to his nature! He thinks that pretending the strong fools us into not seeing his weakness but the only one who fools is himself!” Clark’s outraged voice pierced his mind and it felt worse than being dragged by Bane.

He collapsed on his knees; his right arm was dead but hurt, immobile like a log hanging from his shoulder and his rear end was killing him, blood leaking to his inner thighs. He was feeling terror, despair; he was trembling and crying and through his eyelashes could make out his shadow: only this shadow was of a boy, a really skinny boy no more than eleven years old.

Suddenly, his eyes opened bulging in panic: there was another shadow towering his – a gigantic shadow and a familiar smell that made his guts convulse like a dying fish.

Chill clenched his dirty locks and jerked his head.

“Stand up, ya useless worm!” he shouted.

He wanted to obey but his legs were paralyzed – they weren’t there. He turned his wet eyes to the adult.

“Please, sir…I…I can’t…”

Chill snorted and kicked him in the stomach sending blood burst from his mouth; Bruce thought in terror his injured lungs.
“Ya expect me to carry ya?!”

His bark made the boy shut his eyes and cry shamelessly shaking his head in denial.

“Then stan’ up an’ walk, ya ass!”

But he couldn’t; as much as he urged his legs to listen to him and move, they remained dead. He was feeling the Vulture vibrating from wrath and he was sure that at any moment he’d start punishing him so he used his left arm to push himself up in the floor, to crawl.

His hair was clenched again and he was heaved and this time the respiration was Bane’s and the boy had become a man – a helpless man. A man tossed on a bed unable to move but for his head. He tried to fight because he knew what a bed meant for him, fight only with his head, butting Bane right on the nose as much as this pained him.

“Go ahead: make Crane’s job easier!” Bane growled and Bruce could see his former trainer’s horribly maimed face uncovered.

Bane’s lethal hands punched him on the face deteriorating his raging migraine and then the giant grabbed his useless hands binding them on the headboard. It was like being again that helpless child, that terrified child.

Bane pushed Bruce’s head on the pillow and left Bruce to walk slowly to the bench from where he took a pair of handcuffs and rope. He grabbed Bruce’s wrists and cuffed them to the front.

“You’re so much afraid?” Bruce said undeterred to him. “I’m paralyzed.”

Bane swept with his palm the blood on the bridge of his nose from Bruce’s blow and hooked the rope to the chain between the handcuffs’ rings. He pulled the rope upwards stretching Bruce’s arms to tie the rope to the headboard.

The oval window in the external wall of Bruce’s bedroom retreated soundlessly to the invisible horizontal frames on Superman’s approach and he was pleasantly surprised because he hadn’t expected to be welcomed after the dispute.

He floated inside and the window closed. The big room was dark except from the warm hue that the red-yellow flames of the built-in fireplace and the dim light of the laptop’s screen… It smelt pine wood and…Clark closed his eyes and sucked…Bruce.

Clark crossed his arms and lolled his head on the side looking at the scene in front of him: of course…

All this time his flight from Metropolis to the Fortress was hurried but the last days his haste had nothing to do with dread and concern. His haste to reach as soon as possible was driven by joy: his Star had woken from the coma and gradually was back on living. Bruce was wandering with the chair’s help around the Fortress – Clark had given him access to every corner: mmm…maybe that wasn’t very prudent? Nah…Besides Jor El was with him all the time and it was Bruce: Clark trusted Bruce with his life.

Jor-El finally had found a willing and fervent partner for the chess-like game from Krypton: Clark was delighted to see his Star playing with his father because that meant that his cognitive abilities were intact. But he was even happier seeing Bruce with the newer inhabitant of the Fortress: the kitten he had found in Metropolis and given to Bruce because it was exactly like the kitten he had as a boy – the kitten Chill brutally killed in front of Bruce’s eyes.
Clark floated silently to the room he had made exactly after the master bedroom in Wayne Manor. His androids informed him that he’d find Bruce there. He could see inside through the wall without being noticed. He felt a bit guilty for peeking yet it was so beautiful.

Bruce sat on the chair Clark had made for him and had the kitten on his lap. He had his still hardly movable right arm on the kitten and with the other hand held the special baby bottle feeding the animal. Thankfully, the new Hero wasn’t very boisterous yet so the feeding was easy for Bruce: it was as if the fur ball sensed that his friend was incapacitated and didn’t want to made things hard for him. Clark’s super sense told him that the kitten was purring making Bruce’s heart beat so calmly...

Clark was smiling at the scene of Bruce feeding the small animal: it was so sweet...

“You know, littl’ one” Bruce was mumbling to the kitten. “You’re exactly like the little kitten I had years ago – you have his name: Hero.”

Clark could see through the wall Bruce’s touched eyes look at the kitten’s head – Hero was sucking greedily the milk.

“He was a true Hero: you see, he was born ill and his eyes were infected. One of his eyes was already completely ruined when Selina found him…Right! You don’t know Selina…Well, you’ll meet her and I’m sure you two will become the best of friends: she is the kindest, sweetest, cleverest, bravest girl in the world and very beautiful. And she will instantly fall in love with you. You’re exactly as our Hero and Selina found him in a garbage bin where someone dumped him to die…” Bruce’s voice dropped and the rubber nipple left Hero’s mouth; Bruce hurried to bring it back. “Selina was who took care of him and saved his life but he loved me as well…We used to play – the limited time we had -, we used to share the sandwich Selina was bringing me every night. Your namesake was a brave kitten, a good kitten like you but he was unlucky…”

He pressed his lips and took his eyes from the kitten to look at nowhere.

“He was unlucky to meet and love me…” his voice was steady but completely emotionless and the small animal looked at him puzzled.

Bruce realizing that Hero wasn’t drinking left his daydream – or nightmare – and smiled at the kitten that reassured began sucking again.

“A scum killed him because” he drew a big breath “because I loved him… I hadn’t had the chance to bid him a proper goodbye…” his voice was hoarse but gentle like a boy’s and Clark could see him bite his lip. “But now with you is like he came back” he smiled “and we’ll have the chance to give him what he truly deserved – and you deserve. I guess Clark – I can trust you with Superman’s alias, huh?” he frowned playfully. “Clark cherishes both of us and took care so as to meet again.”

Clark felt moisture in his eyes as too many times before but now was from pride because he had made Bruce happy…He walked towards the door that instantly lifted to let him in.

Bruce and Hero looked at him and Clark in a whoosh was glued to Bruce’s lips, like a metal to magnet.

As soon as he let go of those rosy lips – only because he didn’t want to torment Bruce’s lungs – he presented to his Star the paper bag he brought from Metropolis.

Hero sniffed interested stilling his paws on Bruce’s lap and the young man chuckled.

“You’re going to make me gain too much weight…”
Clark ruffled his hair. That was impossible: actually, it was just a few days that Bruce’s appetite got somewhat normal. The first days after the IV removal he hardly ate anything and that just to make Clark happy…

“Mmm…It’s fresh baked donuts: almond praline filled and white chocolate topped…” Clark widened his eyes innocently - Bruce’s favorite.

“That’s dirty!” Bruce protested but his protest was silenced by Clark touching a dessert to his mouth.

A big smile lightened Clark’s face as Bruce bit the donut and began chewing moaning, the kitten in his lap standing on its legs looking fascinated.

It was too much to expect from Bruce to lie on his bed sleeping… Clark’s lips twitched amused despite the fact he wanted to be irritated.

The younger man was on his chair in front of the table where his laptop was open and Clark albeit behind could see what had kept him up: on the screen, were 3D designs of Batman’s armor from different ankles – the adjustments Bruce had thought that could make him able to be out there…

He shook his head exasperated, pity almost coming to the fore. He rubbed his forehead: no, no, pity – Bruce didn’t deserve to be pitied. And definitely he couldn’t get mad at him. Not when Bruce was like this…

His head was leaned on the chair’s back that sensing that its occupant was asleep had reshaped to hug comfortably his neck. His velvet eyelids covered gently his orbs and his respiration was so calm that was almost imperceptible. Untamed locks had fallen in his forehead and some others framed his sharp cheekbones.

Clark Kent or Superman couldn’t be seen by strangers in the villa or near Bruce Wayne: Vale’s video was enough.

So Clark had to remain hidden till Mat Leench ended his session with Bruce and left using Stark’s helicopter. Leench was the Avengers’ physiotherapist and trainer and Stark trusted him to help Bruce recover – as much that was possible… The man was more than trustworthy and familiar with Stark’s genius so he wouldn’t attribute the energy casts holding Bruce’s bones together to anyone else.

But the most important for Clark was that Mat was at Bruce’s age…Blond, blue eyed, good looking with the body of an Olympic Champion… And almost always his skin tight T-shirt was drenched in sweat sketching his perfect muscles since he was making the exercises along with Bruce.

Clark always cringed seeing how hard Bruce was training and couldn’t understand how this man and Stark allowed so much effort.

Bruce’s torso was naked and his muscles glistened under the sweat’s hue; he was doing pushups with his legs unable to assist but Bruce made it look so easy. Clark was always trembling that he might injure his arms again.

“Bruce, you’ve got a great body” Mat said with his kid-like way.

Yeah…Clark licked his lips and sighed. Nutritional, good food, the healthy climate of the area had helped in regaining much of the lost muscle mass: almost exactly as before the factory.

“Falcone demanded that I’ll be trained…” Bruce answered shyly. “And then I kept the habit
because it helps me to clean my mind…”

“You did great, Bruce” the young man gave his beaming, benevolent smile and Bruce nodded. “That way it’s easier for you to do the exercises – as a matter of fact, you amaze me.”

Clark’s heart was kicking in his ribs and his face was hot.

“Of course he amazes you, you dick!” he gritted his teeth.

“I think that’s enough for today, Bruce.”

He grabbed Bruce with the special way physiotherapists do and placed him on the massage bed.

“Time for your massage.”

Clark could see Bruce blushing because he had to discard all of his clothes for that and his Star never liked to be touched except from Clark – unless that changed…?!

Mat brought the folding screen to grant privacy to his patient yet that didn’t reassure Clark’s jealous heart. He could see Bruce already lowering his gym pants and Clark was rasping.

And then…Knocks on the gym’s door.

“Excuse me, sir but Master Stark’s helicopter is here” Alfred said to Mat who was taken aback.

“But we haven’t finished yet…”

“We”? Clark mouthed and only then he registered Selina perched on the balcony giggling at him, Hero standing on his rear legs grabbing with his front legs the biscuits she gave him.

“Would you like me to tell the pilot to wait?”

The young man was in a standstill but Bruce emerged his head behind the folding screen.

“It’s alright, Mat; you can go.”

“And your massage?”

Bruce smiled.

“You have taught Alfred well; don’t worry.”

Oh! His Star seemed relieved.

“Thank you, Bruce, till our next meeting, continue your daily program but without excess…”

“As if…” Selina whispered passing by Clark and patting his shoulder, Hero perched on her shoulder.

But for Clark only one thing mattered: he rubbed his hands together. Time for massage…No bloody way he’d let Alfred do it.

Clark felt his body getting hotter than usual and his breath becoming faster. He closed his eyes in despair – he shouldn’t slip to that. He focused on Bruce’s lap instead.

Of course! He smiled. Hero was sleeping curled in Bruce’s lap, Bruce’s hands gently placed upon him. Clark shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose smiling: the kitten was supposed to
stay at Selina’s room in the nights so to not disturb Bruce’s rest because cats are restless and don’t sleep like humans: they tend to wake every now and then asking for various things.

But it seems that Hero wasn’t thwarted by doors: Selina probably forgot her door slightly open and Bruce definitely had made some trick to his door to recognize his animal friend and open at his approach. The sly kitten took advantage of that: actually, Clark had heard Selina saying that cats can do anything to get what they want. And Hero was Batman’s kitten…

Kryptonite teeth bit his guts and he sighed: Batman…The time when Clark stalked Batman seemed too distant and a sinking feeling told him gleefully that Batman wasn’t ever coming back… Damn you, Joker! The clown had almost killed Bruce and rendered him paraplegic, bound to this chair!

Flashing images of Diana kicking and punching graciously her opponents sending them to the ground unconscious came to his eyes. Nobody would be ever able to incapacitate that powerful woman – she like Superman was invincible, indestructible not like… He cast a fleeting glance to Bruce’s sleeping form – he closed his eyes: so fragile, so weak…

Bruce’s armpits screamed from the violence of the move but he pressed stubbornly his lips.

“But you still feel…” Bane sneered as he finished the knot “so I’ll maximize your discomfort.”

“I know you prefer torture me…” he tried to reason with him if urging someone to torture you was reasoning.

But Bane smirked with his teeth rattling and with a swift, violent push and without any preparation thrust deep inside Bruce who bit his tongue to not scream.

“That’s true…” he pulled slightly out and thrust immediately again “but I know this is the worst torture for you…” he thrust deeper and stronger relishing the bulged vein in Bruce’s neck stretched from his struggle to swallow his groans. “And I really missed you, whore…”

Suddenly, Clark’s lips were over his, as his eyes to mute him.

“If you weren’t so stubborn to admit your weakness and protected yourself staying behind Bane and Talia wouldn’t have raped you!”

He felt his insides shatter on that and he clenched his jaw to silence his groans both from the searing pain in his pelvis and the pain Clark’s words evoked.

His heart beat somewhat strange and Clark knew that was Bruce’s heart – after so many months of watching the human’s vitals Clark’s body was still tuned with Bruce’s. He looked again at the human and calmed down realizing that it wasn’t something dangerous: Bruce’s heart was a bit arrhythmic which was inevitable after so many years of brutal abuse.

He noticed that he was a bit cold: of course… Bruce’s temperature had a tendency of playing games and the fact that he didn’t wear any socks or robe didn’t help. Thankfully, Alfred had left the fireplace lit and the room was pleasantly warm.

Clark was sure that Bruce planned to do whatever he wanted to do – work on his designs – and then go to sleep so that nobody figured his ‘mischief’ but the handful of drugs Bruce was taking were very strong and also had placatory and sedative qualities. So at some point, his fatigue intensified by the drugs won – that was the reason he didn’t wake sensing Clark’s arrival.

But two glimmering eyes were looking at him now and Clark leaned on Hero who remained still to not wake his master.
“Hero, I thought we had a deal” he whispered mock accusingly. “You were supposed to watch over him not become his accomplish!”

He took gently the kitten and placed him in the basket Bruce had for him near the fireplace: well, Hero loved to watch the flames.

“Stay here, buddy” he told the kitten that was ready to leave the basket to climb again to Bruce’s lap. “Bruce needs to get to his bed.”

Right. He floated back to Bruce and placed one arm under his knees and one around his shoulders to heave him as softly as he could to not alert him.

Suddenly the excruciating pain and the nauseating sound of flesh whipping flesh ceased and were replaced by cool breeze caressing kindly his face. He was flying and was held by strong, loving arms and his heart was beating calmly. He was safe.

He raised his eyes and saw around; he was travelling amongst small, fluffy clouds, stars and then the blinding, beautiful waves of aurora borealis. He sensed two affectionate eyes staring at him and turned his eyes to see Superman with his trademark curl on the forehead, his smile and crystal blue eyes hued with warmth. He was so beautiful… He nestled his head on Clark’s chest and closed his eyes.

Clark chose to go slowly to the bed to not upset Bruce although he doubted if the drugs’ effect would let him wake so easily. So he had to admit to himself that the reason he delayed the transfer was because he relished the feeling of holding Bruce like this and watching his face at sleep; hued from sleep’s calm that highlighted more the man’s beauty.

And then Bruce did something that melted even the last hint of past anger in Clark. He moved his head and settled it snugly and comfortably in his shoulder. With such surrender and trust that it felt like a small kid… Well, Bruce was still a kid deep inside: that poor, enslaved kid waiting an adult to save him…

Clark pressed his lips: Bruce would have cuddled like that in his arms if Superman had barged in that horrible brothel and taken him away. Things would have been so much different then: Batman wouldn’t have been created and Bruce wouldn’t have been in such danger – he wouldn’t have been almost killed and now he wouldn’t be bound in that chair.

Only one thing would have remained the same: Bruce’s kind and generous heart that loved everyone. Sometimes even for Clark who had the fame of the most good-hearted hero, Bruce’s benevolence towards people was a mystery and a miracle. Someone so much tortured as Bruce was justified to be angry at criminals and want to punish and bring them to justice. But to be so caring and generous for his fellow humans who didn’t do anything to help him all these years? Of course, it wasn’t Gothamites’ fault that Bruce was kept prisoner so many years and Bruce knew that but still it was admirable that his wounded heart could hug every human in need.

He placed Bruce carefully on the mattress, fixed carefully his legs X-Raying them to see satisfied the progress that was made; then he tucked him with the soft blankets without being able to keep his eyes from his face. He brushed with his fingertips the stray locks decorating his chiseled features. He found it too difficult to persuade his body to detach from Bruce even for the seconds he needed to put on his own pajamas that Alfred had placed in the dresser and settle himself on the mattress spooning Bruce’s body and touching his cheek to the younger man’s cheek – tenderly to not disrupt his sleep.

“How come and I always end up in your arms?” Bruce asked Clark who was looking so
affectionately at him.

Instantly, Clark’s face distorted; his face’s muscles clenched and his eyebrows frown in rage.

“Because you’re fucking weak!” he yelled. “You’ll never admit your mistakes, huh? Even though they make all of us sick with agony and running desperate to save you! As when you surrendered yourself to Talia…”

His eyes widened but he wasn’t angry...he was hurt, sad.

“I didn’t” he mumbled.

But Superman was really angry and didn’t want to acknowledge Bruce’s hurt eyes. Instead, he pressed his lips and shoved the man on the examination bed and when Bruce swallowed his sadness and supported his body on the elbows to rise, Clark grabbed his upper arms and pinned him on the mattress. Superman’s red hued eyes were above Bruce’s, his breath was a furious rasp; Superman’s powerful thighs kept Bruce’s hips trapped: not that it was necessary since he couldn’t feel or move anything below his waist.

“Weak anger…You know everything about that, huh?” Superman sniggered through gritted teeth. “Do you feel like a warrior?!” his grip on his arms became bruising as he roared – his eyes sneering as he shook his head. “Of course not! You’re a worthless being counting on his super friends to save him from tight spots, when he fucks things up!”

He shook him violently, lifting and crushing him again on the mattress, Bruce watching him with blank widened eyes that caused a new fit of cruel laughter.

“It hurts, huh?” he mocked him. “That’s the point: maybe now you’ll admit that you’re weak and stop pretending the strong, putting everyone in trouble! You really believe that you can be in the same league as me and the Princess?” his laughter was like barking. “No, stupid littl’ human! You’re a zero with the ego of a god but your egoism can’t hide your worthlessness! You’re weak, damn it!”

Bruce was shaking his head in denial, his jaw clenched in rage and hurt.

“I’m not weak!” he growled.

On this Superman clenched his wrists and pinned them above his head, his eyes ablaze glaring at Bruce’s narrowed eyes.

“What I must do for you to admit that you’re weak?” he barked and Bruce jerked his head.

Only to be crushed on the mattress, Superman’s body upon him weighing like that factory…

“Get off me!” he growled.

“Make me!” Superman challenged him with a gleeful smirk and Bruce thrashed but it was useless since half of his body was dead.

Bruce clenched his teeth and launched his head against Superman’s – he didn’t care if his skull was shattered though Ra’s had taught him how to protect his head from lethal impact.

His head didn’t crack open but the pain was great and his eyes lost sight due to the blood that burst from his broken nose.
“Go ahead: make Crane’s job easier!” Superman sneered but his voice was distorted; it was Bane’s voice and as much as he wanted to see Clark’s face to dissolve that illusion a red cloud covered his eyes.

His heart was beating fast sending sweat to wash his body, his respiration was frantic and his lungs burnt because he sensed Clark’s hands ripping his shirt.

“Maybe you understand what you really are…” teeth grazed his breasts and he felt like drowning.

He knew it was Clark but he smelt like Bane, he hurt like his former trainer.

“No, Clark, not like this…”

“Are you going to beg?” now the voice was clearly Clark’s but it was so mean… “Beg me like you should: it’s the only thing weak beings like you can do. And your arrogance must be punished…”

Clark bit him really hard on the abdominals but Bruce closed his eyes, clenched his jaw and didn’t even moan. Not even when he heard the violent ripping of his pants and underwear…

“Beg me to not squash you!”

Brush thrashed desperately even under Clark’s unrelenting body, inside his hands of steel that didn’t care if his flesh was torn and his bones smashed.

“Say it! Admit you’re weak, you idiot!”

Clark was nuzzling softly Bruce’s cheek; his body’s perfume was intoxicating and numbed him. Yet the younger man began thrashing inside his arms, his heartbeat frantic and his breath a rasp. Clark got up slightly eyeing Bruce’s body that convulsed like a fish out of the water: he was sure that this turmoil could make Bruce’s mind force his legs to move in order to fight whatever haunted his sleep. The Man of Steel bit his lips: it was the first time after the incident with Joker that Bruce struggled something like this.

He placed his hands gingerly on the human’s shoulders and shook him gently; he leaned his mouth over Bruce’s cheek and kissed him.

“It’s alright, Bruce” he whispered. “It’s only a bad dream… Wake up…I’m here: nobody is going to lay a finger on you…”

Bruce gave a really painful gasp that made Clark cringe for his lungs and half opened his eyes in the corner of which stagnated tears began flowing to his cheekbones. Clark felt his heart cracking and grabbed him to nestle him in his chest, caressing his sweaty locks and kissing softly.

“It’s alright…” he whispered again to persuade him because Bruce’s cold body was tense and the younger man didn’t let his head touch on Clark’s shoulder. “I’m here, Star…”

Clark realized that all these drugs must have made it too difficult to orient back in reality so he brushed his back. Finally, Bruce relaxed in his chest and his heartbeat began normalizing. Yet the younger man detached his head rather quickly and Clark frowned.

Bruce felt deeply ashamed that Clark witnessed that; now his claims about him being weak would have new arguments. He moved his body with his hands and lay again on the mattress turning his back on Clark who pressed his lips but unfazed lay on the mattress too cuddling Bruce’s body.

The Man of Steel placed his hands on Bruce’s shoulders and kissed the corner of his lips sucking all
the senses.

“Flashback?” he whispered in his ear and kissed the earlobe.

Bruce closed his eyes.

“It was messed up…Flashback and nightmare and…bullshit!” he spat.

Clark nodded and inhaled struggling to keep his calm.

“Crane tampered with your memory…” the scum! Really, who can be so cruel to play filthy games with the painful memories of a tortured being?

Bruce hated discussing about what was done to him.

“He didn’t have enough time to cause damage.”

Clark licked his lips: Bruce would never admit that he was hurt.

“But you said it was intensive: three times a day with increased doses” his invulnerable spine shuddered even in the thought of that metallic box shutting his head and various needles piercing his eyes and skull… “I think that something should be done to restore the damage” he knew that Stark and Lucius analyzed everything that monster used on Bruce.

“We discussed it already, Clark and we decided that it’s better not cause more upset to that part of my brain. Leslie cleansed my cerebrospinal fluid from the remaining substances and that’s enough.”

Clark couldn’t ignore the distant and cold tone in Bruce’s voice that was expected from their morning dispute…despite the fact it seemed like ages ago. Of course he had the chance to engage in so many things and take his mind of that but Bruce albeit with his beloved people, had remained stationed on that chair feeding with designs of his armor his illusions of returning.

He wanted to sigh but held himself – he had to approach again him. Besides he had gotten over what happened. He cuddled tighter Bruce’s body, immersing his mouth in his neck, his hands rubbing his upper arms.

“It’s nice you wear these pajamas…”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow and he knew that Clark heard it.

“Because they’re warm and I won’t catch a cold…”

That coldness was still there in Bruce’s voice so Clark sucked on his neck relishing the softness and the perfume.

“Because…” he whispered in a husky voice “your body must be touched only by the softest materials…when it’s not touched by my body…”

Clark’s kisses trailed upwards to Bruce’s jawline but he didn’t stretch his neck to give him better access though…he always loved Clark’s kisses.

Clark ended up again in Bruce’s ear knowing how his touches there rendered boneless the inexperienced in love young man. Clark wanted to melt the ice his own behavior caused to cover Bruce’s heart.

“Is everything alright? Did Leslie find anything?”
Bruce didn’t look at him.

“
You didn’t eavesdrop?”

Clark’s arms tightened more in front of Bruce’s chest and he closed his eyes: no, he forgot to…

“You don’t want me to…” Clark chuckled.

“And you always do it…”

“You’re still angry with me, huh?” he nibbled Bruce’s so soft earlobe causing goose bumps in the healthy part of his spine.

But Bruce didn’t feel at ease, the messed up nightmare reminding him the morning incident and startling all the emotions he experienced then.

“You’re refreshed though…” the images from Superman’s interaction with the Amazon came to sting more his sensitive heart.

Clark sighed and his hot breath brushing his ear made Bruce shudder. He surely felt refreshed, invigorated, happy: the scenes of his interaction with Diana enhancing his good mood.

“I was afraid that you’d have done something to forbid me from entering your bedroom… I’m happy you didn’t…” he rubbed Bruce’s arms and kissed his cheek. “Though I could blackmail my way in…” he said teasingly waiting for Bruce to ask and when he didn’t “I could say to Alfred that you left your bed…”

“You’re not a snitch” his eyes were still blank.

Clark couldn’t stand anymore Bruce’s turned back neither his ill mood – he wanted him to forget everything and be at ease again, like himself. He cupped gently Bruce’s shoulders and tenderly laid Bruce on his back.

Bruce’s eyes locked with Clark’s and Superman felt his guts jolt on the beauty of these wild eyes.

“C’me on, Bruce; you’re supposed to have your rest, your body is tired.”

The sapphire-emerald orbs narrowed to slits like a wildcat’s ready to attack.

“I’m not tired! I sleep 10 whole hours a day and the rest of the daytime I’m sitting on a chair. Plus, I was constantly sleeping for one month.”

Clark bit his lip and swallowed hard.

“That month you were constantly fighting: the hardest battle you ever fought – the hardest battle no superman has ever given. Your every breath, your every heartbeat was a tremendous feat…I was overwhelmed by your strength, your willpower to fight even though your body was broken…” he touched his forehead to Bruce’s who began relaxing on sensing Clark’s emotions. “For Goodness’ sake, Bruce, promise me that you’ll forget these feeble adjustments to your armor: you know deep inside that they won’t enable you to fight as before…”

Bruce was looking at him emotionless cursing himself for falling asleep in front of his laptop.

“So you don’t believe that I’ll walk again…” his voice was dry like his insides.

Clark caressed Bruce’s cheek.
“Of course you will but this doesn’t mean that you should get back to Gotham’s rooftops jumping, flying and fighting…” he shook his head. “Why you don’t consider Tony’s idea?” his face beamed. “You have a brilliant mind and a will stronger than steel; you can succeed in every field and you can fight crime from other positions.”

Bruce felt his blood rushing in his veins.

“Being Batman never stopped me from doing that as well…” he said coldly. “You doubt that I have the strength to overcome this and don again the cape and cowl” his eyes shone like the lenses of his cowl.

Clark closed his eyes and gulped.

“Do you remember Batman anymore?” Bruce asked.

Of course he did but actually he preferred not remember the way Batman was graciously and lethally fighting his opponents; he had many times his memory ready to replay that epic video from Batman’s battle with Zsasz or the night at Haven’s atrium where Bruce was fighting dressed in an expensive suit. But stopped it before starting because he wanted to adjust to the new reality and not dwell in the past. It was better to see the Amazon Princess fighting… it didn’t stir bitter emotions and he wanted to just focus in the bliss of having Bruce alive…even if Batman died in that factory.

“Batman didn’t die” Bruce stated dead calm and his eyes stabbed Clark. “I’m going to return; I won’t give up on Gotham due to a disability.”

Clark supported his torso on his palms keeping Bruce between them and closed his eyes.

“I can protect Gotham too if that’s your concern… I protect an entire planet: a second city won’t be a problem.”

Bruce felt a vicious bite in his chest: Clark meant that what he was doing in Gotham was nothing – he was replaceable. He hadn’t done anything special. More so for a demi-god. Bruce cocked an eyebrow stilling his eyes in Clark’s.

“Remember the last time you impersonated Batman?” he referred to Clark’s confrontation with Joker.

Clark remembered: it was rather embarrassing: the jester fooled him, set on the loose many Arkham Asylum’s inmates, and probably he figured that he wasn’t the real thing. Not to mention that the clown kidnapped the children from Haven and forced Bruce to face him while injured.

“I was inexperienced then…” he licked his lips eyeing Bruce’s disbelieving stare. “So you hold me responsible for Joker taking the children and…everything that followed!”

Bruce shook his head and blinked.

“No; it was my fault and I paid for that” Clark was shaken by the steadiness of Bruce’s voice. “I learnt that I should have organized it better and not let my city to the whims of a criminal.”

Clark cupped his face and leaned to kiss his lips.

“Stop blaming yourself for every ordeal that city experiences: it’s time your life gets independent from Gotham. You must think a bit about yourself. Tony’s idea is perfect: it’d allow you to prove your worth” Bruce’s eyes were narrowed “do great things and in the meantime you’d get to help Gotham in her struggle against crime…” he was hesitant to continue because Bruce’s stare had
become a glare. “You know as much as we that your injuries are severe and even when you walk again, you won’t ever be fit to do what you were doing!”

Bruce opened his mouth to retort but Clark placed his fingertips on his lips to silence him. And then replaced his fingertips with his lips in a soft kiss.

“You can relay your unique knowledge…you can train someone to become Batman. You can supervise and advise him…” he stopped abruptly seeing the eyes underneath him flash angrily and the body between his arms tense – but it was the hurt he detected that made Clark numb.

Yet Bruce disregarded the hot pain in favor of the anger and the energy that charged him: he was used to that. So he looked calmly at Clark.

“I’ll walk again and I’ll don again the cape and the cowl. And I’ll fight again whomever dares to threaten my city” his voice was power and certainty and Clark felt electricity running his back. “If you came back to try to discourage me you did wrong: you should have stayed with your super powered friend!”

Clark closed his eyes and let his head hang: of course…Bruce knew. He nuzzled the younger man’s cheek.

“You saw the videos…”

“As millions of people” Bruce answered coldly and indifferently.

Clark’s lips were sucking Bruce’s neck, trying to get better access but Bruce was unyielding. So the Man of Steel sighed and rose to bring his face above Bruce’s.

“And…you’re jealous?” he asked hesitantly but amused at the same time because that would be something completely new for the young man.

Bruce frowned: jealous? Well, while a kid he felt jealousy when other children had puppies or kittens and he didn’t; yet jealousy because his…boyfriend (?) was looking someone else that way? Could what he was feeling being indeed jealousy? He felt his cheeks hot and Clark rushing to plant his kisses on his red flesh wasn’t the best thing. He felt Clark’s body trembling from joy and the lips that kissed him formed a big grin.

“Should I? You began doubting my chances of getting back from the moment she said those things about me” he shook his head. “You weren’t like this before: you used to share my hopes.”

Clark huffed desperate and let his torso collapse on Bruce’s which regretted instantly remembering his tender state and jerked upright.

“Bruce… No, what I’m saying has nothing to do with what Diana said to you in the forest. She doesn’t know you as I do.”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“Really you do know me?”

Clark turned his eyes elsewhere and detached from Bruce sitting beside him on the mattress. He placed his elbows on his knees and let his hands hang between.

“Seeing me fighting alongside Diana is what made you looking frantically a way to become Batman? You feel threatened by her? Shadowed by her?” he squinted. “You hate her, don’t you? Because she
saved you.”

Bruce pressed his lips and supported his body on his elbows rising to sitting position.

“I don’t need to become Batman: I am Batman! Even if you regard me as a poor helpless being just because I got severely injured and my healing takes time so much different of you. Finding ways to compensate my shortcomings isn’t new – I’m doing and working this all this time. Batman always loves shadows so being shadowed is what I pursue. I don’t hate your friend though I don’t like her attitude. She helped but it wasn’t she who saved me.”

Clark looked at him.

“Selina was there first.”

Bruce nodded.

“But before her there was someone else who defended me” Clark tensed. “He was the reason I just crawled in the soil and not helped Selina as I wanted.”

Clark was intrigued by everything Bruce said but especially on one thing:

“**He?**” he asked with raised eyebrows: he couldn’t help but think all the men who goggled at Bruce and it suddenly flashed: the guy who mocked him in the forest. “A strange guy approximately at my age with black shoulder length hair, pointy nose and ears? A definitely non human guy?”

Bruce shook his head.

“Loki: Thor’s brother.”

Clark grabbed Bruce’s shoulders: Bagdana’s remembrance was annoying piercing his brain – oddly, Clark hated it when god-like creatures eyed his Bruce.

“What does he want from you?” his eyes were glistening but Bruce didn’t share his upset; he just pressed his lips.

“Play: what else?”

“He was in the forest as I was heading here – he had your form and he sneered at me. I don’t like gods or…demons near you” he said deep in thought.

Bruce snorted.

“That includes yourself?” he retorted crossing his arms. “Do you want us to discuss something useful and let me inform you about the attack?”

Clark still thoughtful about Loki and his interest in Bruce scratched his hair.

“Diana told me everything about your attackers…”

Bruce smiled and let his eyes drop staring at the mattress amused: of course! He raised calmly his head to look at Clark.

“Then why you came back tonight? You haven’t told me the reason yet?”

That emotionless voice again, Clark thought and without realizing grabbed his arms and laid him flat on the mattress. He cupped Bruce’s face with both hands and locked eyes.
“I wanted to apologize for my outburst…” he whispered in a deep voice. “I yelled at you and you don’t deserve that.”

Bruce pressed his lips and averted his gaze.

“You don’t have to apologize: I yelled too.”

Clark shook his head frustrated and gently brought Bruce’s face in a position that the younger man would be looking at him.

“I feel that you’re not so forgiving…”

And before Bruce protested he left the bed to be back in a second with a paper bag that smelt delicious. Bruce rolled his eyes but before saying anything Clark had touched his favorite donut to his lips.

“Fresh baked donuts: Almond praline filling and white chocolate topping…” Clark moved his eyebrows suggestively, smiling. “And your stomach has free space.”

Bruce sighed: it was futile. He bit succumbing. They were still hot.

“You used Superman to make Ms. Rose bake donuts?” he asked accusingly and brought a donut to Clark’s mouth to bite.

“No” he said chewing “she is quite fond of poor Mr. Kent…”

Clark cupped Bruce’s face and let the bag on the nightstand.

“I was panicked, Bruce” he said and his voice was so low that Bruce was surprised. “When I was alarmed about the attack I was scared, terrorized: I know, I’m Superman, and I shouldn’t be afraid of anything but…” he sighed. “I was panicked that I won’t make it on time…”

Bruce brushed softly his cheeks.

“It was like reliving my returning nightmares” Clark arched his eyebrows. “Yes, Superman has nightmares…After that awful night at that fucking factory. I always see the same thing: that I arrived ten seconds later. And the entire building collapsed on you, squashed you…and I search the wreckage to find you, I lift bricks, I melt metallic rods, I smash rafters and cement columns unable to see anything from my tears; my heart deafening my ears ready to explode. And then…” he closed his eyes “I find you not with my eyes but my instinct…But you’re…”

Clark touched his lips and nose to Bruce’s soft cheek to make sure that he was indeed alive; to escape from the icy, terrifying feeling of touching a mangled body, a body that more of its half was churned, only shattered bones there… A head that had been opened by the crushing impact; his beautiful face eerily intact but for his deeply cracked forehead from where brain matter was purring.

He didn’t want to describe to Bruce this sight that was so vivid in his mind; besides the low beating of his heart was enough for Clark to understand that Bruce could imagine the spectacle and Clark’s feelings.

“I…I take…you and I fly away…I leave Earth and I reach space with…you in my arms…and I’m flying, I’m floating in space’s void and darkness but nothing is darker and emptier than me. I stare at your face begging with my blank eyes because my voice is lost; I’m begging you to come back…but you don’t…and I’m just floating hugging you in eternity…my heart doesn’t beat anymore but I know that I won’t die…I’ll continue float with you in my arms but you won’t ever come back to me
and I’ll be forever alive but dead…”

Bruce wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck and kissed him gently on the lips and then nuzzled his cheeks letting hot air from his lungs reassure the powerful being that he was alive, in his arms. But it was the wetness from his eyes that made Clark shake himself: he didn’t want to upset Bruce – violent emotions weren’t suitable for his current state.

He cuddled Bruce in his chest and immersed his mouth in his silken locks kissing insatiably and sucking that perfume while his hands felt that body. He cupped Bruce’s face and kissed his eyelashes.

“Can we cross out this horrible day?” he asked while his thumbs caressed Bruce’s cheekbones. “I promise you I’ll always come back to you – can you promise me that you’ll be there?”

Bruce bit his lips: how on earth he could promise that? He was a human, a mortal and death was his only certainty… Clark as if sensing his hesitance held him tighter and his puppy eyes stabbed Bruce’s desperately.

“I…I’ll do my best…” he gave him the reassurance Clark needed and the Man of Steel let his face to cuddle him.

Clark’s body was crying – he had life in his arms not the carcass of his nightmares and wanted to claim that life. What he experienced the two times he was inside Bruce’s body haunted and created a demanding thirst in him. Bagdana knew what that body had to offer and Clark flinched on the thought that more gods could sniff that as well…Like Loki…Humans had already exploited hard that man, he wouldn’t let other beings do the same. Bruce was only his.

He placed Bruce carefully on the mattress and discarded the top of his own pajamas on the floor, his chest relishing the nakedness as well Bruce’s caressing hands. Clark massaged gently Bruce’s ribs while his mouth fed on his neck that finally Bruce stretched permitting him deeper access.

Bruce moaned as Clark’s magical fingers pressed slightly his abdominals, the healthy part of his body getting violent goose bumps from the tender nibbling across his jawline. And then Clark’s greedy hands had had enough of Bruce’s pajamas shirt and began fast unbuttoning, pushing the fabric of his chest.

Now two lips hotter than any human’s were gulping Bruce’s breasts, trembling hands lowering swiftly his pants and underwear to grope his buttocks – Bruce could only see and hear those movements but he was sure that Clark would soon touch the spots where he could feel. Expecting that, he tangled Clark’s locks with his fingers breathing carefully to not cause fear for his lungs, Superman’s quickening respiration telling him that this time he wouldn’t stop.

Clark had his eyes open to register once again, to admire this flesh – the life. His hands were greedily feeling Bruce’s hard buttocks this time thanking his physiotherapist and Bruce’s stubbornness to train so much. But suddenly these buttocks felt differently and Clark knew that they weren’t Bruce’s: these buttocks gave the exact feeling that he would get from…

His lips stopped abruptly as Bruce’s pectorals became big, round shaped breasts with big, brown nipples that were hard. Exactly as… His eyes widened: he had peeked under Diana’s clothes?! He gulped and blushed and jerked upwards sitting on the mattress beside Bruce, his arousal ebbing fast.

Bruce closed his eyes and let his head slump on the pillow, his heart sinking and his breath held in his lungs. No, Clark wouldn’t treat him as before but Bruce sensed that this time something was different: it wasn’t just the dread that he might hurt him. He pulled up his pants.
Clark was deep in thought and staring at his hands. But then he realized that Bruce would figure that something was amiss – the human had a knack in sniffing things. And frankly it was nothing to let it stir more turmoil to Bruce.

So he turned to him biting his lips on seeing the younger man’s closed eyes: ugh! He had again played with Bruce’s healing body…and feelings. He took gently the pajama shirt’s edges, brought them over Bruce’s slowly heaving chest and began buttoning. On ending with the buttons he caressed Bruce’s chest.

“Let’s not rush things, huh? Your muscles are too tense” he whispered. “I’ll make you some massage – it’ll help you have a peaceful sleep.”

“No need to” Bruce kept his eyes closed.

Clark smiled knowing that Bruce would feel it – he wanted to make up for his blunder.

“You know I don’t want your physiotherapist massage you: I don’t like how he touches you and… anyway I’m better.”

Bruce opened his eyes and they seemed tired yet he hid the coldness that had settled in him.

“Tony called Mat and told him that for three days he won’t have to come” Clark was happy to hear: he really didn’t like him. “And Mat is heterosexual.”

Clark raised an eyebrow.

“I was too till I met you…” he retorted playfully but for Bruce it wasn’t so light.

“I thought you were bi” he said though speaking about matters concerning sexuality was still uncomfortable. “Anyway, let’s get some sleep…” he rolled his body turning his back on Clark shutting his eyes.

Clark clenched his fists and cursed himself; he laid spooning Bruce’s body that had gone so cold and rubbed his upper arms.

“I’m sorry…” he whispered.

“It’s OK…I understand…” he stretched his hand and caressed with his fingertips Hero who was looking at him from the floor – the animal’s eyes shone sad.
Chapter 13

The great thing about being a demon was that you could appear anywhere you wanted. Unless, someone had stabbed you with the Knife of Justice stripping you of your power and imprisoning you at the Tartarus...

Bagdana raised his eyes to the caverns ceiling.

Then you need another god or demon to free you so you regain your power and...seek the one who stabbed you and take revenge. If of course you want to take revenge or instead what the other considers to be your revenge.

He sighed and that was odd and completely un-demonic but Bagdana had no problem with it. Bruce was a complex and sensitive issue after all. Also, Bagdana had suffered enough emotional pain that a sigh was the least to ruin his self-esteem.

He was again in Gotham’s guts – frankly, he preferred Gotham to Metropolis where his ‘partner’ operated: he was a creature of darkness and Gotham was darkness and also Bruce’s city. The city that born his Lilith’s last descendant – how fitting!

It was the great hall: an enormous space framed by stalactites and stalagmites that united into creating huge columns. At the center lay a small formation of minerals like a small table.

He brushed the rock. For him it was rather short but for a small boy was like a waist table. He had first lay eyes on Bruce there...It was amusing as much as intriguing: a really small kid strolling under the earth without any trace of fear. Bagdana cocked an eyebrow: well, there was fear but not for the earth’s guts or the bats surging the place – the boy relished the dark and the bats and that fascinated the aimlessly wandering demon.

So much so that he took a peek into the boy’s mind and saw his great fear. He was a horribly abused child and that was obvious even if you weren’t a demon able to see under his ragged, bloodstained clothes and that explained why the caves were the place where he felt relieved: there he could escape his tormentors. Yet the boy’s greatest fear came from his past: the murders of two people in front of him.

Bagdana remembered how enjoyed that revelation and exploited it taking the form of his dead father making the poor boy happy and despair at the same time. Because Bruce was very clever even then so he knew that he was interacting with an impostor or a hallucination. Oh! It was so amusing feeling the boy’s torment knowing that his ‘daddy’ was a fake but being unwilling to lose even that illusion.

He had left the boy crying while his cruel laughter filled the hall and echoed really nightmarish...

Bagdana smirked but it was for himself: he should have felt that this boy would be his destiny, something unique, something inescapable.

The child kept coming to the caves unfazed from that incident or maybe motivated from his first experience. Maybe he was hoping of reliving it. But Bagdana chose to watch silently the boy’s explorations with the bats being strangely friendly to him.

And one day he felt the summoning: someone was calling him to take his sacrifice. Bagdana was too tired and bored and frustrated from centuries of false alarms by fools who wanted to gain a rich reward but they only offered huge disappointment. However he went as every time because as much frustrating the experience with the offered sacrifice was the revenge afterwards on the idiots who
summoned him was what he came to live for the last couple of centuries. His wrath, his
disappointment and his… pain were unleashed on them who played with the most precious thing for
him: his long lost love, his missing half…his dead mate.

When he arrived at the spacious basement curiosity ignited his blood. The form tied on the floor
covered with black silk was too small: a child. The demon had beamed: humankind had followed a
very sharp slope even without his immediate urge – they offered him a child. An innocent life, an
innocent soul to be ruined for them to take the fat reward the demon promised. Bagdana smirked
because he knew what they would take in the end: he might not be an avenging angel but he sure
enjoyed delivering punishment to those greedy and ruthless people…even if the child was to die
before them as every other victim offered to him.

He still remembered the surprise when he made out the features of the child: he knew that boy; he
was the boy that intrigued Bagdana so much that made him stalk him in the vast, Daedalus caverns
of Gotham. He hadn’t considered of tasting him all this time but his summoners set that before him,
tempting him – and, Hell!, who was he to not fall for a temptation? He was the master of temptation
after all.

The boy was scared – who could blame him? They gave him the special potion – they were good on
their thing. The boy, Bagdana knew, was always scared…and brave at the same time and that lit the
demon’s interest.

He removed the black silk that covered the skinny body: it was an immature body, a very skinny
body but a body with the potential to be beautiful – shame that the boy was to die tonight. The
biggest shame though was that his summoner – Ra’s Al Ghul – had taken the precautions to not be
faced with his ire afterwards: that damn maggot!

They had the boy blindfolded because everyone knew – Ra’s Al Ghul more than anyone - that a
mortal shouldn’t look Bagdana in the eye; not that they could or wanted… But he was curious…He
ordered the fabric to leave the boy’s eyes and kneeled on the floor.

And then the most unexpected thing happened: the boy had looked him in the eye. The scared boy
held the demon’s gaze without faltering. And Bagdana frowned inside: that was unique as the boy’s
eyes…like star sapphires, the rarest star sapphires with emerald sparkling stars. Bagdana’s inside was
squirming worse than the boy’s heart and for the first time in the endless centuries after Lilith’s
demise he felt aroused: he wouldn’t ravish his sacrifice from boredom and whim for destruction but
from real interest.

And as he proceeded to claim the boy’s body with fever that progressively burnt the demon,
Bagdana was realizing that the boy, Bruce, was indeed what he was looking for all this endless ages:
his love’s last descendant. The one with the mark…Only he couldn’t see the mark. But it was fine
because his bare existence had recognized Lilith’s existence.

Bagdana in Gotham’s underbelly closed his eyes flooded with the demolishing emotions of the
moment…the beautiful, exhilarating emotions that flared his powers. He had found his Lilith again
and his body was celebrating, feasting again on the beloved body…And he devoured the moment
unleashing all the lasting, all the craving and all the despair from so many years of lacking.

Only to realize with dread that the boy was dying: he was in grave pain and his blood was flowing
on the cement of the room. He had been ruthless with the boy forgetting that he was a mortal, a boy,
not his immortal Lilith. Yet. He let his seed fill him knowing already that this body would absorb
him. And then he healed the damage his passion had made. And saved the boy. Unlike that night
with Lilith when he failed to give her life again. Because he had arrived too late…Because although
a demon he could give life back only when it wasn’t too late and he felt…oh, that was…
He had given Ra’s what he wanted: the way to kill the Kryptonian.

Bagdana clenched his fists and roared causing the stalactites to shake: he wanted the Kryptonian dead because he had Bruce’s body…Bruce’s love. Because he took Bruce from him…as Cain had done. Only the Kryptonian hadn’t failed to save Bruce.

He remembered that night that Bruce stabbed him with Nemesis’ Knife and sent him back to be imprisoned in Tartarus – really, Bagdana considered himself an idiot for not recognizing the Goddess’ emerald star eyes in Bruce’s irises but who would think that Lilith’s descendant would be a descendant of the justice Goddess too? A perfect hybrid to torture him more: getting Lilith back but not being able to have her because the damn priest’s DNA was in there fighting.

That night he felt Bruce ending – his beautiful spirit being freed back in the sky like Lilith’s. And Bagdana was desperate to leave his prison and rush there to save him, to take him away from humans, to make him immortal again, to be with him forever. But it was like chains binding him there mocking and enjoying his pain and agony as his last chance for happiness, for redemption was fast slipping like the life from Bruce’s gravelly aching body.

But the Kryptonian saved him at the last moment, took him away to heal him. But the Kryptonian wasn’t a god or the most powerful and ancient demon…Bruce’s life slipped from his tender arms – he died and Bagdana experienced a pain worse than that from the Knife as if he had actually a heart and was torn to shreds…

In the end, Superman did it: he saved Bruce. But Bruce was seriously injured and now he was bound to a chair: not that he couldn’t stand and walk and fight if he allowed his mighty mind and will to force his body but doing that would lead to causing new damage to his frail body.

The demon actually sighed and wasn’t ashamed for that: he knew, he felt Bruce’s burning desire to fly – he was Lilith’s son after all…And now he couldn’t even walk…Bagdana punched a stalactite that immediately was shattered in a pile of mineral dust and then reformed it because he didn’t want anything to be destroyed in this cave. This cave was special.

He caressed the empty human shaped Bat that was erect on the cave’s wall; he grinned. Bruce’s first cave; Batman’s suit. Bagdana had hosted his battle for three years; he had watched from afar because that bastard Ra’s feared for the boy’s life after he copulated with him for the second time and used repellants to keep him away from Bruce. He watched amused and intrigued and then fascinated by the boy’s, a young man now, wit and determination: Bagdana admired him…oh! How it’s possible for a demon to admire a mere mortal?

Yet Bruce was anything but ‘mere’: regardless of the fact he had Lilith’s DNA, he wasn’t a demon or a god. He was more: he was a great human.

His enormous hand touched the cowl.

“Do you miss your caves, Bruce? Your armor? The night?”

He could feel what Bruce was feeling right now and smirked.

“It pains, right, Bruce? For now you just acknowledge the pain, the knife in your heart…” he grunted. “Like the Knife you stabbed in my back…” he cackled with bitterness. “Are you questioning your choice yet?”

His eyes reddened and flashed as he brushed the arms of the suit. He was so close to get that man…And then Nemesis defeated him once again having given Bruce the weapons to escape…Having
established herself inside the being that was his salvation, his Lilith’s last son, her last surviving piece…

He just couldn’t even tolerate the slightest doubt that Bruce would ultimately be his. It hurt even to think the possibility of the Kryptonian continue touching his Bruce…

Joker made a deep court bow as he entered his cell where Dr. Quinzel was already waiting seated in her chair with her phone’s recorder ready.

“Ohhhhh! Hellooooooo, Dr. Harlequin! To what I owe this un-expected pleasure? It’s not our usual time, right? Ooooooor…” he moved his eyebrows suggestively “this nightly visit has more than ‘therapeutic’ motives…” he gazed at his groin. “I know I’m an eye-candy…”

He giggled seeing Quinzel’s cheeks getting red but she determined set her jaw in a very strict expression that made Joker laugh more.

“Please, sit down, Mr. J. I changed our scheduled session because tomorrow I won’t be here.”

Joker leaned to her but Harleen knew that this wasn’t the prologue of an attack because her patient would have been already knocked down – Mr. Stark had made that sure installing in him a special monitoring system that read the man’s vitals into stopping him whenever the vitals showed a tendency for aggressiveness. Joker’s lips were a breath’s distance from her long, lean neck and his hot respiration grazed her skin bringing her goose bumps that she wasn’t sure whether they were from terror or something else.

“Mmmmm…” Joker pouted. “Aaaaa naughty date?” he said throatily smirking with his doctor’s change in breathing.

But Harleen realizing her amateur reactions straighten her head and looked Joker in the eye firmly though she was aware that the man was amused.

“Please, have a seat, Mr. J” her voice meant ‘cut the crap’.

Joker giggled and with a long jump landed on his bed. He patted the mattress.

“Fancy that…Is a really gooood bed – pity I can’t try it with someone…” his narrowed eyes fell on the stern looking doctor.

“How was your day, Mr. J?” she asked professionally brushing the phone’s screen into recording.

He folded his legs on the mattress and shrugged a shoulder.

“I guessssss niice…” he smacked his lips while his eyes looked at the ceiling. “Ooooooof course, I’d prefer it if I had a viiiiiisit from my lawfully wedded wiiiiife…” he was staring reminiscently at the ceiling but he noticed his therapist’s uneasiness. “It’s myyy right, right?” he focused rapidly on Harleen’s eyes and she managed to restrict her surprise.

“No, it’s not” she answered blatantly. “Mr. Wayne isn’t your wife.”

He shook his head loosely.

“Aaaaaand may-be he is nooooot generally…” his eyes flashed too serious. “Caaaan you assure me that he is aliiiiive?” his nasal voice rose almost angrily.
The young psychiatrist looked at him completely neutral.

“You’ve made a new acquaintance while in the common rooms.”

“Huhu!” Joker knew that she wanted to change the subject, to bring him out of his ‘obsession’ – but why? People live thanks to their obsessions: is what gives the salt and pepper to their lives and Brucie with his tantalizing secrets was his... cinnamon. But anyway… “Yeah, dear ol’ Joooohnny boy” let’s go with her pace.

“How you feel about it?”

Now Joker couldn’t hold back his laughter: it was so easy to read that woman and manipulate her.

“Joooohny is a good bloooock – I mean, he was a shrink aaaaand eeeended up a looooony! WOW! That sur-passes even meeeee, for pity’s saaaaake! Hmmmm…”

He regarded his therapist curious and she met his gaze.

“Dr. Harlequin, dooooo you think that eeee-very shrink foooollows the steeeep path?” he moved his hand downwards.

Harleen met his eyes serious.

“Psychiatrists are humans too.”

Joker giggled.

“Sooolllll oooou, my hoooooot stufff shrinck” he licked his lips looking at the floor and then suddenly at her eyes solemnly “one day could become like our Johnny?”

She pressed her lips.

“Is it so important for you?”

He moved his head, stretching his neck in every position.

“I looooove loonies, doc – especially thooooose with a university degreeeeeee!” he erupted in a spree of laughter sweeping supposed tears.

Dr. Quinzel gathered her phone and stood regarding her patient determined.

“I think that’s enough for tonight.”

She turned but Joker stopped laughing abruptly: he was the one to decide that and he wanted to play. He sensed that it’d be easy to bring that little doctor to the “Dark Side” and it was so funny.

“Dr. Quinzel, don’t leave” he said with his best solemn voice – he was an Oscar winning actor for pity’s sake (well, his win wasn’t so fair play but whoever wins by playing fair?). “Do you really care toooo learn aboooout meeeee?” his eyes were sparkling almost sad locking with hers as she turned towards him interested – hehe! It was so hilarious but he couldn’t laugh aloud – being an actor is a really difficult thing, that’s why he chose the murders instead.

“Of course, Mr. J, this is the reason I’m here” she arched her eyebrows. “For me, you’re a human being.”

Joker raised his eyebrows innocently but inside he was sniggering: a human being – noooooo
“Really, a human being?” he snorted bitterly – not dragging his words was tedious and boring especially when he wasn’t actually speaking seriously. “I tortured and murdered countless people without a reason…” well, there was a great reason: greeeeat laughs! “You should hate me as everyone else” he sighed “including Bruce” his eyes now were of a puppy’s. “You know, I really care about him…”

Harleen’s eyes were neutral.

“You kidnapped, forced drugged him and attacked him sexually” her voice didn’t contain accusation, just stating the facts.

*Very professional, little doc-y, but you can’t kidnap your spouse, can you?* Joker thought and scratched his nose.

“You knooooow that I’m a loooost case, right?” he stared at her innocently.

“Nobody is a lost case, Mr. J.”

Joker gave the driest laugh of his life pretending bitterness.

“I believed that I was helping him, you know…”

Harleen didn’t manifest her interest, just straightened her glasses.

“Helping?”

Joker looked at the ceiling.

“I didn’t mean to cause him any damage…it’s just that…” he narrowed his eyes staring at her. “Bruce and I are very much alike” he leaned towards her. “Aaaaaand I’m perfectly aware of how much he suffers eeeeven now – so…I just wanted to help him become like me: be freed from the chains of constant pain…” he brought his palm over his eyes watching from the corner Harleen’s avid attention as if she was waiting to see Chris Hemsworth naked – hehe! He barely restrained his giggles.

Harleen felt that she was very close to something important: unraveling this man’s secrets. Finding the root of his homicidal mania.

“You said you’re much like Mr. Wayne – on what terms?”

Joker shrugged.

“You want my life story, doc? I mean, bееeeyond the murders?”

“Of course.”

Joker nodded and smiled and Harleen actually liked that smile – it was a human smile showing that Joker wasn’t the only aspect of this man.

“You already know that I spent more than a decaaaade in a loony bin…” of course she did, everyone did, because Batman had dug too deep and discovered that skeleton in his huuuuge closet, so there was no problem repeating it. “I knooooow how it is to bееee imprisoned without any hope to escape.”
“This is your similarity with Mr. Wayne?”

OK, Joker, your Oscar winning scene, hihi! He intertwined his fingers and brought them behind his neck looking at the corner of the wall opposite him with a blank stare. He could tell that his therapist was holding her breath which was hi-larious. He sighed and untied his fingers clapping his palms in front of him.

“Let’s say that there was maaaaaany reasons I ended up in that loony bin…and thooose reasons make me so intrigued by Bruce…because he, unlike me” he turned his palm showing his chest “…managed to stay…you know…tooooo normal” he articulated it showing his teeth. “It must pain him tooooo much to be like that having all this shit happened to him aaaand I wanted to free him, to make him forget the pain and laugh…be, you know, happy. Be-cause I know that being normal isn’t any happiness.”

Harleen’s eyes sparkled and Joker coughed supposedly from uneasiness but in fact to cover his laughter: the fish bit the bait.

“Can you elaborate on these reasons?” her voice was professional but Joker thought that she was ready to say ‘please’.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

“Hell, no!” he yelled but it was a hurt yell. “I think it’s obvious…aaand frankly I don’t remember much…things are a biiiit foggy” he cackled “maybe I want them to not clear up…” he turned his puppy eyes to her. “You understand, Dr. Harlequin? It’s what fascinates me in that man” well, not the only thing… “I wiped my past and leeeeet my miiiiind go, you know” he rolled his finger around his temple. “I chooooose madness to face my past while he…well, if my suspicions are right, he chose something else.

He pressed his lips.

“I just want to stop his suffering…”

“Every human being has his/her own ways coping with pain.”

Joker shook his shoulders uncomfortable in the mention of pain and his eyes fell on the floor. Harleen’s eyes widened.

“Pain…” the jester said as if thinking deeply and gave a laugh that resembled mostly of a grunt. “You have to live in a lot of pain to being able to cause pain to others” he added in a too serious voice “do you think, Dr. Harlequin?”

He turned his acid eyes to her and – oh! - how much he wanted to giggle unstoppably in the view of the almost on orgasm doctor. She surely felt that had come to a great discovery.

“So pain is what drives you to do what you’re doing?”

Joker scratched the edge of his bed that was made from material that couldn’t be used for any lethal purpose – supposedly…

“Isn’t what drives all of us?” he wanted to throw up with that line… Fun was what drove him. “Even if we try to hide our wounds?” his eyes locked with her compassionate ones.

“Talk to me about those wounds” she understood that Joker’s past resembled Bruce Wayne’s past and that made the man so infatuated with him – only if she managed to make him open up…Only if
she managed to reform one of the worst criminals ever…

“Hehehe…” well, even as an Oscar winning actor that couldn’t be hold back as Joker read her hunger. Yet he managed to make it sound like a bitter laughter: damn! He was more talented than even himself thought.

He brushed the tip of his nose and looked the young psychiatrist.

“It’d be sooooo ridiculous if I returned to that!” he shook his head in denial. “No, no, nooooooo: Joker is fun…”

Harleen’s eyes were sparkling.

“But you’re not only Joker: there is someone else deep inside you and you work so hard to keep him buried.”

Joker pinched the tip of his nose: that was…oh! And he believed that he was the best comedian…oh! The baby had potential! Indeed, there was someone deep inside him and he – oh! Believe me, doc – was making a really hard effort to harness him from popping and creating chaos…

“I’d rather nooooot – not - talk about that…” you can’t give them at once everything they want: you have to tease them to keep them engaged and drag them the way you want and those shrinks were the easiest prays – he had studied them…

“I don’t want to put pressure on you.”

Joker shook his head innocently showing supposed uneasiness but inside he cocked a sarcastic eyebrow: as if you could, doc!

“I guess…I guess…thank you” he looked her in the eyes.

She smiled.

“It’s nothing. I want you to know that I’ll be here for you to listen whenever you’ll be ready. I think our time is up. I’m really proud for your improvement, Mr. J. Your behavior at the common rooms is excellent and you’ve been socializing enough. If you continue like this I’m going to grant you more privileges.”

Joker didn’t look at her but kept staring blankly at his hands between his folded legs.

“It’s me that should thank you, doc” he said without looking at her – you gave me access to my clowns and that asshole Crane. I can get valuable info.

Harleen didn’t smile but her cheeks were hot – she was proud of herself for making Joker say such things but her experience also warned her to be careful.

“You don’t have to, Mr. J – it’s my pleasure to be of any help.”

Now Joker looked lopsided at her arching an eyebrow. Youuuuu beeet you are…

“You really care about a baaaastard like me, uh, doc?”

Harleen stood and gathered her phone shutting the recording.

“It’s the reason I’m here, Mr. J – you can trust me” her eyes widened in sincere interest. “Remember that.”
Joker smiled loosely feeling his scars asking for blood and nodded.

“I will, Dr. Harlequin…” be certain of that…

“Good night; I’ll see you in two days.”

He nodded and watched her leaving behind the curtain of his curls. Too bad he couldn’t laugh because after the shrink was leaving the surveillance was on again. Oh! That would be so much fun – well, not as fun as when he realized that his Rachel backstabbed him AND befriended with Brucey: oh! That was indeed hilarious! He missed Rachel and her snarky remarks, her don’t-giving-a-damn attitude; but of course Brucey enchanted her as well taking her with him in the other side and now that dork Dent would corrupt her…Hehe! Well, only if he doesn’t get corrupted first… Because Joker knew a good sport when he saw it.

As a difficult, compelling one. Like Brucey…and what he hid…Well, he should be sure, right? He had cornered the loony case, Crane, and would learn what he wanted. And then nothing would keep him in that place and away from his Prince…

“UUUUUGHHHHHH!” he groaned from exhilaration. Who said that Gotham was a grim city without fun? Ask Falcone…

He giggled on the thought of the almighty Emperor of Gotham who relished on his certainty that the boy he was fucking was a blind, weak kitten without nails. Joker’s insides roared: Brucey was a tiger! And between a kitten and a tiger Joker preferred it when both of them came in one pack…

Loki brought fast a popcorn to his mouth but suddenly he stayed with the piece in front of his mouth and his eyes widened interested and sparkling slyly.

He was sprawled in his throne in the great hall of his palace, his legs stretched loosely wide in front of him. A huge screen resembling a plasma TV of at least 100” was playing the video from Falcone’s court, the part where Harvey Dent was dismantling the mobster’s arguments giving details of the cruel abuse Bruce Wayne experienced in his hands.

And then on his mental demand the footage on screen changed to show Bruce Wayne dashingly dressed in front of the hotel that hosted the GCPD’s annual ball.

Loki threw in slow motion the popcorn in his mouth and chewed it slowly watching the man’s moves.

“Wow, boy! You must be really experienced in kinky bed!” he cocked an eyebrow. “Surely you wake filthy thoughts in that suit…or the jeans…or without any of these…Supes must be a very boring bedmate…”

Suddenly the screen became black and Loki rolled his eyes.

“I don’t think this is a blackout…”

A loud thud revealed Thor’s impressive figure… The god of thunder was pissed: that’s not news, Loki thought.

“Well, well, fancy that…Big bro – and I mean really big -, is here: did you eat steroids for breakfast?” he didn’t change the way he was sitting but shoved in his mouth a handful of popcorns.
Thor wouldn’t play Loki’s game; he walked towards his throne taking in his ‘brother’ s innocent stare that was never innocent.

“What are you think you’re doing?” he demanded calmly but determined.

Loki pretended to swallow hard the popcorn in his mouth and his eyes bulged pouting.

“Eating popcorn and watching educational mortal TV…Don’t tell me that now in Asgard this is considered a disgrace?’”

Thor closed his eyes: he knew that Loki was always treated a bit haughtily because he didn’t meet the Asgardian standards and Thor personally didn’t like that. But Loki really didn’t make anything to change that, on the contrary: he constantly provoked everyone.

“I think you perfectly understand what I’m saying” he was looking at the god of deceit. “You were watching videos concerning Bruce Wayne. You were never a dribbler, peeping Tom”

Loki’s eyes bulged and he choked on the popcorns he was eating because he could help but laugh.

“Really, I was not?” he frowned. “How much you know me, brotha!” he snorted. “But I have to admit that socializing with Stark made your vocabulary interesting!” he chuckled to Thor’s dismay and made his big container of popcorns disappear and his eyes became solemn. “It’s this why you turned my TV off? Oh, man! You’re too selfish” Thor was used to Loki’s nonsense so didn’t react to that. “I’m just following the newest trend in Asgard” he opened his hands in the air. “Being infatuated with Bruce Wayne!”

Thor shook his head: they made that and Loki was sly enough to notice.

“Nobody is infatuated with the man.”

Loki straightened in his throne and gave a snake like smile, his eyes stabbing his ‘brother’ sparkling slyly.

“Come on, bro – I’m the god of deceit and that means that I’m cleverer than the god of thunder and the rest” he leaned towards the blond, muscular god. “When something stirs the waters” he rolled his eyes “even if the waters are in fact ice, I immediately sniff it…And there’s much to sniff in Asgard concerning the mortal – even, dear Odin, seems interested in the man.”

Thor crossed his arms and Loki smirked at the bulging muscles.

“Is this the reason you harassed him?”

Now Loki stood abruptly placing his palm over his heart and widening his eyes hurt.

“Harass? That’s insulting! That asshole Stark said that?” he gave his voice a weepy tone.

Thor pressed his lips restraining his irritation for Loki’s act.

“You did meet Bruce Wayne.”

Loki lolled his head on the side, looking lopsidedly at his ‘brother’.

“That boy has a big mouth, huh?” he smiled wickedly and his eyes glimmered gleefully. “OK, scratch that: that’s common knowledge – from what that gossipy DA said his mouth – and not only – must be really…”
Thor had had enough: unfolded his arms and his eyes flashed as real thunders.

“Enough!”

Loki closed his mouth and his eyes along with his entire face became serious and even threatening. He hated it when Thor tried to bully him using his stupid physical strength.

“Don’t mock what that man has been through” Thor lowered his tone but not his determination. “What do you want from him?” he set his jaw and Loki did the same unfazed by their difference in height and mass.

“It’s forbidden to meet a…celebrity?”

Thor tilted his head on the side and furrowed his eyebrows.

“I know you, Loki” he shook his head.

Loki laughed and his eyes were really demented.

“Yeah…I suppose you do so. Well, that little red riding hood told your Iron buddy that some ridiculous things attacked him and I defended him? Giving that the boy has two super hero friends, he is protected in a rather lame way…” he rolled his eyes.

“Just stay away from Bruce Wayne” he knew that it was no use arguing with him.

Loki sniggered and narrowed his eyes with his wide forehead leaned towards Thor.

“Or else?” he hissed.

Thor shook his head disapproving.

“Why do you have to be so pugnacious? You know, not everything has to be settled with brawls…”

Loki yanked his head and clenched his waist with both hands.

“Says the god who lives and breathes for battles… Don’t tell me the mighty, muscular god of thunder is afraid of tiny, weak Loki?” his black eyes sparkled gleefully.

Thor raised his index finger; he was angry, he didn’t like Loki playing him in such a manner but he didn’t want to escalate this.

“Bruce Wayne has nothing to do with you or me or any of our kin – leave him alone.”

He turned his back on Loki and walked the long, plain aisle to the exit while he could just vanish. Loki crossed his arms and followed his brother with his sneaky stare. When Thor moved to pass the exit he let a horrible snigger to accompany his enraged brother’s journey: Asgardians were really pathetic!

The soft breath beside him was the only distinctive sound in his vast, glamorous bedroom. The sound proof walls and windows of the most expensive apartment building were keeping Gotham’s cacophony outside and the heavy drapes left the room in complete darkness.

He had his hands under his nape and stared up at the ceiling; his eyes had adjusted to the darkness so he could make out the outlines of things. The ceiling…the shadows sketched so interesting things
there more interesting than the naked breasts of that little dumb nurse Kely.

Thomas had no intention on letting things unfold randomly. He knew how to be patient and lurk but that didn’t mean that he wouldn’t prepare things. So he dressed in his most expensive, tailor made suit, bought an impressive bouquet of red roses and went at the nurses’ apartment – it wasn’t difficult to discover this info, besides he had volunteered in Leslie’s clinic exactly for gaining access in such things.

He cocked an eyebrow in sarcasm.

“I always learn something that interests me…” he had said in his most seductive way to Kely when at opening the door she stayed goggling at her crush-doctor.

Which was the truth: he really learnt everything he wanted. And that was another reason for being so frustrated with his failure to find answers in this case: he couldn’t believe that Brucie was covered so effectively – ugh! All this protectiveness and devotion and adoration made him even now sick… C’me on, he was Brucie Wayne, nothing special then, nothing special now – his only worth was his surname…Falcone spared him only for his last name – to humiliate more the Wayne legacy.

He snorted but the bitch behind him didn’t hear anything just sighed in her sleep. As she was sighing and moaning and whining under him…He had invited her for dinner at the most glamorous restaurant of Gotham and she had blushed, her eyes almost watering for her unbelievable luck…He rolled his eyes.

Then he suggested have a drink at his penthouse and as he guessed she had no reservations for that. Neither for getting laid by the most handsome, interesting, intelligent bachelor in Gotham… He smirked. On the contrary…

He casted an ironic sideways glance to Kely’s sweet, innocent face; her messy locks splayed all over the silken pillow. She begged for more, never getting enough of Thomas Elliot – she melted in his hands. He could see it in her eyes: she would do anything he asked. She was already his devoted slave and he needed such individuals to keep him informed on Thompkins’ movements and maybe later of Bruce’s himself.

His blue eyes glimmered in the darkness as he stared again at the ceiling indifferent of Kely’s bare naked body at his side.

“You thought I was a bully to you then, Brucie? You cried then because I was calling you names and ruined your Tao-Tao. You can’t even imagine what kind of bully I am now and how much more suffering I can cause you…and I WILL cause you…” he mused and smiled satisfied. “Till I ruin you completely as this asshole Falcone failed all these years…”

His sleep was so deep all these months due to the bunch of strong medicines he had to take; so being aware of his surroundings even when sleeping as Ra’s had taught him became difficult – that was the goal of all this medication after all: to get as much as possible rest.

However, even in this lethargic state he felt a mass on him. He was sleeping flat on his back and something, a body, large and muscular was on him – well, that he could figure from the input his half body was giving. A sinking bitter feeling filled his insides before the memories of last night came to complete the puzzle. The words they have exchanged, the hard impact Clark’s words had on him; the sense of resign from everything Clark relating…
Suddenly one new input for the environment was added: two very familiar lips were touching his neck. Clark…

Obviously…He was sleeping with Clark after all. Yet he wasn’t so sure that it was really him. For once, Clark wouldn’t place his heavy body on him; after the incident in Chicky’s factory he was very careful, even afraid in his ministrations. Also, something was off: the lips weren’t as hot as Clark’s and Clark didn’t kiss in that way; not to mention the unfamiliar smell.

He got in battle stance – well, spiritually. As the lips reached the corner of his lips he opened his eyes pretending annoyance for being woken.

“Good morning, sunshine!” Clark’s voice greeted him along with the beloved crystal blue eyes and a big stunning smile.

Yet Bruce’s eyes narrowed and he gasped, his hands grapping the mattress trying to move his body that way. His uncertainty even if proved unjustified afterwards made him keep pretenses…just in case.

“S…Superman, what are you doing?” he asked puzzled and half-hid his supposed fear as a person who wants to put a brave face on and half fails.

“Come on, Bruce, you know…morning glory? It’s your superman, don’t be shy…”

As if…Bruce arched a mental eyebrow but as a front he took a really insulted expression that bordered with terrorized. He was so glad his laptop was programmed to close after an hour of inertia because last night he slept leaving it open with the designs of the new armor… He didn’t know who that impostor was and that was the reason he didn’t call him with Superman’s alias: he didn’t want to betray his secret identity neither to divulge their relationship.

“Are you crazy?” now his voice had a slight tremor either from anger or fear. “How…how dare you? Please, get off me…”

‘Superman’ rolled his eyes and brushed Bruce’s cheek with his lips that now that Bruce was certain that belonged to a stranger felt nauseating.

“You are not completely awake yet, huh? Sunshine? Your man is here.”

Now Clark would never say that bullshit.

“You’re not my man!” and then he rasped and lowered his tone. “Please, Superman, stop that…I’ll scream…”

“Bruce, I can’t understand why you’re reacting like this… I’m hurt. It’s what we’re doing every morning…” he frowned and lolled his head in a completely non-Clark-ish way. “I least I hope so…” he said huskily in a mildly mocking way, as if hardly restraining a jeering snigger at someone.

Bruce smirked but only inside: so Loki decided to continue the game he started with Clark last night. His amusement on the thought of Superman didn’t do his mate every morning was obvious in ‘Clark’s eyes. So obvious that his black eyes almost replaced Clark’s.

“W…what?” Bruce exclaimed. “We…WE?” he snapped as if the idea was crazy. “We don’t do anything like that! Why you’re here?”

Thankfully, ‘Superman’s knees were fixed on the mattress and his considerable mass wasn’t on his pelvis. Loki wanted to be careful.
‘Superman’ looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Are you kidding me or am I kidding you?” he asked.

“Get off!”

“Superman is your boyfriend; you should be happy for him wanting to play…”

Bruce mentally snorted: so the supposed Superman was speaking for himself in the third person.

“He is not” let’s continue in his way.

‘Superman’ seemed frustrated.

“Drop it, alright? I saw him coming here last night and he was very happy to suck your lips…” Loki stopped abruptly and closed his eyes before bursting in his typical laughter.

“Loki.”

‘Superman’ became Loki and the god of deceit shook his index finger, still laughing amused.

“You’re clever…”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“You’re an asshole!” and then his eyes stared at the floor where Hero lay completely immobile; the bedroom granite tilted floor was replaced from the filthy cement in the alley behind Dolcetto and a kitten lay there, his one eye open but immobile, dead, his tongue hanging. This image had the impact of a full blown migraine and Bruce writhed under Loki trying to escape remembering to hide his true strength. “What have you done to my kitten?”

Loki turned his head towards the animal and shook his head.

“Cool down, babe; he’s just sleeping” he cocked his eyebrows. “I might be an immortal yet cat’s nails really hurt.”

Bruce licked his lips and really put an effort to look at Loki’s face, pretending to be afraid.

“Please, get off me…” he was really shaking - well, it wasn’t from fear but anger yet Loki was unable to read his mind.

Loki supported his body on his knees and rose a bit scratching his head. But then Bruce felt his arms being lifted upwards and strapped to the headboard without Loki laying a finger on him – actually, the god had crossed his arms and just stared at him perplexed; his eyes bulged but a black silken ribbon covered them.

Loki clenched his waist with both hands and regarded Bruce.

“Well, straps and blindfolds truly are amazing on you! Hm…let’s discover other things…”

The buttons of his pajama shirt were slowly undone and Bruce felt sweating and was glad that at least he was not wearing the Black Butterfly, he didn’t want Loki being intrigued by the jewel and search what it was. He was angry but he knew how to act anger and fear together.

“This…this is a sexual assault…” he said trying to control his fearful breath.
Loki pushed the two parts of Bruce’s shirt away and smirked at the view of the man’s naked torso.

“I can see why Supes is head over heels…” he remembered what Bruce had said about the sexual assault “look, babe, at least I tried to follow the other way…and, let’s face it: I’m a god – I know it’s unfair but I can do whatever I want.”

Bruce was furious.

“Please, untie me…I…I…it’s awful…and Alfred could come at any moment…Please, I…I can’t…”

Loki twisted his lips.

“I thought after all these years you’d like going fifty shades of gray – hell, you could write one hundred and fifty shades of gray…” but upon seeing his captive shaking and moving nervously his tied hands, he sighed. “Fine…party pooper!”

Instantly, Bruce’s hands were free and the silk blinding his eyes gone. Bruce brushed his wrists though the straps weren’t very tight: in Falcone’s hands he had endured much worse bonding… He looked at Loki, his heart still beating fast.

“So” he inhaled deeply “you want to have your fun with me” he closed his eyes “no surprise there…”

Loki sat on the mattress folding his legs.

“You told Stark I was with you in the forest and he sent Thor to chastain me.”

Bruce shook his head.

“And you decided to punish me.”

Loki lolled his head on the side and smirked.

“If I wanted that I wouldn’t have stopped, would I?”

Bruce grabbed with both hands the headboard and rose in a sitting position.

“Then what do you want from me?”

Loki shook his head laughing silently.

“You’re intriguing, Bruce…and I like being intrigued. Thor coming to face me for disturbing you, Superman being in love with you…”

Bruce opened his mouth to answer but Loki’s lips were on his silencing him. Bruce shook his head to escape and Loki detached licking his lips.

“Mmm…I get why Supes figured me last night when he kissed me… I know the truth, buddy – I saw him leaving this gorgeous villa an hour ago because of an earthquake in Tibet and…there’s a bag of donuts from a Metropolis’ bakery in your nightstand – Superman home delivery, huh? Not bad at all…By the way, I ate one” he squinted “I hope it doesn’t bother you?”

Bruce regarded Loki interested.

“What do you really want?”
Loki smiled, his straight hair falling from the two sides of his face.

“We’re so much alike, Bruce.”

*Not again…* Bruce thought exasperated remembering Joker’s same words.

“I don’t see how…”

Loki laughed.

“I was raised by my father’s murderer… Odin killed my father and then to show off his… ‘generosity’ took me under his wing and raised me.”

Bruce had read about that but he’d never believe that that would make Loki identify with him. So he let his eyes show his interest.

“Were you abused?” he asked in a low voice.

Loki stretched his hand and touched Bruce’s chin.

“Nah… Nothing like what you’ve been through… though even without any abuse it’s always the man who killed your father, right?” he winked. “And having all these Asgardians look down on you because you’re not as tall and broad as them and not meet their beauty or whatever standards… well, it doesn’t help.”

Bruce wasn’t one to fall fully for Loki’s sayings; it was the god of deceit after all and he could pretend as much as Bruce.

“What?” Loki asked and laughed. “You think I’m trying to deceive you? Clever boy” he knitted his eyebrows. “That’s another reason, I’m intrigued: you’re not the typical victim” he shook his head “and neither do I. You’re scared but you try your best to not be or at least not show your fear and you’re still smart. And you charm people – look Supes or Thor.”

“Enough, Loki!”

Loki was already looking at the big oval window that opened for Thor to enter. Bruce turned too and if someone was watching his eyes would discern his irritation and… amusement because that was simply atrocious! The first years in Falcone’s hands, when he was still a stupid, naïve child he was praying and expecting that a god would save him… Well, no god or human ever came for him then and now that he was safe… two of them in his bedroom!

“Oh, dear ol’ Thor-i!” he frowned. “Isn’t impolite to burst like this in someone’s bedroom?”

Thor huffed.

“You did the same…”

Wrong answer, Bruce decided to have his own fun already knowing what Loki was going to retort when the god of deceit opened his mouth.

“But I’m Loki, the mischievous god; the god of deceit. Not the noble god of thunder! Bye, bye, darling” he turned to Bruce and he glued his lips on Bruce’s making a dragging noise of sucking. “See ya!”

He vanished in a pop and Bruce let all his annoyance show in his eyes – Thor knew his secret.
“I’m sorry for that” the god of thunder said walking closer.

Bruce leaned to the floor and gently, carefully took Hero who began stirring. He caressed the confused animal and led himself on his chair that in the meantime had reached the bed following his mental order. The chair approached the bulky god and Bruce stared at him calm.

“It wasn’t your fault...though you could just have watched Loki’s movements and not blandly confronted him. That was the reason I told Tony and he notified you. I’m not afraid of Loki.”

Thor nodded with respect.

“I know: fear doesn’t suit you.”

Bruce smiled.

Maybe because I have been so much scared in my life that it doesn’t make an impression anymore.”

Thor pressed his lips and shook his head.

“I ruined your plan, huh?” Bruce regarded him.

“I guess you have a different approach to things. Humans like me rely on waiting and thinking – having special powers and being almighty can afford to be effective without all these.”

Thor squatted to be in Bruce’s level and their eyes locked.

“Your insight and observation were that revealed S.H.I.E.L.D.’s true colors and it was your perfect planning, timing and organizational skills that led us to defeat the League of Shadows and stop them from killing millions of people. With all our super powers combined we wouldn’t have made it without you. There are no words to describe the depths of my respect for you” his fist hit his own heart as a gesture of appreciation.

Bruce pressed his lips.

“You can find many mortals with the same qualities you praise. It was a good thing we had you fighting on our side.”

Thor smiled but he could feel that Bruce was upset and he couldn’t blame him. He couldn’t fight a sense of regret seeing the warrior who defeated a powerful demon like Bagdana being stuck in a chair. However the fact that this man wasn’t thwarted by that and made a titanic effort to come back, honestly gave Thor goose bumps of pride.

Bruce’s eyes were on Thor’s and the god knew that the human could discern his emotions. So he caressed the small kitten in Bruce’s lap; the animal was now fully wake and stretched his legs.

“The little one looks fine…” he said smiling and Bruce nodded. “And you? Are you alright? I know that you don’t want to show your true skills.”

“Loki didn’t do anything apart from playing yet we must be vigilant” Thor nodded “we don’t know if he plans something. But we need to be discreet…” he said arching his eyebrows and Thor nodded.

Someone knocked on the door and Bruce knew that it must be Alfred.

Thorstood.

“I should leave. Give my regards to Tony” he turned to leave but stopped and looked at Bruce. “I
pray for your full recovery and wish I’ll get the honor of fighting beside you…I can talk to Eir to apply her healing skills on you.”

Bruce smiled.

“I’ll think about it…”

Thor nodded and disappeared in a pop.

“Come in, Alfred” said while buttoning his shirt: he didn’t want Alfred asking questions and be worried.

He had made his decision: as much as he was content here, at times feeling as if he was another person he had to return to Gotham. There were too many things waiting for him there.
One by one Bruno Mannheim’s lieutenants left the warehouse under their boss’ disgusted figure: they were used to his arrogant attitude but they couldn’t imagine that this snobbish tactic actually stemmed from his disgust about humans in general – they never imagined that the sturdy gangster wasn’t one of them.

A woman seemingly at her fifties approached him respectfully. She was dressed in dark blue pants and shirt; her hair short and a dirty blond. She bowed to him and Mannheim gestured to her to rise.

“I can’t wait for the day you’ll squash those idiots like bugs, great master” she said, her lips horribly twisted in such disdain as if she was experiencing nausea.

Bruno cocked his eyebrows.

“I always need expendable slaves… To do the things that must be done and then offer me the entertainment I want by exterminating them. Right, Granny Goodness?”

She laughed.

“Oh, yeah! Killing those humans is all the times a great spree…Like the brilliant earthquake you just sent to Tibet.”

The bulky gangster nodded satisfied and tightened his fingers in a rock-shattering fist.

“I wanted some satisfaction on that stupid human race!”

Granny Goodness moved a bit closer.

“For the failed attack on Bruce Wayne” Mannheim cast a lopsided glance at her. “Next time if you honor me I’ll be glad to bestow you the human: it’s obvious that that worthless demon it’s incompetent – not to mention that maybe he’s sabotaging your plans” her voice was low as a snake’s and her eyes glistened maniac.

Darkseid keeping the gangster’s form paced to the depths of the warehouse and sat at a humble armchair.

“Do you really trust that loser?” Granny who had followed him asked.

“He is an ancient demon so he knows humans better than us and he already faced the Kryptonian and his allies.”

Granny crossed her arms and nodded.

“And lost” she croaked.

Mannheim’s eyebrows united.

“And that’s what makes him a valuable asset: revenge. Bagdana is strong enough and has motivation to destroy his enemy” his lips stretched in a bad imitation of a grin. “He wants what Superman stole from him and would do everything to take it back and punish the Kryptonian. Also, I trust his cunning.”

Yet Goodness wasn’t persuaded.
“His plan to capture the human failed miserably.”

“As the raid to LexLab at Metropolis that anyways didn’t lead to my machine. Now we have to expand our search to every LexLab.”

“The failure wasn’t yours, great master: it was of those useless humans: they aren’t even good servants.”

Mannheim nodded.

“It would have been nothing for me to conquer this stupid planet and search the labs but I don’t want to reveal myself to the Kryptonian.”

Granny gritted her teeth.

“Only because that useless demon persuaded you not to; you have no reason to go stealth: you can defeat the Kryptonian and his allies at any time!”

Mannheim was looking at her expressionless, his hands brushing the armrests. Granny Goodness narrowed her eyes.

“He just uses your power to achieve his own purposes” she snapped her head “but your Greatness doesn’t need a loser like him. Launch an attack right now and this lame excuse of a planet will fall immediately and Superman will kneel before you begging for mercy.”

Mannheim rubbed his chin.

“I definitely prefer your version” his lieutenant grinned gleefully. “Yes…the Kryptonian kneeled before me begging as his human mate will be burned and chopped tiny piece by tiny piece…”

The woman almost drooled.

“I’m sure that human will be perfect for torturing: the more beautiful they are the more beautiful the spectacle when they are tortured..! If I was the head of that attack, now the human would be yours to do whatever you want…”

“And you’d have Superman, Ironman and their allies hot on your tail searching everything, connecting dots and finally kick you out of Earth having suffered a really humiliating defeat” Bagdana’s voice echoed through the warehouse just before the demon emerged in a loud thud.

Mannheim looked grimly at him and Granny rolled her eyes.

“Humiliating defeats are your thing…” Granny spat at him yet Bagdana was staring at Mannheim ignoring her completely.

“If I had let you do as this woman tells I wouldn’t have been doing what I should: securing your victory. And your victory is my main concern…”

“Your main concern is taking Wayne!” Granny interrupted him haughtily.

Bagdana didn’t even grace her with an acknowledging glance but kept looking at Mannheim.

“I never denied it but this is what makes your victory my main concern also: we both take what we desire. You’ll take that pitiful planet and Superman’s death and I, Superman’s punishment and Bruce.”
Darkseid regarded him with narrowed eyes.

“Still I’d prefer it if the Kryptonian at his dying moments suffered even more watching unable to do anything his bitch being tortured slowly to death …”

Bagdana pressed his lips.

“Bruce is nobody’s bitch! And believe me Superman’s passing will be more torturous if he knows that Bruce will be mine.”

Granny Goodness snorted.

“A demon falling for and running behind a human’s ass is pathetic…”

Bagdana grinned and his red eyes shone really menacingly when he glared at Granny.

“It’d be more pathetic if someone like me gave a shit about what someone like you thinks…” his laughter was spooky and spine shattering and Granny just twisted her mouth in deep hatred.

Bagdana turned to Darkseid.

“You need to have your lackeys raid other labs except Luthor’s.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Give me a reason why I should make a detour from my real target” he said bored.

Bagdana walked closer.

“You don’t want suspicions that someone is looking for something Luthor has…and you don’t want anyone taking your machine and ruining all your plans.”

“And who might do that?”

“A great detective” Bagdana hissed remembering how Bruce discovered that the League of Shadows and the S.H.I.E.L.D. was the same organization.

Mannheim laughed with his cracked way.

“You give too much credit to those humans…”

Bagdana was unfazed by his collaborator’s clear degrading tone.

“After hundreds of thousands years, let me know more about humans.”

Darkseid shrugged.

“Fine…I’ll show once again my trust on you though you failed me once…” his red flames of eyes locked with Bagdana’s “But you didn’t really want that attack to succeed, right?” he sniggered and Bagdana’s face became expressionless like a rock made of granite as the color of his body. “You just wanted to scare your little pitiful human and you manage to bring that Amazon near Superman giving him another ally.”

Bagdana smirked.

“Let her to me.”
Granny gave a loud snort looking at her Master but Bagdana just vanished.

“Gotham’s climate might ignite severe pain in your healing injuries and bones” Leslie had said strictly professionally but with her eyes filled with disagreement and worry.

He had announced his decision to return at Gotham during the breakfast; he had uttered it completely calm, almost indifferent but definitely adamant.

He noticed Alfred’s hands clenching tighter the towel he held despite the fact he kept his composed expression; Selina who was feeding pancakes to Hero had raised her eyes and just looked at him. At his long time friend’s eyes saw understanding, deeper understanding, empathy, and trust – she would always support him, no matter what.

Tony stayed with the pancake in front of his mouth; he had remained there during the night in case anyone tried a new attack. He dropped the delicacy to the plate and rubbed the bridge of his nose. His disapproval was more than evident. He stretched his hand to show Leslie.

“The doctor has just said that Gotham is not the best choice for your condition right now” Tony told him stabbing him with his fervent black eyes. “I can’t understand your rush, buddy… I really can’t…” he shook his head. “Lucius and I are taking care of everything at the Enterprises. I just can’t find a good reason for you to go back now: you don’t like it here?”

Of course he loved the place. His gaze wandered to the peaceful horizon that had provided the scenery for some of the happiest moments in his life. Fall was at its third month yet the weather was so sweet and the sky still had the clear blue color missing any clouds since the strong winds made the horizon unbelievably bright. The sun was shining but too gently offering sweet warmth and still sparkled on the crystal waters that formed small waves crushing at the shore offering a melancholic soundtrack to his thoughts.

The light breeze caressed his face with a pleasant, warm salty smell and moved his locks that have got slightly longer than usual. He smiled fondly remembering when after he woke up from the coma Clark cut his hair: the Man of Steel was just caressing his locks and a white light removed the overgrown hair – well, not much…Because Clark was in love with his locks and didn’t want much of them discarded… Thinking of which, Bruce doubted that Clark binned even a hair…probably he kept his locks in a super-secret section of the Fortress.

Something clenched his chest and he turned slightly his head to watch Hero playing with some dry seaweeds – he smiled.

Alfred had driven him to the village because he wanted to bid goodbye and thank the people he had met all this time. Everyone had treated him as if he was one of their own: not like a filthy rich guy, not like a poor victim – without pity and disgust battling in their eyes. For them he was just another human being. And Bruce really could socialize with ease among them without feeling a painful knot in his stomach and an urge to run away.

They had their last coffee in the small table under the huge plane tree in the middle of the village’s square: Selina, Leslie, Alfred, himself. The wide, ancient tree’s leaves had turned a brown orange color but stood on the branches moving slowly on the gentle wind; their concert was so beautiful and calming but a bit sad as if they were also saying goodbye.

Mrs. Suzana once again brought them her delicious ‘mpougatsa’, hot from the oven, and Bruce invited her to have a coffee with them which action made Selina cast him a really shocked stare.
Well, Bruce was sure that Argiris wouldn’t have told his mother about his affair with Selina…though Mrs. Suzana wasn’t an idiot.

Selina loved watching Argiris clean the beehives. And she did just that: stood behind a tree and gazed at the beautiful young man working with concentration and devotion. Of course he had no chance to feel her presence: she was Catwoman.

When she had had enough watching distanced from the tree and walked elegantly to him.

With the first sound Argiris turned to her smiling and his smile was so beautiful and earnest.

“Well, hello, Selina! What a beautiful way to start my day!”

Selina reflected his smile but her eyes were a bit shadowed.

“I’m leaving, Argiris; in two days…” she said without delay and saw his sparkling eyes fell.

He pressed his lips but nodded.

“I hope it isn’t something concerning your friend’s health…”

Selina loll’d her head.

“He is just homesick…” she chuckled and gestured to the wild environment drenched in morning light. “He loves the place as all of us but he got nostalgic…it’s been months since he last saw his city.”

The youth nodded.

“I understand: he was violently taken from his house” Selina frowned “and then what they did to him damaged him so much that he had to stay in rehab for too long” he smiled and caressed with his thumb Selina’s cheek. “And just when he got back to his home after eighteen years.”

“So you know who he is…” she said grinning slyly.

“I may be a beekeeper but I have an internet connection and…watch the world news.”

“But you didn’t say anything…to anyone. I mean, there weren’t hoards of paparazzi surrounding the villa.”

Argiris nodded smiling.

“No, obviously…I’m not the type to feast on a man’s tragedy and need for peace and happiness. And Bruce needed that so much, huh? After all, I’d be ungrateful.”

“Ungrateful?” she loll’d her head squinting.

Argiris moved closer.

“Thanks to him I met you…” his eyes shone and he swallowed. “I’ll miss you…” he smiled “I mean, I wish you would stay for the winter: it’s so beautiful in the island during the winter, people get so close…”

Selina got closer finding a warm niche in his chest and locked eyes with him, her eyes playful.
“I thought we were already close…” she wrapped graciously her arms around his neck.

Argiris chuckled and winked.

“Time to say goodbye then?”

Selina shook her head.

“In the best possible way, handsome!” she captured his lips in a passionate kiss and he closed her in his strong arms rubbing tenderly her back.

“You’ll miss me?” he breathed quickly before resuming their kiss with more vigor.

Selina moaned and ran her fingers in his rich locks.

“Oh, boy..! You know I will…”

His lips were sucking her neck the way she liked so much and Selina grabbed the hem of his T-shirt lifting it till he pulled off the annoying cloth himself. She felt the firm muscles almost desperate as Argiris unbuttoned her shirt and opened it to kiss the flesh that came out of her bra.

“But you’re a free spirit…” he mumbled “a wildcat that can’t stay in one place…”

Selina laughed as his hands undid her bra freeing her breasts exactly when she opened his jeans and groped his buttocks.

“You know me so well…”

“Thank God, Mrs. Suzana gave me the recipe for her wonderful ‘mpougatsa’ because Master Bruce devours it every time…” Alfred had commented with his disapproving tone because forgetting manners his young master had dived into the delicacy like a famished kid. Yet everyone could easily discern that the butler was enjoying the spectacle.

“Though it won’t be the same as when eating it here under the old plane tree…” Bruce had answered and Alfred nodded.

After they took Leslie back to the villa, he had asked Alfred to bring him in this beach. Selina didn’t come along: they exchanged a full of meaning glance. His friend had her own good bye to bid…

Alfred was reluctant to leave him here alone.

“Do you consider it prudent to stay all alone here, Master Bruce? After what happened yesterday?”

He smiled.

“I don’t think that they’ll try a new attack so soon. They need time to reorganize…if, of course, hitting me was their true goal.”

Alfred slightly frowned.

“What are you thinking, Master Bruce?”

He had twisted his lips.
“Not sure, Alfred. But life has taught me to take nothing as it seems” Ra’s had seemed like a compassionate angel who cared for him and was going to save him – and Bruce was so utterly wrong.

However Alfred still cast apprehensive glances around as if estimating the possibilities of that beautiful scenery turn into a death trap. Bruce knew that he had teeth biting his guts in the notion that his young master would stay here on his own.

“Alfred” he slipped from the jeep’s opened door his butler held to the chair. “This marvelous chair has a perfect security system that in the unlikely occasion of a new attack will immediately set off the alarm for Superman and Tony to rush and save me. And the chair will cocoon me into a nice shield that will protect me till the cavalry comes” he was smiling in good spirit yet the thought of Clark and Tony rushing again to his aid made him feel uncomfortable.

Alfred leaned to look him in the eyes.

“You won’t deactivate the shield this time?”

His face became serious if not slightly annoyed.

“Tony told you?”

Alfred grinned in his wicked way.

“I’m not a detective but I have some deductive skills – fairly good if I am permitted to say” the butler arched his eyebrows. “Master Kent wouldn’t have been so angry and” he cleared his throat “scared if you were all the time shielded.”

Bruce eyed him affectionately and nodded.

“I won’t deactivate it” he replied. “I promise you.”

Hero jumped from the seat of the jeep to his lap.

“You see, Alfred?” he chuckled. “I won’t be all alone after all.”

Alfred shook his head disapprovingly and brushed the kitten’s head.

“Master Hero’s protective presence is a huge comfort, Master Bruce. Absolutely.”

Though the morning was anything but cold, Alfred muffled his back meticulously in a cardigan but didn’t move to the driver’s seat and Bruce knew that he wanted to say something.

“Well?” he prompted him.

“Master Bruce, please do not think that I’m try to influence your decision or something, but we can stay here more… A couple of months until you’re fully recovered.”

Bruce looked him in the eyes truly touched; finally, some warmth ran in his veins.

“So, Alfred, you believe that I will walk again?” he asked.

Alfred gave an absolute nod as if even thinking the opposite option was despicable.

“Of course, Master Bruce! As a matter of fact I believe that you can achieve everything you want.”
Bruce’s eyes had sparkled and a smile stretched his lips: at last, a vote of confidence.

“My reasons for wanting to quicken my departure aren’t solid enough for you, Alfred?” he, as the rest, had witnessed his discussion with Tony during the breakfast.

Alfred had seemed fighting to keep his nonchalant attitude but in the end he bit the inside of his lip. It was rather a “blink and miss it” thing but after the years he was kept away from Alfred – the last surviving member of his family – Bruce had become very observant of his every, tiny reaction; from the first time he reached his old home from the tunnels.

“They are solid, Master Bruce, and as always very noble. It’s just that…” he hesitated because he didn’t want to show his emotions. “Sometimes for me your wellbeing and happiness comes above every solid reason” he pressed his lips. “I think the same goes for Master Anthony too. And you’re happy here…”

Bruce lowered his eyes and caressed Hero: Alfred’s sadness even so finely covered made him always regretful. He could hear Alfred’s loving thoughts: here you’re happy and careless as a young man should be, Master Bruce; as if your dreadful, horrible past is obliterated…

“Am I wrong, Alfred?” he raised his eyes to meet his butler’s.

Alfred inhaled deeply.

“No, Master Bruce, you’re perfectly right in your reasons; after all, it’s your life and it’d be awful if the people who care about you tried to use their affection to direct your life as they want, even if they believe that this would be the best for you. You’re not wrong, Master Bruce, but sometimes I get as selfish as to wish that you were a bit more wrong in your reasons…” he gave a tight lips’ smile.

Tony wasn’t so mild in his reactions.

“Yeah, buddy, I don’t see the reason for this rush.”

“How about the rumors that circle Wayne Enterprises and destabilize our steady course? They whisper that I’m dead and immediately the shares fell.”

Tony ran his fingers through his untidy hair.

“It was a very small decrease and after Lucius refute the rumors, the decline was easily recovered” Bruce could see him thinking that they shouldn’t have allowed him a laptop.

He pressed his lips.

“And the next time? The more I stay hidden when such rumors fly around the more gravitas those rumors will get” Tony sighed and averted his eyes from Bruce’s. “I don’t think that we should risk all the good things we established till now – it’d be a pity.”

Tony gulped and cast a lopsided glance at Bruce under his frown.

“Lucius and I have things under control – the only thing that should concern you is how to spend your time here in the best possible way.”

Bruce shook his head and Leslie cleared her throat.

“I think that Tony is right, Bruce” she met his eyes. “A few stupid, malign rumors shouldn’t make you disregard your recovery.”
“But I won’t!” Bruce set his jaw. “Returning to Gotham doesn’t mean that I’ll neglect my recovery…” he saw Tony shaking his head exasperated and Leslie had the same cut-the-crap expression. “As for what both of you fear” he continued determined acknowledging the elephant in the room “it seems that even here, in this peaceful place, has found me.”

Selina nodded arching her eyebrows.

“Obviously…” she said slyly.

Bruce looked towards her and nodded.

“And I don’t want whoever attacked me doing it again here putting in grave danger the innocent people here” Tony was pouting and tightening his lips constantly looking at his fingers drumming the table. “Also” he lifted his voice pointedly towards his friend and Leslie “being in Gotham would make it easier and faster for you to come and save me if needed.”

Selina lolled her head widening her eyes towards Bruce but he instantly met her stare communicating that he was perfectly safe with her guarding him but he had to play along with the superheroes’ arguments. She shook her head amused and gave another pancake to Hero.

But Tony’s eyes were strangely immobile and blank.

“You want to persuade me” he cocked his eyebrows “that your safety is one of the reasons that make you rush your return in Gotham?” his voice was filled with sarcasm.

Leslie was looking at him too while Alfred nonchalantly dusted the kitchen bench.

“My safety isn’t your major concern?” Bruce inquired.

Tony crossed his arms.

“And you use it against me…” he snorted.

Bruce frowned and narrowed his eyes.

“Against? Seriously, Tony…”

Tony stabbed him with his eyes.

“Exactly! You use our fear and our need to keep you protected in order to get back to Gotham” he stood “while everyone here knows what you’re planning to do there! Which is anything but ‘safe’. Oh, you’re very manipulating, little guy! Busted, kiddo?”

Bruce looked him calm while he acknowledged Leslie’s kind of furious expression.

“So, you deny that in Gotham you and Superman will be able to intervene faster?”

Tony had crossed his arms and was staring at him pissed.

“OK, Tony” Bruce continued, nodding. “I confess that my own safety isn’t my major concern, though I definitely don’t want to be captured or killed by who knows who. But it is your major concern, right? So I just pointed to you that my decision would suit you too.”

Alfred was now watching avidly. Tony inhaled deeply and stared at the floor before turning his eyes back to him.
“Will you promise that you won’t make an attempt to don the cape and cowl?”

Bruce knew that Selina rolled her eyes even without seeing her: she was fully understanding that asking him this was…unthinkable. On the other hand, Leslie had her lips pressed.

“It’s like me asking you not to be Ironman again” he tried to reason.

But Tony snapped his arms in the air and huffed.

“I’m not the one with the shattered spine! For fuck’s sake!”

His friend turned furiously his back ready to storm out of the kitchen and Bruce just couldn’t stand to see him leaving like this.

“Tony, don’t go” he said and he felt exactly as the day the 14-year-old Tony was ready to leave from the Manor angry at him.

And Tony stopped at his trucks, his hands pressing his locks. He closed his eyes and then he turned looking at Bruce: the fact that he now towered over Bruce made him recall the last Christmas they had spent in the Manor – eighteen years ago. The younger man saw it in his eyes.

Bruce licked his lips nervously.

“I don’t want you to leave angry…I don’t want any negativity between us, Tony” he lowered his eyes. “It’s a tight, burning knot in my guts” he chuckled – and not the only one…

Tony lowered his head: nice, you help so much things, Stark – his regret shone in his puppy eyes.

“I promise you that I won’t do anything foolish” Bruce continued. “I know how bad things are, Tony…and I’ll wait. Till your bionic parts give me back my mobility and till I’m ready. Is that reassuring enough for you? But don’t ask me to promise things I can’t and I don’t want to do – don’t ask me to deny who I am.”

Alfred drew some air because he was holding his breath during Bruce’s speech.

Tony kneeled before his friend and grabbed his upper arms; his eyes were almost tearful.

“I could punch myself for that knot in your guts because – damn! – I swore to smash everyone that would make you suffer again” Bruce smiled and Tony couldn’t help himself but reflect it.

“We don’t want your admirers crestfallen if your face is bruised…” he cocked an eyebrow.

Tony shook his head thoughtful.

“I wouldn’t punch DAT face” he gestured to his face. “That piece of art can’t be hit even by myself” he sobered. “You know how much fear I felt those past months? And that new assault…And thinking of you rushing to don again the cowl…”

Bruce locked eyes with him.

“I won’t rush things…” if I don’t have to… “And definitely I won’t engage in anything dangerous.”

Bruce could say from Tony’s look that his friend didn’t trust this ‘anything dangerous’ but decided to not press matters more. Tony patted him in the shoulder and stood.

“I must fly to Malibu: Peps was bitching ‘bout a meeting and that I have to make some homework…”
Leslie, I’ll send the helicopter to give you a ride to Gotham."

Leslie stood up and came by Bruce’s side.

“Give me some hours: I’ve got to examine again our bad boy…”

Bruce turned his head with an expression filled with dread.

“Not again…”

Tony chuckled and winked at Leslie.

“Go, Les! Punish him! When you’re ready, just call Happy: my helicopter is at Limenas’ private airport. See ya, kids!”

Seagulls were still crying in the sky even though the summer was gone. As much as he enjoyed the presence of his loved ones, sometimes he longed to be alone – another leftover from his captivity. He felt guilty for wanting to stay alone: they loved him so much and he had the feeling at times that he failed them. He remembered Alfred returning to the driver’s seat when he said that didn’t need help to approach the shore.

Bruce pressed his lips: facing criminals was easier than facing regret for causing sadness to Alfred. The good man had remained for some time hesitant to leave him alone even after Bruce reached the shore (the chair had the quality to adjust to every possible terrain to ensure easy movement). He could see Alfred sighing defeated before he started the engine and left to make the preparations for their departure.

Alfred like Tony was afraid of what Gotham would do to him. Alfred wanted for him a life that would be always as in this island. Crossing everything else, leaving only carelessness and bliss.

Bruce yanked his head and inhaled the fresh air: he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t just ignore everything else. He should return, he need to get back. Not only for his company, not only for the safety of the people here, but also because he missed his city… Even though leaving this place and the wonderful times he spent here was painful, seeing again Gotham was pressing.

And then there was another aching knot to be added: last night…

He grabbed the armrests and slipped his body on the sand. He placed his legs in the right way using his hands, his lips constantly pressed. Being paraplegic was difficult for him as for every other person yet it was the way Clark treated him lately that made things so much worse.

“Are you jealous?” Clark had asked him last night touched because – hey! – the emotional crippled Bruce felt jealousy for his boyfriend; also, the Man of Steel was amused with a bit of self-satisfaction and pride.

Oh! Clark… If only this was what you call ‘jealousy’… He gazed at the bright horizon – even that sun wasn’t enough to lift the gravestone over his chest. He recalled bitterly the first time after his waking up: Clark was always happy seeing him while now…

He grabbed a fistful of sand and let it slip slowly between his fisted fingers watching its fall. Maybe it was his own emotional turmoil that he reflected on Clark or maybe it was true that Wonder Woman’s sudden appearance worsened things – maybe Superman realized that someone like him would be better with someone like her.

Bruce bit his lip but the bite in his heart was more painful. Loki told him that Superman had run to
Tibet to help people after an earthquake. And he searched at the net for news...Superman was there helping to draw people out of the debris, tireless, his beautiful features tense and dusted. But once again he wasn’t alone: the new protector of humanity was there to assist him... A merciful goddess along with a god of benevolence saving humans together... to eternity.

He opened his fist and the rest of the sand fell abruptly. He rubbed his forehead: the image of Clark’s scared face as he was ready to claim Bruce’s body cracked once again his heart.

A cute meow dissolved the images and made his lips twitch in a smile. Hero had come and was looking at him claiming his attention. Bruce patted his thighs and Hero hopped there.

“Are you hungry, Hero?” he stretched his arm and took out of the chair’s pocket a small packet of cat biscuits.

He filled his palm and offered it to his small friend who binged on it since it was his favorite flavor. His other hand filled his own legs: all these months that Clark massaged him Bruce had memorized the route of the still operational sensory neurons.

At first, he caressed the spots and the tiniest of feeling warmed his heart so much so that he began pinching the flesh and hitting with his fingertips. He closed his eyes: it was so exhilarating feeling pain there! If only this sweet pain expanded to the rest of his legs...

Hero had stopped eating and was looking at Bruce’s hand hitting his legs. Bruce frowned at him.

“Don’t tell me you’re gonna RAT me to the others? You’re a cat, remember?” he chuckled and Hero rubbed his head to Bruce’s hand.

Suddenly, in a flash Hero was off his legs and he was trapped against a chest of steel; two powerful and simultaneously tender hands were cupping his head and hot, sweet lips captured his, ‘eating’ them greedily with despair, with longing. Bruce’s heart was flapping from excitement. The past months he had learnt to manage his oxygen supply so to not come short and panic Clark. That permitted him to follow Superman’s pace and enjoy the sensation, prolonging Clark’s pleasure. Bruce’s eyes were wide sucking his mate’s every reaction: Clark had his eyes closed in a way that betrayed both relief as if he had just found safe haven after a horrible storm, pain and hopelessness like he was afraid of his safe haven being lost.

Clark’s hands that were covered with dust from the debris and...blood caressed his cheekbones and then his cheeks with harsh movements that became gentle and then again fast, almost painful, as his kiss that had become fiery, almost savage. It was obvious that the Man of Steel wasn’t holding back and Bruce was determined to take everything.

He was feeling the hurt burning inside Clark and a bit of shame for the personal hurt that taunted him till now. He wrapped his arms around Superman’s shoulders and rubbed his exhausted muscles – exhausted not from physical activity but emotional burnout...

Now those dirty hands that held life and death in the demolished buildings in Tibet were roaming Bruce’s torso, under his blouse, bruising but Bruce didn’t moan, even if sensing the half dried blood of other people was gripping his heart bringing flashing images of his parents’ bodies; Clark was exploring every inch of his torso, massaging, claiming, securing...

He even proceeded below Bruce’s waist following the paths he knew that would offer sensation to the human: Clark needed to feel life even in Bruce’s damaged body. He pumped the flesh that still could feel wanting desperately to arouse the rest, unresponsive part; as if the non-functional neurons would be jealous and wake...
Bruce moaned into the kiss as the flood of sensation in that part of his body after the long sensual drought was overwhelming. He didn’t want that to end and he could last without oxygen for a couple of minutes more so he didn’t manifest any sign of discomfort yet Clark was so proficient in discerning Bruce’s vitals that halted before the looming burning in Bruce’s lungs began. However his lips continued touching Bruce’s lower lip.

Bruce caressed his cheeks and Clark for the first time opened his eyes. He kept massaging Bruce’s legs enjoying the sensations that were sent to Bruce’s brain. Bruce’s lips were laying passionate kisses to his dusty face and Clark didn’t want dust to his lungs so cupped his face and held him.

“I’m dirty” he said with a throaty voice.

But Bruce’s eyes sparkled and he kissed his palm.

“Thank you!”

Clark dove in those mesmerizing eyes.

“For what?”

“For saving all those people in Tibet.”

Clark swallowed hard.

“I was late for many of them…” his voice cracked. “When I got to them…they were dead… mangled…crashed…”

Bruce understood: Clark relived his nightmares.

“Every time I dispersed the debris only to found a dead…was like…”

“Finding me dead under the factory’s ruins…” he completed for him.

Clark nodded.

“But you saved people as well – people that would have died weren’t for you…”

Clark’s fingers felt Bruce’s warm face.

“Yes…But each time I found someone dead I felt like abandoning every effort – how you, humans, manage to go on? The rescuing teams were tireless, tenacious…” he shook his head “heroes…I had to rely on external strength to continue…”

“Princess Diana…” he said calmly and Superman smiled.

“No, though she made an amazing work my strength came back after searching and listening to the most wonderful sound in the entire universe: your heart beating.”

Under the thin layer of dust Bruce could see the red color over Clark’s cheeks; he pressed his lips.

“You wonder how the people in the rescue teams can continue despite the constant death they encounter: each one has something similar to get his strength back in difficult moments – a silver lining” he tried to change the subject because he felt uncomfortable. “And saving even one life is worthy of every effort.”

Clark understood Bruce’s attempt and mouthed gently his lower lip, sucking as if it was a caramel.
“And you? What gave you the courage to continue all these years under Falcone’s cruelty? A little boy faced with so much…” he asked softly.

Bruce’s eyes filled with shadows yet he smiled steadying his stare at Clark’s eyes.

“Are you interviewing me, Mr. Kent?” he replied playfully.

Clark chuckled.

“A very personal interview that will stay between us…off the record – you know?” he could sense Bruce’s unwillingness to share and brushed his cheekbones. “Well?”

The younger man gazed at the horizon.

“I’m not as brave as you think…” he inhaled. “There were days that I prayed I have died with my parents or when Chill was playing with me in the sewers… There were days that” he licked his lips “I was pondering on ways to…to kill myself” he lolled his head and chuckled “but when you’re 8 years old and watched so closely it’s not so easy…”

Clark’s lips were tight and his fingers caressed feathery Bruce’s slightly overgrown locks.

“What kept me going? I guess… the bats, at first.”

Clark’s eyebrows flew upwards from surprise.

“The bats?” he inquired dumbfounded.

Bruce nodded.

“My cage was a small cave-like formation literally under the ground and was inhabited by many bats. They were my… pets.”

“That was… unhealthy! Your pets?” he cocked his eyebrows. “You weren’t afraid of bats? – I mean, even grownups fear bats especially in a dark place.”

Bruce smiled.

“As a matter of fact I was afraid of the bats – I mean, really scared of them – but Tony helped me to face my fear” Clark nodded, the jealousy for the years Stark shared with Bruce panged him once again. “When I heard the bats in my cage, my dread came back; you see…” he licked his lips “I was covered with blood and in a state of shock so I thought that the bats would bite me or” he chuckled “drink my blood and eat me alive! But then rapidly I realized that humans were the ones I should fear and bats became my… company… my comfort… It was very lonely in that cave” he shook his head “especially when you’re in pain…”

Clark caressed his forehead.

“I was talking to them and I imagined that they answered” he turned his eyes to Clark “it sounds crazy, I know, but for a kid…” Clark nodded pouting his lips. “I was telling them to deliver messages to Tony when the bats went out for hunting and I imagined they brought back his answers” he was gazing blankly at the horizon and then at the sand. “And I was happy believing that the bats kept me connected with Tony…” he rubbed his eyes. “And then I met Selina and I knew that she loved me and cared about me and the minutes I spent with her every night behind the big trash bin it was for me the fuel making my heart continue beating…” he gulped. “Also, it was Alfred’s sad eyes when he was forced to leave me… I knew how much he loved me and suffered because of my
suffering…”

Clark cupped Bruce’s slightly lowered head and raised it so their eyes met.

“I want the entire world to know how magnificent you are and how lucky I am to be blessed with your love…” he sucked Bruce’s lips but he could tell that his Star was thoughtful.

Bruce followed into the kiss yet he was aware that what was about to say wouldn’t be pleasant for Clark. He touched his lover’s neck with both hands and Clark kissed those palms that their touch filled him goose bumps.

“Clark, I don’t think that we should give more food to those rumors Vale’s video started” his eyes were dead serious and Superman sighed. “The attack was probably a result.”

Clark detached a bit and sat on the sand.

“I don’t want to put you in danger…” he said morose.

Bruce shook his head; he didn’t want Clark sad and bitter.

“Nonsense! I’m not afraid of your enemies and – listen to me” he touched Clark’s chin piercing his sad eyes with his fervent. “I don’t care about any danger because being with you gives a whole new meaning in my life and I won’t change it with anything. But there’s no need for everyone to know…”

Clark chuckled.

“You love so much secrecy…”

“It will keep safe the innocent people around us.”

Superman ruffled his hair and huffed.

“Is this why you want to leave this Heaven and go back to Gotham?”

Bruce had no doubt that Clark would be aware of his decision especially when he admitted that had listened to his heartbeat. When Clark searched for his heartbeat he was able to hear other things as well.

Clark knew that Bruce wasn’t surprised by his intelligence on that. He nodded.

“Exactly… Listening to your heart made me privy to your discussion with the others. And after Diana helped me and the rescue teams to find and dig out every trapped, I immediately flew back to my life giving sun…”

“You exaggerate…” but Clark glued his mouth to Bruce’s mouth silencing him.

“Don’t go back there…This island with the splendid time difference offered us so many dreamy moments…”

Clark wrapped Bruce’s torso tighter and locked eyes with the younger man.

Bruce’s body tensed and he narrowed his eyes.

“I love this island, it’s like a second home…yet I miss my first home and I want to visit my parents’ graves…”
Clark closed his eyes and sighed.

“Is just that?” he asked disappointed.

Bruce set his jaw.

“You heard Tony…”

“Oh, Bruce… It wasn’t necessary to hear Tony to figure the real reason for your rush to go back. You’re addicted to Batman and now you experience the ‘addict’s panic’!” he acknowledged Bruce’s frown. “You want to go to Gotham to don again the cape and cowl.”

Bruce glared at him and pushed himself from Clark’s embrace. He gestured to his immobile legs.

“Do I look like a man ready to wear again the cowl?” he spat.

Clark clenched his hair and groaned.

“And that’s why you are in a hurry to be again there! To make those STUPID adjustments to your armor and go head first to a new suicide mission!”

Bruce narrowed his eyes and his voice came out cold and low.

“Stupid?”

Clark held his temple rubbing: why was it so hard to find the right words when addressing Bruce?

Bruce shook his head exasperated hiding how hurt he felt from that small word. He used his hands to move his body away from Clark and Hero who was licking his fur run to him feeling his boss’ distress. Bruce caressed the small animal.

Clark punched the sand.

“Damn!”

He crawled much like Bruce had done and sat beside the younger man – Bruce was concealing his vitals from him and that meant suffering.

“Bruce, I’m sorry…”

“You don’t have to: it’s your opinion and belief” his eyes stayed on Hero who pawed his finger.

It was unbearable for Clark when Bruce didn’t look at him yet he didn’t want to force him to, even gently.

“I just know that you CAN’T be Batman again” Bruce’s heart missed a beat and Clark bit his lip; he was ready to add ‘so soon’ to mollify the effect but Bruce’s blazing eyes were glaring at him.

“I’m tired of people saying what I can and what I can’t do: all my life others were bossing me around, demanding and forcing things on me.”

Clark huffed and looked away feeling the pain that nestled in Bruce tormenting him.

“I believed that the fact I escaped from these people’s tyranny would have proved that I’m the one who knows better what I can and what I can’t do. And you know something, Superman?”
Hearing Bruce addressing him like this was like a punch with Stark’s Kryptonite glove but Clark turned his eyes on him.

“I prefer to focus on what I can do and how to manage to do what supposedly I can’t. And I was expecting from you of all people to support me in this effort.”

Clark snapped his hands in the air.

“I do support you, Bruce – you know, I’m always at your side but I don’t want you to risk so much. You’re a human with no super powers” Bruce’s eyes took the attacking jaguar quality that made Clark’s groin rebel. “So…there are limits…”

“Humans are known for surpassing those limits: the fact that you and your new friend are super powered doesn’t entitle you to set the limits for a mere human” he shook his head. “Your super sight oddly doesn’t let you see what a human can do.”

“Is that the problem? My super powers? You’re jealous of my super powers and are you desperate to prove your equal worth?”

Clark expected from Bruce to glare and growl but the younger man just laughed.

“Do I have to prove my equal worth? Because frankly I don’t give a damn about proving anything. As for being jealous of your powers…” he caressed Hero’s head. “You know what Bagdana promised me in order to accept his love and follow him?”

Clark’s heartbeat was audible and his eyes emanated his fervent interest. Bagdana had promised Bruce things to allure him. He wanted to ask but his voice was constricted with agony.

“He promised to give me back Lilith’s wings to fly on my own” Clark knew how strong Bruce’s desire to fly was… “He promised me enormous strength, skills to destroy and take revenge from my enemies and…immortality…” he smiled to Hero who licked his fingers.

Clark remembered and saw again his nightmare while Bruce was in a coma: Bruce had silver wings and he was so happy flying in the night sky. As if he was back home. He felt Bruce’s strong stare and met his eyes.

“I refused even to think about it because I don’t want super powers. I’m fully satisfied with being a mere human” he lowered his voice “and being loved by you…”

Clark’s eyes bulged from joy: damn! Bruce had the super power to make him miserable or extremely happy in a second! He hugged him and captured his lips with new energy and fire. But soon it wasn’t enough and his hands began frantically grabbing the flesh that even under the blouse felt wonderfully warm and firm.

“Hero, go play…” Clark mumbled with his mouth tangled with Bruce’s and thankfully the kitten had the subtlety to obey evoking some laughter from Bruce.

Laughter that instantly became a surprised gasp as Superman pushed the blouse off his torso; Bruce stretched his arms to let him remove completely the cloth and the Man of Steel in a rapid movement was at the same moment naked above the waist. Clark pressed Bruce’s naked body to his relishing the sensation of the hot, firm flesh; his mouth roamed the human’s shoulders causing small moans from both of them because Bruce adored Clark’s body and proved it with his hands’ ministrations over the super human perfect muscles.

“Tell me you won’t stop this time…” Bruce whispered kissing Clark’s earlobe.
His groin was yelling with agreement yet Clark wasn’t willing to let his whims hurt Bruce and the younger man felt it.

"C’me on, Clark! I won’t shatter…"

Superman took his face in his palms and touched his forehead to Bruce’s.

“I just want to feel your flesh on mine…there’s no need for…getting inside you.”

Bruce huffed.

“There is, Clark!”

He was rubbing his torso to Bruce’s agreeing with that but still firm on not finishing it.

“I couldn’t imagine that you would want penetration so much…” he chuckled proud of himself for making Bruce horny and actually asking for the same thing that a couple of months ago detested. “But not now, babe… there will be time for this…”

But Bruce paled; Clar’s words made him feel like a cheap whore though he knew that for a normal person asking from his loved one this wasn’t shameful. Yet he felt horrible… He let Clark dive in his torso, his fiery kisses claiming every inch of his flesh, his hands groping. However Bruce’s hands were detached; plunged loosely in the sand, his eyes on his kitten that played with some stray seagull feathers.

Superman placed him carefully on the sand to ease his mouth devour Bruce’s abs and naval; his rasps burning the human flesh, his palms massaging those delicious pectorals. His groin was in fire but Superman could discipline his body even if his genitals rubbed Bruce’s gently but demandingly. This rubbing was enough for Superman to get some relief and recharge his batteries with Bruce’s revitalizing force.

Bruce was gazing at the sky; it was plain that Clark wasn’t paying attention to him – maybe his mind was elsewhere, maybe he was celebrating his feat to make him ask to be penetrated – fucked. Superman was even sucking his naked pelvis without following the paths that could give stimulation to him.

Clark thought that he asked to make love to him just because he liked being penetrated? He couldn’t feel below the waist, for pity’s sake!

“I wanted you to make love to me not because I like to be penetrated but because you taught me that this can be a pure expression of love and respect. Because that way I’d feel that you see me again like equal and not like a decorative object ready to shatter.”

“You are my equal” Clark’s crystal blue eyes over his face were his entire world now. “Soon I’ll be able to give you again what I did that night in our greenhouse – but when I do you’ll be able to feel and enjoy everything like then. Because your every time deserves to be perfect, Star… When the time comes I’m going to show you exactly how strongly I regard you as an equal!”

Bruce smiled.

“Is this a threat?”

Clark narrowed his eyes and leaned closer.

“No: a promise.”
He lifted him gently and pressed him to his naked body, their hearts beating synchronized, his hands ruffling Bruce’s locks and the younger man was looking him in the eyes with deep love and…with many questions unanswered. Yet Clark was just too mesmerized from these eyes – his lucky Kryptonites.

“You know, Bruce” he said playfully. “For someone who in his dispute with his friend used the point of his safety, being in a deserted beach alone doesn’t make much sense” he winked.

Bruce shrugged and twisted his lips.

“I’m not alone…”

Clark touched playfully his forehead to Bruce’s.

“I don’t see Selina around…”

“Because she isn’t around – she has her own goodbyes to say.”

Clark frowned.

“Then…you are alone with nobody to assist you if something goes awry.”

Bruce raised his index finger.

“First, I’ve got your chair and its shield; second, I wear the Black Butterfly and…although I don’t believe in charms, I have to admit that it does a terrific job. Third, I’m not alone even if the matter of protection is taken into account… Hero!” he called the kitten and gestured for him to come.

The kitten came to him hopping and Bruce looked lopsided at Clark’s amused expression, smiling and pointed at Hero. Clark laughed and Bruce’s heart finally relaxed.

“Yep! Because your kitten is definitely a…Super-Hero!” Clark exclaimed.

Hero lifted his eyes to Superman and meowed as if to agree and Clark stretched his hand to caress his fur only to touch Bruce’s hand that moved to do the same thing. That was definitely an omen! Clark thought and wrapped Bruce’s shoulders grabbing his so willing lips with his own as his Star turned his face to kiss him.

Tony was drumming his fingers on his sleek, silver colored working bench looking blankly down at the reflection of his face. On his right stood a natural sized holographic 3D depiction of a human skeleton.

“Master Anthony, Miss Potts is here” the AI voice disrupted his stupor.

Tony pressed his palm on his eyes.

“Jarvis, tell her that I’m in the shower or some other bullshit…”

“If you want to get rid of me you can just say it, Mr. Stark” her voice was perfectly toned by the clicks of her stilettoes.

Damn, that silent door! Tony cursed his own invention since the doors of the house opened and closed soundlessly which in such cases was a drawback.
Now Pepper stood before him stretching her imposing body.

“You don’t have to corrupt Jarvis too…” she lolled her head.

Tony rose and hugged her placing a kiss on her lips.

“I don’t want to get rid of you, babe – it’s just that I’m not in the mood…”

Pepper arched her eyebrows.

“I noticed that: you were not your known ‘charming’ self at the board meeting. Is Bruce alright?” Tony frowned as if not comprehending. “C’me on, Tony: I mean the assault!”

He ruffled his locks.

“Yeah, I told you so last night.”

Pepper crossed her arms.

“Indeed. Yet your more-than-usual absurd behavior worried me: in Bruce’s delicate condition complications are common.”

Tony spread his arms and nodded as if he has gotten what he wanted; Pepper narrowed her eyes.

“Well?”

Tony crossed his arms and tilted his head on the side; his eyes were too solemn.

“The day after tomorrow he’s gonna return to Gotham.”

Pepper frowned more.

“And?”

Tony sighed and sat again, Pepper sitting at the stool beside him.

“He is supposed to come back, isn’t he?”

Tony punched his own palm and locked eyes with her.

“As if you don’t understand…You know as much as I why he wants to return.”

“To be at his home?” she asked pointing each word but Tony groaned.

“No, Peps! He wants to be again Batman!”

Pepper pressed her lips and her gaze fell on the holograph.

“His condition is still too sensitive for that” she said. “And I don’t think that Bruce is as unwise as you think him to attempt something that would deteriorate things.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.

“He plans on applying adjustments to his armor for enabling him to walk and fight” he cocked his eyebrows. “Relying on me and Lucius to do that” his voice was more than pissed.

Pepper pushed her locks behind her ear.
“For emergencies?”

Tony yanked his head.

“Is there a difference?” he snapped his palms in front of his face. “The fact is that Bruce MUST forget all about Batman and he isn’t willing to do that.”

Pepper touched his shoulder.

“Would you have forgotten Ironman?”

Tony closed his eyes: she raised the same point as Bruce.

“It’s not the same, Peps. He would never be able to be Batman again” he gestured to the hologram. “This is his spine: his lower spine is a mess, his legs carry multiple fractures still healing and most of his neurons are dead.”

Pepper met his stare.

“And here is where you and Lucius enter: the bionic body parts” she smiled. “You can give all these back to your friend.”

Tony’s hands now were fixed on the bench. His eyes were stony and Pepper narrowed her eyes.

“The think, Peps, is that…” he smacked his lips. “I don’t feel like I want to continue with that…”

“What?!” Pepper almost yelled.

Tony inhaled deeply and watched his fingers clench and unclench slowly as his thoughts in sharp contrast with the frenzied thinking pace he was used to in all his life.

“I won’t send him to his death…this time I’ll protect him as I failed then. Giving him back his mobility is like sending him to his death.”

Pepper bit her lip.

“So, you two had a quarrel…”

Tony shook his head without raising his eyes to her.

“No…” he pressed his hair on his head with both hands. “I was pissed, seriously pissed and I rushed to leave but…” he huffed. “He asked me to not leave, to not be angry with him…and Bruce rarely, if ever, asks for anything…so asking that was like…pleading me and I couldn’t ignore him, could I?” he looked at Pepper’s eyes. “So…going against him, arguing and being mad and turning my back on him can’t work.”

Pepper nodded.

“And you’re thinking of…sabotaging his recovery into forcing him to accept his paraplegia and settle with that” her voice was dry and her eyebrows moved “by finding refuge for his energy in your plans to enroll him in Princeton.”

“It’s better being bound to a chair than dying miscalculating your power” he replied equally dryly.

Pepper yanked her head sighing. She didn’t like Tony’s idea: she acknowledged his dread for his friend’s self sacrifice and even felt for him yet not doing his best to give Bruce back his mobility felt
so bad.

“You realize that this would hurt Bruce immensely?”

Tony was stabbing the bench with a pen. He nodded.

“I’m willing to take that on me: Bruce is strong. He’ll suffer but he’ll take it and gradually will come back forming his life again in a safe way.”

But Pepper widened her eyes.

“And you do realize that Bruce would immediately figure that you didn’t want to gift him his ‘legs’ back – the life he so much loves: his self…”

Tony closed his eyes.

“Believe me, Tony, from what I know about Bruce this knowledge will kill him slowly and worse than being Batman again.”

Tony turned his eyes on her; he opened his mouth but didn’t know what to say. Pepper touched her fingertips to his lips.

“I know how much you love him and he knows too but if you deliberately condemn him to the chair you’d have killed him.”

“It’s the best for him, Peps; and if hating me is the price for him staying alive I’ll gladly pay it!” he jerked from his stool and paced the room ending in front of the hologram.

Pepper slowly approached him and hugged his shoulders planting a soft kiss in his ear.

“He has the right to decide the best for himself, Tony. He is a young man now, not the small kid you lost 18 years ago: he was taking his own decisions even when in Falcone’s captivity and – let’s face it – his decisions were right. You can’t rob him from his right to decide himself, even if you think that it’s for his best. Bruce trusts you and even now at times looks at you like a small boy with infinite love and respect.”

Tony turned his eyes on her.

“You think?”

Pepper smiled.

“Don’t tell me that Tony Stark faces self doubt?”

He cupped her hand on his shoulder.

“Bruce has such a strong personality that it’s hard to believe that he still regards me like when he was eight and I fourteen…”

Pepper nodded.

“Oh, he does…But if you sabotage his only chance to walk again and be what fulfills him…” she pressed her lips “it won’t be the same; I mean he’ll surely continue to love you but the love you share will be turned into a knife in his guts.”

Tony closed his eyes and Pepper kissed him on the lips gaining his stare.
“Bruce isn’t stupid: he’ll use your gift wisely. All these years he was doing exactly that: using what he had wisely. If you deliberately refuse to help him, I’m sure he’ll respect it but he’ll turn to some other way to reprise what he misses so much” she widened her eyes. “And that could possibly be dangerous and you won’t have any chance to control the conditions.”

Tony nodded.

“He is too stubborn…”

Pepper smirked and snorted.

“Look who’s talking!”

Tony turned swiftly, grabbed her waist, glued her on his body and locked his lips with hers in a quick kiss. He winked.

“I have an hour before my virtual meeting with Lucius and…I bought a new mattress that I want to test…”

She chuckled.

“So you’re still on the project?”

“Devouring your body or manufacturing the bionic spine parts? Ouch!” Pepper had just pinched his buttock. “It’s a ‘yep’ to both!”

He grabbed her hand and dragged her along to the elevator to his bedroom roaring.
Dick was playing with his cereals deep in thought. His grandmother watched him from the opposing chair at the kitchen table.

“Eat your breakfast, Dick: you’re going to miss the school bus.”

The boy raised his eyes at her having made his decision.

“Granny, why you don’t want me to hang out with Zucco?”

Ms. Turner yanked her head and drew a breath; she suspected that Dick never stopped thinking about that man so hearing it out loud wasn’t a shock, just a headache.

“I thought you trusted me?”

Dick shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“That’s not the point! I trust you, granny, is just that…” His grandmother leaned towards him.

“What, sweetheart?”

Dick huffed and leaned his back on the chair.

“He is dad’s cousin and his trainer; in the net I read that they were best friends till dad died.”

Ms. Turner rubbed her temple.

“You’re so interested that you search the internet for him?” her voice was so disappointed that Dick felt bad.

“Your dislike made me curious: I wanted to find out what’s up with him since you didn’t tell me.”

Ms. Turner pressed her fingers on the table and Dick watched eagerly waiting her reaction.

“He continues to bother you…” she said irritated and her grandson shook his head disapprovingly.

“No, he doesn’t!” he protested. “And actually I don’t see why I should avoid him!”

Ms. Turner bit her lips.

“At least till you give me a reason to do that because honestly I don’t find any” the boy lowered his voice. “He knew dad, granny” he continued with real craving “and he can tell me a lot about him and also he can train me to be a champion like my father.”

Ms. Turner felt her heart aching and the air cut in her lungs: Zucco had stretched his web around Dick.

The boy noticed her paleness and worried rushed to her wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

“Maybe you’re wrong, granny; maybe you don’t have to worry so much” he chuckled. “He is only a guy after all…”

Ms. Turner took his hand in hers and caressed it; her solemn eyes found her grandson’s blue eyes.
“He is a bad man, sweetie; he doesn’t care about you, he doesn’t care about anyone. He came all of a sudden to our life because he wants something and believe me it would be bad for us, baby. So, stay away from him, please.”

Dick smacked his lips in disbelief.

“For pity’s sake, granny! Why assume the worst? I don’t say that he cares about me but maybe he just wants to meet his cousin’s son and help.”

Ms. Turner yanked her head, her eyes widened.

“He never came for you from the day you were born!”

Dick crossed his arms.

“Maybe because you have this opinion about him and passed it to mom too” he spat. “And then when mom married Peter he felt completely alienated and didn’t dare to approach. But now that I lost my family he decided to help me cope…”

His grandmother blinked disheartened: the obvious allure this man had on Dick nauseated her. And it was clear that Zucco had met the boy again.

“Is this what he told you?”

Dick’s face became red: he didn’t want his granny realize that. OK, he disagreed with her attitude towards Tony yet he didn’t want her to know that he didn’t listen to her. He lowered a bit his eyes.

“It’s reasonable…” he said hesitantly and raised his eyes to her. “It’s a nice block, granny, and he has nothing to gain from us” he saw his grandmother shutting her eyes “at least tell me why you fear him so much…” he uttered exasperated.

Ms. Turner grabbed Dick’s shoulders and stabbed him with her fervent eyes.

“Don’t believe him that he was a friend of your daddy” Dick frowned. “They hanged out a lot, your dad trusted him, enjoyed his company and for a time Zucco was his trainer but I never got the impression that Zucco really cared about your father. John was already a champion when Zucco persuaded him to hire him as his trainer degrading his old one.”

Dick shook his head.

“But dad won at the Olympics with Zucco as his trainer! I checked that in the net.”

Ms. Turner realized that Zucco had done with Dick the same he had done with John. But maybe she could make Dick open his eyes.

“Your father won the three gold medals because Trevor Breizic, his old trainer, was still in the team. When Trevor retired right after the Olympics your father’s career took a downturn…” she took a deep breath really hesitant to say the next. “His performance in the tryouts wasn’t the best…”

Dick grunted: what now? His granny was trying to ruin his father’s fame?

“Every athlete has some decline in his career!” he spat.

Ms. Turner lowered her eyes because she couldn’t say what she had to say looking at her grandson’s angry and hurt eyes.
“The Federation found illegal substances in your father’s samples during an unexpected doping test.”

Dick jerked away from his granny, his heart was kicking in his rib cage and his face was hot.

“My father didn’t do drugs or doping!” he yelled and Ms. Turner pressed her lips and locked eyes with Dick.

“Your father didn’t and he refused it blatantly; he protested that someone must have sipped the substances secretly in his food or drink” Dick’s eyes widened. “Only one had access to do that…” she nodded. “Your father finally suspected Zucco…you see, his performance’s decline had made John antsy and displeased with his cousin so Zucco to appease him gave him secretly the substances to cover his inadequacy as a trainer.”

Dick was shocked and angry: that couldn’t be truth, this was preposterous. He couldn’t believe it.

“It was proved?” he demanded.

Ms. Turner’s eyes sank because she understood that the boy wasn’t willing to accept it.

“Your father was also unwilling to believe it: he was dissatisfied with Zucco’s training skills yet he loved and trusted him as a relative and friend. He didn’t want to accept that he could have done something so sly…But who else could be? Only he had access to John’s food and drinks.”

“This is your theory! My father didn’t believe this shit and I see why Tony didn’t attempt to approach me earlier!” he snapped at his granny. “I can’t believe you say all these things, granny!” Ms. Turner rubbed her forehead tired. “All these just to keep me away from my father’s only relative – the only person that connects me with him! Your hatred for him is more important than what I want, what gives me some joy!”

Ms. Turner’s eyes flashed.

“Dick! Your wellbeing is the only thing that matters for me!” she almost yelled but her voice cracked: that boy was the only part of her daughter left, the only thing that gave meaning to her life. Her eyes watered and Dick felt a painful pang in his chest and sat in the chair next to his grandmother calmer.

“I know you love me, granny” he said warmly “but because you don’t like that man doesn’t mean that he is bad or he wants to harm me: I’m a big boy and I know to protect myself.”

She cupped the boy’s face and kissed his cheek.

“You’re a big boy but you’re vulnerable, sweetie” she smiled and caressed the boy’s soft cheeks. “You don’t know much about the world and how dangerous some people are… I only try to protect you from learning with the hard way and being hurt.”

“I know everything about bad people, granny…” he couldn’t help but feel a bit annoyed since his granny talked about ‘bad people’ while always defended Wayne. “Better than you…”

The elder woman frowned.

“What do you mean?”

The boy shook his head.

“I bet you wouldn’t have any objection if I wanted to hang out with Wayne although he’s the reason
my family was killed! But for poor Zucco…”

Ms. Turner shook her head.

“Mr. Wayne didn’t do anything, sweetheart; try to understand…”

But Dick jerked from his chair avoiding her hands. He groaned.

“You defend him all the time!” he spat. “It’s because of him I lost my family! But you all the time speak so high of him while blame Tony for things without any proof! You keep ruining the only good time I get by accusing and spitting poison for the only man that give me some comfort!” he clenched his jaw. “Dad loved him and Tony loved my dad and everything you say about doping is bullshit because Tony remained my father’s trainer till his death!”

Ms. Turner stood too and placed her hands on Dick’s upper arms. There were more ominous things about Zucco but in Dick’s emotional state she was afraid that saying them now would provoke worse things – her grandson wasn’t going to believe her.

“I’m not making stories, Dick. And I would never play with your feelings: I wish that man was really good for you because the only thing I want is your happiness. But believe me, baby: your mom would have acted exactly the same because she knew that Zucco was bad for John as he is for you. There are things about him…”

Dick was tired of all this discussion and he didn’t want to hear more of his granny’s dislike for the man. He looked at his wrist watch that his granny gifted him for the Halloween and his classmates were really amazed by.

“Are you gonna tell me that he killed my father?” he asked bored keeping his eyes on the watch and didn’t notice Ms. Turner’s sigh. “I’m gonna miss the bus… See ya, granny!” he pecked her cheek and rushed out of the kitchen.

Ms. Turner heard the apartment’s door open and close and slumped on the chair; she sighed again covering her face in her palms. She had to keep Zucco away from Dick but the boy was fascinated by someone who could make him connect with his dead father – and truth be told, Dick was more relaxed those days, almost happy. Yet she knew that this was temporary until Zucco achieved his purpose because there must be some purpose for him to remember all of a sudden the son of his dead cousin: a cousin whom he almost destroyed.

However trying to explain those things to Dick seemed pointless; he was just a hurt boy after all that had managed to find some solace at last. An adult friend, something close to a father: she shivered – no, not that! But presenting the facts to the boy was only leading to the opposite result: Dick attaching more to that man and alienating from her. And she didn’t want that...

Ms. Turned placed her elbows on the table: if Mary was here things would have been easier…Zucco wouldn’t have dared to intrude to their lives again.

Blue and green. That was what he saw through the small round frame of the window; between white fluffy clouds and golden rays of sun. They took off early in the morning because he wanted to arrive at Gotham around noon so the news of his arrival would make it to every TV station and radio. He couldn’t fight off some melancholy as his eyes gazed at the rough sketch of the island that offered him such beautiful moments… And Clark hadn’t come last night.

He pressed hard his lips together: maybe that was an omen for the future; a hand with super strength
clenched his heart and his healing lung... Some urgency didn’t allow Superman to come or it was just that Clark was unhappy with his decision to return to the States... A part of him wanted to stay here more and cajole his friends and himself: he took a deep breath.

It was morning when the car stopped in front of Cassandra’s house. It was some days since his health permitted his transfer from the Fortress to Tony’s villa in a place where nobody would annoy him: a place beautiful and peaceful – the perfect choice for someone in need of recovering.

And of course since Marathon was so near, Bruce wanted to meet again the family that had been so definitely connected with him and his salvation.

Alfred had driven him there: he didn’t mention it but Bruce knew that his butler also wanted to meet these people; he was grateful to them as much as Bruce. Leslie had some objections because she felt that it was too early for such a road trip even though Tony’s jet would take them to Athens; yet she didn’t insisted. Both she and Selina stayed at the island not wanting to barge in something personal.

“This is the house, Master Bruce?” Alfred asked him and he nodded.

He stopped the car and helped him sit in the wheelchair they used when in public because the chair Clark had built for him cried that it was made with extraterrestrial technology. Not that Tony’s creation was less perfect.

Cassandra and her mother came out of the house and led them inside where Bruce made the introductions. What impressed Bruce was that they didn’t seem shocked to see him in the chair.

Cassandra’s mother squatted before him and with her polite familiarity cupped his face which move oddly didn’t make Alfred cringe. The woman said something and her eyes were both amazed and touched.

“She says that you defeated the demon – you made it!” Cassandra translated.

Bruce looked at the woman’s eyes and smiled.

“How does she know?” but Cassandra winked to him and he didn’t need anything else. “It was the weapons you gave me and...Nemesis’ help” he said hesitantly because it was difficult for him to utter something that a few months ago didn’t believe – well, there were still times he felt awkward about what he experienced in the guts of the mountain.

But the woman as if she had understood the meaning of his words shook her head in refusal.

“No weapon or charm would have helped if your spirit wasn’t powerful” Cassandra said smiling solemnly.

Bruce remained expressionless: even now, listening to people praising him felt so...he knew that people were talking honestly yet he still had difficulty believing good things about himself.

Cassandra’s mother eyed his muffled in the blanket legs and her warm eyes caressed his. Bruce couldn’t understand what she was saying yet it was as if he knew the meaning.

“Fighting evil always takes an awful toll on the noblest of warriors – those who are willing to give their lives to save others” Cassandra confirmed.

And seeing Bruce’s narrowed eyes expressing his wonder:

“Well, my mother sensed that Bagdana was near you so we kept watching the developments in
Gotham. We learnt that Superman brought you back injured and when we heard that Batman stopped Joker from killing those children and that the building collapsed without anyone being able to speak with certainty about Batman’s survival, we knew that you were injured again…” she cleared her throat. “We were aware that you were alive.”

Bruce nodded, looked up at Alfred and then at Cassandra’s mother who now sat on an armchair next to him.

“I died for a minute or two…” he said to the woman’s fascinated eyes; she seemed to understand his words without translation the same way as he understood hers. “Superman revived me but it was the Black Butterfly that gave me the energy to hold on and finally wake from the coma…”

His hand slipped inside his T-shirt and brought out the Black diamond that shone as if happy for reuniting with old friends. Cassandra’s mother brushed with her eyes the gem and closed Bruce’s fingers around it.

“The Black Butterfly did that only because you are the goddess’ chosen…” Cassandra translated. “Despite how hard things look now your willpower and strength will help you win once again: at times, you may lose your hope but your inner strength is limitless and you’ll overcome every obstacle…”

Bruce grinned and locked eyes with the older woman.

“Efcharisto” he thanked her in Greek and her eyes sparkled touched.

Alfred stood from his armchair and bowed to Cassandra and her mother.

“I’d like to express my gratitude to you, madam. Miss Cassandra – without your help Master Bruce wouldn’t have made it and I…” his eyes fell fleetingly but with infinite affection to Bruce “wouldn’t have the happiness of getting back my…” he cleared his throat “young Master. I’m obliged to both of you” he bowed again and Cassandra’s mother nodded solemnly to him as her daughter translated.

Later, after they had a splendid lunch, Alfred drove them to the ancient temple of Nemesis at the hill overlooking the small city and the Aegean Sea. It was Bruce’s request and Cassandra happily obliged; her mother was clearly overwhelmed as she walked inside the ancient ruins.

Alfred pushed Bruce’s chair though it wasn’t necessary and the young man closed his eyes relishing a sense of relief and completion as images of his dream with Nemesis’ priest came to his mind.

When he opened his eyes found both women look at him.

“I have seen this place as it was in the old times” he admitted hesitantly, watching Alfred’s reactions with the corner of his eyes: he was aware that for a rational English gentleman those things may sound stupid. Yet Alfred was watching interested. “In a dream, when I was a captive: I was seeing the temple through the eyes of the priest and it felt as if I was him. I saw the goddess’ emerald eyes and I heard her order me to leave Marathon and Greece to save my life...his life...And then I saw the caves he was forced to take haven to escape his enemies…”

Cassandra was translating and her mother nodded staring fascinated at Bruce who blushed.

“When in the temple” he rose his eyes to Alfred “in the dream...I saw letters engraved in the marble cornerstones...the letters that form my surname” he locked eyes with the older woman and she rose from the stone she was sitting and walked to the four corners of the rectangular place.
Cassandra followed to help her bring back four stones that they placed in front of Bruce whose eyes widened as Alfred’s: each stone had a capital letter carved – exactly like the dream: A Y N E. Bruce watched Cassandra’s mother walking to the center of the temple, gripping another stone and returning to position the new stone before the others: the stone had engraved the rough sketch of a bat with open wings and it was exactly like a W. Bruce felt an electric current going through his back – at least the healthy part of it.

The older woman took first the stone with the Y and spoke, his daughter explaining.

“Yvris: hubris. The crime: the sin of arrogant people whose deeds violate the divine laws hurting humans and insulting Gods” her mother took the stone with the A. “ATI: the Gods intervene and confuse the culprit leading him to new deeds that will lead to…” her mother showed the third stone with the N. “Will lead to Nemesis: the wrath and revenge of the Gods which will finally end to…” the stone with the E “-TISIS: the punishment, the destruction of the offender by the Goddess’ descend. This four words form the truth of justice – the truth of the Goddess.”

Cassandra’s mother placed the stones in creating his surname: W A Y N E. She brushed the stone with the W.

“The symbol of the Goddess Nemesis, the daughter of Nyx (Night). Nemesis fell on her enemies with her wings spread, like a bat…”

“Master Bruce, Miss Kyle, I brought you some juice and brunch.”

Bruce came out of his reverie and Selina patted his shoulder smiling.

“Daydreaming, darling?”

“A bit” he answered and looked at Hero who rubbed his head to his calf as if trying to persuade his master’s dead leg to feel; yet it was the kitten’s purring that notified him of the act.

Bruce took a bite from his sandwich and broke a small piece that gave to his kitten. Which provoked a really disapproving stare from Alfred.

“It isn’t polite dropping crumbs to the floor, Master Bruce…”

Selina widened her eyes and laughed. She had sprawled in the seat opposite Bruce and ate her sandwich.

“Oops! Bad boy!”

Bruce cocked his eyebrows.

“Sorry, Alfred but poor Hero seems to be hungry too.”

The meow and the kitten’s sparkling big eyes piercing Alfred’s came to confirm what Bruce said and Selina chewing her sandwich chuckled.

“They are a gang, Alfred, those two: a ruthless gang!”

Alfred cast a glance at her.

“No speaking when your mouth is full, Miss Kyle!” now it was Bruce’s turn to laugh and the young woman rolled her eyes.

“I’m an alley cat, Alfie!” she said smugly and the butler gave her a disapproving glance filled with
affection and walked to the small kitchen of the plane.

Selina slumped on her seat.

“Is everything alright?” she asked her friend.

“Why?”

“I have read that plane travel can be difficult for people who are in recovery.”

Bruce gULped his food and grinned to her.

“I’m just fine: you know I’m more than endurable – it’s not easy to get rid of me.”

Selina’s eyes darkened.

“Not even utter this…”

Bruce cupped her hand on the table.

“Fine.”

The young woman shook her head and looked at the laptop that lay open on the table.

“You don’t get a rest, huh? That’s why you couldn’t wait to get back in Gotham.”

Bruce pressed his lips: he felt guilty because Selina had to leave behind her boyfriend, Arghris. The young man had come early in the morning to say goodbye to Selina and Bruce saw how emotional his usually cool friend was after.

“I’m sorry I became the reason to end your relationship with Arghris. You were so happy…”

She waved her hand nonchalant.

“Both Arghris and I knew that it was going to end sooner or later: maybe it was better it ended now because I wouldn’t want him to get too attached. But” she jerked her index finger “if your return to Gotham gets connected with any funny business” she frowned warningly “I’m gonna tell Supes to grab you and lock you up in his Fortress… or whatever!”

Bruce crooked his lips amused.

“I just can’t imagine you taking his side over mine…”

Selina lolled her head and widened her eyes.

“You need to put your imagination to work, kiddo, because I won’t tolerate you risking your life. You realize it’s too early to open your wings again, right?”

Bruce opened his hands on the table and looked at his legs.

“The reality is a bit too hard to ignore, don’t you think? Sel, you know I’m not stupid” she shook her head “I’m not going to put myself in danger – I know how limited I am right now. But there are things in Gotham that can’t wait. And… you can stay in the Manor to make sure I’m not up to anything bad…”

Selina narrowed her eyes and gave him a sweet smile.
“Nice try, sweetie…”

“Come on, Sel: it was awesome living under the same roof! And what about Hero?” the kitten hearing its name climbed to his lap. “I know you can’t live without him…” he twitched his lips and his eyes shone wickedly.

Selina snorted.

“Huh! So you blackmail me…” she shook her head. “It’ll be a battle for the custody then!”

Bruce chuckled and his friend did the same.

“I don’t know, Bruce…It’s perfect living with you and Alfred and Hero but…” she pressed her lips.

Bruce nodded.

“You need your independency…” he huffed. “I perfectly understand, dear…Just give it a thought, will you?”

“I definitely will…”

Bruce’s laptop beeped and Selina looked interested. Bruce stared at the screen.

“It’s Lucius: we have an appointment through satellite.”

Selina jumped from her seat.

“I buzz off” she winked “I hate business talk…” she took Hero.

Bruce smiled because he knew that his friend wanted to be discreet.

“Thanks, Sel!”

She rubbed his upper arm passing him heading for the other cabin.

“Give Lucius kisses!”

Bruce chuckled looking up at her.

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled!” he said slyly and Selina pinched his cheek playfully before leaving.

Bruce opened the program and Lucius’ delightful smile welcomed him.

“Good morning, Mr. Wayne! How are you this fine day?”

“Good morning, Lucius. I’m fine. How about you? I hope I didn’t ruin your sleep.”

Lucius shook his head.

“Not at all. I don’t need much sleep.”

Bruce lifted an eyebrow.

“Me too but lately with all these medicine I’m sleeping like a cat…” which reminded him of Selina’s request. “Selina sends you her kisses” he said grinning.

Lucius protruded his lips in bliss.
“Hm…That alone would be enough reason to wake up early even if I wasn’t a morning bird” he chuckled.

“I watched the Wayne Enterprises’ shares’ course from yesterday and it’s quite satisfying.”

“Well, thank you for the compliment…” he frowned. “It was a compliment, right?”

Bruce chuckled.

“Of course, you personally and the rest of the company’s staff are superb.”

Lucius’ face got serious.

“Then you could have prolonged your much needed vacations – recovery.”

Bruce nodded.

“If it was only a matter of trust to you, I’d have had vacations all the time, especially in a place like Thasos…yet there are other things too.”

Lucius pressed his lips and nodded.

“Your donations to various charity foundations in Greece have been arranged as the construction of the health center in Potamia, the village near Mr. Stark’s villa.”

Bruce grinned.

“Those people treated me really wonderfully, Lucius, and the health center is a must: during our stay, a local got seriously injured and weren’t for Leslie who happened to be with us, he probably would have died.”

Lucius cast a lopsided glance to the young man which was full of respect.

“It will have your parents’ name as you asked and a yearly fund covering the salaries of the personnel and the provisions’ cost.”

“Nice. Thank you, Lucius!”

The scientist shook his head and took his glasses off his nose.

“It’s a pleasure for me helping the fulfillment of such noble acts” his voice became hoarse. “Your parents would have been so proud…”

Bruce lowered his eyes: still he couldn’t imagine his parents being proud of him despite the fact that the people that knew them so well, like Lucius, said it all the time.

“You took care of the other thing we discussed?” he asked wanting to change the subject and Lucius smiled.

“Leaking to the press from trusted sources that Bruce Wayne is arriving today under…” he chuckled “complete secrecy at Gotham’s airport?” Lucius lolled slightly his head. “I bet the airport has already started to get swarmed by reporters – brace yourself!”

Bruce chuckled.

“It was my choice so I’ll give them what they want.”
“To gain what you want…” the scientist said smartly inclining his head.

The younger man nodded.

“Exactly. The rumors of my demise that hurt our company will be evaporated once and for all and perhaps we’ll see a shares’ rise after the stability you managed to keep throughout the rumors.”

Lucius cocked his eyebrows, his clever eyes sparkling playfully.

“And?” he asked knowing already the answer.

Bruce’s lips twitched and he squinted.

“You know me so well, huh, Lucius?”

Lucius chuckled.

“Great minds think alike, Mr. Wayne!”

“Now you flatter me… And yes: by showing up battered, paraplegic, bound to a wheelchair will eliminate any possibility that Bruce Wayne gets connected with…odd things, like jumping from rooftops or chasing criminals. Your holograms are a great assistance in that.”

Lucius drummed his fingers on the table, his eyes sober.

“But definitely you’ll want to exploit the paraplegic façade yourself” he stressed out the last word.

Bruce looked at his hand on the table and licked his lips.

“You saw the rough sketches I sent you?” he inquired without lifting his eyes; he was afraid of Lucius’ reaction being as everyone else’s.

When after a second Bruce looked at Lucius the loyal scientist’s face was solemn and his lips pressed and for Bruce that was the indication that he had to act alone. However Lucius turned his eyes to his employer’s and Bruce saw the familiar warmth.

“I think that the modifications you suggest are solid and could counterbalance the obvious difficulties in mobility and the need for extra protection.”

“But?” although Bruce felt encouraged by Lucius’ estimation sensed a ‘but’ lying there. “You spoke with Tony?”

Lucius met the decisive yet a bit sad eyes of his employer and pressed his lips.

“My loyalties first and foremost lie with you, Mister Wayne” he stretched his eyebrows “you don’t doubt that, right?”

Bruce smiled.

“Of course not.”

Lucius loll’d his head.

“I’m relieved to hear that. So when you tagged your mail as ‘confidential’ there was no chance for me to discuss the content even with your best friend.”
Hearing the ‘best friend’ Bruce felt a bit embarrassed.

“To make things clear Tony already knows about my sketches and my…intentions” Lucius nodded. “But I wanted you to assess the modifications and how effective they can be unbiased.”

“So Mister Stark is negative…”

Bruce’s eyes fell on his hands and he pouted.

“He didn’t take the time to have a second look at the sketches…” he sighed. “He believes that even the thought of getting out there equals with instant death so he won’t even consider the possibility…”

Lucius intertwined his fingers in front of his face.

“Well…we can’t blame him for that, can we?” he asked calmly. “It’s certainly very dangerous…”

Bruce closed his eyes and tilted his head exasperated.

“For pity’s sake, Lucius… I don’t understand why all of you bring the same thing up” he pinched the bridge of his nose. “All these years I used Batman wisely without jeopardizing the bigger plan and the lives of others…and mine” he hurried to add. “If I was as reckless as you think, Falcone would have discovered my escapees and would have killed me…obviously, he didn’t.”

Lucius nodded.

“I don’t consider you reckless, Mr. Wayne; on the contrary, you are a wise young man. Yet we all know your …bias for self sacrifice” he smiled and Bruce twitched his lips. “And I think that this is the reason we are afraid of you getting out there.”

“Listen, Lucius: the reason I want this suit to be made is for enabling Batman make some appearances – one or two.”

“The holograms persuade Gotham that you are still out there.”

Bruce nodded.

“I know and they are a perfect creation of yours but…” he stabbed him with his eyes. “It’s been four months and Batman hasn’t busted a single robber: don’t you think that soon someone will notice?”

“The majority of Gotham’s underground are still petrified by the ‘big three massacre’ and Batman’s action so many of them have already fled to other cities. On the small time culprits, Batman can’t be everywhere, right?” Bruce didn’t seem persuaded. “I can’t deny that you got a point there…but we always can ask from Superman to dress up.”

Bruce shook his head in negation.

“I don’t want him in Gotham” Lucius frowned and Bruce cleared his throat. “Superman has other responsibilities and Gotham is a hellhole with its own rules and norms – a person as bright as him shouldn’t be consumed by this city’s darkness… I don’t want Gotham’s dirt get to him: it almost happened” he pressed his lips. “And I won’t risk someone realizing the differences as Joker did.”

Lucius arched an eyebrow.

“Joker isn’t a common villain.”

“None of Gotham’s villains are common and Joker’s one meeting with BatSupes was enough to
make him suspicious of my secret. The night at Chicky’s factory he hinted that” he took in Lucius’ deep frown. “A second encounter with Superman disguised as Batman would affirm his suspicions and what I want now is for him to take that out of his mind.”

Lucius nodded.

“So you’ll appear in front of every news camera of Gotham on a wheelchair, attend some social events while Batman who till now was roaming Gotham will make some arrests.”

“Exactly.”

“So we must make those modifications perfect to enable you to have some basic artificial mobility to catch crooks and protection from additional injuries – always provided that you’ll be extra careful and barely engage in fights.”

“As I was doing while in Falcone’s captivity to avoid injuries and bruises that would betray the truth to him.”

Lucius rubbed his forehead and it was clear that the man was reluctant to give Bruce the ability to risk so much. But he was also aware that his young employer would proceed in his plans with or without his participation and that would enhance more the danger. The youth loved his city so much and would do anything to protect her. And Lucius loved Gotham as much and his young employer so he couldn’t let him attempt to modify his suit himself. Even more since he could see how all these could secure Bruce’s secret identity.

Bruce could see that the loyal scientist was thinking fast and his eyes were sparkling eager and thirsty to hear that Lucius would help but at the same time determined to continue even if he refused - on his own.

“This suit will be only for one or two times” Lucius said strict as Bruce had never again heard him. “You won’t engage in very risky situations and you’ll make sure that there will be backup for you” his eyebrows formed a very strict line over his dead serious eyes. “Which brings us to this: Mr. Stark will be on the project.”

Bruce was looking at him with the same level of seriousness.

“I promise, Lucius, that I won’t make ill use of your gift. But I don’t think that Tony would agree to be a part of this” he ruffled his hair. “He is against and also he has too many things on his head with being the new director of the S.H.I.E.L.D. and working on the bionic parts – for crying out loud, he has his company to run…”

“I’m sure that Mr. Stark won’t have an objection to participate in your new armor’s creation – more on an advice level. As long as he” he cocked his eyebrows “and I see that your top priority will be your recovery and your health because you need to be ready for the operation…”

Bruce would never interrupt Lucius but this news made his heart beat faster with childish enthusiasm.

“So the bionic parts for my spine are ready?!” no – it was too soon, he could read it in Lucius’ eyes. “Are in good progress?” he continued more restricted.

Lucius smiled seeing the youth’s thrill: Bruce’s joy was infectious as much as when he was the little boy that roamed the Wayne Tower.

“Is my pleasure to affirm that, Mr. Wayne, but” he hated to see the small shadow in his employer’s
“Even after the operation you’ll need some time to be able to fully regain your normal functionality not to mention your more demanding activities.”

Bruce nodded.

“Absolutely!” the shadow was gone and a grin caressed his cheeks.

“And that makes it evident why this new suit must be used in great caution and with much consideration because a new major injury” Lucius felt that both shared a shiver on that “could make the use of the bionic parts impossible.”

Bruce licked his lips. Lucius took in the youth’s paleness and wanting to raise his spirits smiled.

“Not to mention that Mr. Stark will kill me if anything happens to you because of my decision to help you built that suit and my contribution in persuading him to agree” Bruce looked at him and Lucius narrowed his eyes. “Now I’m thinking about it, Mr. Stark won’t be the only one…A second superhero will be after me, a wildcat and let’s not forget Alfred and Leslie” he shook his head “they can be more intimidating and lethal than any superhero…” he chuckled.

“Nothing will happen to me, Lucius. You have my word.”

Lucius’ smile vanished and he leaned to the screen.

“Mr. Wayne, the only reason I’ll help you with this new armor is that I don’t want to let you make it alone – because I know you will whether I or Mr. Stark help you or not – and because I trust you that you won’t endanger the life of you and of so many people who love you” Bruce closed his eyes and Lucius arched his eyebrows. “The one month you were fighting for your life and nobody knew if you’re going to make it, all the people that love you were also staggering between life and death. You must realize that you’re not only responsible for your own life but for the lives and wellbeing of your loved ones…”

Bruce nodded and locked eyes with him.

“I know, Lucius…”

Lucius wore his glasses again and looked at another screen that Bruce couldn’t make out clearly.

“Now about the soil and wood samples you sent me from the location of your attack and of your own clothes…”

Bruce’s eyes flashed: Princess Diana might have blown up the awkward creatures that attacked him yet some of their remains must have fallen on the soil or the wood; also, some of the creatures grabbed him at some point. So he put samples in special cases and sent them to Lucius through Happy, Tony’s pilot.

“They were good enough? Because you can’t imagine how difficult was to go back there and gather them…” he rolled his eyes and Lucius chuckled picturing Bruce trying to evade Alfred’s watchful eyes.

“So…I get that you passed to the other side of the law?” he asked in his innocent friendly irony.

Bruce laughed.

“I thought I was always on the lawless end of the line – yet Alfred’s laws are stricter and the ramifications from violating them more fearsome…”
“Indeed!” Lucius laughed. “Being spanked in this age is a bit embarrassing not to mention being banned from Alfred’s cinnamon biscuits…” Bruce nodded. “Well, back to business: the soil samples you sent me had indeed traces of other materials – materials that matched those found in the samples from your cloths.”

“And?”

“The analysis of those matters and substances indicated life forms matching your description.”

Bruce’s eyebrows jerked upwards and he leaned to the screen.

“Life forms? They weren’t robots…” he whispered. “So we’re talking about results of illegal experimentation?”

Lucius shook his head in negation.

“The substances were definitely unlike anything in Earth.”

Bruce didn’t want to accept that.

“Anything known” he stressed out the last word. “Maybe someone created something never seen before – substances or materials that were used to create those odd beings.”

“You’re thinking of the League of Shadows and that demon?” he asked softly because the issue was extremely sensible.

Bruce rubbed his chin.

“That could be a possibility. Or Luthor. Or some other sick genius.”

Lucius cocked his eyebrows and took a pen from his desk.

“What about aliens, Mr. Wayne?” Bruce huffed and Lucius nodded. “Our data from Lexlabs and the League of Shadows don’t show any evidence of such experiments. And…Superman has extraterrestrial enemies who definitely would want to gain some leverage against him.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“You don’t like that idea…” the scientist remarked and the younger man looked at him lopsided.

“I just believe that there are too many local villains for Earth to draw alien villains too but…it’s not a matter of what I like, right?” Lucius nodded. “Brainiac maybe?”

“It could be…Yet Superman has too many enemies and maybe he has others who never encountered yet. We must search it more and hope for some new evidence – not as dramatic as a new attack.”

“And keep our eyes open for what the registration in Luthor’s labs will bring up: he had delved in many shady businesses and he absolutely hates Superman, so why not being into this scheme too? And recently one of LexLabs was broken into.”

“Star Labs and some other less famous were also raided those days so maybe it was random looters.”

Bruce shrugged.

“Maybe or maybe not…We certainly can’t let go so easily of that possibility – especially when LexLabs unlike the rest are in our control.”
“Which was the main reason you wanted to gain the absolute control of Mr. Luthor’s famous labs…”

“You know me so well, Lucius…”

Lucius leaned to the back of his armchair with a huge smile on his face.

“I’m eagerly waiting to see you back in Gotham, Mr. Wayne.”

“Me too, Lucius.”

“The Metropolis’ central lab was attacked and you mention it just now?” Luthor’s voice echoed through the small space where his new lawyer had visited him. “How many lawyers I have to fire to find a decent one?”

Luthor’s young lawyer stared at him completely unfazed and with a sarcastic expression in his face.

“Well, for starters, not exactly every acknowledged counselor is eager to be hired by you, Mr. Luthor. And second, you know that I’m the best for you right now.”

Luthor narrowed his eyes and twitched his lips in disdain.

“I don’t like arrogance…” he hissed but the lawyer smirked.

“Then you surely don’t look a lot in the mirror!” Luthor’s eyes widened in that insult and his lawyer raised his palms in appeasement. “I’m not here to quarrel, Mr. Luthor: my focus is on how to get you out of here and I think you should also focus on that instead of trying to intimidate your lawyer.”

“I don’t see you achieving anything, Mr. Larson: I’m almost 4 months stuck in a filthy Gotham prison while my company is raided!”

Mr. Larson tilted his head.

“Maybe because this time you’re deep in shit, Mr. Luthor. There are a lot of proofs for your collaboration with the League of Shadows. Not to mention a charming video with you making some grave felonies, like attacking Mr. Wayne, threatening him with a gun and assisting in his kidnapping.”

Luthor shook his head: that still stung bad – how they managed to trap him like that. That stupid brat! Damn! He shouldn’t have been so carried away by his grudge to expose himself like that.

“We can prove that the video was somehow fake: fabricated to frame me…” Larson shook his head.

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question: the transmission of the footage was almost live and there’s no sign of alienation. Plus, there are other evidence and foremost Wayne’s testimony.”

Luthor fumed, his grey eyes taking an icy texture.

“At least, he died after the testimony: it’s some satisfaction.”

The young lawyer snorted.

“I’m sorry to disappoint, Mr. Luthor, but that was just a rumor: Bruce Wayne is returning today to Gotham – every media in the city babbles about that.”
Luthor frowned and his fist punched the table causing a smile to his lawyer. He stabbed the man with his eyes.

“Use all of my connections to get me out of here! I won’t let that brat walk in LexCorp undisturbed!”

Larson shrugged.

“He now possesses the 30% of the shares so he had every right, especially in the Labs which are already under his control.”

Luthor felt cold sweat running his body and he clenched his jaw.

“I’m doing everything to arrange some special pardon for your case” the young lawyer said. “Even a psychiatric assessment claiming that after the incident at Stark’s party you became abnormally obsessed with Wayne in a way that dimmed your reasoning.”

Luthor cast him a glare but gradually his face loosened in a grin.

“Not bad…” he said content squinting. “Not bad at all, Larson…”

He placed his briefcase on the table and began settling his papers in.

“The temporary DA is as hard as Dent but…he isn’t Dent” he smirked. “He doesn’t have Dent’s appeal so he wouldn’t be able to last for long.”

Larson took the briefcase and moved to leave, casting a last glance at his client whom he didn’t like much.

“I hope to have good news soon.”

Luthor gave a nod and stared at his hands without a second look at his lawyer’s departing figure. He pouted. Undoubtedly, things would change soon—for the best. He smirked. Mannheim was raiding his labs desperate to find his machine. So when his efforts failed the powerful gangster would have no other option than getting him out of there in exchange to get what he wanted.

Joker was gulping a big forkful of salad.

“Eat your salad, buuuuuddy” he said to Crane who was glaring at him from opposite. “It’s good for youuuuuur health and…bowel, unless you like things getting stuck to your…hoooole…HAHAHAHAHA!”

“You mean like your…wife?” the lean doctor tilted his head on the side and spat dryly. “No…I do not think that I like being stuffed as him…” he chewed calmly his vegetables.

Joker giggled but all of a sudden Jonathan choked as he felt something digging his stomach: he noticed that Joker’s fork was nowhere. The jester’s eyes were casual as ever.

“Aaaaaanthing can become a le--thal weapon in the rrright hands” he whispered in a scientific way. “Ugh! I did master-pieces with plastic forks…Liiiiike that eye I smashed before anyone even noticed…” he brought a carrot slice in his mouth and bit nonchalant. “I think it was an orderly” he squinted “but I’m not sure – not that matters…What matters, Johnny” he raised barely his voice and Jonathan almost screamed from the pain that plastic thing gave him “iiiiis to know how aaaaand where to use each thing…Like when referring to my Brucey: when you dooooo it after I ask you to
“It’s OK” he pouted “well, it depends…anyway. But when you dooooooo it to insult him” his teeth rattled but then he loosened “or flatter him you get in trouble. Understood?”

Crane nodded with gritted teeth: how he wanted to cause terror to that man, to see him cry and squirm and beg. He knew that the clown would be an easy subject to his fear gas…unlike Wayne.

“Stop threatening me!” he hissed in a voice unlike his normal and Joker gave a full Cheshire smile.

“Buuuuuut I’m not…” he answered innocently. “It seemed like I was?” he scratched his head and then tilted it on the side “well, maybe I am…” he dag more the fork in Crane’s stomach. “Now, let’s speak about what I want…”

“OK, then!” Crane clenched his jaw. “How about your precious wife really likes to be fucked? The hard way” he leaned towards Joker with a gleeful shine in his eyes disregarding the increased pain in his stomach.

Joker licked his lips and moved his shoulders. He gestured to Crane to continue.

“Go ooooon, give me your” he giggled “professional opinion…”

Crane smiled wickedly.

“Wayne likes to be raped” the jester arched his eyebrows fascinated and mocking at the same time. “He was raised up like this and now inside him struggles his disgust about sex and his deep desire to get fucked – so the only solution he has is being raped: don’t you find it a bit strange that he always gets in situations that can lead to a rape?” he raised his head looking down at Joker. “Because he wants to be dominated and violated: it’s the only way he permits himself to have sex and can enjoy it.”

Joker left his head hanging on his shoulder seeming deep in thought as if Crane’s words made an impact.

“Soooloooo, you wanna say that he likes to be fuck--ed…raped by anyone BUUUUT mee?”

And then suddenly he erupted in laughter.

“Is this youuuuuu opinion as a shrink?” he moved in his seat and giggled again. “I was soooooo right that every shrink is a mental case…”

Crane shook his head.

“It’s funny that someone like you likes so much the idea of someone’s purity – especially, when he is so filthy…”

Crane’s eyes bulged as the fork almost made his flesh bleed.

“OK, Ok, let’s…let’s calm…” Crane’s voice became a bit shaky and definitely appeasing. “We can’t deny the truth about his past, can we?” he squinted and Joker pouted mocking him. “Or his present…And he’s absolutely a hard used whore” now the hissing became once again Scarecrow but seeing Joker’s eyebrows twitch he widened his eyes. “You wanted me to give you info and that’s what I’m doing.”

Joker smacked his lips and looked at the huge flat TV that played a stupid reality show. His eyes flashed: one of the guys sitting on the nearest table was Lou, the goon from the night at Chicky’s factory who shot and caused the fire. Joker knew that they had him first at the Blackgate prison but
finally they realized he was nuts and dumped him here. The jester tilted his head on the side: well…the bozo was lucky that Batman didn’t die that night because at first when Joker wasn’t sure, he had a death penalty for him.

The goon was so different in the orange fit of the Asylum but soooooo same moronic faced. He sensed Joker’s stare and began waving enthusiastic for seeing him again.

“Hiya, boss!” he yelled and Joker rolled his eyes snorting.

Jonathan smirked sure that Joker had forgotten him occupied with his henchman. In the same time, he didn’t like it that the clown was gathering his thug-army even without doing anything…

“Infooooo…” Joker spat in his nasal voice still waving at Lou. “Start chewing your apple pie and spill it.”

Jonathan crooked his mouth but did what he was told.

“That crazy bitch who considered Wayne her slave…”

Joker rolled his head regarding again Crane completely bored.

“Well, definitely not, Joker thought remembering his one half - time with him. No, Cran-y, he smirked: they tied him because they were afraid of him.

“Binding someone that you already rendered completely paralyzed.”

Joker frowned and the former doctor smiled.

“They shot him twice: in his nape and his waist making him unable to move below the neck” his eyes shone gleefully.

Joker’s mind travelled back in that night at the old factory: Batman had come to save the brats and face him and he absolutely…moved and ran and kicked and everything. If Bruce had two bullets stuck in his body paralyzing him then how the Bat-guy was able to come? He wasn’t that moron Super-Goofy: he would easily make out the difference…And then all these rumors that the Bat was stalking the city even though Bruce Wayne was away? Fine, it could be a trick but…if it wasn’t and the kitten wasn’t the Bat?

Joker cocked an eyebrow: well, in this case, at least the threesome was still in the plan…He giggled but then sobered again.

Jonathan could understand that the clown’s mind was racing but he couldn’t guess what he pondered
on; maybe how to punish those who defiled his…wife. So why not expanding his list and providing more reasons for Joker to rely on him?

“And Superman certainly bangs your boy” he shook his head. “There’s no doubt: he sent that oaf Bane for two months in the hospital because obviously he figured that he had fucked his bitch’ the forgotten fork dag again his stomach surprising him. “It’s him you must punish not me! And I can help you with that!”

Joker rolled his eyes and snorted.

“Help? HELP!” he giggled and shook his head. “You’re completely nuts, Cran-y!”

Something in the big screen caught the corner of his eye and he lolled his head watching half interested, half glaring at Crane who looked at the screen too.

Behind Vicky Vale’s velvet armchair a whole wall screen showed footage of Superman and a woman dressed in a fancy swimsuit lifting tons of ruins and save people. And then the footage changed into a luxurious hall where the duo was decorated by the UN’s General Secretary.

“The two heroes seemed to be at ease together…” Vale commented slyly. “Hm…it seems that our Prince couldn’t hold Superman’s interest for long…”

Bruce watched Superman and Diana being decorated by the UN’s General Secretary in the official video on the organization’s site: the two heroes were honored for their contribution in the rescuing efforts after the Nepal earthquake.

The video continued showing image from the humble reception that the organization held after the ceremony: the two heroes sat together and spoke all the time in a way like they have been friends for years – or centuries, since they both were practically immortals – and at times Princess laughed with something Superman told and Clark’s eyes glimmered reflecting her eyes’ shine…

Bruce’s breath became restrained: he knew that glow in Clark’s eyes – it was like the entire existence loved you…

The sky had waves of neon blue moving slowly, glimmering majestically: he was watching it from the hovering round balcony the Fortress had created for him. Waiting for Clark to return from Metropolis.

Which was now. Bruce could hear him even if Clark usually floated in the Fortress; he turned to his direction and Superman flew to him, his hands immediately wrapping around his back and behind the knees lifting him easily as a child.

“You could say ‘Hi’, first” Bruce chuckled as the roof above them opened because obviously Superman wanted to.

“I guess I could…” Clark captured his lips and Bruce felt the jolt in his stomach, signaling the sudden ascend.

Oh! Being among the glorious blue light was unbelievable, as if he was inside a fairytale. And every night was the same exciting feeling even if the color in the sky varied: green, red, yellow or mixed. He was looking the natural wonder in absolute admiration and fascination. Yet today he decided to be more restrained.
“You know, you don’t have to take me for a stroll every night…” he teased Clark who smiled.

“Really?” he arched an eyebrow. “Then why are you gazing at the sky for hours EVERY NIGHT?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Because you didn’t get me a cable TV?” he snorted.

Clark laughed and at the same time unfastened his cape and wrapped him in its unbelievable warmth and softness that always made Bruce relax like a baby. Of course, there was no need for warmth since Bruce was dressed in the House of El ceremonial attire which was cold proof. Yet both of them relished the use of the cape…

“That night” Clark said in a deep, touched voice locking his eyes with Bruce’s “I promised you that I’d take you to watch the aurora every night till you’re bored of it…Do you remember that night?” his voice became very low and very throaty.

Bruce took away his eyes to avoid the deep pain in Clark’s sweet, beautiful eyes and gaze at the glowing like a huge gem crystal pyramid under them: he remembered that night…he remembered all the pain from his injuries and then the worst pain…knowing that he was dying and he wouldn’t see his loved ones again: their immense hurt for losing him as he acknowledged it in Selina’s eyes mixing with his for losing them.

And saying goodbye to Clark forever… Shutting softly his eyes at least relieved that he wouldn’t be used again to hurt the Man of Steel… Hearing Superman’s eerie heartbreaking howl as he was floating away…Realizing that Clark couldn’t be left alone: he had to return to him…

“I remember…” he said returning his stare to Clark’s waiting eyes and the older man took gently his chin between his fingers and kissed softly his lips.

“Well…You don’t seem bored of aurora borealis yet…”

“Bruce, we’re ready” Selina’s hesitant voice broke into – she was going to stay in the plane and leave when the reporters were gone. “Are you alright?”

He nodded and stretched his hands to put on the leather jacket Alfred held for him.

“Master Bruce, the ramp is down; can we go now?” Alfred asked politely.

“Let’s give them what they came for…” he answered with his eyes determined.

“Breaking news” Vale’s eyes shone thrilled as the video showing Superman and Wonder Woman was cut abruptly. “Tony Stark’s private jet just landed at Gotham’s airport.”

The camera zoomed on the jet’s door that opened and the ramp that was set.

“Ladies and gentlemen, at last: Bruce Wayne back home!” Vale said excited.

But she was astonished watching along with the people filling the seats in her show Bruce Wayne getting out of the door and descending slowly from the ramp: seated on a wheelchair that was pushed by his loyal butler. Hundreds of cameras flashed simultaneously as the people of the press yelling questions pushed closer and were held at bay by the security staff of the airport.

Joker’s eyes were glued on the screen completely immobile glimmering maniac; it was the image of
Bruce seated on the wheelchair that made his eyes explode. His previous discussion with Crane was erased as his doubts about Bruce being the Batman since he was already paralyzed when Batman fought him. This moment only one thing dominated his boiling mind: the fire in the factory and the building collapsing, obviously crushing Batman and rendering him useless to play with him. And the responsible was there, laughing stupidly.

His body jerked upwards jumping on Lou and Joker was seeing only the neck of his goon readying his bare teeth to tear it apart. The useless moron was dead.

Several people cried in surprise and horror, the loudest voice that of Lou who felt his boss’ sharp teeth stabbing his neck. Orderlies rushed there stretching their Tasers. Yet Joker was seeing only Bruce confined in a wheelchair merged with the damn old factory and a hell of fire…

Suddenly there was only darkness.
The airport’s security kept the raging crowd of reporters at a distance as Alfred led the wheelchair to the waiting silver Rolls Royce under a buzzing cloud of questions. Alfred cast a glance to his young master and Bruce gave a discreet nod.

Upon that, Alfred opened the back door and held Bruce’s body as the physiotherapist had taught him in order to move him from the chair to the car’s back seat. Of course Bruce was perfectly able to do it alone yet they had to play a little show for the press so he let Alfred help him while secretly spare the older man from the majority of his burden – a Wayne Enterprises’ driver (the one who had brought the Rolls) was standing right next to the car’s front door and hurried to them eager to help but Alfred politely sent him away because they didn’t want him to realize Bruce’s true body and the young man still loathed strangers touching him.

Their show was a success: dozens of cameras flashed maniac on the sight of Bruce Wayne clinging his arms around his butler’s neck to be hoisted and settled on the back seat.

Selina was already there, sprawled, one foot on the leather and Hero in her lap, clearly happy now that he was out of his portable cage. The kitten jumped on Bruce’s lap as soon as the door closed.

Bruce wasn’t shocked from her presence there – his friend had a pretty effective distraction to disembark unnoticed and slip in the car while the reporters were goggling at their show. Alfred, however, who entered the car after he put the wheelchair in the trunk, cocked an eyebrow at the driver’s mirror just as he turned on the engine to get them out of there.

“Miss Kyle, I’m delighted to see you here…”

Bruce and Selina exchanged an amused glance.

“I wouldn’t have missed a ride with that car, Alfred!” she winked.

Alfred smiled.

“We were supposed to pick you up after we lured the reporters from the airport.”

She shrugged.

“Why bothering you with that? Besides it’s more fun to razz those papa-razzis…” she pressed more her foot on the seat’s leather to Alfred’s dismay and Bruce stopped looking the tablet on his legs to widen his eyes to Selina and she hurried to put down her foot.

He was watching avidly his tablet-like gadget, the latest creation of Wayne Tech that only he, Lucius and Dick had at the moment. He was scrolling the articles on his screen thoughtful yet with a playful eye on Selina.

“I didn’t know that you were so fond of old, outdated cars…” he snorted to tease her.

Which caused a disapproving grunt from Alfred and Selina’s raised eyebrow.

“This isn’t old, darling; this is classic…” she said slyly and looked at the driver’s mirror Alfred giving her an approving nod. “Forgive the kid, Alfred: he is still too young and inexperienced…”

“Of course, Miss Kyle… Would you give us the pleasure of coming with us to the Manor?”
Selina was glancing at Bruce’s tablet screen.

“Not today, Alfred: I have to see if my apartment is still standing after all this time. But I’ll come visit as soon as possible.”

“So our destination is Midtown” Alfred said not without a slight sadness for Miss Kyle’s so rapid departure. All this time he got to love the young woman’s presence: it was as if the Waynes had left him two kids to look after.

“Sorry for the inconvenience, Alfred – I know it’s out of your course…” Bruce and Alfred both cast her exasperated glances and she shrugged innocently. “It is a detour from the road to Pallisades AND we have to lose our tail” Selina said looking from the back window at the string of cars following them. Rolls had armored windows with glass that didn’t permit the view inside.

Bruce still scrolling the headlines touched his finger to his lips.

“Alfred is one hell of a driver!” Alfred coughed disapprovingly for the expression but Selina could see the satisfaction in his gleaming eyes. “Yet it would have been so much easier if you came to live in the Manor…” he raised his eyes and met hers. “You’ll always welcome if you change your mind.”

Selina nodded: she felt Bruce’s love and how he’d miss her constant presence and the truth was that she would miss him too.

“What are you searching for?” she asked to drop the subject and Bruce petted Hero who was also looking at the screen curious.

“Superman sightings from last night” he said casually and Selina frowned.

“But he was at that UN ceremony last evening with that woman.”

He nodded keeping his eyes on the screen because he didn’t want Selina to read them.

“Afterwards…”

She didn’t need much more to figure; she didn’t like it but also she wanted to pretend that it wasn’t important though for Bruce it was – even if he put on a nonchalant face.

“Don’t tell me he didn’t come last night…”

Bruce shook his head in denial still avoiding Selina’s stare.

He liked people; he liked all these UN officials yet he grabbed the chance and slipped to the deserted foyer of the top floor. He stood before the whole wall window overlooking New York and his eyes were caught by the newly finished Avengers’ Tower dominating the skyline. Stark’s need for showing off… Well, he didn’t want to be unfair to the billionaire: after the revelations about S.H.I.E.L.D. he had to use every means to heal the organization’s image and status.

Superman inhaled deeply: he really didn’t care much. He just wanted this ceremony to end for him to return to… where? He felt coldness inside and something else…what exactly? He couldn’t name it but he knew that wasn’t good – it drained him from energy. He yanked his head: he always could go back to his sun and recharge his batteries…His sun… The one here on earth which was more powerful than the sun out there. He so much missed being inside Bruce’s body that sometimes, like now, it hurt because this thought made the knot that strangled for days his stomach worse.
“Are you seeking loneliness or indulge in sweet remembrance?” a soft female voice breathed in his ear and he was startled.

Diana smiled her radiant smile.

“So the Man of Steel can be taken by surprise?”

He closed his eyes and chuckled.

“Sometimes…by extraordinary people…” like Batman or you…

Diana came closer, their chests a breath away.

“When powerful things dominate your mind and senses…” she whispered and her eyes flashed in his.

He stretched his head and sighed.

“Yeah… sometimes even Superman gets distracted.”

The Amazon princess lolled her head on the side and eyed him thoughtful.

“I’d be very indiscreet asking if it is your love interest that occupies your thoughts?” she smiled.

“Does he realize how lucky he is or torments you?”

Torment…Superman couldn’t stop himself from thinking that Diana was right. What he was experiencing was tormenting… The way Bruce looked at him… the way Superman sensed that as much as he tried he always he blundered with Bruce… the way his immense happiness was turning into something unpleasant.

He mentally shook himself and pictured Bruce smiling, Bruce gulping greedily the doughnuts he brought to him – the warmth and elation he felt every time. Bruce didn’t torment him…at least, on purpose. Wait…

“He?” Superman asked frowning – he had denied to her that he was related to Bruce.

Diana laughed.

“Bruce Wayne: for one unexplainable reason I can’t shake off the idea of you having a relationship with the human” she shrugged. “It’d make perfect sense that you look so troubled and unhappy. Because definitely a human – especially he – is unworthy of someone like you…” she widened her eyes sympathetically “resulting inevitably in pain.”

Superman watched her in disbelief but he couldn’t deny that her words made something in him.

“Once again, Princess: there’s nothing between me and Mr. Wayne…other than my duty to protect him as every other human being. I thought I’ve made that clear already.”

She smiled and nodded.

“My mistake, Superman but my fear of you being involved in something so wrong drives me to seek reassurance constantly. I dread seeing you wasted with someone like him and eventually destroyed by deceit...” she noticed his slightly displeased stare. “Since you two are not involved he won’t be annoyed when those stupid reporters publish the video of us they’re shooting right now...”

Superman looked over Diana’s shoulders to the cameraman who had located them and of course
didn’t miss the chance getting a nice footage. Yet he wasn’t pissed: after all, he wasn’t doing anything wrong and Bruce was busy with other more important things than caring about his lover’s evenings.

Diana followed his eyes satisfied by the lack of reaction.

“What about leaving that place?” she asked serious. “I don’t think that they would be insulted or something…and I know you want to leave as much as I…” her thick eyelashes half covered her sparkling green eyes.

The idea was appealing. He shrugged one shoulder.

“New York nights are legendary after all… But we’ll come back later to bid goodnight to our hosts” he replied beaming and Diana’s eyes shone.

“Mmm…I guess it wouldn’t suit the boy scout to misbehave like that…” she laughed and the impact was similar with Bruce’s laughter.

Superman pressed his lips and shook his head.

“No, not at all!” he said with conviction.

Not even the camera that was fixed on them caught their exit.

New York was blinding illuminated by millions of multicolored lights: it looked like Metropolis but Clark could spot all the tiny differences – smells, voices, sounds, mood… The Statue of Liberty where they stood right now.

He was gazing at the ocean with his arms crossed and his mind totally empty which was bliss… Diana cleared her throat and he turned his eyes on her.

“It’s quite different than my homeland” she said with her steady voice “but it’s still beautiful.”

Superman nodded and remembered the night dinner at the balcony in Stark’s villa: Bruce was so relaxed and happy among them – his mind wasn’t yet obsessed with that madness. Bruce then wanted just to live and absorb everything life had to offer – that Superman had to offer… And then suddenly, Superman’s love wasn’t enough for Bruce: Batman had defeated him…

His jaw clenched unconsciously and Diana’s soft, long fingers touched his chin.

“You have to relax a bit…” he felt the hot air from her lungs brushing his skin and he was shocked to realize some goose bumps. “Superman…” she smiled. “This is what humans call you yet I’m sure you have a real name unlike those mundane human names declaring your regal kin and stating your superiority… I’m Diana of Themyscira, daughter of Hippolyta…” she cocked an eyebrow and stretched her hand.

She waited for a proper introduction, for a token of mutual trust and allegiance. Superman knew that he could trust her with his real identity but also he could imagine her shock and disapproval hearing his human name: he definitely would lose some of her respect. And for the first time, Clark felt uneasy about the name that connected him with humankind.

“Kal El of Krypton” he grabbed her hand. “Son of Jor and Lara of the House of El.”

“Your stew is getting cold…”
Clark looked startled at Martha sitting right next to him at the kitchen table. She was beaming.

“Your mind is always with Bruce…” she caressed his forearm.

Clark blushed embarrassed on the realization that he wasn’t thinking of Bruce.

“Mmm… I can’t help it” he chuckled and sighed. “But I’ve got a daily job to maintain…”

Martha frowned.

“Speaking of which, it’s still working hours…”

Clark winked.

“I’m supposed to do field work investigating those burglaries in Metropolis’ labs.”

His mother raised her eyebrows shocked and amused at the same time.

“My baby would never skive off school or work!”

Clark chuckled.

“I can do my work while enjoying my Ma’s company… My hearing is tuned at Metropolis. And dear Martha deserves some attention” he kissed his mother’s cheek.

“Don’t fret about me, sweetheart” she smiled her eyes filled with love. “I’m always happy to see you but I know there are things that demand your attention…” she sighed. “I’m proud of you like your father was…even if what you do keeps you away from me. I know that there are people that their need is biggest than mine…”

Clark’s eyes caressed her wrinkled face and his heart ached for her loneliness after Jonathan died. He held her hands in his and kissed them.

“You saw the ceremony at UN building?”

She chuckled.

“Yes and I was crying like a baby from pride…not that I needed some decoration to know my child’s heart of gold…”

He cuddled his mother kissing her graying hair feeling again the same dread as with Bruce: the looming presence of death shadowing everything.

Lois’ melody from his smartphone blew like a bomb in the room and Clark rolled his eyes and reluctantly released his mother to take his smartphone.

“Kent here.”

“You could have given us a tip, farm boy…” Lois’ exasperated voice escaped the phone’s boundaries.

“What are you talking about, Lois?”

“Cut the crap, Clark! Bruce just arrived at Gotham’s airport and the Planet didn’t know anything! Why didn’t you tell something? Every news outlet of Gotham knew already so it wouldn’t be so bad if you informed us…”
Clark rubbed his forehead: damn! Bruce in Gotham… Yes, they had discussed it but had Bruce mentioned when? He closed his eyes raking his data. Yes, he had mentioned and he forgot it… FORGOT IT!

“Listen, Lois…I’m…I’m sorry…”

“What’s the matter, Smallville” he could hear her frown “I know you trust me with way more sensitive information than that…”

“Of course I do, Lois.”

“You forgot it, don’t you?” her voice was utterly shocked and Clark could hear her scoff. “My Goodness, what’s wrong with you, Clark?”

Clark lolled his head on the side and ruffled his hair.

“Planet got plenty of coverage from the last night’s reception in UN.”

“That’s not the point! Ugh, Clark! Fuck the Planet: we’re talking about more important things… At least, tell me that you escaped work and you’re incognito next to Bruce…”

He shook his head not knowing what to say.

“I’ve got to go, Lois…Bye.”

“Clark, wait…”

Selina could easily see through her friend’s façade of calm.

“I see… And you’re worried” she pressed her lips “for his safety and…there are other things, huh?”

Bruce lifted his eyes on her to catch also Alfred’s seemingly composed stare on the road that darted discreetly to the back seat.

“There’s nothing on the news.”

“And that’s more worrying for you. You have his number – call him.”

Bruce looked at Clark’s number that he had already on hi screen. However he hesitated.

“Maybe he just didn’t want to see me. And…” those matters were so awkward for him. “I don’t want to press him to speak to me.”

“Nonsense!” she rolled her eyes. “Something happened between you and you think that maybe he was pissed and didn’t come to see you. But you’re worried too so why not calling him?”

Bruce huffed and ran his fingers to Hero’s fur.

“There’s a chance he doesn’t want to speak me and for that he didn’t came or called. I don’t want to disturb him if that is what he wants…” his voice was decisive.

“Bullshit, handsome! You worry for him and need to learn he is okay – he is your boyfriend so a phone call is the first choice not…searching the net! Please!”
“Master Bruce, I think that Miss Kyle is right: calling him is the easiest and safest way. And I’m sure that Master Kent would be rather happy to see that you care – especially if something came out to disturb your happiness.”

Bruce sighed: all these made him uncomfortable yet he knew that they were right. And he felt the beat of agony in his chest not only for Clark’s safety – because he had the gut feeling that he was alright – but also for Clark’s possible detachment… He took in the others’ urging stares and decided that calling was better than live in uncertainty. He brushed his screen calling the number.

Clark hanged up hurriedly under his mother’s puzzled stare. The phone immediately rang again and Clark sighed: typical Lois! Yet he wasn’t in the mood to discuss it more so he deactivated the phone: he’d explain to her later.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Nothing.”

But Martha wasn’t convinced.

“Anything wrong with Bruce?”

Clark shrugged frustrated.

“No.”

Martha licked her lips.

“I heard Lois saying that you forgot about his coming back?”

Clark huffed.

“She doesn’t know how to lower the decibels of her voice… Yeah, I forgot: sometimes even Superman forgets things.”

Martha felt uncomfortable pressing her son but from the moment he made her happy coming for lunch she sensed that Clark was upset.

“How can you forget when every night you’re together?” she smiled. “I’m sure he mentioned last night?”

Clark lowered his head and drummed his fingers on the table making the dishes shake.

“I wasn’t with him last night” he raised his eyes to look at Martha. “I had to attend the UN ceremony and the reception after so…”

Martha touched his shoulder.

“I feel your upset, baby – you had a quarrel with Bruce? Are you displeased with him?”

Clark’s eyes hardened.

“He is too stubborn, Ma; he never listens, he never thinks about me…”

She pressed her lips: those words were so heated and so different from the way her son talked till now about the young man he loved.
“What happened, dear? If of course you feel like sharing…”

He yanked his head backwards.

“Maybe I forgot about his returning because I wanted to forget it!” Martha narrowed her eyes and Clark inhaled deeply. “I told him I didn’t want him to come back in Gotham but he didn’t care! All he cares about is…” he stopped abruptly: his Ma didn’t know about Batman.

“But it’s his city – his home. I bet he missed it all these months…”

Her voice was sweet as ever and Clark regretted his heated tone; he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“This city almost killed him, Ma! If he was sensible enough, if he listened to others, he would stay as far away as he could! But he is too obstinate and strong opinionated and…”

Martha cupped his face and brought their eyes to meet; she was smiling and Clark narrowed his eyes.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because it’s nice hearing that our Bruce has such a strong personality – after everything he’s been through people believe him to be weak and scared but you tell me that he is someone who stands his ground opposite…Superman. And that, my son, makes me really happy for that young man and…” she caressed his cheek “explains why you fell in love with him. I know that your heart is so kind that can embrace every human in pain and need but for falling so mad in love with someone, it’d take something more. Which now I understand. You wouldn’t love Bruce that much if he was different…”

Clark sighed: it was true – Bruce’s strength and personality was that electrified his body and soul. Even now in this awkward state picturing again the man’s sparkling with determination eyes made him crave for him.

“This is why you’re so upset: your feelings for him are too strong but you have to understand that he has some needs. The fact that he decided against what you wanted doesn’t mean that he doesn’t respect your opinion. I’m sure he is unhappy for having to do something you don’t like. He definitely would want you supporting his decisions and not being against and disgruntled…away from him. But Bruce has his own personality, Clark: you can’t decide for him either force things on him. And I know that deep inside you wouldn’t want that because then Bruce wouldn’t be the man you loved.”

Clark put his hands on his mother’s shoulders.

“Things are so complicated, Ma…” he inhaled deeply. “When he woke from the coma everything was so beautiful, so bright, so clear…but now…” he bit his lips and Martha frowned. “It’s not the same…I feel that I can’t cope with Bruce, I can’t give him what he needs and…” he felt that he could speak honestly at least with his Ma “I’m tired of this: I need something that won’t make my guts twist.”

Martha’s eyes widened.

“Your feelings have changed?” she asked.

Clark realizing the meaning of what he had said looked at his mother almost desperately.

“No! Absolutely not! I love Bruce as ever but…” he pressed his hair on his head “ugh! Ma, I don’t know what’s happening…”
She pressed her lips.

“It’s fatigue, Clark; I know that you never in your life experienced physical fatigue so now the emotional fatigue is quite odd for you. You and Bruce shared a Hell together all these months: things that hurt both of you. At first, the joy and relief from Bruce’s saving hid everything but slowly as the life becomes casual all these things are coming to the fore: Bruce feels the need to return to his normal life and you are afraid for him and this fear intensifies the impact of what you experienced while Bruce was fighting for his life. It’s a trial, son; a trial of your love.”

Clark nodded thoughtful.

“It’d be easier if he understood…He is a human and he is vulnerable and Gotham is full of dangers. Why is it so difficult for him to sympathize with me and ease my torment?”

Martha smiled.

“Maybe he does, maybe is as much difficult for him as for you…But he needs to be himself or else he’ll be miserable and withered. We, humans, are vulnerable but this isn’t our only quality: if Bruce submit to you and settles in his vulnerability you’ll be still interested? You’ll still be interested in a being that would be half? Is that what you really want from him? To be submissive and simply obey to your wishes?”

He pressed his lips and swallowed hard. He remembered Falcone’s slave: Bruce’s façade to satisfy his owner. It was just a mask then but still echoed Bruce’s suffering all the years under Falcone’s mastery. Clark cringed: no, he didn’t want to be turned into Bruce’s new owner. He met his mother’s eyes.

“I don’t want that…” he whispered and his heart felt light.

Martha nodded.

“I know…Because your love is real: I remember your suffering and agony while his life stood on the edge and you were coming to me… I remember your elation when he was saved, when he first opened his eyes and talked to you…”

Clark’s eyes watered: he remembered too. Martha kissed his cheek.

“When in doubt, recall those moments…”

Bruce kept his face completely unruffled as his tablet called several times Clark’s smart phone. No answer. He finished the call decisively. He looked at Selina nonchalant.

“He has his phone deactivated…”

“Perhaps he is somewhere where he doesn’t risk being heard…”

“Or as I suspected, he doesn’t want to talk to me…”

“C’me on, Bruce!” Selina pouted. “You don’t honestly believe that!”

“Master Bruce, if you pardon my indiscretion” Bruce tilted his head and looked him exasperated “I must agree with Miss Kyle: I don’t think that this is the case.”

Bruce shook his head pressing his lips. They didn’t know what happened the last night Clark came
to him; they didn’t feel the change in him...

Alfred stopped the car at the back side of Selina’s apartment building and rushed to open the door for her. She was staring at her friend reading his sadness for what he believed that was indifference from Clar. Bruce locked eyes with her.

“Call him again! You’ll see it’s not what you think…”

Bruce smiled and ran his fingers to her cheek.

“It’s okay, Sel… Don’t worry.”

She kissed him on the cheek.

“Have a good rest, will you?”

“I will.”

She kissed Hero who meowed to her. She stepped out of the car and Bruce holding Hero leaned towards the door.

“Come to see us soon!”

Selina turned rapidly and kissed her friend again.

“Tomorrow morning, sweetie!” she caressed Hero once again. “Call Clark again!” she said and rushed to the building’s back door because she didn’t want them to see her eyes watering. After all, they’d soon see each other again!

Alfred started the engine.

“Do call Master Kent again, sir” his butler told him looking at him from the mirror.

But Bruce dropped the tablet on the seat and hugged Hero. He was feeling exhaustion slowly eroding his muscles deep to the bones.

“I’m too tired, Alfred; I just want to sleep for a couple of hours…”

Alfred nodded, worry evident in his face: a journey of ten hours was extreme for a healing organism, especially when sadness cast its torturing burden on everything else.

“Of course, sir: Leslie and Lucius took special care for the Manor to be ready. But first you’ll have a nice meal and your medicine.”

Bruce let his head rest on the back of the seat closing his eyes, taking solace by Hero’s warm tongue licking his face.

Dick was hanging from the still rings trying to finish his exercises. The gym was full of people: young and older athletes, trainers and other staff. In his trainer’s expression he could see that Jeffrey wasn’t much satisfied by his performance and Tony Zucco standing a few feet away in a corner was watching with his arms crossed and his lips pressed.

The boy clenched his teeth and turned his body upside down supported in his stretched arms which tremble too much – insanely more than the previous times. Jeffrey, his Afro-American trainer shook
“Stretch your legs more, Dick! Concentrate on your arms… Relax…”

Ugh! Relax! That was easy for you to say, Jeff… Dick gritted his teeth trying to stop his arms from shaking, the air pressing in his mouth. He closed his eyes but the result wasn’t as the other times: his heart beat too loudly, too fast…too angry.

“IT’s okay, Dick” Jeff yelled clapping once and Dick knew that his trainer gave up for today. “We’ll continue tomorrow” after you find again your self-control, Dick filled the gap in his trainer’s words.

The boy let his body fell entirely gracelessly disappointed with himself and angry… and then landed on his tiptoes. Jeff smiled to him and patted his shoulder.

“Go take a shower and back home to get some rest: you’ve made a great progress the last months so you can relax a bit…”

Zucco approached with his light strides and covered Dick’s shoulders with the big towel he was holding. He smiled with Dick’s awed eyes when took in the towel’s imprint: three times Olympic Champion – the legend: John Grayson. Under that there were signatures – names that Dick recognized as some of the world’s greatest gymnasts. He had heard about the towel that was given to his dad as a token of his colleagues’ respect but never till now had he seen it.

Jeff looked irritated at Zucco: he didn’t want Dick being stressed and pressed by his legendary father’s legacy. He wanted his young athlete to focus on what he could achieve and not on a stupid pressure to repeat his father’s feats. And Jeff, unlike some of his colleagues in the gym, didn’t like Zucco.

“Dick, shower and home” he said to the boy.

Zucco nodded to Dick and winked.

“Exactly, Dick; Jeff is right.”

“You’ll wait?” the boy asked him calmly.

Zucco smiled.

“Of course, champ!” they slapped their palms in the air and Dick ran to the showers.

Jeff walked to Zucco towering him, his eyes’ cold.

“I don’t want you here, Zucco…”

The shorter man grinned meeting his eyes.

“The gym isn’t yours, Jeff… As far as I know, it’s public…”

Jeff protruded his lower lip.

“Let the boy alone: I don’t like your bad influence on him.”

Zucco laughed.

“This is for Dick to decide and he wants me here. So you’re not entitled to kick me out.”
Jeff shook his head.

“What do you want from the boy, huh? Returning here all of a sudden?” his thick eyebrows knitted.

“Hang out with my nephew” he answered casually.

“As if…” Jeff spat and pressed his finger on Zucco’s chest. “I’ll being watching you…”

Zucco winked.

“You’re still a homosexual, Jeff? I wonder if the parents of your young athletes know that and how they’re gonna react hearing…”

The veins in Jeff’s bulging deltoids moved irritated wanting to ignite an attack but a fellow trainer called him and he walked away glaring at Zucco who raised his eyebrows jeering.

“Thank you for showing me that towel” Dick approached him after some minutes holding the famous towel folded carefully. “I thought it was just some exaggeration…” he gave the precious item to Zucco but he waved him off.

“No… It belongs to you” Dick’s eyes bulged. “Your father would want you to have it.”

Dick’s eyes fell touched on the towel: it was so perfectly preserved. He put it carefully in his gym bag. It was obvious that it had great emotional value for Tony and the man just gave it to him! He remembered what his granny had told him the morning and blushed ashamed of her.

“Come…” Zucco put his arm around Dick’s shoulders and led him towards the small cafeteria of the gym. “You have time or you must go home immediately?”

Dick met his eyes and shook his head.

“I can stay a bit.”

Zucco raised his eyebrows innocently.

“You sure that your granny won’t worry?”

“It’s okay – I’m not a kid.”

Zucco grinned.

“You’re definitely not: you’re an incredibly mature teen” he gesture to him to seat at the table on the corner and he walked to the bar returning with a coffee for him and a natural juice for Dick.

Dick eyed the juice and shook his head.

“I’d rather a chocolate or a milk shake…” he said mischievously.

Zucco crossed his legs casually and chuckled.

“I’m sure you do, young man, yet you must be careful with your diet: you’re an aspiring champion. Anytime now you should start attending tournaments and even championships.”

“I have already some honorable mentions for my performance in tournaments in our state” he blushed admitting and Zucco nodded. “Mom was very proud…” his voice dropped. “Now I don’t feel any mood on participating…and my skills as you saw earlier are off…”
Zucco raised his palm stopping him; his eyes were firm.

“You’re a great talent, kid, and you shouldn’t ever forget that.”

“You saw how trembled my arms unable even to hold my body…” he said frustrated playing with the straw in his glass.

Zucco supported his elbows on the table and leaned towards the boy.

“You can do way more than this: I know your range of movements is incredible for your age” he took a deep breath having gained Dick’s attention. “Today, you just weren’t concentrated: your mind was elsewhere.”

Dick frowned.

“How do you know?”

Zucco bit his lips.

“Because your father was exactly like this towards the end…” he gulped. “It was a phase where his career had turned downwards…” the adult took in the boy’s intrigued stare and smirked inside but didn’t let Dick utter his questions. “I know what caused it…and understand.”

He looked upwards on the wall behind Dick where a huge TV screen was built-in. Dick made to turn his head to see but he narrowed his eyes and changed course only with a glimpse of what was on. His face became gloomy and his lips upturned in disgust. His shoulders slumped: once again they were showing Wayne’s return.

Zucco cupped his hand on the table.

“He’s alive…” he mumbled sympathetically “and he is back – I know, Dick: it hurts that he came back while your loved ones who died because of him won’t ever come back…” he took in the boy’s lips trembling. “Life is unfair, champ, but you should not let him ruin your life anymore” he smiled. “You should use him as a motivation to become a champion” he winked. “He is disabled and I hope he never walks again so your success in gymnastics would hurt him more…”

Dick nodded although he wasn’t sure if Wayne gave a shit about him becoming a champion and how could this hurt him. Yet indeed seeing him disabled, glued to a wheelchair gave him a wild satisfaction.

Zucco watched carefully the boy’s expression: he was easy to read like his father and his hatred for Wayne was a sure way to win Dick over. He took a sip from his coffee taking in the boy’s frown.

“Drink your juice, Dick; it will lose its nutrients.”

But Dick’s mind was occupied with something else.

“You said that my father was like me…towards the end…” he hesitated and finally met Zucco’s eyes. “It was because his career was lapsing…, right?” Dick wanted to hear Zucco’s take of the story and compare it with his granny’s.

The adult opposite him became serious but not uncomfortable.

Zucco was smirking inside: so Ms. Turner opened that closet… She was desperate to take the boy away from him and would use everything to achieve it. She was a clever cow but he was cleverer
and the boy definitely didn’t listen to her – exactly like John, at least at first.

“No, Dick: his career was lapsing because he wasn’t concentrated” he sighed as if reluctant to continue. “He was facing personal problems and that had a detrimental effect in his performance” he relished the boy’s widened eyes.

“Personal problems?” Dick tensed. “Mom said that they were happy together.”

Zucco tilted his head on the side and smiled warmly.

“I’d have said the same in her place… A mother always wants to keep unpleasant things far from her child” he pinched the bridge of his nose. “On the other hand, it’s tough to speak about the problems your husband was facing when those problems were in fact…” he shook his head: he knew that choosing to not say directly what he wanted was the best to persuade the kid that he was telling the truth and that cared about him “let’s drop it…Poor Mary died a terrible death so let’s forget the rest…”

Dick drew a big sip from his juice, his breath caught in his lungs.

“Mom had something to do with dad’s problems?” he demanded breathlessly.

“Mmm…let’s say that family is what causes the personal problems of a married man. Listen, Dick, I don’t want to cause any troubles to your relation with your granny…I know that she doesn’t like me and if she learns that I told you about that…” he grimaced. “Ms. Turner has already many things in her head – honestly, I don’t want to cause new pains to her. And you.”

Dick rolled his eyes: Zucco should hear his granny talking about him…She wasn’t so generous with him; she didn’t hesitate to speak ill about him.

“Please, Tony, you must tell me everything about dad: I know that parents often have fights – it’s not that I’ll hate my mom or something…”

Zucco drink from his coffee.

“You’re an admirable young man…So unbelievably mature for your age that you’d understand your mom’s increasing upset and restlessness when your father’s investments failed to make profit…” he shrugged satisfied from the boy’s widened eyes. “It’s understandable, Dick: she was panicked. Your dad’s career had peaked, he was a champion but in a few years he would have to retire – the money he naively put in some insecure business was their savings from advertising contracts that probably he wouldn’t get again” Dick gaped shocked: so his dad was…broke?

“Mom wasn’t…I mean she didn’t love money more than my dad…” the boy was flabbergasted and Zucco pressed his lips.

“I didn’t say that, my boy. Mary loved John but she was scared; she felt insecure and – I’m sorry for saying it – your granny wasn’t helping” he was enjoying the different shades of color Dick’s face was taking from red to pale. “Women need some security in their lives and when things aren’t so good…” he sighed dramatically and ruffled his hair. “John was sharing his pains with me but it wasn’t enough…He just couldn’t concentrate on his craft, he felt a loser and one day…” he didn’t know if Turner had reached to the point of speaking about that but he would “after a surprise drag test, he was found…”

Dick jerked angry.

“My father refused he had done use – he didn’t know anything!”
So she indeed told the boy.

“Calm down, Dick; please…” the boy sat again a bit reluctantly. “I’m the last person in the planet that I’d say anything bad about John: he was a great athlete in talent and morality; his teammates and people adored him” he gulped touched. “Damn! He was my hero!”

He leaned towards Dick and took his hands in his own.

“But you have to understand that sometimes despair changes even the best of people… Mary wasn’t happy with their marriage and she even spoke about breaking up and poor John wanted to regain her trust, to help her feel secure” his eyes stabbed the boy’s hurt eyes “to stop her from leaving him…”

Dick shook his head in disbelief.

“But she was pregnant when dad died.”

“Yes, she was but that was after your father was found positive in use of illegal substances – Mary still loved your father and realized that her coldness had pushed him to desperate measures. So she gave him a second chance – and I’m glad…” he smiled “because we got you…”

Dick’s eyes were expressionless: his heart ache from all these and his brain was confused. It was the first time that a doubt about his parents’ love and marriage got to him – till now everything he had heard was like a fairytale. He didn’t believe it and at the same time…believe it…well, not exactly: maybe Zucco was lying?

“Dad said that someone slipped the substances secretly in his drinks or food…” he said searching Zucco’s eyes but there he could see only understanding.

“Me, right?” he smiled. “That’s what your granny told you?” Dick didn’t answer and Zucco didn’t need him too. “Believe me, my boy: you can take her word for that” he nodded “actually, I’d prefer it if you thought ill about me than have a prickle in your heart. But I didn’t…If I had done that don’t you think that your father would have fired me? It’s easy for people blaming the others than admitting their own faults…” he said meaning Ms. Turner.

Dick pouted and lowered his eyes.

“There ya are!” a young voice that was trying to sound tough startled Dick. “Ya told me to wait ya at Bernie’s, ya dork!” Dick looked at Jason sheepishly and the younger boy cast an irritated glare at Zucco. “Up!” he pulled Dick from his jacket.

“Wait, Jay! I’m talking here!”

Jay put his foot down.

“Yeah! Yar talkin’ bullshit!”

But Dick paled seeing Ms. Turner walking furiously towards them. Her short posture tensed eyeing Zucco who answered her glare calmly but with a glint of satisfaction.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Turner! I hope there’s no problem we chatting with Dick – if it is however, I take the full responsibility.”

Ms. Turner didn’t even answer.

“Let’s go, Dick” she said to her grandson and led the two boys outside under Zucco’s amused eyes.
Only after they were outside the building, Ms. Turner stopped her frantic pace and squatted before Dick.

“I think I told you to return home right after your training! What’s wrong, sweetie?” her voice cracked and her eyes bent. “I know I’m not your mother but…” her eyes watered and Dick just couldn’t stand it: despite everything he heard today he loved her so much.

He hugged his grandmother.

“You’re the best, granny, and I love you…I just…”

Jason was watching exasperated with his hands clenching his waist.

“It’s just that Dick sometimes is…a dick!”

Ms. Turner turned to him realizing his presence. She smiled fondly.

“Who is this charming young man?” she asked Dick and Jason actually blushed which made his friend chuckle.

“He is my buddy, Jason Todd. Well, Jay, this is my granny.”

Jason cast him a lopsided glance.

“I figured already…”

Ms. Turner stood and stretched her hand to Jason and he took it uncomfortable.

“You’re not Dick’s classmate, right?”

Jason scratched his nape.

“Nah…”

“He is from Narrows” Dick felt that he must be honest at least now. “But he’s my best pal.”

His granny smiled to the two boys.

“I’m very glad to meet you, Jason!” and she definitely was: after Joker killed Dick’s family, Ms. Turner was afraid that her grandson would shut himself from the world: actually, his teacher had warned her that indeed Dick became very aloof. So Jay was the best thing right now – the little boy gave her hope.

Jason sensed the elder woman’s affection and felt awkward; he wasn’t used to people being glad for his meeting or so fond of him. Even his mom didn’t look at him with such shining eyes.

“Mmmm…Me too…” he glared at Dick who was smirking. “Ya…” he was ready to call him something nasty but he remembered Ms. Turner and stopped. “I…I’ve got to buzz off…mom is waitin’.”

Ms. Turner frowned seeing the young boy riding a bike and rushing into the road.

“He isn’t too young to drive a bike?” she asked dumbfounded and put her arm around Dick’s shoulder leading him towards their home that wasn’t too far from the city gym.

“Jay is an awesome dude! He lives in the Narrows!” he said with awe.
Ms. Turner nodded.

“Why you didn’t tell me about him?”

Dick chewed his lips.

“’Cause he’s from Narrows and I thought that you’d forbid me from hang out with him…to not get in the wrong path…” he raised his eyebrows.

Ms. Turner shrugged.

“He seems a good boy and growing up in Narrows is a feat…No, I have no problem with you being friends with Jay: you can invite him home if you like. Zucco on the other hand…”

But Dick was too tired from everything he heard that afternoon.

“Please, granny…” he pleaded. “Can we just drop it for today?”

Ms. Turner pressed her lips: her poor boy was so tormented by all these; he had just lost his family and now this…

Thomas Eliot had just finished his lecture at Gotham’s university and was heading to his office at the top floor of the Neuroscience Department. It was the best situated office with a panoramic view of the city since this building was rather tall and the university was placed on the hills at the east of the city. Thomas had asked for that specific office because since his student years he was envious of the old, gloomy professor Georgiou for occupying it.

Well, ten years later and he, Thomas Elliot, was putting his key in the lock of that same office where that old rascal preached him about being more modest and moral concerning his scientific projects. Opening the door, Thomas smirked: dear professor, here I am! An acknowledged doctor and scientist with great, breakthrough work and an endless list of charities: a role model for his students.

Thomas got almost aroused every time he entered the amphitheater to teach all these students. He sucked their attentive eyes and respect. He was beaming and smirking inside because he put on a modest, serious, nonchalant face.

He relished the luxury he established for the office and the smell of the expensive air freshener. He brushed the control panel on the wall and the secret lighting illuminated the space. He tossed his brown, leather briefcase on the armchair facing his desk and walked to the half-wall window overlooking Gotham that slowly began filling with multicolored lights as the evening approached.

Thomas pulled a deep diaphragmatic breath and exhaled slowly, his blazing blue eyes stabbing the city. He loosened his silken, mahogany tie product of a famous fashion house.

His eyes were empty as he gazed at the city: he hated that city…but at the same time was tied with her…well, at least now that Brucey returned from the dead. All these years that his childhood… ‘friend’ was considered dead Gotham bore no interest for him because he felt unchallenged, the definite winner. But when he first heard the shocking news of Bruce’s ‘resurrection’, his brilliant mind went completely numb as his body; his entire life was toppled…And since then Gotham despite hateful became an obsession much like that extremely lucky brat.

Thomas knew that he had to come back, to re-establish the order of things, to re-establish his superiority over that appalling thing which now was again the Prince of Gotham: the favorite son of
this shithole. Thomas was dethroned: his successful career and his feats that till now made Gotham proud and positioned him at a pedestal were forgotten only because that brat happened to be alive and saved by Stark and the other assholes superheroes.

He fist his hands; all this attention and love that filthy whelp used to get even during their childhood was outrageous! “The Little Prince of Gotham”, “the Angel of the Narrows” – everybody was kissing his little ass to lick his father. And Tommy was always left in the shadow, although he was brighter than that stupid kid and better in everything…

Thomas breath became rasps. That pint-sized puppy always got everyone’s eyes and admiration without doing anything and his parents adored him while poor Tommy had to suffer his rascal father and his stupid mother who never took his side…

Thomas smirked: at least, Falcone gave Brucey what he deserved. He remembered how aroused he was listening to Bruce’s testimony at the court: his steady voice that failed to hide his pain and terror as he recounted the various and so delicious torments Falcone had put him through. Thomas, who snubbed the Gotham’s Emperor during his kingship, now felt a deep respect for the man who understood the real nature of Bruce Wayne and what he should get; his only failure was that he didn’t finish the job.

But then that clown killed the man and Thomas was enraged at how that boy managed to fascinate all these people: from scum to superheroes.

Thomas yanked his head; from the moment he learnt that Bruce was alive he wanted to return and finish the job Falcone left half… Thomas’ eyes were fixed on the city that lay underneath: he’d become this city’s ruler and do Bruce’s life a living Hell: eighteen years of Falcone wasn’t enough for the Wayne brat and Thomas would take care of making him wish he had stayed in Falcone’s bed. He had already established connections…

He smiled remembering the sweet, angelic face of Bruce when young Thomas ripped the leg of his Tao-Tao toy: oh! Bruce, you should cry all the time… A cackled laugh escaped his mouth seeing again those wet, beautiful eyes filled with weak rage, despair and hopeless bewilderment: the little shit couldn’t understand how someone could be so cruel to him – he was accustomed to be loved and sweet talked by everyone. Bruce couldn’t accept that people around him weren’t as good as himself and could be happy by making him suffer and cry.

The phone on his desk rang and dragged him out of his reverie; he turned his head towards the stylized expensive device and wondered who could be. Probably, something professional since the more personal calls were made at his smartphone… He closed his eyes and puffed: he had closed his smartphone when at Gotham General and with the lecture right after he forgot to open it.

He let the phone ring several times, sitting slowly and pompously at his royal, ergonomic leather chair and clapping once for the built-in fireplace to ignite: the room was warm enough but Thomas loved the atmosphere of nobility it gave.

He finally took the receiver.

“Oh, Tommy, at last!”

Thomas yanked his head and pouted his lips in disdain.

“Hi, sweetheart! What’s the matter?” he answered hearing Kelly’s voice was a bit exasperated and filled with eagerness.
“I’m trying to reach you for hours!” the idiot nurse kept bitching instead of getting to the point.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose asking himself if he really had to tolerate that stupid girl.

“I’m sorry, darling, but I had a surgery at Gotham General and then right after a lecture in the University and I forgot to open my smartphone…” really now? You have to justify yourself to HER?

He heard her taking a hesitant breath as if regretting her tone.

“You don’t have to apologize, Tommy” she said and Thomas imagined her blushing. “A…actually, I’m sorry for…for my tone but I have exciting news and I didn’t know if you heard…”

Thomas straightened in his chair and frowned.

“What news, babe?”

“Oh! So you really didn’t learn anything…of course, with all the things you have to do daily…”

The doctor rolled his eyes and snorted finding it hard to not burst out.

“OK, Kelly… What’s up?”

“Bruce Wayne returned!” she was in fact happy for that. “Every station plays it! And I thought you’d want to know ASAP!”

Thomas’ lips formed a tight line, his eyes shining coldly.

“Thank you, my dear. Of course, I wanted to know…”

He heard a pressed breath and he understood that the nurse remembered something.

“Mmmm…Tommy…” she mumbled rather apologetically and Thomas was intrigued.

“What is it, Kelly? You make me worry…”

“I’m sorry…Is that your friend… I mean the way he has returned…” Thomas clenched his jaw and ruffled his perfect groomed hair. “He was using a wheelchair!” she was really miserable relaying these news because she really believed that he gave a shit about Brucey’s wellbeing.

But this was very interesting and satisfying.

“Oh! God!” he exclaimed in his best heartbroken imitation. “I knew that something was off…Poor Bruce! But maybe he was just tired from the trip and they used the wheelchair to help him.”

She sounded thoughtful.

“Yeah! Maybe he isn’t really paralyzed!”

Thomas shook his head in disbelief: I hope he really is! Yet he had to get rid of her to see it with his own eyes.

“Kelly, I must hang up now – I have an appointment with a student for his diatribe…Mmm…thank you, babe for calling: you’re a treasure.”

“I’ll see you tonight?” she asked with a begging tone. “I’m not in the night shift and I know that you’re not as well so if you wanted…”
Thomas rolled his eyes and his lips twitched in disgust: that’s what you get when you encourage too much people. Anyway, she was useful for now.

“I don’t know yet, babe. You can’t imagine how much I’m dreaming of a night with you! I’ll call you… Now give me a kiss!”

She giggled and did that causing Thomas’ snort.

“Bye, Tommy!”

He just put the receiver back feeling a deep disgust for what just took place. He inhaled deeply: at least now he was free. He rushed on his computer and opened the Gotham Gazette’s site.

His eyes narrowed, sparkling with wild joy. Here it was: head news.

“The Prince of Gotham is finally back – but on a wheelchair!”

He turned on the video from his arrival at one of Gotham’s private airports. He shook his head and a wide smile lightened his face as the frame filled with Bruce confined in a fancy wheelchair – certainly, Stark’s creation – pushed carefully by Alfred.

His childhood ‘friend’ was in good shape: no paleness or thinness. Wherever Brucey was the place made wonders considering the critical condition he was. The Wayne brat had rosy cheeks and must have gained some weight; he looked tired from the trip – and that meant that his rehabilitation center wasn’t in US – but at the same time seemed rested.

But the best was that he returned a paraplegic. Thomas shook his head: that chair wasn’t like the ones used by companies to just help their ill clients – that chair was made for permanent use.

“Yes!” he exclaimed gesturing to the air. “That serves you right, my little friend, since you turned over my professional help! I could have saved you, you selfish, arrogant shit! Suffer now!” his teeth grinded.

But then he loosened in an innocent grin, a thought forming in his mind.

“Yet a true friend must be forgiving and sympathetic, right, Brucey?”

Dr. Quinzel was watching on her tablet the footage from the Asylum’s cafeteria the moment Joker attacked to his former goon. She was outside Joker’s double cell, sat on a plain chair; Joker was lying on the bed, still unconscious since the rising in his vitals during the attack activated Tony Stark’s intra-organization measures and the man was instantly knocked out. However, she took care to be woken up sooner than it was programmed.

It was the fifth time she was watching the video: Mr. J was talking as usual with Crane during their meal. Her patient was calm and even pleasant with the former doctor who however kept acting a bit strange if not hostile – anyway, Mr. J didn’t seem the type to hold grudges. Then he looked fleetingly at the TV and his eyes fell casually on his former henchman who was enthusiastic on seeing his former boss. And Mr. J’s reaction wasn’t bad either.

He continued his discussion with Crane which discussion seemed very interesting – Harley was curious to learn what they were talking about. She had brought up the subject to Dr. Finley, the psychiatrist who was appointed to Crane but he had no idea albeit he was as much interested as her and… alarmed at the same time. Dr. Finley was a fearful man and didn’t like the idea of Joker
walking around in the Asylum’s premises. What a bad professional!

Suddenly, without an obvious reason, Mr. J jerked upwards and in a remarkable fast way jumped on his former goon digging his teeth in his neck. It was a good think Mr. Stark had his intra-organization triggers to knock out Joker because the orderlies’ intervention would have been too late. Thankfully, the goon – a Lou Garfield with Down’s syndrome and manic disorder – wasn’t seriously injured though he would bear for some time Mr. J’s bite marks... Joker had managed to remove a chunk from the man’s neck in the fraction of the second before falling unconscious.

Harleen felt goose bumps: it was kind of pervert… and she had worked it with her supervisor psychiatrist but... vampirism was a turn on for her... Well, apart from being a psychiatrist she was a human too so... some eccentricities were permitted when harmless...

Her gaze fell on Mr. J: he was a fascinating man… well, case. A hard case and at the same time he had the potential to become her biggest success. She bit her lips: professional success and ambition wasn’t the only drive for her – she really wanted to help him become a reformed man. Because Mr. J, Jack, was a special person and he could change into being a man skilled in whatever he wanted. Harleen could see his above average I.Q., she didn’t need to apply some test: she doubted whether someone so extremely intelligent and rebellious like Jack would take that tests seriously.

And there wasn’t only his intelligence; he could become a good person. She was sure that he was one but his life experiences turned him into that mass murderer – he lived for ten years in a psychiatric hospital! And Harleen wasn’t sure that the staff there cared much about some punk the police sent them. But she cared and Mr. J seeing that changed already. He opened up to her during their last session and gave her a glimpse of his tormented life. He even socialized with the other patients without any incident proving that he can be nice to others and that he wasn’t the blood-thirsty and sociopathic monster everyone thought.

Till now. Harleen almost immediately saw the reason of Mr. J’s violent reaction: it was on the TV screen. It showed Bruce Wayne’s arrival at Gotham’s private airport, the billionaire descending the special ramp on a wheelchair with his butler’s assistance.

The young psychiatrist grinded her teeth: that arrival ruined every progress she had accomplished with her fascinating patient. He just pushed Mr. J miles back to his cruel, sociopathic self. It was evident that Bruce Wayne was Mr. J’s demon – weren’t for him, her patient would have continued his impressive improvement.

She was really angry with the timing because Joker manifested signs that he had nearly overcome the young billionaire and even he seemed to get interested in her; so Harleen was really angry with her patient’s infatuation – Bruce Wayne could have stayed away from Gotham for some time more, right? Or forever... If Wayne was dead, Mr. J would sooner or later forget him and proceed into becoming a normal, charming person with her guidance.

Harleen bit her lip: that was completely inappropriate. It wasn’t Bruce Wayne’s fault that Mr. J got obsessed with him. On the contrary, surely the young man wished that Joker never had set eyes on him.

Mr. J stirred for the tenth time since she rushed there after being informed for the incident. He was meant to stay unconscious for many hours but she intervened so to be woken earlier. Harleen watched eagerly his eyelids and finally she saw a fraction of his glimmering orbs.

Joker felt awkward: he was knocked out a few times in his life yet this one had a different quality. He cocked an eyebrow and chuckled: Stark’s touch! Hehehe! Not bad! He could sell it in clubs to stupid brats wanting great stuff. He still felt a pleasant tickling in every cell of his body – ummm...
imagined that banging Brucey would be like this…

His muscles became tense and his eyes narrowed to slits: a flash crossing his mind showed him the screen in the cafeteria with the footage from his spouse’s arrival…On a wheelchair, led by someone else, unable to stand, a cripple…He gritted his teeth and groaned. He saw again the moronic face of his goon laughing carelessly as if he hadn’t done anything wrong or happy for what he did! He pulled the trigger that caused the fire, the collapse of the building that disabled Batman and…Bruce.

He punched his mattress in frustration realizing that he was knocked out before causing fatal damage to that scum. Damn! Lou was still alive! He punched again and suddenly erupted in laughter.

“Mr. J, how do you feel?”

So, he wasn’t alone. The funny little doctor was here, worried about her prodigy patient. Joker cackled: he definitely had a splendid time with her but now it wasn’t enough. He looked her with the corner of his eye without moving his head just putting one leg upon another.

“What’s uuuuuup, doc?” he asked indifferently so unlike his attitude towards her.

Harleen immediately discerned the difference and didn’t like it – it almost hurt. She didn’t want to lose her patient’s interest just because the Wayne heir returned.

“You don’t have anything to tell me?” she answered.

Joker made a negative sound pouting his lips, still not looking at his doctor, being aware that this was unsettling to her.

Dr. Quinzel closed her eyes disappointed but she wasn’t a quitter.

“Mr. J, what happened at the cafeteria?” she continued calmly, even compassionate.

Joker’s eyes fixed on the ceiling as if it was the most interesting thing and put his palms under his nape.

“Youuuuu have cameras watching the place soooooo this is a stupid question ooooooor a slyyyyyyyy one… Whaaaaat option you prefer, Harle--quin?” his voice was now cold and Harleen felt hurt after how close they had come.

“I’m interested in your view of things, Mr. J; I thought we had come to this understanding all this time…”

“HA!” he exclaimed sarcastic and then giggled. “I think that YOU” he stressed the word accusingly “should stay with what the cameras showed” he nodded. “HEHEHEHE! I have the im--pression that the short film you have is eloquent enough…HUHU…HUHU…HUHU…HUHU…” he ended in a singsong manner knowing that he was getting on the young psychiatrist.

Harleen was really upset: till now she had Jack’s trust. Jack showed her that he believed her good will. She didn’t like that he was getting so cold to her, treating her as he did everyone else.

“I sense that you got some complaint…”

Joker giggled but still didn’t look at her which really annoyed Harleen.

“Meeeee? Complaint?” he exclaimed amused. “Naaaaaah! I’m a tooootally satisfied customer…” he paused and his eyes stabbed the ceiling. “If you crooooos out that MY doctor who braaaaags that
cares about me allowed that perv Stark put something in me to knock me out whenever he wants to!”
he turned suddenly his head and stabbed Harleen’s widened eyes. “Now” he dragged his tongue “I
don’t think that this is the way to get someone’s truuuust…” he lolled his head downwards with his
eyelids batting innocently.

Dr. Quinzel managed to find her calm and looked at him casually.

“Mr. Stark’s measures were taken not to torment you but to prevent you from harming other people
and yourself – you were ready to tear apart the neck of that man.”

Joker twitched his lips.

“If you had killed that man I’d be forced to keep you in complete isolation and withdraw all the
privileges you gained with your admirable efforts” Joker hiccuped to hide his giggles on the
‘admirable efforts’. “So actually you should be grateful to Mr. Stark” she said widening her eyes for
emphasis.

Joker shook his index finger to her.

“I wouuuuuldn’t be grateful to Stark--y even if he was our best man aaaaand his wedding gift was a
car like Bruce’s…” he crossed his arms and then uncrossed them cackling. “Grateful…” he
mimicked the doctor’s solemn voice and shook his head amused.

“What’s the reason you attacked Mr. Garfield? Until that moment you were talking calmly with Mr.
Crane and you even greeted that man.”

Joker had fixed his right eye on her cocking an eyebrow.

“I dooooon’t have to answer youuuuu. Harlequin…” he spat nasally like a small brat and devoured
how the doctor pressed her lips in frustration.

Harleen took a deep breath.

“It was that you saw Bruce Wayne on TV…” she said to prompt him to elaborate since there was
nothing secret.

Joker eyed her under furrowed eyebrows and narrowed eyes: ha! So the doll face had an ounce of
brain enough to watch carefully the footage and connect the dots. Well, it didn’t take Einstein’s
brains to figure THAT. A Cheshire smile curved his cheeks.

“Uuuuuuuuu! Youuuuu are a smart pumpkin” he clapped his hands. “Now you have your answer,
hit the road!” his voice became harsh.

“I’m not” she retorted calmly. “Not before you speak about what happened.”

He laughed and his back shook. He lay again on the mattress returning his eyes to the ceiling.

Harleen felt like crying from frustration: why Mr. J was doing that to her? He knew that she was on
his side, that she wanted to help him. It wasn’t her fault that Bruce Wayne didn’t want him or that he
was a convict; a dangerous man that should be guarded all the time. For pity’s sake, she wanted to
change that and make him a free person again without anyone having to be scared of him and instead
see in Jack what she had seen.

“It’s a pity that all our work and trust was ruined because of a news’ footage… You must control
what that man is doing to you. We must work on that.”
Joker let out a sole cackle: control what Bruce was doing to him... What’s the fun in controlling what you want to be uncontrolled? Bruce was a totally uncontrollable force – so much so that his abusers-masters failed to tame after so many years of thinking the kid a zobbie. So everything that this man provoked was uncontrolled and that was what made Joker fascinated like a kid finding an exciting, unpredictable game, as himself...

Harleen understood that Joker wasn’t paying much attention to her, probably pondering on his... wife. And that was annoying! She was struggling to help him and he had his mind on that man who didn’t give a shit about him – Bruce Wayne hated Mr. J whereas she cared about him: she was the only person that really cared about Joker and believed in him and his hidden quality.

“You need to understand that Bruce Wayne triggers the worst things in you” she tried to sound collected.

Worst things? Joker moved his lips as if blowing a gum bubble. Nothing was bad in Joker so worst was a stupid term but he could sniff the young doctor’s despair. Hehe! He had done a perfect job: the shrink got attached to him and every speck of his attention and ‘secret information’ about his life and soul was the most delicious bone for that puppy to wave its tail. And when he withdrew that bone… oh, it was hilarious! Harlequin was desperate to do anything for getting her rubber bone back – rubber because it was a fake bone all this talk about his past life: Hell, it was obscure even to him...

Joker chuckled: all in all, psychology was a great science. Look how right it was about conditional learning... I love you and your dogs, Pavlov!

Harleen realized that her patient wasn’t listening to her at all and closed her eyes.

“You don’t hear me…”

Time for a hint of a bone...

“’Course I dooooo, doc! I loooove your voice after all!” he turned his wicked eyes on her flushed from frustration face. “Didn’t I tell ya?”

The young psychiatrist felt relieved and satisfied by that comment.

“We must work on your infatuation with Bruce Wayne; the time we discuss things together I came to the conclusion that this man is the key for your reform. If you get over him” her eyes shone “you’ll be a new man: your true self!”

Joker turned his hand into a gun and pretended to shoot his temple.

“Ho-holly shit!” he gazed again at the ceiling.

Harleen squinted. Mr. J’s gesture definitely wasn’t a sign of him taking her words seriously but she knew that would be hard for him to give up on his obsession.

“I get that you don’t agree?”

Joker whistled: well, Harlequin might have some professional titles but much like Crane her brain was losing some spins. He giggled: she really believed that Bruce made him what he was? But he was his charming self even before that groundbreaking night he met him at Stark’s party.

His doctor cleared her throat.

“I know you were killing people years before you met Bruce Wayne and I don’t claim that he was
the trigger for that behavior. Yet in this phase, he hinders your liberation.”

The last word made an impact on Joker who jolted from his bed and stood, walking towards the inner barrier before the blue neon energy bars. He supported his elbows on the railing and stooped his head towards Harleen who was watching eagerly.

“That’s…that’s” he shook his index finger “Dr. Harlequin is the gist. Freedom!”

Harleen stood up and walked to the energy bars.

“Exactly! You deserve a second chance: you deserve to be free…”

Joker gave a full Cheshire smile and nodded.

“I’ll agreeeee with that, doll face.”

Dr. Quinzel met his eyes.

“Free from yours demons – free from Bruce Wayne.”

“Hehehehehe!” he jerked his head backwards. “Naaaaaah! Deeeeemons are niice, sugar: I’m oone…and I can show you how exciting demons are.”

Harleen shook her head in denial: her patient after everything that was said from the press might have formed the idea of being a demon or saying that he is a demon was a figure of speech for the crimes he committed. At first, he didn’t manifest any sign of remorse but during their sessions he showed that things began changing. And that was hopeful.

“You’re not a demon, Mr. J. And you just agreed that you deserve to be free.”

Joker huffed exasperated.

“Free from that fucking Asylum, you dummy. At first, it was fun but now it’s getting booooring. And Joker wants to playyyyyyy!”

Harleen felt cold sweat: no, he just couldn’t drawback; he couldn’t just deny their work till now, his improvement. She managed to hold her calm.

“You’re a convict, Mr. J: you can’t get out of this institution without being healed, reformed.”

Joker licked his lips and cocked his eyebrows looking mockingly at her: she really believed that a stupid asylum could keep him jailed?

She read his thought and met his stare unfazed.

“You just experienced what happens when you misbehave…”

Joker kept her gaze but he was absorbed in his thoughts: mmmm…right, that mumbo-jumbo thing courtesy of Stark was entertaining and he didn’t regret his outburst yet it’d be even more fun if he had ripped the throat of that stupid goon. Stark’s nonsense wasn’t capable to hold him from maiming and killing buuuummmm upon seeing Bruce disabled made his vitals work differently than every other time he killed: his vitals rose just a tiny bit and that was enough to trigger the ‘knock out’ effect.

“Youuuu, Harlequin, have the same need to be freeeee…” he whispered in a hushed, too solemn tone.
“I’m free, Mr. J.”

Joker’s cackle was dry, humorless and he shook his torso as if he could get closer to her to share a secret.

“Naaaah, my dear… You may staaaate that, youuuuu may believe it at times buuuuut deep inside you feel imprisoned” the young psychiatrist was staring at him seemingly cool but Joker knew that she was interested – he nodded. “This well defined world you live in, your sup--posed success, your biiiig position in this fine establishment, your car--eer, your white criminal record – everything seems perfect, huh? Yet youuu feel empty, right, pumpkin?” Harleen shook her head in negation yet Joker smiled, a normal man’s smile. “You know that your self demands something else without which you’ll remain unfulfilled. Buuunt you don’t know what this is…oooooor” he stabbed her eyes with hers “you suuuuspect what it is – you’re fascinated by that buuuuuut you’re afraid to get iiinto it with everything you’ve got…” he licked his lips and nodded reading her inner numbness. “That’s why you’re en--grossed in scum like me, darling; and youuur profession gives you the best excuse to suck what you love…buuuut being in the perimeter of that isn’t enough, right? You want to dive into it…you neeeeed to follow what you really are to be complete, to be happy, to be free, Harleen… I can give you all that, Harlequin; I can freeeeee your true self because you know that I succeeded where you failed: I’m completely free.”

The young psychiatrist felt numb during his speech: it was true that she never felt OK with herself. It was like always pretending to the o0thers and her own self. And she wasn’t satisfied from her life: her isolation from her family, her nice apartment, her job and career; something was missing and she was getting something when talking with her patients with a criminal record… But it wasn’t what Joker hinted…Oh, no: she wouldn’t play his game. Her work was to make him follow her in the road to normalcy not vice versa. And in the end it was clear what he wanted.

“If you believe that I’m gonna help you escape, you’re wrong” she jerked her eyebrows decisively. “The only way you’re coming out of here is when you’re reformed. We were in a nice track and we’re going to return there… But you need to stop imagining that you can escape and that you’ll manipulate me to do what you want. Believe it or not I have much experience to be handled by you or anyone else in that way. So I’m leaving now, letting you think about it and get over the possible side effects of the knock out.”

Joker grinned to her and tilted his head on the side.

“I’m soooorry you took it thaaaat way, Dr. Harlequin. Buuut you can still come with me…to free--dom.”

Harleen just turned her back and walked away under Joker’s amused stare. His doctor was fun – he was sooooo lucky! And her reactions! She could be Rachel no. 2: he’ll definitely need a second expert apart from Crane for doing his things to Brucey…

Brucey… He recollected the image from the TV screen. Bruce was paraplegic. He scratched his head: well, Crane had told him that Morticia had shot him twice rendering him completely immobile below the neck. One point. The night Super-Goofy brought him back he was already disabled. Second point. Batman came to the factory and was fighting as always – definitely not a cripple. Third point. The Batman in the factory wasn’t an impostor. Fourth point. The factory collapsed that night but Batman was reported stalking Gotham afterwards… And we know that Bruce was already disabled.

Maybe Batman wasn’t Brucey and Brucey wasn’t Batman… How could someone with two bullets in his spine, crippling him, come and fist fight with him? Maybe he was wrong in his suspicions?
He yanked his head backwards and laughed amused. Or maybe the boy was toooooo clever and was trying to play with him like he did with Falcone and the others. Or Joker was wrong: it wasn’t easy to stand up and run to save a bunch of brats even if you want to… But also it wasn’t easy for Joker to let go of his suspicions…after all, he was interested about Brucey even before noticing the similarities oooooor coincidences…

Joker giggled: oh! That game was getting more exciting with time: Bruce or Batman gave a new meaning to the word fun. Now he only had to get out of here aaaaand play along putting his own chaotic rules.
Chapter 17

It was the tenth time Alfred came to the master bedroom which was in subtle darkness since the thick drapes were closed hours before to ensure a restful sleep for his young master. The exterior lighting of the grounds that automatically turned on with the evening’s twilight cast a dim light into the room permitting Alfred to navigate easily – after all, the loyal butler knew the space even with closed eyes.

He placed softly his palm over Bruce’s forehead and was relieved to sense normal temperature; however he gingerly brought the thermometer in the sleeping man’s ear to be sure. Alfred was worried from his young master request to sleep since he usually had to be persuaded to do that which meant that he was exhausted or worse… He dreaded the idea of the long trip causing some drop in Bruce’s recovery – because even though almost four months had passed and he seemed healthy, apart from the paralysis, the fact was that he was still sensitive.

Alfred didn’t like the idea of their return and the long hours of flight was only one of the reasons. Yet he knew that Bruce was entitled to decide for himself and Alfred understood his need to get back. Even if the loyal butler would prefer it otherwise this city was part of the youth and there was his house which after eighteen years of suffering he managed to regain only to enjoy it for seven months before new Hell found him. And… his parents’ graves were in these grounds, their remains rest here and Bruce was bound to them…

He pressed his lips and sat carefully on the mattress: he wasn’t afraid of waking his master because although in normal days Bruce woke up with the tiniest sound of a breath now with all these heavy medicine and the fatigue of a challenging – demanding recovery his sleep was too deep. His young master had expressed many times to Leslie his worries about getting addicted to all these drugs but there was no other way and Leslie reassured him that addiction wasn’t a risk.

He touched two fingers to Bruce’s jugular vein and counted his heartbeat that was perfectly normal as his breaths, light and soft in an untroubled sleep. Alfred’s eyes lost their cool butler-ish hue and filled with affection as caressed the youth’s peaceful face; he even smiled taking in once again his rosy cheeks beaming with healthiness.

Alfred fought for a bit the urge but in the end allowed his hand to caress his young master’s locks that weren’t messy at all, another token of how exhausted he was to fall asleep as soon as he lay down. And bodily fatigue wasn’t the only reason: poor master Bruce had experienced so much emotional hurt that even the slightest suspicion of his beloved’s disgruntlement could be a blow for his battered soul.

The elder man took some stray locks that fell on Bruce’s eyelids and pushed them back. He was afraid of what a major disappointment could do to Bruce so early after his liberation. Fine, the boy was strong and probably would hide every trace of suffering but Alfred was dreading the possibility of that splendid relationship between Bruce and Master Kent gone wrong and the consequences… Of course, he trusted Master Kent but as they say: shit happens sometimes…

He caught with the corner of his eyes the tablet-like gadget on the nightstand: it was still open and Alfred closed his eyes. Bruce left it there waiting Master Kent’s call which didn’t come. The loyal butler really felt for his young master… He had witnessed many times the youth’s horrible suffering in the hands of Falcone and Chill and knew that the instances he witnessed was only the peak of the iceberg – so he didn’t want any more of that for the young man: physical and emotionally. Bruce had enough hurt for several lifetimes.

He took the blanket and muffled carefully his young master: how could he protect him from potential
pain? He was more afraid of Bruce suffering than Bruce himself: his young master was brave: dared to let Superman touch him – both in body and heart. And if things ended up badly, Bruce would face it with the same bravery but Alfred knew that it would hurt him too much like a bleeding wound and could probably lead to a closed forever heart.

He rose slowly. Hero at the corridor was screeching the bedroom’s door: Alfred had kept the kitten out of the room so that Bruce would doze off undisturbed. But the animal missed already his young master and followed Alfred; he pressed his lips: you didn’t miss him, Master Kent?

He walked soundlessly to the door still casting fleeting glances to the sleeping form. He opened the door and managed to grab the kitten as he was ready to rush to Bruce. Alfred brought his finger to his mouth hushing Hero who meowed calling Bruce – thankfully, not waking him.

He closed the door hastily.

“Now, master Hero, you must be patient: Bruce needs his good rest” he raised his eyebrows for emphasis. “He’s been through a lot…But you’ll see him as soon as he wakes. Now, come for some milk!” he smiled.

As he descended the grand staircase to the ground floor holding the kitten, he shook himself. Probably all this fuss between Master Bruce and Superman was nothing, just a misunderstanding so usual to young couples deep in love that just came out of a traumatic experience. His young master’s suffering soon would be over with Master Kent coming to him because Alfred was sure that Superman was truly in love with his boy.

But even with that new reassuring lightness a burden lurked somewhere underneath.

The tablet-like gadget glowed on the nightstand before beginning emanating the tone for the incoming calls.

Bruce although fast asleep jerked and he would have jumped on the mattress if his legs were a little more alive. His heart was beating fast because even in his sleep waited for Clark’s call and the jeering female snigger that haunted his dreamless sleep had kept him in some odd vigilance.

His heart sank as soon as he remembered that this tone wasn’t Clark’s; of course he regretted immediately his momentarily disappointment because it was Tony and he had missed him.

“Aloha, little guy!” he greeted him in his cheerful way.

“I’m in Gotham, Tony, not Hawaii.”

“A man can only hope…” he sighed. “And I have so many memories of Hawaiian dancers around me…”

Bruce chuckled.

“Of course you would, veteran…”

“One of these days I’ll take you there, kid, to introduce you to some of world’s divine pleasures…Oh! Hula!”

“Tony, are you drooling?” he laughed frowning. “You left Peps in Malibu and you’re doing nasty business in New York, huh?” on his screen the special locating system showed the caller’s location
in map in detail.

Tony frowned.

“I’m calling from the Avengers’ Tower and our communications SUPPOSEDLY have the safest, anti-detection software…”

Bruce cocked his eyebrows and snorted.

“Then Wayne Tech beat you to that, big guy! Mmm… I’m thinking of giving my gadget to Peps so to track you everywhere, naughty boy.”

He heard a sound that was definitely Tony slapping his eye.

“You won’t do that, you backstabbing, traitorous brat! Bros before hoes, remember?”

“It’d depend on your behavior” Tony groaned.

“You know I’m like a virgin to Peps – don’t roll your eyes! It’s true…”

“Okay, I believe you. Lucius would be glad to give you his intelligence about our call locating system so to enhance your security.”

“Ouch! That hurts my arrogance, little guy!” he protested.

“Calling me little guy is hurting you more because people think that you’re pretty older than me” a thud was heard and a new ‘ouch!’ which was Tony falling from his chair – Bruce could picture his friend rubbing his rear.

“That damn new chair! Ergonomic bullshit… I wonder what idiot created it” a stop “it’s a genius chair made by a genius” it was his creation after all. “And nope! I won’t drop the little guy thing” he said dead serious. “Chicks are suckers for daddies!”

Bruce couldn’t hold up a yawn and of course Tony cleared his throat.

“Either my extremely charm worn out or I just woke you up.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“The latter, Tony.”

“I’m sorry, little guy” his voice was fool of regret. “Are you alright? When you called me right on landing you sounded fine.”

“But I’m fine just a bit tired – and actually I’m glad you called because it’s been” he looked at the bottom of the screen “three hours I’m sleeping. And I have an endless night of sleep waiting me.”

Tony’s delight on hearing that Bruce was going to spend the night sleeping was almost audible and the younger man raised an eyebrow: did his friend really fear that he was going to roam the rooftops on his wheelchair?

The billionaire from Malibu cleared his throat.

“You know, Bruce, Fury relayed some info from our division in South Europe” Bruce frowned “and they seem to have traced some odd activity – I’m sure you’ll be shocked” he said sarcastic “the day you were attacked.”
“Odd activity?” probably they were near the same findings as he and Lucius.

“Yeah. Like transmissions with technology that has nothing to do with anything we know. Like extraterrestrial involvement in your assault or some product of illegal experimentation – S.H.I.E.L.D. is conducting research.”

As much as he knew that the organization had been cleaned and reformed Bruce felt a rush of disdain.

“Well, Tony…” he had to share his knowledge with his best friend though he expected to be scolded.

Tony’s huff was dramatic.

“You. Investigated. Al-ready!” he said defeated. “Under our nose...Damn! That ninja training!”

“You were too occupied reprimanding me and I couldn’t let the evidence be lost: Wonder Woman took extra care to eliminate most of them.”

Tony looked at the transparent ceiling giving a spectacular view of New York’s sky and whistled.

“She has nice boobs, little guy – I mean, as a long time expert I give her 8.5 out of 10. Of course if Iron Man meets her I’ll have a more accurate impression” he licked his lips “I told you about the ultra-scanning vision?”

“Lucius analyzed soil and wood samples from the area where the pieces of the attackers fell and he says that there are substances and matters that aren’t from our planet.”

“Mmmm…Superman’s enemies?”

“This remains to be seen… We can exchange notes.”

“If course; I’ll be there soon. For dinner.”

“Tony, I know you must be tired so there’s no need to make the trip.”

“Believe me, kid: nothing is more tiring than being tied in a bed with four horny girls having you at their mercy...and even that didn’t bend me... Besides the food is awesome! Oh! Nick, m’ boy, com’ in! I have to hang up, little guy: do you want me to give your kisses to big bad Fury? I...don’t think so, huh?”

“Bye, Tony…”

He called Clark. Again the same artificial voice informed him that his phone was deactivated. Bruce pressed his lips.

“C’mere, Clark…” it wasn’t like they had a major quarrel the last time they met...Yet Bruce was reading and more important sensing the signs of change from that day he was attacked...and the Amazon Princess got in their life.

The bell of the front entrance rang as Alfred had just ended filling Hero’s bowl with milk. This must be Leslie, he thought, since the gates opened automatically only for few, selected people.

“Where’s our troublemaker?” the doctor asked as soon as Alfred greeted her.
“He is sleeping. Please, do have a seat; would you like some tea?”

But she frowned throwing her coat clumsily on an armchair to Alfred’s dismay.

“How on Hell you persuaded him?”

He took her coat and put it meticulously to the built-in closet that emerged after he pressed a spot on the wall.

“I didn’t: he asked it.”

Leslie lolled her head on the side and clenched her waist.

“I must examine him” she said determined not liking what she heard. “Bruce asking to sleep?” she shook her head “very unusual…Were he experiencing any pain or dizziness or any discomfort whatsoever? The trip was way too difficult: the last time I made that trip I needed a day to fully find my normal rhythms – for someone recovering from many, critical injuries it must be awful…”

Alfred gestured calmly to the sofa for her to sit down.

“Calm down, dear. I’ve been watching his temperature, heart rate and breath regularly and everything is normal: Master Anthony’s jet has a brilliant system of eliminating the effects of abrupt pressure changes due to extreme heights so Bruce’s lungs didn’t suffer at all. He was fine just exhausted from the long flight” Leslie twisted her lips in disapproval. “And…” he sighed “he was a bit downhearted.”

She cocked her eyebrows curious.

“Downhearted?”

Alfred raised his eyes and shrugged.

“Young love…” he said nonchalant wanting to entertain his own worry. “And it’s Master Bruce’s first time dealing with these things” and taking in Leslie’s questioning look “it seems that they had a misunderstanding with Master Kent and he wasn’t among the reporters in the airport as Master Bruce had expected neither he came to visit the night before our departure.”

Leslie nodded.

“Poor boy… All these are complicate for someone ‘experienced’ and without his traumatic past, imagine what impact have on him… Is it my impression, even bias or Superman has become a bit short tempered towards Bruce? I didn’t like his outburst after Bruce was attacked.”

Alfred pressed his lips.

“Master Kent is tired as all of us from the last months – he actually more than everyone: he was with Bruce all this time, he was watching him day and night struggling between life and death. I think he is admirable and his super powers are the least reason. I believe that it is his love and concern added to his emotional fatigue that leads to those tantrums.”

Leslie rubbed her forehead.

“I know, Alfred, and I didn’t mean to accuse him… but Bruce really doesn’t need that at this stage and… he is Superman…” she stilled her eyes on Alfred “I mean, remember what happened in the examination room? How Superman almost forgot his strength and Bruce’s vulnerability? Before the
injury Bruce could handle Superman but now in this state…”

Alfred shook his head.

“I don’t think that we have to fear this, Leslie: I’m more afraid of the consequences of a failed relationship…I know it’s only a petty disagreement but what if there is indeed something going on and leads to a breakup?”

Leslie let her eyes wander in the room in thought.

“Bruce is strong” she huffed “he was willing to take the risk when embraced Superman’s love and to tell you the truth, Alfred: I’m glad he did because he let his heart love and experience the love of someone else.”

Alfred nodded.

“I know…” he pressed his lips “but if things go awry I’m afraid that it will have a great toll to his emotional world. It took much courage and energy for Master Bruce to make that huge leap of faith and if his faith is crashed…”

Leslie stood up and patted her friend’s back.

“We’ll be here, Alfred… Bruce isn’t alone anymore.”

He looked at her and she could discern under his cool expression the doubt and insecurity.

“I don’t want Master Bruce hurt again…” Leslie could feel the burden that her old friend carried from the countless times he saw Bruce in pain and suffering – she was blessed to be spared from this though even listening about Falcone’s tortures it was enough for her heart to bleed. “I’m in a complete loss, Leslie, on how to protect him; of how to spare him from a potential new trauma: if his parents were alive…”

She gave him a pressed lips smile.

“Their trust though an honor makes the responsibility greater… But I’m sure that they are more than satisfied by you – you’ve been proved worthy of their trust, my old friend.”

Alfred shook his head.

“Thank you, Leslie, but I haven’t done anything other than watching unable to help him; like I am now…”

“You’re too harsh on yourself, Alfred!”

“I agree with that…” a voice lively but a bit raspy from sleep startled them.

They both turned towards the entrance from the kitchen’s direction to see Bruce coming with Hero on his lap. Alfred took his scornful expression.

“Master Bruce, I thought that you were taught that is impolite to eavesdrop!”

The young man grinned: he preferred Alfred scolding him than being sad and self-doubting. He led his chair to them and Leslie perused him for any sign of discomfort.

“I’m fine, Leslie” he said though he felt some stiffness and mild pain in his shoulders and back but he knew that it was due to fatigue. “And I didn’t eavesdrop, Alfred: I took the lift to the kitchen to drink
some water and then as I was coming I overheard the last part of your dialogue” he pouted mischievous “it’s not my fault you were too engrossed in your discussion that didn’t hear us coming…”

Alfred smirked as his young master came in front of him.

“You’re perfect, Alfred: don’t you ever forget that!” his eyes locked with his butler’s baby blues. “I’m so lucky to have you” he smiled to Leslie “all of you. I know that sometimes I’m a pain in the ass…and I’m not showing how much I appreciate all of you…but I do” he nodded.

Alfred was numb unable to articulate a reply and Leslie rose from the sofa and squatted in front of Bruce holding his upper arms.

“You’re not a pain in the ass” she said briskly but then frowned thoughtful “well, at least not all the times…”

“We never had any doubt of your feelings, Master Bruce…” the young man smiled and Leslie stood. “I was going to wake you up when the dinner was ready.”

“I already slept too much and given that I won’t go anywhere during the night” his expression was indifferent but the other two could sense a hidden regret “it’s better to keep some sleep for then.”

His eyes wandered to the spacious salon and he led the chair towards the small, round marble table on which lay an impressive bouquet of white roses. Hero sniffed.

“They brought them while you were sleeping” Alfred commented and Bruce nodded and took them.

“Hero, you’ll stay with Alfred and Leslie.”

Leslie cocked her eyebrows.

“And where you’re going, young man?”

Alfred knew already: Bruce wanted to lay the flowers to his parents’ graves. He made a step forward.

“It’s dusk, sir…”

“I’m not afraid of dark” he replied nonchalant. “Besides, the grounds are well lighted.”

Yet his butler wasn’t persuaded and exchanged glances with Leslie.

“May I escort you, sir? That hill might be a bit challenging…”

“Or I could, Bruce…”

He smiled.

“Clark’s chair can easily adjust to every possible terrain – thank you both. After all, Alfred has the dinner and you, Leslie, will make me a great favor if keep Hero entertained” Leslie rolled her eyes and Bruce chuckled “I thought that rolling the eyes was forbidden!” he handed her the kitten “you’re staying for dinner, right?”

She shook her head mock disapproving.

“Do I have a chance?” she sighed caressing Hero who purred.
“Great!” Bruce’s eyes sparkled happily reflecting his smile yet both Leslie and Alfred knew that he was doing it mostly to reassure them that everything was fine.

He moved towards the main door and Alfred hurried to take from the hidden closet a coat which held for his young master to wear.

“It’s cold outside, Master Bruce” he lifted an eyebrow “Gotham, real cold; we are not still in Greece.”

Bruce winked.

“You’re right – I guess I’m a bit jetlagged, huh?”

Alfred opened the heavy, oak door for his master and Bruce moved towards the brand new titanium ramp that Lucius had taken care to be built right beside the stone stairs.

“Sir, please do not stay too much outside…” the chair stopped with Bruce’s mental order and the young man looked at his loyal butler who blushed because he sounded like a mother hen – he cleared his throat and re-established his cool demeanor. “The dinner will be ready soon and it’s not very polite to let our guest waiting.”

Bruce grinned on the change of tone and nodded.

“I won’t, Alfred, thank you!”

“If you excuse me asking, do you have any news from Master Kent?”

He shook his head in denial and pressed his lips in a tight line.

“Tony called to see if I survived the flight – he woke me up, actually” he answered indifferent wanting to evade answering because it was a prickle in his guts – but in the end he realized that not answering only increased Alfred’s certainty that he was sad. “No, Clark didn’t call me back and…” he said before Alfred asked “I tried again to reach him but his phone was still deactivated” he blinked and lolled his head on the side. “It’s okay: the reporter’s job is really demanding – I have my tablet with me in case he calls…”

He turned towards the ramp and began descending slowly.

Clark Kent sat in a corner table at a bar in Metropolis. He had left Smallville with the intention of heading to the Wayne Manor because after his discussion with his mother he longed to see Bruce and make up for his absence. He could listen to his soft breaths and steady heartbeat which made the profile of his sleep: Superman huffed. Of course, he was exhausted after so many hours of flight – Bruce wasn’t a superhuman like himself to withstand such a trip.

He shook his head and felt ashamed: once again he thought scornfully about Bruce as if his human nature made him inferior… And the more he listened to the man’s heartbeat the more Clark was realizing that exhaustion wasn’t the main reason that pushed Bruce to sleep: although the heartbeat was characteristic of sleep there was a different quality in it, a thud that Clark knew too well: it was hurt maybe unconscious but Bruce was suffering, emotionally. And Clark knew that it was his fault.

He had meant to change that rushing to the master bedroom and cuddling his mate but his hearing that was perfectly able to watch different locations at the same time, caught voices from Metropolis’ warehouses. Voices of scum he was looking for days: they must have gone underground getting
suspicious of been watched or in a mission.

Clark had intelligence that these men might be members of the Intergang and hoped that they could lead him to the organization’s core or leader or more modestly give him a hint on what they were up to. He sighed, listening Bruce’s soft breath and picturing him on the bed yet he had to get to Metropolis. He clenched his jaw: after all, he was fast asleep; better not to wake him up…

The *Daily Planet*’s reporter didn’t need a disguise because he wasn’t famous so he just settled on a corner away from most of the clients watching and overhearing his targets’ chat. Contrary to Gotham’s underworld, in Metropolis thugs used to mingle with citizens in bars and cafes since there were no areas strictly for outlaws, which served them perfectly because they didn’t raise suspicions: normality offered a great camouflage.

Alistair Bendel – White and Johnny Stitches sat on a table on the far end of the hall. They were busted a year ago by Metropolis’ Police for being involved in a wide range of illegal activity but strangely the charges were dropped and they return to the field; Clark suspected that they were recruited by the new player and this was the reason that both acted cleverer this time. Emerging and disappearing before being connected with anything.

Clark’s sources though very scared to say much hinted that those thugs’ job was mainly to recruit small time hoodlums from other gangs and lead them to attacks or other jobs. Obviously, their boss was saving those two for bigger things or he managed to cover perfectly their traces.

Unfortunately, their mindless chat didn’t contain anything remotely interesting and Clark sipped his bourbon replaying scenes from last night’s reception with Diana.

As if someone had read his thoughts the big TV screen on the wall above the bar played footage from the same event: it was first page news after all… His eyes focused on Diana’s hot body and her dazzling smile as she shook hands with the General Secretary and then with Superman. It was a good thing his huge glasses covered his orbs. Damn! She was fucking hot!

He was startled hearing exactly what he was thinking by Alistair’s whispery voice and his attention turned to them.

“I won’t mind being choked by her thighs around my neck…” the man sniggered. “I might suck her a bit…”

The guy opposite him sniggered stressing the faint stitches all over his face.

“Nah…She fancies Supes: you can see it in the way she holds her posture that she is horny…”

Clark felt his face hot and focused on Diana over the screen searching for clues of what the thug said.

“I bet she’s after his super dick following him around like a bitch in heat” Stitches cackled. “She doesn’t give a shit about humans or justice” he spat on the word “you see it in her eyes…”

Alistair drew a large quantity of his vodka.

“The fact is she is Supes’ ally and that will complicate things.”

“I don’t think that boss really worries about her or even the S guy.”

“If those two become a couple then they’ll be a force to be reckoned…” Alistair insisted.
Stitches nodded towards the screen where footage from Bruce’s arrival in Gotham was shown and Clark felt a knot in his throat. Especially, since the one who made the reportage had the stupid idea to include the infamous video of Superman carrying Bruce. Cold sweat poured in Clark’s body.

“Supes prefers ass over pussy…” Johnny sniggered and Clark gritted his teeth for this vulgarity.

“And sluts…” Alistair commented amused. “That brat was Falcone’s whore for years and” he winked to his partner “I heard of many others… I’d expected from the big guy to feel appalled by such filth.”

Clark banged his knee on the table in his rush to stand up and shut that man’s mouth. But thankfully he stopped himself before his strength broke the table or anyone noticed. He clenched his jaw and fists.

Johnny smirked.

“I wouldn’t have a problem making Superman’s bitch squeal and beg as I rip his asshole…”

The other cackled.

“He is a cripple – won’t feel anything below the waist!”

“But he’ll feel everything above the neck!” Stitches winked wickedly and laughed which his friend mimicked. “Maybe the boss plans to do that in the end, after he…”

“Ssssss!” Alistair hushed him hastily.

“It’d be the perfect punishment for Supes… watching his slut gangbanged to the death by his partying enemies” his sly eyes found again Bruce on the screen and Clark’s heartbeat became so strong that he thought that everyone in the room heard.

Alistair was thoughtful.

“It’s not so easy: that whelp has more protection than S guy himself. Iron man is his best buddy and he drags along the entire Avengers’ circus. And Gotham has Batman guarding her property.”

The news changed in something uninteresting and Johnny turned fully to Alistair.

“The boss seems confident enough” he shook his head “I bet he doesn’t chicken to attack that bitch and after his scheme unfolds nothing would save this bitch…”

Clark erased everything else to focus on their discussion but Alistair stood up and clutched Johnny’s upper arm.

“Enough! You downed a lot and your tongue got loose not that you know anything about his scheme but we’re not supposed to babble about the boss – we’re off!”

They threw some bills on the table and walked casually out of the bar. Clark pretended to be absorbed in his drink and followed them after some minutes from a safe distance to not raise any suspicions.

He hoped that they’d lead him to one of Intergang’s ‘invisible’ hideouts but at some point they parted to embark their cars and head to their apartments leaving Clark frustrated because he didn’t learn anything important other than reaffirming his suspicions that those two were working for the new powerful crime lord for whom Clark knew nothing.
Damn! He hated the fact that he couldn’t go forward with this shadow-organization; with every step he was met with a wall – a dead end and its members were secretive and unbreakable even after they were busted: it reminded him of the League of Shadows. Which association brought back those vulgar comments the thugs made. About Bruce…

He felt nauseated and leaned on the wall of the pavement; he sighed and looked up at the starry sky of Metropolis. So much filth connected with the being he chose to tie his life with – his guts clenched in…shame? He frowned: it was really shame? That was preposterous, unfair…utterly wrong to be ashamed of Bruce…because he had been doomed to be a slave to Falcone and suffer his and the other scums’ tortures…

“I dread seeing you wasted with someone like him and eventually destroyed by deceit…” Diana told him again.

Wasted…Many people had the same opinion with her. And many people thought her a perfect match for him. Many people or just him?

“Nah…She fancies Supes: you can see it in the way she holds her posture that she is horny…”

It was pointless to deny that he had sensed it too. He knew that Diana desired him. Well, she wasn’t the only one and that wasn’t him bragging but a fact. Which brings us to the big question: was he interested in Diana’s interest?

He sighed and his mind brought the image of Bruce in front of his parents’ graves, three days after his testimony against Falcone.

“You’ll find someone worthy, someone who won’t cringe whenever you motion to touch her or him, someone who won’t panic whenever you look at him with lust, someone who won’t feel disgusted even with the thought of you craving his or her body, someone who whenever you believe that you give him your love and happiness won’t feel Falcone’s cruel hands instead of your gentle ones, Chill’s sneering eyes instead of your kind ones, Al Ghul’s punishing thrusts instead of your pleasant ones, Bane’s teeth instead of your velvety lips…”

And then his absolute reply echoed.

“You deserve happiness too, Bruce, and I’d give everything to…”

He made a spin and hit his forehead to the cool wall that cracked. How could he think like this about Bruce? Could he be so frivolous to change his emotions so fast and so irresponsibly? Because Bruce opened his heart to him and offered him his body risking his shattered heart being rendered to shreds. And now he was behaving like a creep.

“Bruce…” he whispered.

“It’d be the perfect punishment for Supes… watching his slut gangbanged to the death by his partying enemies.”

Chill’s horrible voice taunting Batman returned from that night:

“Wha’? Ya thought I didn’t recognize ya? C’m’ on, littl’ slut! I’d recognize yar body anywhere; ya see I forged that body, every day for eighteen years! I recognized ya sinc’ the first time ya laid yar fists on me... The poor traumatized kid created a strong persona to find haven when pain an’ humiliation were too hard to stand an’ slowly the lie became a man; a man who was avenging the beatings he had by beating bad guys! An’ I was fucking both the Prince an’ the Batman!” he had laughed haughtily. “Oh! Ya can’t imagine how satisfying was that, littl’ slut, like our first time, do ya
He didn’t manage to catch his mind from recreating the giant thug thrusting in the poor boy that trembled and begged to be spared… His enemies wanted to do the same and though Bruce was a great warrior willing now to defend himself… he was disabled and… a human. And Clark realized that the same dread he was feeling now would bind him for the rest of their life together… It wasn’t like being Diana’s lover…

“Shut up, you idiot!” he gritted his teeth and thankfully there was no pedestrian around.

He pulled out his smartphone that had stayed closed all these hours; he eyed it indecisive: he won’t go to Gotham, probably Bruce didn’t care much about his absence anyways – probably, after his nap the disabled Dark Knight was too absorb in designing a new suit for his comeback. He would just make him a call to remind him of his presence and then head to his apartment.

But upon opening the gadget, a window popped up informing about unanswered calls. He grinned: Lois must have had a fit. But after his friend’s calls, his eyes bulged seeing another number: his breath stopped and his heart flew above the stratosphere. Bruce had called him several times – the last only a few minutes ago! His Star missed him and searched for him! Ugh! He felt so stupid for all these horrible thoughts: how could he?!

His feet were already floating and he barely managed to scan the area for witnesses before taking off for Gotham: Bruce deserved more than a simple, cold phone call!

Bruce had laid carefully the white roses on his parents’ graves: it was dark already and he secretly wished that their spirits took form and appeared to him, like the ghosts in the legends. But unfortunately, ghosts don’t exist or fortunately because Bruce wanted his parents to be peaceful in their eternal sleep…

It was much uncomfortable with the wheelchair but he stretched his arm enough to touch his fingertips to their tombstones. His eyelids fell heavy over his orbs and images of them flashed in his mind: it was incredible, unbelievable but even after all these years he could still hear their voices, their laughter; see their eyes glimmering with love when they were talking to him bent over his cradle; he could smell them, their pleasant perfumes of warmth and safety.

And then the horrific bangs and the acid smell of guns and bullets and blood. His mom already dead on the dirty cement and his father rasping with his last breaths for him to flee…

His head had lowered to his chest and his breath mimicked the agony in Thomas’ last moments. Bruce stared at the remains of the rock pile beside their graves: some letters were still discernible – B W U E… The others were washed away by the elements.

He inhaled deeply: he would have never demolished his grave… But Clark did it to free him… He remembered the anger, the hatred, the despair of those moments as he had watched trapped in Clark’s arms the stone exploding: he felt as if it was Clark not Falcone that separated him from his parents. And then when his mind cleared he was able to see Clark’s love and his own feelings for the Man of Steel. He had let the man love him.

His stare returned to the tombstones: he was sure that it was their wish… He pressed his lips and caressed the stones one after the other.
Someone was here…His smile became broader: he could recognize that presence everywhere.

“How long are you standing there?”

The steps got closer.

“Not much, handsome: actually, I thought to leave because…you know…I don’t like to intrude but then you sensed me. And it’s cold out here so I owe to Alfred getting you inside.”

Bruce stretched his hand and took hers. Selina walked closer to the graves getting solemn as her eyes fell on the names.

“I knew you’d be here…” she whispered. “It was long since you’ve last been here – you missed them…”

He lifted his eyes to her.

“I always feel the need to offer them beautiful, bright white roses” Selina nodded remembering the battered white rose of that night, seventeen years ago that Bruce lay on the filthy cement where his parents died. “Not that they would have complained with less…” he rubbed his nose.

Selina felt her eyes watering and was glad that the lights from the grounds were far enough to not be illuminate her face much.

“Well, they wouldn’t want you to catch a cold by staying much here so we’re off!”

“You’ll stay for dinner?” he asked encouraged.

She shook her head slyly.

“I wasn’t in the mood for cooking and delivery food in Gotham is garbage so… I thought of the best restaurant in the city” she winked. “Which is also free of charge!”

Bruce laughed.

“I hoped that the company would be the major pro…”

Selina grasped his hand and walked beside him to the Manor.

“Always…but I like combining interest with pleasure!” she winked.

Her eyes fell on the torch-like glow that emanated from Bruce’s chest pocket where he’d stashed his tablet-like gadget after setting it to shrink in smartphone size – the gadget had the ability to scan its environment and when dark enough illuminate like a torch adjusting the lighting intensity to its owner’s wish. She whistled.

“Can I have one of these or I have to steal it?”

“I thought you didn’t fancy high tech thingies…”

She crooked her mouth wickedly.

“I think that this dingus will be very useful in my business…”

Bruce frowned; he didn’t like his friend continue her career as a thief now that Gotham wasn’t lawless.
“I thought you worked for me? And you liked your work?”

She shrugged.

“Old loves never die, sweetie…” she sighed but taking in her friend’s expression chuckled. “You know how many tycoons use their money to snatch jewels for their illegal collections? I gather that I could spoil their game by returning their loot where it belongs – that way I’ll get the chance to relive my youth!” she gave a dramatic sigh and Bruce laughed.

“Youth?” his mood was light approving of what Selina planned to do with her talents. “You’re still a baby, Sel!”

She made a deep squat and sucked her friend’s cheek wrapping her arms loosely around his neck.

“Did he call?” she asked because the reason Bruce took the gizmo with him was obvious.

Bruce cast a look at the gadget and then found again Selina’s eyes. He grinned.

“No” he answered quietly and Selina grunted.

“Did YOU call him again?” she was afraid that her friend’s dignity would have forced him in something stupid like not searching for his boyfriend.

“Several times…”

His voice was indifferent but for Selina wasn’t difficult to sense the disappointment and melancholy. She jerked her head and her eyes flashed.

“Well, let’s get you inside ‘cause I want you in good shape so you kick his ass when he rushes back like a beaten puppy begging for your forgiveness!”

Bruce chuckled.

“Sel, he didn’t do anything!”

“Exactly!” she stood. “And stop defending him!”

The Manor’s door was open and Alfred stood there waiting while Hero had slipped between his legs and was already at Selina’s feet meowing to get her attention. She grabbed him from the armpits and rubbed his cheek to hers.

“I missed you, baby!”

Jonathan as every night had waited patiently and eagerly for Ted, the orderly he hired while he was the head of this Asylum. Ted was loyal to him even now: Dr. Crane had given him money to buy a small apartment and allowed him to take drugs from the storage for his addict brother. Ted believed in him and that he would once again regain power in this shithole so when the defeated doctor promised him to have his share, Ted had no hesitation to serve him. Secretly.

So like every night after the medical staff was gone Ted escorted Scarecrow to the basement where he was left guarding while Jonathan slipped to his secret laboratory: the one he established during his reign there. Nobody was ever to discover that small, ancient hall – because it wasn’t in any blueprint of the Arkham Mansion. Jonathan had discovered the secret passage one day while admiring the rare volumes the Arkham family had in the ancient, dusty library. It was encrypted but he had no problem
deciphering it.

Jonathan breathed content mixing his ingredients in a testing transparent tube; he had a medical mask covering his mouth and nose. He was at his home, his favorite place, much like Jeremiah Arkham who, as the legend had it, made his horrific experiments in this exact place.

Jonathan could feel the vibes: the cries of the bound patients suffering from Dr. Arkham’s juices and other experiments, the terror, the insanity of the doctor and his brilliance… There had remained some of his instruments rusty and hastily abandoned: rusty chains, ripped and mice-eaten torturous straightjackets, chairs with plugs, cases with dried, odd concoctions… Some of Jeremiah’s patients died terrible deaths but Jonathan was aware that groundbreaking science needs and deserves sacrifices – sacrifices of lesser people. Like that idiot Joker or his…wife.

The concoction for his fear toxin was ready to be added to his stock waiting for the right moment when he’d take his revenge on those inferior stupid people. Who intimidated poor Jonathan into submission without knowing that Scarecrow was there to support the genius but weak doctor and take revenge against those bullies…

Joker was sprawled on his mattress watching the ceiling and pondered through the tangled mess his thoughts were in his head. Sometimes a giggle escaped him recalling his discussion with Herlequin and her so hilarious ire – ire for sane people was the first step to the road for madness. Hihi! And it was a matter of days to get out of there now he knew how Stark’s intra-something bullshit worked. Also, he was sure that his goodhearted doctor wouldn’t keep him in that cell – she wouldn’t take his privileges away because lil’ Harleen wanted to lick her little bones. And only a happy Joker could feed her.

Suddenly, he sensed a presence and that was watched. He jerked his eyebrows: he knew when he was watched because he loved to be the center of attention…and hated it…well, his relationship with fame was complicated…

He turned his eyes where he felt the presence and frowned seeing a doctor sitting at a grandiose armchair with a golden pen in his hand and a notebook on his lap. He definitely hadn’t seen him again and he was…Joker laughed on the absurdity of him calling someone else, well, bizarre. Raven hair straight to his shoulders, a thin, pointy nose and sly, almost like his, eyes behind old-fashioned round glasses.

“A newwww kid on the block?” Joker snorted leaning slightly his head towards him. “Me liiiikes to plaaayy with other kids – are you a new doc? Isn’t a bit aaaaa late for sessions?”

The stranger’s eyes shone but he kept his head completely still studying Joker, a faint amused grin in his lean face.

“Me? Doc?” he chuckled though his voice had the thick accent of a German clearly imitating someone.

Joker rolled his eyes.

“It’d beeeeee myyyyy cr—azy idea then, Sigmund!... as in Sigmund Freud” he stressed more his nasal voice.

The stranger yanked his head and smirked.

“It must be the robe…” he said nonchalant and the white robe vanished along with the glasses,
revealing his all leather attire: green leather leggings, green leather tunic reaching his thighs, and a golden short vest. “But I like dress up!”

Joker cocked his eyebrows.

“I seeee that, Hoody! UHU! Aaaaand they call my dressing Kiiitsch!” he erupted in a fit of giggles hugging his belly.

The man on the armchair licked his lips drumming his fingers on the armrests. He smirked and out of nowhere a large amount of cold water splashed on the giggling Joker who jerked from the mattress and sat on the edge of his bed studying narrow-eyed his visitor.

“I like laughing but not being laughed at…” the bizarre man said indifferent. “Imagine the giggles when the staff sees your bed all wet…” he leaned towards Joker.

Joker shook his head and gave a wide lick to his lips.

“Then try changing attire…” he retorted in a hissing unfazed and then cackled entertained “I’ve toooooo admit: your joke was gooood but not au--thentic. “Sooooooo you’re not some loony” he arched his eyebrows “at least, some oooyyorderly loony. What dooooy want?” he asked and his eyes went dead serious.

His visitor crooked his mouth and locked eyes with the inmate.

“You don’t want to know who am I?”

Joker shrugged.

“Toooookuh!”

His visitor chuckled.

“You’re good, Joker! I’m Loki…”

“Biiig deal! I knew already you’re a loca…”

Loki understood that he was referring to the Spanish word for crazy.

“I’m Loki, the god of mischief and deceit…”

Joker hiccupped and made a glorious roll of his eyes.

“Ooooohh, boy! HEHEHEHEHE! Your maaadness” he rolled his finger right beside his head “breaks a record, huh? Niice! ‘Cause this fine establishment needs some fresh jokes…”

Loki smiled confidently and snapped his fingers causing the bars to vanish: both the common bars and the energy ones Stark created. Joker smirked and his scars were stressed.

“It’s easy for me to just intervene and mess Stark’s creations – I get so much fun poking that arrogant man…” and with a second snap the bars were back.

Joker pouted.

“Paaaarty pooper!” he slapped his thighs. “Goooods are not fun!”

Loki arched his eyebrows and brought his leg upon the other.
“Tell me about it…that’s why I came here: fascinating! A loony bin inside a loony bin…”

Joker giggled.

“Yeaaaah! Yoohooooohoooo! I loooovee Gotham too! Buuuuut” he raised his index finger waringly “gods ooooor nooot I don’t like intruders in my playground…Legolas…Oooh, sorry! It’s the ears” he whispered as if sharing a secret “did uuuuu anyone tooooool you that are elf like?”

Loki rolled his eyes and stood pacing the room.

“Not even when the… intruder can make the game more interesting?” he craned his head on the side eyeing the jester; Loki smiled wickedly. “I met Bruce Wayne” his grin became wider seeing Joker’s frown “twice… one in his bed… HEHEHEHEHE!” he mimicked Joker’s giggle.

Joker knew better than letting his vitals get aggressive still he jerked upwards and rushed to the god grabbing his neck. Yet the raven haired man just smirked unfazed.

“He’s my wife…” Joker hissed and Loki shrugged.

“I didn’t see a wedding ring…” he loll’d his head on the side and pouted, his smugness stronger than ever. “Maybe if you’ve given him a decent diamond ring he wouldn’t sleep with Mr. Super-muscle…”

The jester had been almost certain of that but hearing it was a fuel to kill – his hand clenched more Loki’s neck but the god just scorned.

“Ow! You didn’t know…” he said pitying him but his jeer was evident. “Ugh! I hate being a marriage wrecker though…I’ve done it sometimes – some of them with unfortunate results…You know, husband killing wife or lover… It really wasn’t my fault” Joker regarded him through slit eyes “calling me a sly abettor to these misfortunes…” he shook his head disgusted “the injustice of people…” he huffed. “By the way, Bruce is hot stuff: I mean the hottest stuff. You’re a lucky man” he said solemnly but then erupted in a mad fit of giggles “well, not so lucky!”

Joker’s hands were left with thin air and the raven haired man reemerged outside the cell. The jester laughed on the absolute absurdity of the scene and put his elbows on the bars supporting his arms.

Loki did the same but with the energy bars that had no impact on him.

“I heard that you call yourself the Agent of Chaos…”

Joker shook his head and raised his eyebrows sarcastic.

“But Loki knitted his eyebrows.

“Don’t be! I’m making my school project on Bruce Wayne and that’s how I learnt about you. Of course academic research doesn’t give you juicier details like how statuesque the man is and you need your handiwork to find out how taut and smooth he is.”

Joker rolled his eyes and laughed before he tilted his head on the side and stabbed with his eyes the bizarre guy.

“I’ve chopped people for lesser…” he hissed, the dropping of his stuttering the only sign of his wrath.
Loki gave him a lighthearted smile.

“Ow! You’re threatening me: the best clown joke I ever heard! And I was considered a clown…” he supported his forearms between the nano-energy bars and leaned towards Joker locking eyes with him. “You brag that you bring chaos yet it’s Bruce Wayne that actually brings it…” he nodded. “I’m sure you’ve noticed how this cute, weak brat makes everyone around him twist and blow: mere humans, superheroes, supervillains” he gestured to him “demons, ugly gods – like Thor… which make a beautiful and genius god…like me…intrigued.”

Joker shook his shoulders and leaned more to his counterpart.

“I’ll give you a tip as a crazy to a loony: Bruce is mine!” he grinded his teeth. “You didn’t saw the… aaa…sign?”

Loki’s mouth twisted.

“Tell that to the superguy who fucks him and to Thor… My dear ol’ bro shows too much interest in the youth; I guess superdudes’ competition… – if you get what I mean: who is BIGGER… who makes Bruce convulse and moan more…” he twitched his eyebrows in suggestion.

Joker’s acid eyes were ablaze but expressionless.

“Chaos is nice” Loki said thoughtful. “Especially when you’re the agent of the proper agency…” suddenly his mouth was right next to Joker’s ear.

The jester cast him a sideways glance.

“If you loooooook for aaaagents, call Molder and Scully. I’m not a hired gun!”

Loki stretched his posture, his hands behind his back.

“Who said anything about hiring?” he answered and just disappeared leaving his cackle behind.

Superman was flying in high speed towards the elegantly illuminated Wayne Manor, at last seeing the majestic building: he would have arrived sooner but cries for help made him rush at Washington to save a homeless old man from the torments of stupid teens who decided to play tough with a weak man. Well, he lectured them a bit and they seemed regretful – no, they didn’t cheat him: Superman checked their brain waves.

He was thinking that Bruce would be fast asleep but his hearing told him that he was wake – probably, fiddling with his designs… But then in midair his phone rang and it was Bruce’s tone. His Star was trying to find and speak to him; his face beamed – he was about to make a big surprise to Bruce so he didn’t answer, much to the human’s dismay: Clark could hear the same sad thud coloring Bruce’s strong heartbeat. Hang on, babe, he smiled.

Suddenly, Superman remembered the reinforced window in Bruce’s bedroom and pressed his lips because he didn’t want to smash it to get in…Obviously. Maybe he serenaded Bruce to open…He chuckled.

But his problem was solved as his eyes focused on the master bedroom’s huge window… Bruce was there on his chair in front of the open window staring at his tablet that hadn’t managed to bring him close to Clark; Superman smiled not without self-satisfaction.
And then Bruce gazed at the clear sky and Clark saw the shine in his eyes and heard the increase in his heartbeat so he just couldn’t hold himself any longer!

He covered the distance in a couple of seconds and landed on his knees right next to Bruce, his arms already burying the younger man in his chest.

“You should be sleeping” he said softly. “And definitely not in front of an open window – it’s freezing!”

Bruce left the warm heaven of Clark’s chest and looked at him. His heart was beating normally now, a bit happy and still a bit apprehensive.

“I was waiting for you…Hero was making me company but he fall asleep and I put him in his basket. I knew you’d come…at some point…”

Clark filled with regret and self-loathing.

“And you were waiting for me last night too?” he asked hating himself more as he read the sleepless hours in Bruce’s body.

Bruce didn’t want to admit that but he couldn’t lie too so let his eyes answer to Clark who cupped his cheek which was cold but so deliciously soft that his lips glued to it almost on their own.

“I’m a bastard!” he growled feeling with his other hand how tired the muscles in Bruce’s back were – and that considering that he had slept a couple of hours before said a lot.

Bruce smiled.

“I don’t think that Ms. Kent would be happy hearing someone calling her son ‘bastard’…”

Clark chuckled and nuzzled Bruce’s neck.

“Mmmm… She surely won’t appreciate it…” he sucked the perfume that was more intense there “you should meet her – she is so fond of you!”

Bruce put his hands under Clark’s jaw and lifted his head to make him meet his eyes.

“She talked you into coming back?”

Clark closed his eyes and sighed.

“I…I acted like…” he bit his lower lip “I don’t know what got into me…” Bruce was staring at him expecting and with brave understanding.

“If your feelings have changed…”

But Clark couldn’t even hear Bruce’s voice forming these words. He hugged him and stopped him by capturing his mouth in a breathtaking kiss. Bruce wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck for support following his lover’s passionate ministrations while always keeping his eyes on Clark’s.

Suddenly, the Man of Steel hoisted him carefully and moved him slowly to the king sized bed where he placed him gently cuddling him to regain his temperature.

Superman took reluctantly his mouth from Bruce’s to allow him to breath. He licked his lips to take the lingering taste and the younger man caressed his cheek.
“You didn’t answer” he whispered with a steady voice.

“No!” he replied with conviction and Bruce nodded even though his eyes were still unsure. “I’m sorry” Clark said reading those eyes “I was irresponsible…”

“You acted as you felt.”

Clark shook his head.

“I acted childish! I stayed away from the one I love more than anything because of foolishness – a stupid stubbornness, something completely irrational. I know that I can get whatever I want – it’s selfish! And definitely…” he sighed. “Damn! I love it that you defy me!”

Bruce shook his head in denial: staying in front of the open window made him cold but Clark’s body was warming him better than the old fireplace.

“I don’t defy you…” he replied. “I just want to be true to what I am and not simply Superman’s or anyone’s pet” Clark pressed his lips. “I always listen to your ideas and opinions, Clark and I respect them yet in the end…we’re two different people and we can’t agree in everything… It would be better if I was someone like you…Like the Amazon Princess?”

His eyes were estimating Clark’s reactions and Superman felt irritated not so much for Bruce’s inquiring mode but because that was an awkward subject that always made him uncomfortable even when alone.

“Diana’s thought seems to torment you too much…” he decided to evade an answer.

But Bruce wouldn’t swallow that; he shook his head.

“It troubles me because I get the feeling that you’re troubled too” Clark twisted his mouth. “From the day the Princess intruded our life you always look thoughtful, irritable…unhappy except when you are with her.”

It was so easy for Clark to discern the bitterness in Bruce’s voice though it was effectively hidden.

The younger man cupped his face locking their eyes.

“Since you met her you spent more time with her than with me” he continued determined with steady voice but Clark’s heart melted on the love and understanding that colored Bruce’s voice – he wasn’t blaming him.

“Oh, Bruce…You shouldn’t think like that…” Bruce’s eyes were still and Clark felt regret for having acted like this but…it didn’t felt so wrong when he stayed away – it seemed…natural. “It was random I found myself with her” he lifted his eyebrows for emphasis. “And Diana is a friend, an ally to our fight against evil” he chuckled “not what your brilliant but tired mind thinks” though sometimes Clark arrested his eyes darting to more private parts of the impressive woman’s anatomy…but that wasn’t a crime, was it?

Bruce didn’t buy it: fine, he believed in Clark’s honesty right now but he could see the signs. And Clark.

“I’m sorry for staying away so long, for being so abrupt to you but…I’m so irredeemable?” he pouted. “Our last time in the beach wasn’t nice?”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.
“It was… great…but then you didn’t come and I was wondering what went so wrong…”

Clark lowered his eyes and Bruce didn’t like to see him like this so he wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck clinging to him in order to plant a kiss to his lips.

“I get it” he looked deep in his eyes “I get how you felt about my decision to return and I want you to know that I feel for you… about your fears… Because I fear for you too: the fact that you’re someone almost invincible doesn’t mean that I don’t have the same fears for your safety” he chuckled. “How would have seemed to you if I asked you to stay at the Fortress and never be Superman again?”

Clark shook his head and looked at the younger man lopsided. He sighed.

“It’s not the same, Bruce…” he hesitated to say it but in the end huffed “you’re a human, which makes you more vulnerable and easier to break” he closed his eyes. “You’re currently paralyzed…” he didn’t want to sadden him but Bruce looked him straight in the eyes.

“Easier to break? Really now? Remember the Kryptonite bullet on the rooftop?” of course he did: Bruce saved his life then. The human nodded. “I remember the footage Ra’s showed me with Zod plummeting you around…” his eyes though locked with Clark’s stared at something else “I was scared for you…”

Clark tightened his embrace to feel Bruce’s body on his. He cupped the man’s jaw with both hands and touched their foreheads together.

“You loved me from then?” he asked throatily from the emotions.

“I… I don’t know… things were so complicated then… but my heart was beating so painfully like in mount Marcy when you were hit by Bagdana…”

Clark let his fingertips on Bruce’s lips and the younger man stared at him.

“I don’t want you even uttering his name…” he breathed and felt Bruce’s cheekbone with his hot lips – in front of his eyes he saw again the demon stripping Bruce ready to claim his body, he watching unable to do anything…

“You see that you can be hurt as much as I? Someone stronger or with evil plans can always get to you – actually, those hours after the UN reception, all this silence…I was worried…”

Bruce’s hands tightened around Clark’s shoulders and nestled his head in the crook of his neck, his breath sending goose bumps to Clark’s spine.

“I don’t think that you’d like Superman settled in his Fortress indifferent to the world’s suffering…” Clark said kissing Bruce’s silken locks.

“No, I wouldn’t like that…And you? Would you like Batman caged?”

Clark closed his eyes a battle raging in him; that answer would have been so much easier if Bruce was like Diana… So the answer to Bruce’s previous question whether the things would have been different if he was like Diana – if Diana took his place – was yes: things would have been different; Clark would have been free to enjoy his happiness without the clenching of fear. Yet he hadn’t the heart to admit to Bruce something like that. He heard again Stitches’ snarky remark:
“I wouldn’t have a problem making Superman’s bitch squeal and beg as I rip his asshole… Maybe the boss plans to do that in the end, after he…”

His enemies wouldn’t even dare to suggest something like that for Diana… His enemies would never hurt him through someone like her; and their boss might already have had his eyes on Bruce.

He opened his eyes feeling Bruce’s eyes on him – he smiled his brilliant smile that always made Bruce reflect it.

“I don’t think that anyone can cage Batman…” he became serious. “And I’m glad for that!”

Bruce caressed the diamond shaped insignia in Superman’s uniform and placed his palm softly over his strong heart that jolted joyfully to that.

“I love you, my great Bat!” Clark exclaimed and his mouth ‘attacked’ Bruce’s neck where the intoxicating perfume emanated stronger and groaned happily when his lover bent his neck letting Clark suck greedily, wetting the flesh. Forgetting all the thoughts that tarnished their time together.

“And when you stop loving me?” Bruce inquired calmly and Clark sighed. “You’ll tell me?”

Clark’s breath became a rasp and he took Bruce’s head in his hands sinking his eyes in the sapphire-emerald seas that studied him.

“I’ll never stop loving you!” he said exasperated and Bruce’s heart gave a painful thud. “You’d never be alone again…I promise you” his eyes searched Bruce’s and narrowed suspiciously “you believe me, right?”

Bruce felt something clenching his guts but he smiled reassuringly. He nodded. Which made Clark roar playfully and began tickling Bruce’s ribs rendering him to giggles.

“You can’t let go Batman’s reticence and answer properly? Huh? I have to tickle the answer from you?”

Bruce’s laughter was a blessing and Clark relished in it but he stopped to let the man breathe.

“I…surrender…” Bruce beamed. “I believe you.”

“Glad to hear…”

He pushed gently Bruce on the mattress and untied the belt of his robe, rushing to close the window in less than a second and return. Bruce looked at him confused but Superman whistling carelessly unbuttoned his pajama shirt pushing it to his arms and extracting it; his hands unable to resist the view felt the younger man’s chest, his lips drawn to those sweet nipples like metal to magnet.

He licked to taste them, realizing how much he missed Bruce; he sucked with all his might, gently touching his teeth on the stiffened flesh and heard the human groan. Clark smiled and massaged with his mouth the playful nipple along with some of the taut pectoral; just to feel smoother and richer flesh which wasn’t of a man: it was a woman’s breast – Diana’s porcelain, juicy breast.

He shook himself embarrassed wishing Bruce hadn’t realized and hurried to descend to the man’s abs before clutching the waistband and lowering the pants and the underwear till the body he loved was completely naked.

“We must talk about the attack, Clark: we found some things with Lucius and Tony also got intelligence…”
But the Man of Steel rose with a disbelieving frown in his brow.

“Are you kidding me, right?” he asked slyly.

And without waiting for a reply he immersed his head in Bruce belly nibbling the taut, soft flesh, each abdominal muscle separately and enjoying the goose bumps he was causing. He felt Bruce’s hands caressing his messy locks in the pace of his exciting breaths.

“What are you doing, Clark?” the younger man asked because he knew Clark’s reluctance to engage him in intercourse. Clark who was fondling with one hand Bruce’s soft penis and with the other his buttocks moaned displeased for having to take his head from Bruce’s warmth.

“Mmm… a nice massage? Your muscles are too tense and tired BECAUSE OF ME! You haven’t slept last night waiting for me, right?” “Your body needs its rest to heal…”

Bruce blinked.

“Nothing bad happened… You’re here.”

Clark beamed and nodded.

“Yes, I am! So I’ll make up to you with my magic fingers” he waved his fingers in front of Bruce who smirked with his eyes shining gleefully.

“Matt comes tomorrow and I’m sure he’ll take care of that…” his voice was cut from a fit of giggles as Clark’s mouth attacked his belly tickling him relentlessly.

“No massage from him!” he growled imitating Batman’s roar and turned Bruce on his stomach. “Your body is only for my fingers to touch…”

Bruce chuckled and lifted an eyebrow.

“A good massage requires the masseur wearing the proper attire, which for your case is…” he moaned closing his eyes as Clark already touched his back “none! It’s so long since I last saw you without this ridiculous outfit…”

Clark leaned his head right next to Bruce’s cheek, who feeling his breath opened his eyes.

“Ridiculous?”

“Red, blue, yellow and orange? Really?” he snorted. “Besides anything compared with your naked body IS ridiculous!”

“You saved it…” Clark commented and was ready to discard his suit when his eyes fell on two flashing eyes on the floor. “Huh, Bruce? Nudity is allowed for underage kitten?”

Bruce chuckled and stretched his arm to brush Hero’s head and the kitten purred and climbed on the mattress to Clark’s rolling of eyes.

The Man of Steel took the kitten and in a blur placed him in his basket getting rid of his annoying attire in the second of his return. Bruce’s eyes caressed Clark’s god-like nude body making the Man of Steel feel as if the most skilled hands in universe had fondled him.

“I hoped for a sensual, slow strip tease…”

“So the client isn’t happy?”
“You took my kitten away!” he protested as Clark straddled him careful to not let his weight burden him.

“Hero understands…especially since I gave him his favorite smoked salmon” he winked.

Bruce supported his torso on his palms and looked at him.

“So…the crime was carefully planned beforehand…”

“Always…” he laid Bruce carefully back on the mattress. “And now, my Star, your faithful super masseur will earn his money…” his fingers ran Bruce’s shoulders easing the tension, kissing and sucking every inch of flesh he touched.

“But I didn’t pay…” Bruce let his head sink to the mattress and moaned as Clark’s lips doubled the effect of his skilled fingers.

“You just did…” Clark trailed Bruce’s deltoid with his hot tongue relishing the pleasure that flooded the young man’s brain waves.

“Fifty two hours and 24 minutes without you…” he whispered his thought as the magic fingers massaged his stiff neck numbing pleasantly the depths of his brain loosening his tongue.

Clark blushed because that was the greater admission of love from Bruce and because he hadn’t realized that so many hours had passed. And then he moved slowly down, finally reaching Bruce’s legs that still carried marks of his horrible injuries. He stretched the unresponsive legs aware of Bruce’s held breath. He knew that he was craving for his ministrations.

And Clark traced with his fingers the paths of the barely functional neurons rejoicing the stimuli that slowly ascended to Bruce’s brain. He could hear Bruce’s relieved smile and his head nestling in the silken pillow. Clark wanted to compensate for the lost time he neglected that special treatment that kept the neurons active and helped the generation of new synapses.

His eyes narrowed on the marks Bruce’s fingers left on the paths he followed.

“You were hitting your legs?”

Bruce gave an affirmative huff through the soft fabric.

“It’s nice to get some feeling…”

Clark pressed his lips determined to give Bruce more than some feeling. He took away his fingers and began massaging with his mouth, letting out hot and cold breath in turn savoring Bruce’s aroused breaths – Clark knew that stimulating those ill functioning areas turned them into highly erogenous paths. He smirked, hearing his lover moaning, clutching the soft pillow; his breath was quickened with pleasure.

He used all his skill to guide his lips into extracting the most stimuli possible and he knew he was successful as Bruce’s forearms hugged tighter the pillow grunting as his healthy torso shook.

Clark after ten minutes of smelling Bruce’s perfume intensified by his arousal didn’t have the restraint to continue: he was aroused more and his body was drenched in the same glowing sweat as Bruce. He whined and rose wrapping his arms around Bruce’s shining torso before touching carefully his body on the human’s; his suffering length rubbing on those delicious buttocks, Clark leading his member to slowly get release even without penetration – Kryptonian physiology had many other precious advantages apart from super powers.
His head nestled in Bruce’s shoulder blade chewing softly the hot flesh, savoring with his tongue the salty flavor.

“It’s nice, huh?” he whispered.

Bruce turned his head on the pillow, some locks had glued on his sweaty cheekbones which view made Clark rush to nuzzle that hot cheek.

“It is…You’re back…”

Clark’s hands massaged Bruce’s buttocks guiding them into treat his penis to climax at a safe pace. Bruce had no feeling below his waist but from Clark’s rasps, the sound of flesh brushing flesh and his body’s shaking understood what he was doing. And he was content that Clark could get some sexual satisfaction out of him.

“I promise you…” Clark whispered in his ear sucking and burning the skin with the rasping of his orgasm. “I’ll always be here…” he grunted.

Bruce stilled his blank eyes on the pillow.

Don’t make promises you can’t keep…His insides were torn as soon as this thought cracked in his mind like a lightning.
Bagdana was standing in the middle of his underground lair, a circular huge cave with colossal columns made from stalactites and stalagmites glimmering with different colors; he retained his true form with his granite gigantic body, the sparkling silver spikes all over his scalp and the ivory straight horns. He was in his domain, in his kingdom watching in the crystal waters of the round lake in front of him Darkseid with his sycophant Granny Goodness overseeing his hired and brainwashed thugs raiding hideouts of rival gangs in Metropolis and labs all over the States. His partner was in his real form too since the underground of the Mannheim Mansion was unreachable to everyone and his red eyes were glaring smugly at his human servants on the holograph projection right before his throne. He smirked: this new God didn’t suspect that Bagdana could have access to his headquarters and watch his movements. Darkseid didn’t trust him enough to tell him what he was looking for in the LexLabs but he was sure that the new God wasn’t going to find it. Luthor though not a god was cunning enough to hide perfectly what was to secure himself from his present allies and potentially future enemies. Luthor was going to sell dearly this precious info especially now that he was in need.

And there was another factor that should trouble Darkseid: LexLabs belonged now to Bruce and he was even smarter from both Luthor and Darkseid: Superman’s intervention in the raid of the Metropolis’ central LexLab manifested clearly that the security system that Darkseid knew from Luthor had been already replaced by Wayne Enterprises’ security systems that blew the whistle ruining their plans. Bruce was fully aware of Luthor’s shady businesses and experiments so would not risk of something dangerous being taken from there.

They had continued attempting robberies at LexLabs always in combination with other irrelevant laboratories as Bagdana had advised to camouflage their real target. Darkseid simply didn’t give a shit about his thugs which were busted every time: they were cheap, expendable tools and each time he recruited new. If they managed to find the desirable thing Darkseid would take it himself.

At the same time his partner’s servants (either with their will by generous payment or with brainwash) were erasing the competition of other gangs in Metropolis. It was obvious that Darkseid wanted to establish his reign in every sector and hit Superman from different battlefields simultaneously.

Bagdana yawned because all this trouble to dominate earth had become after the first couple of millennia boring and uninteresting. Well, he definitely liked to be in the winner’s side or better to be the winner but his major concern at this stage was getting back what ran away from him.

His red flames of eyes stabbed the water surface and erased the footage from Darkseid’s headquarters. He ordered mentally the waters to show him Bruce…but nothing came up.

Bagdana snorted and smoke filled the space: Bruce had returned to Gotham, to their city, the city that gave birth to Bruce and brought them together. The thought alone made his gigantic, granite looking body get on fire ready to storm his bedroom and conquer his sleeping body… or since he didn’t want to disclose his menace yet, at least caress with his hot breath the youth’s neck to cause goose bumps to his body in his peaceful sleep…

But he could only sense and imagine his stubborn soul mate and his surroundings not even take a peep of him, proof that the damn black diamond was hanging powerful from his neck, over his chest and…there was still deep love in the Kryptonian’s heart which lay right beside him with his lips brushing the same neck Bagdana wanted to suck.
His fists clenched and he shut his eyes roaring because every time the love between Superman and Bruce created a shield against him, it was real pain: how could Bruce still insist on the love of this man? He opened slowly his eyes and over the water the image of the Amazon Princess smiled seductively to Superman.

Bagdana nodded: his pain would be over soon: there was still love in Superman’s heart…but it was cracked and before long it’d be shattered.

It began with a sense of tickling slowly pouring from the few functional neurons of his legs to the entirety of his bottom half body. He was still sat in Clark’s wheelchair and two blazing crystal blue eyes were watching him avidly sharing the same senses through reading his brain waves.

For an instance, he was hesitant: he didn’t want to have his hopes crushed by a failure…But life flooded his legs and flared his body. So he pressed his lips determined, clenched his jaw and tightened his grasp to the armrests.

Clark jolted to hold him if he fell but Bruce cast him a sharp glare to stay at a distance.

His feet felt the floor, the solid surface and his heartbeat raced before he controlled it back to normal pacing. His fingers hurt from the way he was gripping the armrests as he prepared himself for the last and most difficult part. He could sense Clark holding his breath…He pushed his body upwards and his legs trembled.

Clark jerked in his place but didn’t intervene as Bruce slowly let go of the armrests…standing…well, not very steady but it was amazing since he wasn’t using an ounce of his mental power to assist his body.

He concentrated on his body and the shaking eventually stopped; Clark was rasping now but Bruce didn’t look at him to not lose his focus. He inhaled deeply and his eyes were sparkling in determination as he ordered his left foot to move forwards. He felt Clark’s eyes stilling at his foot as if transferring some of his insane power to the human limb; Superman was so tense that didn’t smile when the foot settled an inch ahead. Neither did Bruce: he just controlled his breath and ordered his right foot to go ahead the left.

A small step for a human, a huge step for Bruce… He smiled to himself encouraged; his brow sleek with sweat; he staggered a bit and stretched his arms for balance – Clark’s body resembled the body of a lion ready to attack but not really attack but catch.

He had stability now and breathed: time for a second step. First the left then the right. A faint smile carved his face and for the first time he turned his eyes to Clark whose face was still tense with apprehension, a lump evident in his throat.

Bruce moved again his feet to reach him enjoying how the beautiful body was coming closer; he was inches from him and Clark was beaming – was right for Superman to shed tears? Bruce didn’t want to see Clark crying even if it was from joy…

…The floor left from his feet and Bruce after all this time wasn’t able to retain his balance…he was falling and it felt awfully…

But then two unbelievably strong but simultaneously gentle arms caught him from the armpits and suddenly the lack of floor didn’t feel terrifying but thrilling. He was ascending to the sky – he was flying…
“I got you… I’ll always be the faster to catch you…” Clark’s face was touching his and Bruce attacked his lips more aggressively, more enthusiastic than ever. “Yeah, Bruce…” Superman whispered “you made it!”

Batman was gazing down at Gotham’s streets, the strong wind blowing his cape around him. His eyes were ablaze with determination: he just stopped a murderer and knocked out a gang ready to attack a woman and her little girl. He was back!

The whoosh was eloquent enough: he really thought that he could take him by surprise? His eyebrow twitched under the cowl and Batman jolted passing over Superman’s body with a somersault that the alien barely caught. He landed softly at his feet but sprang again as a blur came at him – Superman wouldn’t admit defeat – Batman smirked as he twisted his body to meet Superman’s instead of avoid it.

He could tell that the Man of Steel was astonished but as Batman expected, Clark wrapped his arms around his torso and connected their lips in a wild tango of flesh… He felt the rush of movement but Batman didn’t worry: his back was softly rested on the wall and immediately fast hands were unclenching his armor’s parts causing his heartbeat and breath go crazy… Superman’s lips were sucking desperately the visible part of his face, frustrated for being unable to get access to the rest of the face.

But the Man of Steel was luckier in stripping Batman’s hips and his greedy hands fondled the human’s buttocks roaring his pleasure in Bruce’s mouth.

“It’s… wrong…” Batman growled. “Superman… can’t be… fucking around – especially with Batman…” of course his moans disrupting every syllable were relaying the opposite.

“Who cares?”

Superman grabbed his still armored legs and brought them to hug his hips in the same second Superman freed his erection. And then Batman’s gloves tightened on Superman’s back as his lover thrust in him causing a moan.

“No foreplay?” Batman growled in Superman’s ear biting carefully to not break his teeth but the effect on the Man of Steel was powerful.

“I think” he thrust again “we had that” he granted perfectly synchronized with Bruce as the human sucked and licked his neckline “I, with Metropolis’ thugs and you, with Gotham’s scum…”

Superman began thrusting without restricting himself only holding Batman tenderly to not be hurt by hitting the wall from his force. And Bruce was moaning and grunting as Clark searched with his teeth for Batman’s still hidden cheekbones.

“Take off your damn cowl…” he rasped between his thrusts that sent fire to Bruce’s spine.

Batman’s gloved hands fistied Superman’s messy locks as his blood boiled with joy.

“Never!”

Superman’s eyes found Batman’s real eyes since he had deactivated the lenses and the Man of Steel chuckled like a boy; his thrusts became faster and then he cupped Batman’s head touching their foreheads together.

“Sex on a Gotham rooftop” he breathed “I always wanted to do that…”
Batman bit Superman’s lower lip.

“Not so boy scout-y…”

Superman laughed and then his hot fluid rushed in Bruce’s body filling him with goose bumps exactly as his own climax erupted. Superman’s embrace became tighter.

“You’re my life-giving sun…Don’t you ever leave me…”

“Do you really want to do that to him? Do you believe that he deserves that?” it blew like a thunder in the quiet of the night.

It was the same arrogant female voice that had jeered him for being hidden behind a tree only this time the scorn was stronger. And Gotham was gone, as the cool air, to be replaced by impenetrable milky-white fog…

Bruce suddenly could see the fog dissolving revealing the back of a kneeled Superman dressed in the same grandiose attire Bruce was wearing during his stay in the Fortress of Solitude. With the difference of being all white in agreement with the surrounding crystals…A color that Bruce knew it was mournful because the whole scene clenched his insides in sorrow. Reflecting Superman’s emotional state…whose head was slumped in his chest, his arms loosely left to touch the cold surface without any energy, without any mood to make a move.

It seemed that the Man of Steel didn’t even breathe either had a heartbeat but Bruce could see his tears falling from his eyes…

“…my heart doesn’t beat anymore but I know that I won’t die…” he heard again Clark’s dry voice recounting his nightmare.

He felt his heart ache for Clark and moved closer to console him because they could fight everything together…He touched his shoulder blade but his froze as his eyes were able to discern in front of Superman. The Man of Steel was leaning above a body…Bruce’s body.

“I’ll continue float with you in my arms but you won’t ever come back to me and I’ll be forever alive but dead…”

Bruce bit his lips hard and the copper taste of blood was heavy; he looked at his dead self and his face was gaunt and wrinkled, his hair white: he was old, very old…and Clark was young, beautiful as ever – he looked like Bruce’s grandson but the Man of Steel was crying for him, his insides were torn apart because his human lover died his natural death of age…

“It’s okay, Clark” he whispered to Superman’s ear and caressed his shoulder. “We lived together all these years…humans die but at least you gave me happiness…You’ll be alright – life is beautiful and people love you: your heart will beat again with joy…”

He closed his eyes: he knew the pain Clark was feeling…The pain of losing your loved ones…It kept stabbing through the years.

“Do you enjoy what you succeeded?” the same female voice hissed in his ear. “Do your human egoism relish seeing a being like him broken for your sake?”

Her voice was poison and Bruce could see Superman’s crystal, sparkling eyes…only they were glassy, their blue topaz glow put out as if these eyes were of a dead man…Of a dead man crying above the corpse of an old man as if this carcass had sucked Superman’s life and energy before dying or even after death.
“No…” Bruce spat angrily. “You can’t be like this, Clark! You’re life incarnated! You’re my Sun…” his voice was choked by despair.

He heard steps echoing to the empty, depressive chamber. A snigger sharper than knife wounded the silence of Clark’s non existing vitals and silent sobs.

“YOUR. SUN…” she spat gleeful. “Of course, littl’ Brucie kept Superman for himself so his miserable life could get some light – so he could hide behind him…to brag that someone like him managed to capture, trap and drag Superman to a living death, along with him…”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, Clark…Your life doesn’t end with mine…” he tried to chuckle as if Clark could hear him but he ended up grunting. “You know that…You promised…”

The woman laughed.

“It’s your fault: you always knew that he wouldn’t be able to keep that promise but still you doomed him…you doomed humankind…”

He saw buildings burning, collapsing, huge waves shattering ships, people crying for help, mothers beg Superman to save their babes…but Superman though could hear their pleading didn’t stir, his dead eyes focused on the old man’s wrinkled face, his hands weakly caressing the gaunt cheeks.

Bruce gulped because Superman’s pain had settled in his throat as well as in his heart.

“I stare at your face begging with my blank eyes because my voice is lost; I’m begging you to come back…but you don’t…” Clark’s monotonous voice continued echoing through the crystal walls.

The steps stopped right next to him.

“You did that: you put your egoism above anything else – above his wellbeing. Do you really think that you offered him anything more than agony, suffering and pain? Even the satisfaction he deserves was taken away from him by you…”

Bruce turned to the presence right next to him and his eyes widened seeing the one he already knew.

“Selfish human, do you believe that you’re worthy of him? You’re worthy of his love and misery?!”

“He isn’t miserable!” he yelled but he wasn’t sure.

Diana jerked her head and began laughing.

And Bruce found himself in front of the Daily Planet building in a Metropolis that was totally different, like coming taken off a sci-fi movie depicting the distant future. He heard the sound and raised his eyes to see Superman and Wonder Woman hammering some bizarre flying enemies until the last one was down. The crowd cheered as the two heroes hugged mid-air and kissed passionately.

A blade ripped Bruce’s heart in two but his eyes disobeyed him and kept looking there… and then someone else flew to them: a boy dressed in Superman’s – the House of El – colors; he had raven hair and crystal blue eyes; a curl brushing his forehead exactly like his father’s. The boy rushed to them and Clark took the boy between him and Diana, and Bruce saw that the boy had the same lips with her and a tiara like hers was in his locks… Their son…
Bruce felt one by one the drops of blood from his heart...yet...he was happy because Clark’s eyes were alive, joyful, hopeful...

“Do you want to deprive him of all this happiness?”

The drenched in sunshine landscape of the future Metropolis with the smiling super family dissolved abruptly leaving in its place the depressive all white chamber of the Fortress with the slumped, uncaring, broken Superman. His dead eyes were stabbing Bruce’s heart though the Man of Steel wasn’t looking at anything except the lifeless face of his dead lover or not even this but somewhere in the past. It was obvious that from now on for Clark there was only the past: not the present, not the future, not life – exactly like a ghost...

“I don’t think that you’d like Superman settled in his Fortress indifferent to the world’s suffering...” Clark’s playful voice echoed from past times.

And then he felt again the shadow of the Amazon Princess scolding at him.

“Are you so cruel?” she hissed.

Bruce stirred in his sleep; he was vaguely aware that it was a dream but still the impact was grave – actually, a gravestone settled on his chest and he just wanted to get out of the blindingly white chamber and escape to something relieving: like reality...

Well, there was nothing relieving in feeling that you’re cut in half with your body below the waist being nonexistent. He tried to re-experience the feelings from the other dream where his legs were alive again but the thud, exhausting beating inside his ribcage didn’t permit that.

The strong medication he was treated with always made it difficult for him to get quickly from sleep to awakening; it demanded some ‘twilight’ zone where Bruce was aware of his surroundings and pondered on things: actually, although rapid awakening was crucial for him, that pondering was nice and inspiring.

However, today the ‘twilight’ pondering was filled with disappointment as an abrupt clearing informed him that although he was warmly cocooned this cocoon wasn’t Clark’s hot body but blankets carefully placed to muffle him meticulously. He was dressed in his warmest pajamas – if he knew Clark well, the ones he wore last night were neatly hanged to the chair’s back because he was taught by his mother to be neat.

His body was cleaned from his and Clark’s sweat, saliva and...semen. His lover had cleaned him after he fell asleep defeated by the medication, the fatigue and...the happiness of Clark’s return. Definitely Clark didn’t use the shower’s aid; he’d have woken...So he cleaned him with his own means... – on that he felt his cheeks hot which angered him because he was behaving like a teen – an innocent teen while he was anything but that!

He inhaled deeply: innocent or not, teen or not, his hands caressed the other side of the mattress. The absence of that body-nest around him and that hot respiration wetting his ear and sending electric currents to his healthy body discouraged Bruce for the day that dawned.

But he was in Gotham now – here the time difference didn’t exist so Clark had to fly to Metropolis for his daily job. Here they didn’t have the blessing of sharing mornings...Unless, Bruce struggled and didn’t surrender in deep sleep so to get up the same time with Clark, which would first cause an outcry from Leslie...and the rest of the gang, and second would hurt the infamous ‘rest to heal’ dogma, especially when the surgery could be happening soon...
There was something warm on his chest but it certainly wasn’t Clark’s ‘possessive’ arm…and it purred! His face radiated with a big smile and he actually chuckled before opening his eyes exactly when his fluffy burden felt the movement and stood to bring its face above Bruce’s.

Bruce now giggled, finding it so funny to have Hero’s pink nose right above his own and the kitten’s big round eyes looking him curiously.

“So…you were the burden over my chest? Huh?” he narrowed his eyes mock strictly but the kitten didn’t buy it and pecked his cheek causing a new lighthearted laugh. “Nah…It wasn’t your fault, buddy…”

Indeed the impression from the dream lingered and Bruce shook his head to clear it.

“Do you think that all these drugs I’m taking and Crane’s sick experiments got to me?” he caressed Hero’s head. “Or it’s the thoughts I don’t want to acknowledge?”

Hero’s paw touched his nose softly and Bruce nodded.

“You’re right…I’m babbling…” he took gently the animal from its armpits and lifted it to place it on the pile of blankets. “Wait a minute, buddy…to hoist myself. As much as I’ve been training, it’s still much different from having my legs doing the job…”

Yet his ascent was stopped abruptly when his eyes fell on the nightstand and he ended up supporting himself on his elbow. He knew he should have smiled on the sight yet his expression stayed neutral. On the nightstand lay his tablet-like gadget – it had fallen on the floor when Clark lifted him last night so Clark must have picked it up before he left. Upon its screen a ruby colored rose was placed diagonally – Clark knew that this screen was indestructible and scratch proof; under the rose the entire screen was covered with Italian letters:

“I’m sorry I left without saying anything but you were sleeping so peacefully – like an angel – and I didn’t want to ruin your dreams (I hope they were filled with me…)” – of course they were…Bruce almost sighed “I’ll come as soon as I slip Perry’s clutches…I love you! P.S. Thank you for being so generous and forgave me…”

Bruce took the rose whose thorns were meticulously removed and inhaled deeply its intoxicating smell – certainly, Clark brought it from another corner of the planet and didn’t just buy it because the fresh drops on its petals were natural and not the product the florists were using.

Hero had climbed again to his lap now that he was in sitting position and touched his muzzle to the petals.

Bruce’s eyes were blank replaying the scenes from last night with a strange mix of feelings: he was joyful and relieved that Clark hadn’t been injured or something and that he came back to him, but on the same time he felt a sinking feeling: he knew he did the right thing to act like that yet…it hit him like…

“You were there, Hero…You think I’m too soft to him?” his sparkling eyes met the kitten’s, who stopped rubbing its head to Bruce’s chest and Bruce frowned shocked “do you think that he has wrapped me around his pinky?!?”

He was Batman, for pity’s sake! He shouldn’t be like this…like…like… He should have made Clark beg for his forgiveness; torture, punish him for letting him in agony – for being with the Amazon more than with him…Her voice from the dream echoed again in his head and he rubbed his face.

No, he wanted Clark to be happy even when the Man of Steel caused Bruce some turmoil…Because
Clark had suffered because of him all these months; Clark took care of him like a father and a mother together: he was bathing him, feeding him in the mouth like a baby.

He’d have died without his love and care…Clark’s heartbreaking howl of that night when Bruce succumbed to his injuries made the blood freeze in his veins…Clark loved him and his love troubled and filled the older man with agony…so he needed some time alone to find himself, his stability…despite being the most powerful being, Clark could be bent from his fears and his fears had to do with Bruce’s vulnerability and that was that caused his irritation when he decided to return to Gotham. But now he was sure that Clark was calm again and things would be like the first days after his awakening.

Unless…He remembered the footage from the UN ceremony; the knowing laughter of the reporters as they commented on the rapid disappearance of the two superheroes… Did Clark enjoy more her company than his? But then he recalled all the moments from last night, the massage that gave again life in his legs – though now they were again dead -, the kisses, the moans, the whispers, the promises…Don’t make promises you can’t keep…

“Master Bruce, you’re already awake?” the door opening and Alfred’s slightly surprised and embarrassed voice dissolved his thoughts. “Pardon me for not knocking the door but I didn’t want to disrupt your rest – I was going to just…”

“…Check on me” Bruce smiled. “It’s okay, Alfred” he reassured him and took in Alfred’s nonchalant eyes estimating the room’s condition.

“Perhaps you should resume your sleep for a couple of hours more: Mr. Leench, your physiotherapist isn’t due till afternoon and it’s not even 8 o’clock: you must be tired after Master Kent’s return” Alfred’s eyes were cool as ever when his young master’s cheeks became red.

“Actually, I’m quite rested, Alfred” he said having decided to stop being a teen in these things. “You know that Clark is very careful and takes care of my body’s wellbeing…” he frowned “but how you knew about his coming?”

Alfred walked to the chair that hosted Bruce’s pajamas and gestured to the clothes.

“First of all, the pajamas you wore last night: you wear a different set now; second, the rose you hold and third, the body shape in the other side of the bed” his face was totally expressionless but Bruce could make out a sparkle of amusement in his clever eyes.

“I must remember to exploit your detective skills…” he replied arching his eyebrows and placing the rose on the nightstand.

He brought his legs off the mattress to touch the floor as the wheelchair ‘reading’ his order came near him; Alfred waited eager to help but didn’t make a move because he knew his master’s wish to make everything alone – not even Hero moved closer to not thwart his master’s effort. However, Alfred grabbed the robe and held it for Bruce to wear immediately after he was settled in the chair.

“Alfred…” he was hesitant to phrase his question as his arms slipped inside the robe.

“Yes, sir?” Alfred though for eighteen years had been kept away from the boy, had trained himself to read his mood even when there were no many signs – and the clever man saw that apart from the relief the reunion brought and something else.

Bruce opened his mouth but closed it shaking his head.

“Nothing…”
But Alfred was so attentive for anything threatening Bruce’s emotional peace that couldn’t let the chance go away.

“Forgive my insistence, sir, but you know that I’m here for everything you want to share, right?” Bruce raised his eyes to find his butler’s eyes. “Your trust is always an honor for me.”

And a pain...Bruce thought and he didn’t want to sadden this good man with such things. However Alfred was wise and patient and unbiased concerning Clark; Tony didn’t cover the last so he couldn’t ask him.

“Alfred, do you think that I have changed?” he asked straight and ran his fingers through Hero’s fur – the kitten had found the chance to resume his rightful place in Bruce’s lap.

The older man lifted an eyebrow because it was a complex question and his young master’s eyes manifested how important it was.

“Before answering properly that question, allow me to require some clarifications: change in relation to what and when.”

Bruce inclined slightly his head and licked his lips: he should have asked the question properly.

“Do you think that...what happened between me and Clark has changed me?”

Now that was difficult to answer: Alfred had lived Bruce only through glimpses – stolen, rushed moments filled with agony in the darkness of the Manor’s underground caves – and then his daily experience with him was only for one year from the moment Falcone decided to move to the Manor and drag Bruce along. He felt that he knew the youth better than anyone – except from Miss Kyle – but still the seriousness in those young eyes said to him that Alfred had responsibility to assess right.

“To begin with, Master Bruce, anything new in our life can cause changes – especially, when that new is a person and more important a person that stirs the strongest emotions inside us” Bruce was staring at him sucking every word collected yet giving the impression that he was holding his breath.

Alfred leaned and held the young man’s upper arms.

“The core of us remains the same yet when something so strong enters our lives some changes do happen; maybe not so much in our personality but mainly in the way we see things and cope with them. Life means change, Master Bruce” Bruce’s eyes were sparkling “our experiences in relationships always bring something different in our worldview or attitude around other people. What is important though is whether we feel content with those changes; whether we consider them good or bad or if I may say, worth to be maintained.”

Alfred’s stare was stronger now.

“Which leads us to this, sir: are you content with your relationship with Master Kent and how it is affecting your personality?”

Bruce’s eyes lowered a bit and then returned to look at his butler’s kind face.

“I’m too soft with Clark? Am I acting out off character? Sloppy?”

Alfred was divided between smiling for the youth’s first known love issues and being serious because it was very important for Bruce – and so for Alfred too.

“I get that you didn’t – let’s say – punish him much last night, right?”
Bruce blinked: he felt so uncomfortable speaking for these things. He actually felt like an idiot.

“Not at all…” he admitted.

Alfred pressed his lips.

“Did you feel the need to punish him for staying away without a word?”

Bruce lowered his head and rubbed his forehead. He shook his head.

“No…I just wanted him to get back safe…and be like…” he inhaled “like we were before the attack. Oh, Alfred, I can’t get angry with Clark… he also suffered too much and struggles all the time with his fears of me being hurt…and I’m sorry for him” he yanked his head. “Maybe these things aren’t for me: I don’t think that I’m supposed to be in such situations…”

Alfred frowned: no, Bruce shouldn’t think like this.

“Do you regret the last night, Master Bruce?” Bruce’s eyes widened and got warm.

He shook his head in denial and brushed Hero’s head.

“No, I was…happy.”

“Did you ever regret what you started with Master Kent?”

Alfred didn’t lose the tension in Bruce’s healthy body.

“Only when I was to die and I felt Clark’s terrible pain; that howl of his the moment I…” he locked eyes with his butler “when I momentarily died…” he tasted again the sour taste of his dream. “But other than that, no, I have no regrets.”

Alfred’s lips twitched.

“So if I’m getting this right, the Bat inside you is concerned that you let Master Kent easily get away with his misbehavior and nudges you, huh?” he stretched his posture. “Well, I’d hate to make suggestions but why not enjoy your last night reunion, which I assume it was quite pleasant? Perhaps the brilliant young man that we know Master Clark is realized his misbehavior and won’t do it again…But if he does anything so nasty again you’ll adjust your stance accordingly?” he winked smiling.

“I just don’t want him to think that I’m a desperate victim that clang to the first person that approached him…”

Alfred nodded solemn.

“Pardon me, sir, but I think that currently this is your own fear: what if Master Kent actually thinks that he is the bloody luckiest man on this planet and thus the happiest too?” Bruce raised his eyes to him. “You’re not weakened, sir, because you’re soft and understanding to the man you love, like Batman is not less strong when is generous enough to give criminals a second chance. It demands more strength to depart from one’s anger and adhere to what is really important…”

Bruce gave a smile and nodded; Alfred’s heart beat calmer because he saw that his young master was relaxed, his face regaining his beautiful healthy rosy color. And as the kitten in his lap became restless and writhed rubbing his fur on Bruce’s chest, Alfred saw the clouds dissolving.

“Shower and breakfast, sir?”
“Hero…Hero…” the kitten was nuzzling Bruce’s neck purring and the young man tried to escape. “I think he is hungry, Alfred…” he chuckled. “Is Tony still here?”

Alfred was already gathering his master’s pajamas from the chair.

“I just met him on the corridor to the kitchen: Master Anthony like myself thought that you’ll be sleeping for some more. Do you want me to notify him?”

Bruce made an affirmative sound.

“I wish Selina had stayed for the night too: I always have more appetite with all my friends around the table…”

He let Hero down and turned towards the bathroom that was already adjusted to his increased and special needs as an individual with mobility impairments.

“There are many things I have to do today, Alfred” he said with vivacity as his chair rolled inside the bathroom.

“A lot, sir?” Alfred’s voice was slightly downhearted because definitely he wanted for his young master to continue his rest filled days at Thasos.

Bruce realized and grinned to him.

“I won’t exert myself, Alfred, I promise, but there are things that waited too long.”

“Of course, sir” he nodded.

Hero’s soft paws didn’t make a sound on the thick carpet but Bruce caught him before the kitten slipped in the bathroom.

“Do you want a bath too?” he asked him as he brought Hero’s head to his. “I don’t think so…” he shook his head and let the kitten outside the bathroom closing the door.

Bruce chuckled remembering the first time he bathed Hero. He was still in the Fortress and although Clark reminded him what he already knew that is to say that in the Fortress bath didn’t require water, Bruce insisted on Hero getting used to the normal procedure…

Well, it proved to be quite difficult to persuade an energetic two months old kitten to be bathed…and thankfully, Clark was there not only to help controlling Hero but also to dry and dress Bruce in new attire because he ended up more drenched than Hero.

He was laughing so hard as if he was again the giggling toddler in the Manor’s grounds and he sensed Clark’s glimmering eyes sucking the sight of Bruce ‘wrestling’ with his kitten before the Man of Steel erupted in even louder laughter and joined them to get as much soaked.

Hero was clean and dry in his kryptonian basket and Clark heaved Bruce in his arms: they were both dripping water and even their hair was soaked. Bruce couldn’t stop his hands from touching Clark’s wet locks and he was surprised to feel Superman shaking from emotion.

“We must get those drenched clothes off you…” Superman breathed in a husky voice and Bruce was naked in a second and Clark’s mouth was glued to his, tantalizing and conquering his lips.

Bruce had closed his eyes diving into the sweetness of the Kryptonian’s kiss and the avalanche of his touches to the healthy part of his body; touches which although soft and tender drove his newly
revitalized body to excitement and bliss. Once more Clark sparked life in him…

Clark was scrolling down on his PC screen the news headlines referring to Bruce’s arrival. He supported his chin on his palm and his eyes were blank replaying the last night’s moments: he never had much need for sleep so that permitted him to watch Bruce sleeping…and that would melt him every time, especially as he spooned Bruce’s warm body that emanated that intoxicating smell that was paralyzing pleasantly his brain as his half open lips nestled in the human’s neck.

“If you plan on writing an article concerning the reactions about Bruce’s return too late, buster! Perry gave it to someone else. You lost your chance to cover it live” Lois settled on his desk sniffing at him.

Clark heard her coming and was ready for her outburst – he hadn’t answered her calls from yesterday: oops!

“Aaaand you didn’t have the decency to answer my calls, farm boy!” she shook her head disgusted “Ms. Kent will be very displeased when hears about your behavior…”

Clark smiled to her and she frowned narrowing his eyes.

“C’mere, Lois… You know how highly I think of you” she cocked an eyebrow and rolled her eyes in disbelief “but I didn’t call you back ‘cause we’re gonna argue and argue, and I wanted to ‘answer’ Bruce’s calls and talk to you up close and personal.”

Lois took his cup of coffee and sipped grimacing.

“You certainly can afford a better coffee…”

Clark snorted.

“As soon as Ms. Rose decides to buy a new coffee machine.”

Lois chuckled; she was a fan of Ms. Rose’s bakery as well but the old lady’s coffee machine was from the 90s.

“So you made Bruce so worried that he was searching for you through phone…”

Clark sighed and nodded pressing his lips.

“I did and it was cruel from me. I went to him to soothe him and…make up to him.”

Lois shook her head.

“I hope he made you kneel and beg and beg and cry. That would do your” she lowered her voice to whisper “super powered ass justice.”

He jerked his eyebrows upwards.

“He…he wasn’t angry” he looked Lois in the eyes showing his vast regret “he was worried, Lois, and sad, and that was worse than being angry and forcing me to beg for getting in his good books again. Of course I apologized” he added hastily “and…I made my best to compensate and make him happy again…” he winked.

But Lois’ eyes widened.
“You didn’t!” she exclaimed shocked and some of their colleagues looked at her. “You told me that his pelvis is too fragile” she continued much calmer and in whispy mode after casting a glare at the others.

Clark chuckled.

“I gave him a heavenly pleasant – I’m not bragging here… massage that relaxed, rested and revitalized his body.”

Lois crossed her arms.

“Like ad for brothel selling cheap porn massage!” she snorted.

Clark opened his mouth affronted and raised his index finger shaking his head.

“No cheap, not cheap at all!”

“And he just let you?”

Clark huffed: he knew that he deserved to be tormented by Bruce but he was glad the younger man didn’t go for that option.

“Oh, Lois, I know I acted stupidly but I regretted it and apologized and why we should have kept arguing about my stupidity and not go on enjoying the moments life offers us?”

Lois’s mouth crooked in a smirk and she snorted.

“Cut the crap, buster! The boy needs to learn some things…”

Clark yanked his head and chuckled.

“Bruce has Stark to disparage me.”

She nodded with her eyebrow cocked.

“Yeah…a womanizer. Bruce needs a woman to teach him about men.”

“He is a man too, you know…” he tilted his head on the side.

Lois shook her index finger.

“He is much more than simply a man: he is a sweetheart, the bravest, cutest being out there… but he is inexperienced and innocent” Clark shook his head smiling in disbelief for the strong sympathy Bruce got from women. “I hope you realize that you’re the luckiest bastard, mister!”

Clark looked her in the eyes, completely serious.

“Do I look like I haven’t realized?”

She widened her eyes in emphasis.

“Absolutely! And though I’m a woman, I tell you: that Diana sucks and doesn’t compare with Bruce.”

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I have nothing with her, Lois: she is just a friend and ally.”
“That you can sell to others not me – I see how you look at her!” she leaned to him placing her palm on the desk.

He ruffled his hair.

“Okay! I might look at her… appraising and acknowledging her beauty” Lois grunted “but it’s normal, Lois… Before I met Bruce I was heterosexual so I recognize the female beauty too.”

Lois crossed her arms.

“Heterosexual my ass! Even your mom knows that her son had experience with both sexes…” Clark crooked his lips. “The name Ron Cooper rings a bell?” she smirked and Clark blushed. “You’re bisexual but either of them doesn’t justify you drooling for her. She’s bad influence, Clark!” she inhaled deeply. “You began neglecting Bruce from the day you met her – do you think he didn’t notice?”

“Wait… wait… Neglect? For pity’s sake, Lois!”

But she poked him at the chest grimacing because she had forgotten that this actually hurt.

“You have to get a grip, Smallville: Bruce might be sweet and kind and forgiving but I’m sure that if you continue your double play he’ll react because he has dignity – he won’t stand being fooled around by you.”

Well, Clark was also sure more so since he knew that Batman was watching.

“You need to clear things, Clark, because you’ll hurt him and remember that you vowed to not let anyone do exactly that?”

Clark lowered his eyes.

“There’s nothing going on between me and Diana. Honestly.”

Lois looked him disbelievingly.

“I hope you’re not lying to yourself, Clark…” she pouted. “You need to be honest with yourself, buddy…”

He licked his dry lips and his eyes found Bruce on the news’ photos on his PC screen.

“I love Bruce and I’d never cause him new pain: he has had enough of this shit…”

“Good to hear…” she patted his shoulder. “On other stuff: we had some gang quarrels last night – Police hints Intergang: seems like the new gang is expanding and increases its power while remains vague like a ghost.”

Clark nodded.

“I was watching White and Stitches last night – they spoke about their boss but nothing fascinating; just some scattered words about a plan and about how confident he is – they hinted that their mysterious boss isn’t afraid of Superman…”

She raised her eyebrows and whistled impressed.

“Do you think that he has Kryptonite stock? Maybe he was co-operating with Luthor?”
“That would explain the raid in the LexLab…”

“Yeah…and then they added other laboratories in their target to drive us away from suspecting their actual interest.”

Clark remembered Bruce’s suggestion to discuss about the attack against him – well, that moment he wasn’t in a state to discuss anything but as soon as he left the Planet he’d rush to Gotham to share notes with him.

Jim Gordon was pacing the rooftop of the MCU building which was an unusual thing since he used to do that a lot but at night not early morning. He looked at the bat signal that had remained unlit for a long time. His obscure ally after the incident in the Chickey’s factory had become even more unreachable. Batman had saved the children, had stopped Joker and his goons and since then kept a low profile – not that Gotham needed something more for the time being.

Certainly, Batman read the circumstances and adjusted to their needs and at the moment the city was quite calm with criminality rates that reminded other, normal cities. His ally during these months had contacted him via his cellphone. Yet Jim had an odd gut feeling concerning the city’s protector; and he had the boy’s testimony. Dick Grayson was also held hostage by the Joker and according to his sayings Batman saved him both from the jester and the fire – along with a strange woman because as Dick said the last glimpse he had from Batman was of him under a lethal pile of debris from the collapsing building.

Dick was sure that Batman had been killed. Okay, the boy was distraught and shocked that night so maybe he had estimated wrongly. Also the fact that many witnesses said that they saw Batman after the incident and he had contacted Jim proved that the Dark Knight wasn’t killed. However that didn’t deny the possibility of him being licking the wounds the fire surely made to him.

So Jim was worried and couldn’t enjoy the miracle in Gotham’s criminality charts. He inhaled deeply: not that expected this to last forever without some aspiring crime lord making his move – Gotham still had some figures whose fame was ambiguous and burdened with suspicious: it wasn’t a matter of time before they decided to make the big move and claim the rule, forming a new underworld.

Jim even though there wasn’t any critical condition missed his allies: Harvey Dent and Batman. Robert Howard was a talented young lawyer and as much justice oriented as Harvey but still Jim would be glad to have the old DA back. Maybe if Garcia actually made that referendum about Dent’s return… And then Bruce Wayne: the young man had manifested with actions his support Gotham and the police but he was hurt badly from the League of Shadows to the point of being disabled… Would the tormented man have the strength and will to continue his active support? Or the new tragedy would break his admirable stance turning his interest more into the vast needs of himself? Even if the latter happened Jim could not blame the boy…

“That spotlight isn’t of much use lately…” Montoya’s voice burst suddenly but Jim by now was used to that and wasn’t startled.

He smirked – Batman taught him that. He turned to see both Montoya and Bullock.

“Peace melancholy, chief?” the young officer asked him.

“Unfortunately, lieutenant, peace doesn’t last much…”
Bullock nodded solemnly.

“We have to be always ready” the tough officer remarked.

Jim patted the shoulders of both.

“This is our job” Jim said and turned his head to the spotlight. “And I’m sure that someone else out there is thinking exactly the same thing…”

When Bruce entered the kitchen Tony was sipping his espresso and Alfred was refilling his plate with scrambled eggs. The tycoon from Malibu looked at his friend’s stare raising his eyebrows.

“What? You think I’m eating too much? It’s Al’s fault because usually I am an abstinent guy…” he pouted and turned his eyes upwards deep in thought; he shook his head “with food…” he clarified stressing the words. “It’s how I maintain that divinely beautiful sexy body!”

Bruce nodded smiling and took his place at the island in the middle of the huge kitchen room.

“Good morning, Tony!” he cocked an eyebrow to his friend who grimaced.

“Damn! I knew I forgot something… Good morning, little guy, but this Gotham weather doesn’t persuade of a good morning…” he sighed.

“If I may, Master Anthony, it is just a figure of speech and a wish…” Alfred smirked while serving breakfast to Bruce who brought his chair to the proper height to the bench.

Hero who was slurping his own breakfast turned his head to regard his master.

Tony regarded the butler under his arched eyebrows.

“I must add that to Jarvis’ repertoire of ‘sarcastic retorts to Stark’s clever comments’.”

Alfred shook his head affronted.

“Sarcastic, Master Anthony?”

“Clever comments?” Bruce chuckled, locking eyes with his friend.

“Et tu, Brute?” Tony sighed, mock hurt and Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“Now, that was a really clever comment but…a bit cliché” Tony opened his mouth to protest “Sorry, Tony, I just can’t stop myself from teasing you…”

Tony nodded.

“Yah, yah, yah…Poor Tony always being the punchbag…” he pouted but then laughed. “I love it when you tease me, buddy” he cocked an eyebrow “Batman definitely improves with my charming humor’s influence…”

Bruce took a spoonful of his cereals – he just couldn’t stand scrambled eggs for breakfast and coffee was forbidden because had a counter effect on his medication, so just milk, juice and toasted bread with honey.

“It’s nice having you around for breakfast, Tony.”
Tony gulped his food.

“Ah! Now I see why it seemed to you like a good morning…I’m glowing, baby!” he shook his head. “Poor Malibu will be facing a gloomy weather without me…”

Alfred huffed causing Tony’s innocent glance and shrugging and Bruce just sipped his milk.

“Actually, it’s a perfect sunshine day in Malibu, Tony…” Pepper’s voice came out of Tony’s phone: she had left a message to his StarkStel and Tony had set it in waiting mode to connect her immediately.

Tony crossed his arms and shook his head in disappointment.

“My other sycophant! Well, good morning, sunshine!”

“Good morning, Alfred, Bruce, Hero…, Tony…”

Tony leaned on the island towards Bruce.

“Lesson 1: this is what you get when you leave them some days without mind-blowing sex…” he mouthed to him stretching his eyebrows for emphasis, pointing at his own chest and Bruce almost choked in his food. “You get toppled to the bottom of the list with a kitten before you” he met Hero’s eyes “no offence, furry buddy…”

A hologram of Pepper scowling at him popped up from his StarkStel.

“Stop corrupting Bruce!” she grunted shaking her index finger and Tony turned towards her with a smug expression.

“These are life lessons from the best, Peps…”

She rolled her eyes.

“Anyway…I called to remind you of the meeting with the executives of the tech department.”

Tony crossed his arms and yanked his head.

“Ugh! I must give my lights again to those people…Com’ on, Peps…I prefer overlooking the last details of the Avengers’ Tower – you can’t expect everything from good, ol’ Tony, you slackers!”

Pepper was indifferent.

“Whatever… I’m sure you’d rather play with your LEGO but it’s about the StarkExpo so your presence is required.”

Tony ruffled his black locks bored crooking his mouth.

“Okay, I’ll be there. It’s nice Happy and the jet is here: it’s been days since I last made a grandiose, cocky entrance to Malibu” he narrowed his eyes seductively and kissed the air “be ready, babe: I’ll make up to you for those dry days.”

“Fuck you, Stark!” Pepper fumed and Bruce looked at Tony who smiled smugly and sighed.

“I truly hope so!”

She rolled her eyes.
“I’m sorry for the wild awakening, Bruce, and for the language, Alfred.”

“No problem, Miss Potts…” Alfred smiled handing Bruce his handful of pills.

“I hope I see all of you soon – I missed you” Pepper said looking at Bruce and Alfred. “Have a lovely day!”

“I bring out so powerful emotion to people!” Tony exclaimed when Pepper vanished and the call ended. “Sometimes I impress even myself and myself isn’t impressed by nobody else than Tony Star… wait! That doesn’t make any meaning, huh?”

Bruce laughed and swallowed his last pill. Tony smiled warmly and patted his friend’s shoulder.

“When I return from Malibu I want to know everything about your new tablet – sounds… adequate…” he said condescendingly.

Bruce snorted.

“Right… Also, I want to discuss about our info on the attack.”

Tony’s face got immediately serious and cloudy.

“I’ll call to cancel the meeting.”

Bruce shook his head.

“There’s no need; actually, I was thinking that evening will be better: I’d have finished my session with Matt, I’d have checked on some source of mine and Clark would be off work.”

Tony twisted his mouth and hugged his own upper arms.

“Baaah… He finally decided to grace us with a phone call?” his sarcasm was heavy as his raised eyebrow.

“He actually came here last night…” Bruce replied with steady voice unfazed by his friend’s animosity.

Tony nodded.

“I knew I should have put Kryptonite aerial fence around the grounds…”

Alfred cast him a neutral glance and took the empty plates from the island.

“C’me on, Tony… He admitted his fault and I know that it was my decision that made him upset and pissed – not that I’m making excuses for him…”

Tony jolted to his feet and leaned above his friend clutching the armrests of Bruce’s chair.

“I was pissed by your decision too, little guy, but I would never do that to you! Torment you with needless worry, agony and…” he lowered his tone because he always discerned so many emotions in Bruce’s eyes “sadness” he thought of Superman with Wonder Woman.

He stretched his body.

“He isn’t worthy of causing so much turmoil to you…”
Alfred was on the verge of saying something but decided that it was inappropriate to intervene.

“I make many mistakes, Tony, so I can’t hold a grudge against those who also make them…and Clark saved my life and I” he inhaled “love him so I can’t shove him out of my life for a misunderstanding…like I can’t lose you, Tony. It’s so wrong that I want to enjoy my loved ones’ presence?”

The older man ran his fingers through his hair.

“He is a lucky bastard!” he spat. “Don’t let him rest in that, kiddo” he shook his index finger warningly.

“He won’t, Tony.”

Tony sighed.

“I wish my lovers showed the same understanding…alas! ‘xcuse me now I have a flight to catch. Bruce, don’t get in full Batman mode…you promised that you won’t exhaust yourself and that goes for investigation too.”

Bruce grinned.

“Don’t worry, Tony: it’s just a visit.”

“It’s final! He has put a spell on you!”

Selina shook her head exasperated staring impatiently at the red light on the street. Bruce had called her to Wayne Tower to give him a ride with her mini cooper since he had sent his eye-catching and recognizable car with auto pilot back to the Manor luring along the raging crowd of reporters who had been besieging the grounds all night waiting him.

Which was exactly what Bruce wanted: he took his sleek car that all this time Tony looked into making the proper adjustments for mobility impaired person and headed to Wayne Tower taking them with him. His return to Gotham had already changed the vibe for the stable but constantly under attack Enterprises’ shares erasing all the rumors of his death. And now by visiting his father’s company he wanted to show that it remained his first priority despite his disability that wouldn’t keep him locked in.

As was expected, the reporters lingered outside the Tower waiting his departure hoping for a statement since for his entrance he used the underground parking evading them. However for the next part of his daily schedule he didn’t want their escort.

Bruce looked at her.

“My friends deserve some understanding and patience from me, don’t you think?”

But she shook his head and cast him a glance.

“He isn’t a friend: he is a L-O-V-E-R: and that is different! Oh! You need intense lessons…” the car moved as the light became green.

Bruce turned to look out from the passenger’s window: the doubt that maybe he hadn’t handled it right and the dream were fighting with the relief and pleasure of last night.
“He needed to suffer a bit more, kiddo – don’t fall for his puppy, gorgeous eyes: it’s the same ol’ dirty trick of men!”

“He was already in suffering, Sel; he apologized…”

She huffed and sniggered at the same time.

“You need to dog him a bit to realize your value…”

Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“You think that he doesn’t?”

Selina turned and looked at him sighing.

“I can’t answer that with certainty but boys are…boys: they get easily impressed by new toys even if their old one is gold with diamonds – they have it in their possession now, they have it secured so they wander around playing with other toys.”

Bruce closed his eyes; though there was no real comparison, Falcone was using him every night and after locking him up, he was sleeping with women who occasionally gained his interest and desire. But he always returned to him, his possession…

“I killed Thomas an’ Martha Wayne an’ spared ya in order to have my livin’ trophy to keep my triumph fresh!” Falcone’s voice taunted him.

He shuddered: no, Clark couldn’t be like that. Clark loved him. But then…he didn’t know anything about these complex things.

“Do you believe that Clark sees me like…a trophy?” his hairs stood on end: perhaps what kept Clark so passionate with him was his resistance and now that he had him on his bed, had begun losing interest?

Selina saw her friend’s agitation and it was easy to understand and feel for him: he just came out of a near death experience, his first love disappeared for two days making an appearance with a woman who unashamedly claimed him; and after all this agony, his lover comes back apologizing making Bruce relieved and happy only for her to come and fill him with doubts.

“If he thinks like this is a big asshole” she exhaled. “You’re nobody’s trophy – I think Clark knows that and didn’t act like this due to arrogance… we’ll see…For the time being enjoy the good time he offers you” she cocked her eyebrows. “You’re too clever to grasp anything off and act accordingly.”

Bruce’s eyes were unreadable and Selina patted his shoulder.

“You did right to act as your instinct told you: if he misinterpreted your love for weakness, the worse for him! But we know he loves you, right? So no regrets, Bruce!”

He smiled to her.

“No regrets, Sel!”

The apartment building they were looking for emerged to the end of the street: it was a luxurious skyscraper which conveniently had an underground parking – not that Selina’s car was a target for his reporter-chasers but if someone saw Bruce coming out, would possibly notify the hungry reporters.
Selina stopped the car and hurried to bring Bruce’s chair for her friend to easily slip in.

It was a rather modern building so the wide elevator wasn’t really a surprise but a great convenience for both.

“I had the certainty that he would have picked a loft…” Bruce said to his friend as the screen indicated the passing floors with red numbers.

“Yeah…More discretion and quiet, especially when you own the entire floor…”

Since the top floor of the building was occupied only by one loft Bruce had no hesitation to guide his chair only with his brain waves. He stopped before the plain but reinforced door – he couldn’t help it remembering his first meeting with Ra’s Al Ghul when Chill stopped him before an equally pricy door and threatened him to be completely obedient to his second master.

“Are you alright?” Selina grasped his hand; her friend had coped wonderfully with the long flight but those last days had exhausted him and she had her eyes open for any sign.

Bruce raised his head to see her face and smiled reassuringly.

“Perfect…”

Selina’s hand was ready to press the small screen which served as a doorbell but the door opened.

“I was expecting you…”
Crane had just ended another boring session with Dr. Finley, his inadequate psychiatrist, and breathed satisfied once out of his office. He walked the linoleum corridor escorted by an orderly that wasn’t Ted – Jonathan advised Ted to not ask to be his orderly in order to not raise any suspicions about Ted’s preferential treatment and loyalty to his former employer.

He sniffed at his orderly and followed him to the common room because it was still early for lunch. Jonathan now that his chore with Dr. Finley was over could let his pleasant mood return: it was a nice day because he was to have a day off from Joker’s bullying stupidity.

However that changed the moment he put his foot in the vast common room that thanks to Wayne’s generous donation was extremely and impressively renovated after Crane’s sharp downfall; he heard the appalling giggle of the jester. Jonathan’s upper lip twitched nervously from frustration and his eyes went blank.

Joker crossed hopping the space and hugged the skinny doctor under the orderly’s frown: Dr. Quinzel assured them that Joker was harmless after the previous day’s breakdown but they had to keep their eyes open just in case. Well, the orderly did keep his eyes open and was sorry for that because the jester planted a loud kiss on Crane’s cheek.

Jonathan felt as if a slug had just crawled on his skin and for the first time experienced a slight sympathy for Bruce Wayne.

“The duuude I wanted to seeeeeeee!” Joker cheered patting Crane’s shoulder and the same moment turned completely serious to address the orderly. “Can’t you see we need some uuuum priva—cy here? King Kong? UHAUHAUHAHAHAA!”

The sturdy orderly thought of a few ‘compliments’ for the jester but first the head’s soft spot on him and second Joker’s fame kept his mouth shut. He didn’t want to be sacked neither to be targeted by the lunatic: Mark might not be a genius but he definitely could read the malice in that man even now and he doubted that the Asylum would hold him for much longer. So he walked away to his colleagues – he had done his job after all.

Joker wrapped his arm around Crane’s shoulder and led them to the interior of the room.

“You shouldn’t be here!” Crane hissed as Scarecrow surfaced.

Joker scratched his head and tilted his head.

“I see we’re nooooot a—lone, huh? Any—way: youuur best buddy is my buddy too…” he knitted his eyebrows in despair “Aaaaand where else could the pooor Jocker beeeee?”

Crane’s eyes narrowed to slits and flashed.

“To isolation: you almost killed a man! This Quinzel is an idiot!” he growled in a low voice.

Joker pouted and shook his head.

“Weeeel, I wouldn’t disagree with that…Buuuut I think you’re jealous of the preference the blondie shows to me – sorry, Johnny boy, but I’m the hunk here!” he gestured to his orange clad body “as you can see! HEHEHE!”
Crane rolled his eyes and sank to the sofa forced to follow Joker’s abrupt descent.

“We’ve got to talk” Joker’s voice was strictly business as his eyes.

“’Bout Wayne again?” he answered almost yawning and Joker giggled.

But then Jonathan caught with the corner of his eyes the huge flat TV on the wall and his lower lip curled in disbelief: it played cartoon which was unusual: they were always watching the typical TV program.

Joker followed his stare and cackled.

“I loooove Bugs Bunny! And the program suits the place: “The Looney Tunes” – HEHEHEHE!” he stopped laughing and stabbed Crane with his sharp gaze. “Harlequin thinks that seeing news ‘bout Brucie drives me mmm…” he shook his head “crazy and decided that from now ooooon we should watch only programs that are pure and without violence…HEHEHEHE!”

Crane snorted.

“Yeah…As if you needed Wayne to drive you crazy…”

Joker’s laughter was like hiccup and gave a strong pat in Crane’s back.

“Exactly! You haaaad me down cold” he widened his eyes mock impressed. “W—ow! You could be a shrink!”

“What do you want, Joker?” the former doctor demanded without any mood.

Joker licked his lips and his whole expression was of a hungry wolf.

“I have had enough of this place” he said in his most nasal, menacing voice “not enough stimulation, you know… Aaaand now that Brucie is baaaaack…” he winked grinning slyly “I’m sick of my paaaalm…” he twitched his hand nervously.

Crane’s eyes filled with contempt and he shook his head.

“You can’t leave: everyone knows about Stark’s unbreakable cell.”

Joker hiccups-laughed.

“And you learnt yesterday the hard way what you get when misbehave.”

Now Joker became serious and came closer to the former doctor.

“I could kill you right now without Stark’s system feels anything… What happened yesterday was a…” his eyes sparkled coldly as they fixed on Lu who bore gauze on his neck where Joker’s teeth had sunk “mistake. Not that I didn’t enjoy the ex--perience…”

“Wayne indeed drove you out of control” Jonathan sneered. “You murder people without any of the physiological changes that signalize violence to the normal people: for you violence and murder is what for normal people is eating or drinking. The only one who can ruin that for you is Wayne: he stirs things in you making the connected with him murder arousing enough to change your vitals.”

Joker raised his index finger smacking his lips.

“That’s… NONE of your business!” he hissed. “Aaaaand if I want an analysis I have myyyyy
Harlequin or my god-therapist” he giggled. “A god visited me last night…Be jealous!”

Crane’s lips crooked in disgust.

“Your drugs need changing…”

Joker was actually satisfied that Crane believed that he had hallucinations.

“Back to ooooor topic…I’m out of here…”

“What if I tell everything to your stupid doctor?”

“HEHE!” he tilted his head staring at him interested. “You won’t doooooo that: first, because the next
day you’ll be deeeead – I might be in isolation but my goons won’t. Aaaaand second, you don’t
want to miss the chance to be free aaaand…practice your ehmmmm…science” he winked.

Jonathan frowned.

“If you count on my contribution to your escape” he shook his head sniggering “I’m sorry to
disappoint.”

Joker tilted his head to the side.

“Nah… I’m not thaaaaat crazy! Buuuut I always get my goooood buddies along and youuuu
areeeeee…” he made a pause for Crane to complete the sentence but when his fellow inmate didn’t
say anything, rolled his eyes exasperated “myyyyy best BUDDYYYYYY!”

Jonathan smirked and his eyes narrowed.

“You need my expertise in concoctions…toxins and gases” he shook his head. “So what’s the plan?”

Joker turned his eyes on the ceiling, licking his lips impatiently.

“Dooooo I look like a maaaaan of plans?”

Crane snorted.

“Absolutely…” his voice was snarky.

The jester looked him in the eye.

“I take it back that you could be a shrink…Meeeeme planning? Bitch Pppppplease! I love
improvisation aaaaand I have my caaaaast available” he opened his arms to hug the common room
that was occupied by various members of his gang.

*Of course…* Jonathan thought: those stupid doctors brought Joker’s thugs near him. Anyway, it
wasn’t his problem; on the contrary, he could benefit from this.

“And how far you think you’ll go with Stark having whatever in you monitoring your vitals? You
might be able to trick it into killing people without being knocked out but certainly Stark can use it to
track you or immobilize you without the need of your vitals triggering.”

Joker nodded enthusiastic.

“Hehehe! I’m a man of positive thinking…aaand I told you I’ve got myyyyy personal god…”
The former psychiatrist rolled his eyes snorting.

“Aaaand then you, my Johnny, enter the staaaaage…”

Crane frowned.

“I thought you want me to make my thing to your…wife.”

Joker pressed his lips.

“Hm… I don’t like the sound of it…Next time rephrase it…if you want your carotid! Well, that’s bonus: I bet you craaaaave to beat Stark on his thing – you brag to be a genius, rrrright? So here’s your chance to prove it…I don’t know…” he scratched his head “maybe a deodorant forming a clooooud blocking the signals?”

Crane regarded him through half closed eyes: really Joker believed that could manipulate him?

“I’m a prisoner here” he snapped irritated but always whispering “I don’t have any of the materials I need and my expertise is psychopharmacology not Stark’s mambo-jumbo.”

Joker patted his back and blinked.

“Oh! C’me on…Don’t be modest…you caaaaan’t act, after all. I’m sure you’ll find a way… or else…”

Crane grunted.

“Can you stop doing this? I don’t like threats!”

“Hehe! I think you won’t like more how these threats become acts.”

“Even if you manage to escape and we blind Stark’s system they’ll find you sooner or later because they’d know you’ll head for Wayne. He has a bunch of fucking super-heroes protect him…”

Joker arched his eyebrows and stuck his tongue out.

“Super-heroes are over--rated…Aaaand I told you I have my priiiiivate god…” he inclined his head squinting. “Dooooon’t know…perhaps he’s my deus ex machine…HEHE…Doooo you knoooow what that is?”

The former doctor rolled his eyes exasperated.

“You’re nuts…”

Joker licked his lips and popped his index finger.

“Noooooo, actually I’m pea-nuts!”

Crane shrugged.

“Whatsoever…” he replied completely bored. “But when they bust you I’ll tell I was your hostage.”

Joker giggled and poked Crane’s chest with his finger a bit too strong causing the doctor to support on the sofa’s back.

“Aren’t you always?” he sighed. “The thing is that noooo--body believes you! Hehehe!” he planted
another kiss to Jonathan’s cheek and hopped away to his thugs.

The loft was spacious and bright with a whole wall window overlooking Gotham’s skyline. From the first glance it was obvious that the philosophy of its owner was ‘less is more’. The space wasn’t divided with interior walls but for a folding screen with Chinese designs that concealed the owner’s plain bed; the lounge toned in black and white covered the front space whereas in the center stood a twirled stair that led to the attic.

The lounge was as plain as possible with a white corner sofa, two assorted armchairs and a rectangular black waist table. There weren’t any lamps apart from surface or secret lighting. A few pots completed the minimal decoration that screamed that this was a temporary accommodation for its owner so nothing personal was to be found.

Exactly, as Selina remembered it; her head craned following the twirl of the stair that led to the attic that was actually a vast training room.

“Master Ubu…” Bruce inclined his head courteously as soon as their host closed the door.

His former trainer brought his glued palms before his face and bowed.

“Bruce…” he replied with his regret for his past actions shadowing his solemn voice.

Selina cleared her throat: she was clenching her hips and her lips were slightly upturned as her eyebrow. Ubu looked at her.

“I hope you don’t expect me to call you ‘master’, as well, huh, Greg?”

Ubu smiled in a most unusual way for him and shook hands with her.

“Selina, I see I was right about you.”

She tilted her head to the side and snorted.

“This is meant to be a compliment?” she asked slyly and strutted inside.

“No, child, merely the truth. But do come in” he gestured to the lounge.

Selina tilted her head towards Ubu smirking since she was already inside.

“And…You’re not the change type, huh?” she remarked looking around.

“She’s make yourself at home.”

He left them heading to the shining, modern kitchen and Selina made a spectacular dive into the armchair to Bruce’s surprised stare.

“This is my favorite armchair, sweetie… That leather…Mmm…”

Ubu returned with a tray bearing an ancient and expensive looking teapot with the match pottery which Selina with her professional experience could easily tell that it was an authentic Satsuma.

The former Leaguer served them the tea that was nothing like the usual and Bruce stare at it hesitant – he knew that now Ubu was trustworthy but the past experiences with Ubu’s brews held a powerful influence; his body tensed involuntarily. Yet in the end he took the cap and sipped under his trainer’s
penetrative eyes that read his initial hesitance and smiled with his final vote of confidence.

Selina sipped too – she had heard Bruce’s recount of the times Ubu had given him strange brews to serve Ra’s purposes but now the man had redeemed himself to Bruce. Because for her it was more difficult to forgive anyone that hurt Bruce.

“Well, tea is not my cup of tea but this is nice…” she shrugged. “10 grand…” she brushed her cup “for the whole set with the right buyer.”

Bruce chuckled and Ubu cocked an eyebrow.

“A modest estimation for the original pottery the prince Shimazu used for his tea ceremony…”

Bruce cast a sideways look at his friend and chuckled again at her bulged eyes.

“I hope your chair has secret pockets because I have some stuff to stash…” Selina winked to Bruce.

Ubu gazed at them both with deep affection and admiration.

“Brother and sister indeed… A bond stronger than any blood kinship…” he uttered and his eyes shone. “Ra’s made one more mistake by underestimating that bond and its power.”

Bruce looked at him.

“But you knew…”

Ubu stood up and approached Selina locking their eyes.

“A little girl so brave to defy the rules of the orphanage and roam a dangerous city; and so affectionate, so loyal to a battered boy that never stopped going to him every night to offer him her love the only solace he had to keep him alive.”

Selina coughed uncomfortable.

“You exaggerate…” she said trying to clear her voice from the huskiness.

“He doesn’t…” Bruce cupped her hand and gave her a tight smile.

Ubu walked to him and kneeled. He placed his hands over Bruce’s knees.

“There is still much life and vigor here, child” he stilled his eyes in Bruce’s. “That waits to be awoken – it’s another test for your spirit and you’ll make it again…”

Selina huffed.

“As if he didn’t have enough tests already…”

Bruce looked her sideways and she shrugged innocently.

“What?”

Ubu placed his hand on the top of Bruce’s head and closed his eyes murmuring some strange incantation; Bruce felt the same peace and tranquility, the waves of pleasant and clearing numbness, as the days he was still a frightened child faced with the challenges of a hard training and Ra’s’ demands.
After a few minutes of silence Ubu slightly frowned, rose and returned to his armchair: the pain he felt in Bruce always shocked him like the first time but now he could sense also the tension from something that occupied the youth’s mind. Bruce needed another couple of seconds before overcoming Ubu’s effect and turning to his old master.

“You said that you were expecting us.”

Ubu nodded.

“Dr. Thompkins treated me like an old friend, taking extra care for my recuperation…as if I had done the same for the lost child of her friends despite the fact she knew that I didn’t: I found the courage to do the right thing only in the end.”

“Weren’t for you I wouldn’t have found Bruce and a safe way for us to get away” Selina interrupted him.

Bruce nodded.

“Young contribution was crucial – you stood up against Talia for my sake and you almost got killed. You gave me back the Knife and the brew that strengthened me.”

Ubu shook his head.

“It was you two that made it” he said with softly closed eyes like he was meditating. “You fought Talia and stood up against the demon…”

“Bruce saved us all…” Selina remarked and Bruce cast a glare at her. “One super powered alien, one high tech armored superhero and a fucking Norwegian God were subdued by that Bagdana guy and Bruce managed to stab him in the back and send him to his shithole.”

“Can Bagdana escape his prison?” Bruce found the chance to ask something that bothered him all this time. “Thor reassured me that he was trapped in Tartarus but I was wondering…”

Ubu was regarding him with awe that made Bruce feel uncomfortable.

“The Knife’s blow left him heavily injured, stripped from his power. Thus, only a powerful deity would be able to free him and I don’t think that there is someone willing to help an ancient demon.”

Bruce nodded somewhat relieved.

“You asked me something” Ubu continued setting his palms on his knees. “After I was fully healed I decided to remain in Gotham waiting your return; I knew that you would want to speak to me.”

“Leslie told me that you were constantly asking her and Tony about my condition.”

His former trainer’s deep brown eyes focused on his student.

“Thanks to Mr. Stark’s immediate intervention my life was saved and I woke up soon. Your friend thought that it would be best if I was transferred to Gotham under Dr. Thompkins’s care and confidentiality. I heard about the events in that old factory where Batman saved the children…” his eyes shone. “Ra’s Al Ghul would have been awestruck and delighted hearing what his dream student managed to do with his injured, paralyzed body… Yet I knew that your life was almost the price…” he paused for a second. “This kind of agony was first known to me” Ubu said hesitantly “I dreaded the demise of the one who was so generous to forgive me… Then Dr. Thompkins informed me that you came around but you’d have to stay far from Gotham to recover. I stayed here waiting
and praying till yesterday Gotham echoed with the news of your return and I knew that soon you’ll come.”

Bruce sipped again from his tea that was really revitalizing and relaxing. Ubu opened his palms in front of him.

“You can tell me what is bothering you.”

“Four days ago I was attacked” he said without further ado, his voice cool.

Ubu’s calm face turned into stone and he shook his head.

“They won’t give you a break…” his voice was dark.

Selina huffed.

“No, they won’t!”

Bruce’s eyes were fixed on his old mentor who waited for him to speak.

“Master Ubu, do you think that the League could be behind this attack?”

Ubu stretched his neck thoughtful.

“After the complete defeat you and your allies succeeded against them only four months ago?” his eyes locked with Bruce’s. “Do you believe that Talia survived and ordered that although her army is smashed?”

“Talia wasn’t found, Master Ubu: dead or alive. And Ra’s’ mummy was gone as well as… the painting with my portrait.”

Selina’s eyes widened and her head snapped.

“What mummy? What painting? You didn’t mention anything!”

Bruce licked his lips.

“After Crane’s experimentation, the multiple head injuries and one month in coma, my memory had many gaps: these things came back slowly. Talia had preserved her father mummified…”

Selina’s eyebrows twitched and she snorted.

“The bitch was more pervert than her father!” she cast a sideways glance to Ubu “for nice people you were working…” she said dryly and Bruce looked her and coughed.

“…Anyway… Ra’s had in his position the same painting you, Selina, have: he had ordered the painter who made my portrait for Falcone to make a copy for him” Selina rolled her eyes. “Talia inherited that. After the events in Mt. Marcy, the mummy and the painting was nowhere to be found.”

Ubu’s eyes were interested and thoughtful.

“You want her to be alive” Bruce said in an understanding, calm voice and Ubu seemed shaken. “I don’t blame you, Master Ubu, neither feel I betrayed…”

Selina on the other hand frowned and crossed her arms and legs affronted.
“I am!” she stabbed Ubu with her eyes and Bruce tilted his head towards her asking with his eyes to calm down. “What?! She almost killed you” Selina showed with her hand Ubu “she would have killed me deviously stabbing me in the back if Bruce hadn’t exceeded himself into dueling with her…”

Ubu looked at Bruce impressed.

“You managed to stand against and stop the Lady of the Shadows while you were paralyzed?” his awe was so great that he didn’t utter anything else.

“Of course he did!” Selina exclaimed. “By the way, this is what you’re teaching to your students? To stab their opponent in the back while the said opponent fights a dozen ninjas?! Not to mention what she did to Bruce while her captive…”

Ubu lowered his eyes; he knew what Talia had done to Bruce…

“Forgive me sometimes emotion betrays my reason…”

Bruce shook his head and found Ubu’s eyes.

“I feel for you, master Ubu…” Selina snorted remembering how easily Bruce let Superman go: of course you do… “You knew her since she was born; you taught her for years since her childhood; you knew her before her father’s ideas corrupted her. It’s natural to love her even now.”

The older man’s eyes however were adamant.

“I want her to be alive only to realize the wrong path she and her father followed and return to the initial values of justice and charity” his voice hardened. “If her survival is to be connected with the same crimes and atrocities, then I pray that she died so her spirit might find the truth in other worlds and innocents be spared by her wrath.”

The former mentor’s eyes for a minute became blank and then refocused on Bruce who waited patiently.

“Your attackers were members of the League?” he asked.

Selina twitched her lips remembering the flying, green creatures: no, they didn’t seem like Leaguers at all. However, she was curious to listen to Bruce; because if he suspected the League behind this then there were solid reasons.

“No, definitely, not” Bruce said and Ubu frowned. “They were green flying creatures with thousands of needle-thin, sharp teeth covering their jaws, nostrils emanating steam, perfectly able to handle weapons.”

Selina grimaced in disgust.

“Hearing it is worse than facing it!” she snorted.

“Master Ubu, the analysis of their remains showed that they weren’t of this planet: probably, extraterrestrial or…” he stared intensely in his mentor’s eyes “product of illegal experimentation.”

Ubu united his palms and brought his chin over the fingers, his eyes on Bruce.

“You suspect that the League is the one who conducted those experiments and has such soldiers ready to fight for its causes. Despite the fact that every hideout of the League was found and
destroyed along with the secret weapons the League possessed. Did your friends discover either in the League’s or S.H.I.E.L.D.’s premises traces that indicate such experimentation?”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, but the base in Mt. Marcy was Ra’s secret known only to his daughter – there’s nothing to make me cross out the possibility of other such places…or” he arched his eyebrows “projects.”

Ubu blinked.

“Continue, Bruce.”

The younger man pressed his lips.

“Talia told me of her plans to summon Bagdana and offer me again to him.”

Selina growled and Ubu nodded.

“She told that to me as well” he shook his head “I tried to talk her out of that but she was already too arrogant and thrilled of the prospects to listen.”

“Her intention” Bruce continued struggling with the memories of that moment and the boiling emotions “was to create a powerful army of beings created by the mixed DNA of me and Bagdana.”

“But she was stopped” Ubu remarked arcing an eyebrow.

Bruce nodded.

“What if she took that idea from her father? What if Ra’s had already done that and preserved the products in locations that only he and his heir knew? My body had absorbed Bagdana’s semen both times.”

A crease formed in Ubu’s forehead.

“Holly shit!” Selina exclaimed and to the absence of anything stronger gulped the content of her cup at once. “Shit! I need something stronger!” she turned to Bruce feeling her hair standing on end. “Both times?!” she quirked her eyebrows – she knew about the first time the demon raped her friend but a second?

Ubu didn’t say anything though he knew and Bruce took her hand.

“Aftter what happened in Ra’s basement, Bagdana used me again in Dolcetto” his voice was completely calm and that calmness pained more the young woman. “Falcone was going to punish me for my…adultery but someone left in the checkroom the payment for my services” his tone now was ironic. “An ancient looking pouch with rubies that Falcone said that couldn’t be found anywhere…”

Selina closed her eyes and her head fell towards her chest; Bruce caressed her hair.

“I’m sorry, Sel…” he pecked her cheek feeling moisture.

“You never told me…” she protested, making her cracked voice tough.

“He couldn’t have told you, Selina, because we were giving him the Oblivion Serum: Ra’s Al Ghul didn’t want Bruce upset from the memories both of his sacrifice and of the demon’s second claim and ordered me to give him the serum and use the repellants that would keep the demon away. Bruce was able to remember through flashbacks only after other traumatic experiences stirred the
memories."

Bruce cupped Selina’s cheek and smiled.

“It’s okay, pretty…” he said and locked eyes with her in silence for few moments.

Selina filled again her cup: actually, this beverage was good for strengthening her nerves.

“All in all, Master Ubu, could Ra’s have done that? I mean do you know if he had the knowledge to do that?”

Ubu was deep in thought.

“He never spoke to me about anything like this, child…” he shook his head.

“I remember vaguely strange people along with you treating my body…”

Ubu felt the sting of remorse.

“I participated in the process of turning your body into a special Kryptonite; I applied substances and medicines to strengthen your body and compensate for the years of malnutrition; but I never extracted DNA from your body.”

Bruce nodded.

“What about the others? My memory still has gaps…You were always with them during my treatment?”

Ubu rubbed the center of his forehead and shook his head in denial. He expected that discussion to be hard but still remembering and counting his indifference to the boy’s suffering was more painful than the bullet Talia shot to his chest.

“No…No, child” he inhaled deeply. “I wasn’t always there and I don’t know what they were doing to you: Ra’s was rather secretive about you and I…it felt better to not know the details…”

Selina yanked her head and huffed.

“Oh, Greg!” she exclaimed exasperated. “I mean Ubu…” she slapped her thighs frustrated. “At least we can find these motherfuckers and make them speak!”

But Bruce wasn’t so enthusiastic keeping his eyes fixed on Ubu who closed his eyes.

“I’m afraid the healers who were appointed with your care…”

“…are dead!” Bruce finished his sentence for him.

“How convenient!” Selina grunted.

Bruce took another sip from his cup.

“So the question remains” he said unfazed: “did Ra’s have the knowledge to create such beings taking samples from my body? You already had the knowledge to summon a demon.”

Ubu took in the youth’s intense, undefeated stare.

“Personally, I never sought the knowledge to create life forms – hybrids of human and demon.”
Selina supported her elbows to her thighs and leaned towards Ubu.

“But that kind of knowledge exists?” her voice was filled with agony but Bruce’s eyes were determined to accept whichever answer.

Ubu closed his eyes; he didn’t like to speak about these things yet if it was of any help to Bruce and Selina…

“Humans had always the insane tendency to mess with things that surpass them…and Ra’s wasn’t an exception. But I can’t tell for sure…”

Selina raised her palms.

“Wait! Those creatures were ugly – I mean, malformed. If they were made by Bruce’s genes…” she chuckled. “Bruce is absolutely beautiful – even if that demon is…” she shook her head “a demon, Bruce’s beauty should have given them a…normalcy in appearance?”

“Selina, this isn’t a science” Bruce replied. “I’m sure it’d be more of an experiment than a certified procedure so many things could have gone awry or differently than they had expected.”

Ubu nodded.

“On the other hand, searching for Lilith and Bagdana I found legends about babies being born from demon-human couplings” Bruce remarked.

His mentor shook his hand.

“After normal copulation, fertilization and normal pregnancy in a female womb; so, yes, the attempt to use extract of your body to create hybrids could lead to malformed or bizarre life forms, or…” he jerked his eyebrows “with the features their creator wanted – if, of course, we accept that he had the know-how.”

Selina rubbed her chin.

“I fought them…and I don’t think that these creatures have either the strength of a demon or the skills and cleverness of Bruce.”

“I pray for that” Ubu said.

Yet Bruce wasn’t soothed; something else was prickling his mind.

“Talia said that I didn’t need a womb to give her the army she dreamt.”

Ubu cupped Bruce’s hand.

“She failed on that: you need to reassure yourself. Besides you told me that analysis was conducted of these beings: if they were made from your DNA, don’t you think that you have found out?”

Bruce nodded.

“You have a point there; yet the samples I managed to collect from the scene of the attack” Selina rolled her eyes both amused and outraged on how Bruce evaded their attention to do that “were mingled with soil or wood – the creatures were blown up by Wonder Woman. Only the samples from my clothes were from the creatures in their normal form. So something might have missed the analysis or the other substances that constituted their material could have concealed my DNA…Master Ubu, did the League know about aliens’ existence in Earth other than Superman?” now that
Ubu almost crossed out the possibility of the League having created such beings, he had to examine if Ra’s’ right hand knew about other aliens lurking the earth.

Ubu shook his head.

“You can find legends hinting such presence on Earth – Ra’s was interested and studied such myths. But other than that, no, the League of Shadows didn’t have concrete evidence of other aliens except the Kryptonian.”

Bruce brought his palm to rub his neck.

“And…How about…a child?” he finally told what concerned him all these days. “A child that came from me?”

“If Talia survived, after what she did to you, she does carry your semen…”

Bruce stabbed him with his dead still, flashing eyes.

“I don’t mean that… Forget the bizarre creatures that attacked me, forget the mindless beings used as soldiers: could Ra’s have produced a human child using my genes? I remember the glint in his eyes after he realized that my body had absorbed the demon’s seed; especially, when he told me that if I was a girl I’d have been with a baby. Maybe he proceeded on doing that after all?”

Selina’s breath was cut in her lungs and the crease in Ubu’s brow became deeper.

“You think that Ra’s had reached that level of corruption?”

Selina snorted.

“We’re talking about the man who strapped a kid on the floor and summoned a demon to…” she looked at Bruce “use him in order to gain his personal reward? Or the one who mutated the same boy’s body into turning him in a weapon to kill his enemy?”

Ubu lowered his eyes and shook his head.

“I guess he wouldn’t have hesitated to defile even more his precious acquisition for enhancing his power…”

Bruce licked his lips.

“When Ra’s summoned Bagdana, human cloning was already established with a flourishing tendency…” he pressed his lips and his eyes stabbed Ubu. “Is there a solid possibility that he created an embryo from my cells and his and …a child was…created? My child?”

“Gosh…” Selina whispered.

Ubu held Bruce’s gaze feeling the conflicting emotions burning the youth’s insides. He could see inside those eyes the hope that this hadn’t happened, the hope that Ubu could give him an absolute negation of this possibility; but simultaneously, Ubu could discern in his beloved student’s eyes the certainty that his former trainer couldn’t negate it.

“Unfortunately, I can’t deny that possibility, child” he said regretful but not wanting to deceive Bruce. “Actually…I remember him talking avidly about how great it’d be if you were a girl and you could give him a baby with his blood and yours, especially since your body had absorbed Bagdana’s genes – of course, in the end he was stressing out that the fact that you couldn’t be used merely for
reproduction left you free for being trained to become his greatest warrior.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Bane was Talia’s spy on Ra’s – he could have informed her for Ra’s’ thoughts and inspired the same wish to her or she just sensed it. The fact remains that Ra’s had the idea and the desire and we know that when he wanted something nothing could stop him…” he bit his lip. “While I was searching the lists with what we have found till now from LexLabs, I came across some logs referring to experimentation on human cloning” he felt Selina’s bulged eyes piercing him “it was around the time Ra’s met me at Dolcetto and began training me – and when Bagdana’s summon happened: also, I know that Falcone was already working with Luthor so Ra’s could have learned about LexLabs’ cloning project and established his own partnership with him.”

“Have you found anything?” Selina asked.

Bruce shook his head.

“Despite the fact LexLabs had invested a huge budget in that project we still haven’t found any remains of it except some pretty vague logs which claimed that the embryos from that procedure died soon after but…with Luthor” he shook his head “you can’t be sure.”

Selina who was shocked but was keeping her cool nodded.

“Luthor buried the evidence and the results from the experiments he did for himself and Ra’s forced him to bury everything concerning his own business.”

“So…if that child truly was…born…he or she might be anywhere in the world…alone or…forced to be trained as…whatever they wanted…” Bruce added.

Ubu moved closer to his student; he squeezed his upper arms.

“Even if Ra’s tried to do that, it is quite possible that the unusual process failed or the embryo died at the early stages or the baby died soon due to anomalies. And if the child indeed survived Talia would have killed it, afraid that she/he would be her rival to Ra’s’ succession, much as she hated you and wanted your death.”

Bruce’s insides were clenched; since he woke up that morning everything that happened with Clark the previous night, the dream and now this conversation made the knot inside him bigger and pricklier.

“Maybe that was the reason Ra’s kept it under such secrecy” he arched his eyebrows “because he knew his daughter…”

Selina cleared her throat.

“Or the baby didn’t meet his expectations and disposed of it himself…” Bruce looked at him appalled and she shrugged. “The man was ruthless: if the result disappointed him he wouldn’t have an issue to get rid of it – I think that if he had your…” she hesitated to utter it “child in his hands he’d have used it as leverage to blackmail your complete submission. Even towards the end.”

Bruce was deep in thought and this “your child” had a complex impact on him. Both Al Ghul, father and daughter had exploited him, had used and robbed him, and now both of them might have in their possession literary and metaphorically a part of him to continue tormenting him.

He felt Selina’s soft touch on his shoulder – he must have been absorbed.
“Bruce?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Still I’d like to know the truth; know if somewhere in the planet exists a child – my child… somewhat – and find him or her to…ensure that his or her life won’t be like mine…Especially, if there were some abnormalities due to the process” he rubbed his right temple. “Perhaps Luthor has some answers; yet even if he gave them – which I highly doubt – we can’t be sure that he’ll tell the truth. And Bruce Wayne can’t be associated with this because Luthor would be even more suspicious of my real relationship with the League…” he bit his lip “and Batman is unavailable for the time being.”

“Listen to me, Bruce” Ubu told him in a soothing voice. “Now I saw you I can leave Gotham and return to the monastery in Nepal: I was thinking of training youth in the principles of humanity and justice. Once I go there, I’ll do everything in my power and use my connections to verify if such a child exists and if exists to find his/her whereabouts.”

Bruce lowered slightly his head and Ubu touched his chin yanking gently his head.

“If there is a child we’ll find it…”

Selina slipped next to her friend and hugged him. Bruce pressed his lips in a smile.

“The monastery is currently under S.H.I.E.L.D.’s control but I’ll speak to Tony and you will be able to settle there with the organization’s means and protection: if Talia is alive she’d definitely seek you to take revenge.”

Ubu’s stern mouth upturned.

“I’m more afraid of my conscience than Talia…” he touched his lips to Bruce’s forehead. “Your spirit is strong, child” his hand cupped the hidden diamond hanging from his neck and he smiled to Selina “and you have precious friends with you.”

“When the moon hits your eye
Like a big pizza pie, that's amore” Sinatra’s voice sang.

“Amore!” Tony’s singsong voice towered the workshop’s dull sounds of popping data on the various holographic screens and automatic screwdrivers.

“Master Anthony, I'm glad to discern your easygoing mood…” Jarvis remarked.

“But – I smell a but there – with one t: Jarvis, if you’re going to reproduce some snarky Alfred-ish comment about my singing talent drop it. You’re not an X-factor critic!” he rolled his eyes thoughtful “Critics my ass!”

“You have an incoming call from Mr. Lucius Fox.”

Tony rolled his hand.

“Shoot it.”

Lucius’ smiling face emerged on the screen in front of Tony – the one with no running data or designs on it.
“Good afternoon, Mr. Stark!”

“The same to you, Lucius; to what do I owe this pleasant surprise?”

“To Mr. Wayne.”

Tony pouted and frowned.

“I just sent you my latest attributions to Bruce’s spinal parts. I had a meeting here in Malibu and then some other obligations but tomorrow we’ll work them together.”

“Fine, Mr. Star. I’m studying them right now. It’s something else I want you to consider.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“I’m all ears.”

“About Mr. Wayne’s new suit.”

Tony twisted his mouth and huffed.

“I’m not Armani.”

Lucius laughed.

“Good one, Mr. Stark! But I’m sure you know what I mean.”

Tony drummed his fingers on his working bench.

“Actually, I don’t want to know… That brat talked you into it? You’re his mediator?” his voice became harsh. “This is suicide, Lucius! You can’t agree with that!” he abandoned his slack position and leaned toward the screen. “He is paraplegic, for fuck’s sake! A suit however good can’t enable him to act the hero of Gotham from all cities!”

Lucius nodded serious.

“And that’s why we have to make that suit perfect.”

Tony slapped his eyes with his palms and yanked his head backwards.

“I won’t allow my friend to be out there while he is disabled! And I can’t understand how you, who I know how much you care for him, have agreed to that!”

Lucius exhaled.

“Because, Mr. Stark, Mr. Wayne wouldn’t wait for anyone’s permission either yours or much lesser mine. Even if we don’t assist his effort he’ll proceed himself – and that would be more dangerous.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Have you seen his designs?” the older man asked calmly.

“Of course not! Because there’s no meaning in that! We should focus on the bionic parts and the surgery. And even after the surgery he’ll need time before he gets out there – if ever! So let’s drop it altogether!”

Lucius intertwined his fingers on the desk.
“He wants the suit so that Batman makes one or two appearances to erase any suspicion that it’s not the real Batman that patrols Gotham right now.”

“I don’t give a fucking damn! Bruce is more important than Batman or Gotham!”

“Gotham and Batman are parts of Mr. Wayne’s existence: you can’t just extract them. He’ll proceed with or without us and if we participate in his plans we’ll be able to control the conditions and set limits.”

“Limits to Bruce? Ha!”

“Your friend is a very mature young man. He managed to be Batman even under Falcone’s captivity in a way that no major injury betrayed him. Mr. Wayne reassured me that he’ll behave as cautiously as then. And… I told him that the spinal parts are almost done and he must be in perfect condition for the surgery so he definitely won’t risk his chance to walk again.”

“So… no suit then!” he jerked from his stool and clapped his hands. “If his worry is that the holograms will be debunked, then I can make a BatRobot to kick some asses.”

“Mr. Stark… You know that Mr. Wayne won’t agree to that.”

Tony pressed his lips stubbornly, crossed his arms and shook his head.

“Don’t care!” he arched his eyebrows. “He is a paraplegic – he can’t play punches with bad guys.”

Lucius blinked.

“Mr. Wayne is an extraordinary young man.”

Tony protruded his lower lip and nodded without looking at Lucius.

“I prefer him less extraordinary and more alive!” he almost whispered piercing the older man with his flashing black eyes. “And Gotham’s bad guys are dangerous lunatics, unpredicted.”

“At the moment Gotham enjoys a period of low criminality without any organized crime or major villains: that was the reason I agreed to that, Mr. Stark. And I’m sure that your friend took that into consideration. Batman needs to catch one or two low timers to secure that nobody will ever associate him with Bruce Wayne.”

“You’ll build him the suit even if I won’t agree.”

“I want you in that.”

“Why? You can manage perfectly.”

“Because Mr. Wayne wants you too; you’re too important for him and your participation even in a consulting role will boost his spirits. Mr. Stark, if we try to suppress him there’s the probability of triggering quite the opposite and worse result. Having an active role in that we can protect him.”

Tony shook his head and growled.

“I’ll think about it…”

“Thank you, Mr. Stark; I’ll send you Mr. Wayne’s designs.”

Tony turned his eyes to the ceiling.
“Jarvis, turn up the volume to Frankie and call Peps: I need some cuddling!”

From the moment the car engine ignited and they returned to the street, silence fell between them. Selina tightened her grip on the steering wheel because from the fleeting glances she cast to Bruce it was obvious that he was somewhere else and she dreaded that this somewhere might be all the times this pervert pedophile, Al Ghul, violated him. It was disgusting: a powerful man had a powerless, defenseless, hurt child at his mercy and he exploited and tortured it in every filthy way!

In front of her eyes, Chill raped again the 9 year old Bruce in the alley his parents’ were killed, the thug changing to become the lion-like man whom Bruce had considered his savior! Her hand fist ed on the steering wheel: Bruce didn’t deserve that… And the worse was that they still tortured her friend.

Bruce even though absorbed in his thoughts could discern the pressed breath of Selina. He realized that his silence made her worry.

“I’m a bit tired…” he turned his head to her and grinned.

Selina swallowed her feelings.

“I bet you are! I’ll drive you to the Manor and after a fine meal you’ll take a nice nap.”

“You’ll stay for lunch?”

She winked.

“I never say no to a free meal…And I’m curious about Alfred babysitting Hero…”

Bruce chuckled and rested his head on the seat’s headrest.

“I’m sure they are fine…”

Unwillingly Selina thought of Alfred and Bruce’s supposed child. She was hesitant to bring that up.

“Say it…” Bruce muttered playfully keeping his eyes closed.

“Alfred knows about your suspicions?”

“Of course not I don’t want to burden him or anyone else with a theory like this…I’d have spared you too but if I had told you to leave me alone with Ubu it’d have been worse.”

“And I’d have been mad!”

Bruce snorted.

“Exactly what I meant…”

Selina just couldn’t hold it inside anymore.

“Damn, Bruce! How could he have done that? What kind of a person he was?! I mean, I know he was a bastard but still…”

Bruce opened his eyes which remained blank.

“He snatched and squeezed everything I had to offer and still he wasn’t satisfied because he wanted
my soul too…” his voice was emotionless. “I was thinking that the night of Falcone’s downfall, when Ra’s poisoned me and was about to take me away from Gotham, maybe he planned to get me to the place he had the child…Perhaps it would be better if he had succeeded because I might have freed that poor soul.”

Selina felt her eyes watering from the hidden emotion in Bruce’s voice.

“Don’t even think about that, Bruce! You know that if he had taken you then he’d have rendered you completely controlled by him and” she inhaled “even if this kid exists and he had taken you there, you wouldn’t be of any help for him or her.”

He nodded.

“You’re probably right.”

Selina pursed her lips.

“When you began thinking about this? You wanted the control of LexLabs to check this?”

Bruce yanked his head and sighed.

“No, this had nothing to do with gaining the labs’ control. The gun Joker used to smash the security windows of Wayne Tower was made by Luthor and he along with Dagget used Talia’s special Kryptonite to make an attempt against Superman. Of what I knew about Luthor and his rivalry with Superman I had the certainty that he had created in his labs many things to harm Clark.”

“So you wanted the labs to protect that ungrateful alien.”

Bruce’s lips twisted in a smile.

“In general, I wanted to check every shady project Luthor executed because he was collaborating not only with the League but also with other illegal groups so knowing what Luthor produced for them I would know those groups’ plans as well – and Luthor’s own intentions.”

The young woman whistled impressed.

“That must have hit Luthor close to the bone… And about the kid?”

“With Crane’s drugs and then the coma, as I told you, my memory was in a foggy state: I remembered the major things but some details were missing. When those strange beings attacked, I remembered the things Talia was telling me while in her captivity: about the army and of her planning to have children with me. And then I thought about the possibility of Ra’s having planned or executed the same thing so as I was searching the LexLabs’ logs for anything matching our attackers I kept my eyes open for other projects that might lead to creation of human beings.”

Selina didn’t say anything and kept her eyes straight ahead on the jammed street.

Bruce pouted: he could sense Selina’s turbulence from what she heard and he decided to lighten her mood. He intended to not reveal anything till Lucius told him that everything was ready to spare his friends from disappointment.

“Mmmm…Sel, I haven’t told you” he saw Selina bracing herself for another hideous thing and made sure that the red light was lit so the car wasn’t on the move “but Lucius informed me that the surgery might not take long…”
Selina’s eyes bulged and she gasped letting of the steering wheel. Her face was flashed when she turned her body to hug Bruce.

“You sadistic brat! Why you had to keep the good things secret?!” she punched his shoulder lightly.

“Because I wanted to spare you from a disappointment in case something changed…”

“You…dirtbag!” she gritted her teeth but was kissing him at the same time.

“It’s not like I’m walking and didn’t tell…”

Selina detached from him and growled.

“I’d have broken your cute nose then!”

Bruce chuckled as angry horns filled the street coupled with infuriated adjectives since the green light had been on and they were stopping the traffic.

“Move your ass, lady!”

“Get a room, you morons!”

Selina started the engine lazily, lowered the driver’s window and showed her middle finger.

“Fuck off, asshole!”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow and snorted.

“Some stealth…”

Selina looked at him with the corner of her eyes and twisted her lips.

“You caused it, buster!”

Bruce chuckled and turned his head to look outside the window; they were passing a school – Gotham County High School as the sign read. The building’s condition was good in comparison with other schools in Gotham and its yard was swarmed with kids making a beautiful fuss and Bruce found himself thinking about that supposed child: if he or she would be attending a school or have any contact with other kids – he estimated that if a baby came from Luthor’s and Ra’s’ experiments now it would be approximately at Dick’s age…

Wait… This was Dick Grayson’s school.

“Sel, can you slow down a bit?”

“Why?” she inquired lowering the speed.

Bruce moved in his seat to have a better view.

“It’s the school Dick Grayson attends.”

Selina cocked an eyebrow and crooked her lips.

“You’re much informed about that boy, huh? Do you want me to stop for you to say ‘hi’?”

Bruce blinked considering that for only a second because the answer was too easy for negotiating further but then he saw the boy coming out of the school’s yard door with Ms. Turner and his
attention was drawn there.

“Here he is…” he suddenly remembered Selina’s suggestion and hastened to answer before his friend made a move to approach. “No… I wouldn’t do that – the boy hates me.”

Selina parked the car in a niche between two other cars at the other side of the street, opposite the school. She craned her head to see what Bruce was seeing.

“You almost died to save his life” she remarked dryly: the idea of someone hating Bruce was preposterous to her – especially when Bruce had done so much for him.

Bruce detached from the scene he was watching and turned to her.

“I’d have done the same for every kid in Gotham; and that doesn’t mean that he owes to like me – besides it was Batman who saved him; Bruce Wayne was the reason he was Joker’s hostage” his eyes focused again on the boy. “Because he had the misfortune his life to cross mine…”

Selina rolled her eyes and huffed.

“Don’t start the “because of me” thing! Joker did all these, not you… He took the boy to touch a sensitive spot. Have I told you how much I don’t like Joker suspecting Batman’s true identity?

Bruce smirked.

“Only a hundred times…” he arched his eyebrows. “And I don’t like it either but I hope that Bruce’s paraplegia would persuade him that’s not true.”

“Who’s that lady?”

“Dick’s grandmother, Ms. Turner: I didn’t know she was picking him up from school…”

Selina shrugged.

“Maybe some parents’ and guardians’ gathering. That explains the early dismissal.”

But Bruce’s eyes were glued on a figure at the opposite corner of the pavement they were parked: it was a well-built man, covered by the shadows however Bruce was able to discern that he was around 35 years with black hair.

“Selina, look there” he gestured with his head. “That guy has his eyes fixed on them…”

She frowned.

“Maybe he is a friend or some acquaintance.”

“And why he stays in the shadows watching?”

“You mean like us?” Selina snorted.

Bruce cast an amused glance at her and took out of his jacket’s breast pocket his smartphone that Selina knew it was his tablet that shrank to smartphone mode to fit in the pocket. With a brush of Bruce’s finger on the screen it turned into a camera and Bruce zoomed to take a shot of the stranger.

“The windscreen won’t distort the picture?”

“No” he replied as the clicks of the camera were heard. “It has a system that eliminates every source
of distortion…”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“I feel like I’m in a James Bond movie!”

A crook smile curved Bruce’s cheek.

“I didn’t know you wanted to be a James Bond girl?” he asked playfully.

Selina rolled her eyes and snorted.

“Please, darling…” she dragged her words “I prefer my solo movie” Bruce chuckled. “Everyone knows that Bond girls are just pots…” she waved her hand dismissively and then frowned “do I look like a pot?”

“Nah…More like a jardinière…” he chuckled as Selina punched him softly on the shoulder, gritting her teeth but she ended up laughing. “You know you can be only THE Queen…”

Selina wrapped her arms around his neck and pecked his cheek.

“I so much want you to laugh…”

Bruce returned the kiss and patted her forearm.

“I know, dear, and thanks to you I manage…”

Selina’s eye fell on Dick and Ms. Turner entering the elder woman’s small car.

“At least, they’re in the car and…off.”

Bruce turned to see the car leaving.

“I’ll feel better if we escort them to their house…” he arched his eyebrows for emphasis “discreetly.”

Selina grabbed the steering wheel. Bruce raised his hand signalizing her to wait till the stranger got in his own car – he got a shot of the number plate since his memory was still recovering and they didn’t have the time for him to repeat the number many times since the car took a totally different direction than Ms. Turner’s.

“Now, we can go.”

“As you wish, Master Wayne!” she mimicked Alfred’s accented voice turning the engine on but once they were on the street again, cast a business like glance to Bruce. “Being a chauffeur wasn’t in the job description, mister” she said in a smart-ass way “so I want a raise…”

Bruce closed his eyes and smiled.

“With the next paycheck…Deal?” he offered her his hand and she shook it, all part of the game since it was obvious that the young woman didn’t meant it.

“Is he following them?” Selina asked fleetingly looking at the mirror.

“No, he isn’t but I’ll check on him.”

Ms. Turner old car got in the building’s parking.
“Aren’t you happy that your monthly grant allowed them to live in a building with interior parking?”

“Actually, the apartment is in Dick’s name.”

His eyes were scrutinizing the surroundings for the stalker’s car: he could have come from a different route. But there wasn’t any trace.

Selina drummed her fingers in the wheel: this had gone too far and Bruce needed some rest.

“Well, kiddo, time to get you home: Alfred will be worried.”

Bruce nodded keeping his stare at the building as the car turned towards the city’s exit to the Palisades.

“You’ll tell Alfred and the others?” she looked at him. “About the kid…I mean the possibility…”

He breathed heavily.

“No” he knew that he didn’t have to ask from Selina to keep it secret once he wouldn’t reveal it. “At the moment, there’s no reason to upset them for a slight possibility – they have enough to cope with.”
Alfred opened the main door for his young master. Selina had left Bruce on the front and drove the car to the garage: she was to stay hidden since the Manor had a guest.

The Englishman had called Bruce to warn him about a surprise visit and ask if he wanted for him to find a nice excuse to send away politely their guest. But Bruce would see their guest.

“She is waiting for you, sir” his butler said nonchalant. “I believe that it’d be much better if we arranged an appointment for another day; you need your rest.”

Bruce looked at him.

“I’m interested to listen to her and I’ll have my rest after – it won’t last much.”

“As you wish, Master Bruce.”

Alfred huffed and led the way to the grand salon. In front of the marble Victorian fireplace stood a young blond woman holding and staring interested the painting Billy had given to Bruce. As soon as she heard footsteps approaching she left the frame and hastened to meet Bruce.

“Harleen Quinzel, doctor.” she stretched her hand to Bruce for a handshake. “I’m the head psychiatrist of the Arkham Asylum.”

Bruce nodded solemnly and shook her hand. Of course, he didn’t need her introduction to recognize Joker’s psychiatrist: all this time he was being updated concerning the jester and the young head of the Arkham Asylum was a figure so familiar to him as if he knew her.

The long, blond hair tied in a plain ponytail, the square spectacles, the strange attire, though today she was wearing a business suit consisting of mahogany jacket and assorted knee-length skirt like she wanted to make an impression to him showing off her authority. He knew other things as well: her studies at Harvard University, her doctorates, her previous work with famous sociopaths.

“Pleased to meet you, Dr. Quinzel. Please, have a seat” he gestured to the sofa. “I see Alfred has already introduced you to his famous tea.”

She smiled and Bruce thought that along with her sweetness there was something awkward in her eyes.

“Oh, yes! Mr. Pennyworth” she stopped abruptly remembering the butler’s suggestion to call him by his first name “Alfred was extremely kind.”

“I’m obliged, Dr. Quinzel” Alfred replied with a slight bow. “If you’ll excuse me I have some things in the kitchen that require my attention.”

Bruce nodded and Alfred left them alone.

“I’m really glad to see you, Mr. Wayne: during your absence there were some nasty theories around.”

Bruce smiled.

“Yes, I’m well aware of that, Dr. Quinzel but” he shrugged “people like to make up stories” he shook his head “and my past predisposes for the grimier ones.”
She nodded.

“Unfortunately… Yet they were right about the severity of your injuries. I’m honestly sorry, Mr. Wayne.”

“It could have been worse, Dr. Quinzel, much worse.”

The young psychiatrist took her cup and sipped but Bruce could tell from the way her fingers brushed the porcelain cup that she was uncomfortable and hesitant about something. Probably for uttering the reason of her visit. Yet he pretended ignorance and bit one of the cupcakes Alfred had served to accompany the tea.

Harleen estimated her host behind her elegant glasses; she was trying to discern what had made her unique patient so infatuated with this man. Fine, he was beautiful above average and definitely he had an intriguing past that Joker trusted her enough to divulge that was much in common with his. However, she couldn’t deny that Mr. Wayne emanated a dynamic aura: strength, courage and bravery accompanied with vulnerability – maybe this combination intrigued Mr. J.

Yeah…Bruce Wayne was an interesting case, not as much interesting as Mr. J but definitely that made her idea even more appealing. Now she had to find a nice way to serve it…She remembered the small framed painting on the fireplace: the Waynes were squatting on both sides of their six or seven year old son kissing each of the boy’s cheeks.

“It’s a very beautiful painting” she said pointing there “the one that made it is very talented.”

Bruce stared at it and smiled.

“The artist’s name is Billy; he is one of the young adults that are housed in the Haven. I’m positive he’ll make a fine career.”

Harleen smiled cleverly which didn’t evade Bruce’s attention.

“You sound really proud of him.”

“Exactly as of every other boy and girl in the Haven…” he frowned internally remembering Billy and the other kids in the cage Joker had jailed them: a wave of white, burning rage travelled the healthy part of his spine.

Dr. Quinzel believed that she found what she was after.

“You’re an avid philanthropist; the horrors of your past didn’t manage to make you indifferent to other people’s pain neither willing to cause them pain.”

Bruce knew that the young psychiatrist wanted to say something from the first moment; also, he felt that she was laying the ground for delivering it in the best possible way.

“Thank you, Dr. Quinzel; the experiences of all these years made me determined to soothe the pain of people around me. But although I’m sure you were interested in my wellbeing” – well, not sure at all… - “and I do appreciate your kind words, there must be a more serious reason for the Asylum’s head to come and see me.”

The young woman smiled and pulled out her glasses.

“You’re smart, Mr. Wayne…” she cleaned her glasses with a handkerchief and put them on again.
“Not so much” he shrugged. “It’s a bit obvious, don’t you think?” he took another bite from his cupcake – he was really hungry.

She nodded and raised her index finger.

“You’re right! Well, you don’t know that but I’m the therapist of the man known as Joker” Bruce lowered his eyes, licked his lips nervously and made his breaths a bit pressed; he let his cupcake on the plate feeling the doctor’s eyes watching him intrigued.

“And what this has to do with me?” he asked abruptly but giving an almost indiscernible shaking to his voice.

Harleen left her place on the sofa and came to Bruce. Her eyes seemed truly worried.

“Are you alright? I didn’t want to upset you.”

“I’m fine” he said looking her in the eye. “Please, proceed” he was really interested to know.

She sat at the nearest armchair: Harleen honestly didn’t want to upset him in the middle of his recovery but her patient was a more urgent case. So she set her chin and locked eyes with him, every hesitation finally leaving her. It was a doctor after all.

“Mr. Wayne, you just said that you care to soothe the pain of every person around you.”

Bruce’s eyes were perplexed; he shrugged.

“As much as I can…But I don’t understand how…”

Dr. Quinzel interrupted him.

“My patient, Jack, is a human being too” her stare was strong in emphasis and Bruce frowned.

“His victims were human beings too” he arched his eyebrows “and also their loved ones that stayed behind to mourn” he remembered Ms. Turner at the Phelps’ funeral and Dick calling his little brother when the small casket lowered to the ground – Bruce’s eyes almost watered.

He shook his head to get a grip.

“Anyway, Joker is at the Asylum because justice sees him like a human being that needs reformation” he remarked.

She crossed her legs and leaned towards him, shaking her index finger.

“And this is the whole point, Mr. Wayne. All these months Mr. J’s, I mean Jack’s therapy is showing encouraging signs: the patient has exhibited trust towards me” her eyes shone proudly “and he even socializes with his fellow inmates without any incidents.”

Well, Bruce knew that already through Tony and Clark who kept an eye on Joker. However, he was curious what she wanted.

“I suppose this is good?”

“It’s great, actually and it manifests that there is hope for Jack to reform: you do want that, Mr. Wayne, right? You care about people.”

Bruce gulped on hearing about his kidnapper like a victim of abduction that was abused and almost
raped by that man.

“I can’t see how this has anything to do with your patient.”

“Do you want to help the reformation of Jack, Mr. Wayne?” she demanded.

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I give funds to the Asylum so the inmates have the best life conditions and the most qualified therapists” he gestured to her. “But other than that” he shook his head in denial “I don’t think I can do anything else – I’m not a therapist.”

Harleen leaned more towards him and Bruce tensed sensing her urge to touch him. He took in how fervently her eyes shone – almost maniac.

“Mr. Wayne, I believe that you’re the key to Mr. J’s healing” Bruce felt unease hearing that ‘Mr. J’.

“Let me explain” she continued thrilled “during your absence Jack was calm – at least, for his standards -, he was socializing with the other inmates and moreover he developed a kind of friendship with Jonathan Crane” Bruce made a mental note – he didn’t like that. “All in all, he manifested a spectacular improvement until he saw your arrival in TV.”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“Maybe I should have stayed away?”

Harleen leaned to the back of the armchair.

“The moment he saw you disembarking the plane he attacked one of the inmates nearly tearing his neck: the poor man was saved thanks to Mr. Stark’s safety measures that knocked out Jack.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Is the man alright?”

She waved her hand almost indifferently.

“Yeah, Jack didn’t manage to hurt him lethally. What’s important…”

“More important than the injured man?” his eyebrows rose in disbelief.

Harleen flashed.

“I didn’t mean it that way: I meant more important in relation to our topic” he nodded. “From the instant Jack saw that you returned he lapsed: he manifested again Joker’s behavior – he stopped responding to treatment, trusting his therapist. It is like your return is the trigger to resurface Joker.”

Bruce’s eyes widened and he clenched his jaw.

“You claim that it’s my fault Joker is like that?” his voice was filled with disbelief and anger.

Harleen raised her palms appeasing shaking her head in denial.

“Please, Mr. Wayne, don’t get defensive…”

He stabbed her with his eyes.
“You say that I trigger Joker’s aggressive behavior!”

Harleen yanked her head: this man didn’t want to understand!

“Let’s face the facts: Falcone, the Phelps’ family, Jack Napier…” she folded a finger for each name. “All these murders have only one thing in common: you.”

Bruce felt his cheeks hot and his heart beating too heavily: he always had felt responsible for all these but hearing it coldly stated by someone else was like a blow. Besides, what she wanted to hint: that if he somehow stopped existing Joker would be harmless? He had hoped that science would have found some more legit explanation.

“The police said that Joker had begun killing people way before he came at Gotham!”

Harleen shook her head exasperated.

“Yes, but before he met you at Mr. Stark’s house he had maintained one normal persona: Jack Napier’* normal?* Bruce rolled his eyes remembering their first meeting. “It was his effort to keep an anchor to the society – a desperate struggle between Joker and Jack. But when he met you he stopped caring about Jack and Joker absorbed him entirely – he was unwilling to maintain an anchor to our world, he didn’t care to be normal. During the time of your absence Jack resurfaced and Joker almost vanished. It was your return that destroyed Jack and brought Joker back.”

Bruce couldn’t believe what he heard and his head began hurting: the first time he left the Fortress he was faced with migraines that the energy of the Fortress had kept at bay. Leslie managed gradually to eliminate them till now. He rubbed his temple.

Dr. Quinzel leaned again towards him, her face filled with sympathy.

“You care for people and you do wonders to help them” she gestured to the painting on the fireplace. “You’re proud of these kids and Joker kidnapped them to get to you.”

Bruce rubbed harder his aching head.

“He asked for Batman too…” he said dryly.

Harleen closed her eyes and sighed.

“Believe me if there was a way to conduct him I’d have asked his contribution too…” Bruce lolled his head on the side and regarded her. “What I’m trying to say, Mr. Wayne, is that if you really care for these kids and the people of Gotham in general, you’d want Joker’s therapy to be effective. What would be better than Jack getting out to the society reformed, repentant for his crimes and willing to offer to the others? Believe me, Mr. Wayne: prior to your return he manifested signs of regret.”

Bruce wanted to believe that but he had his doubts.

“So…” he inhaled “what do you want from me?”

She crossed her arms and took a breath.

“I want you to be part of Jack’s therapy.”

Bruce’s eyes widened in dread whereas inside he was enraged. Dr. Quinzel saw the terror and hastened to raise her palms reassuringly.

“You could come to the Asylum once a week for Jack’s session – it’d be something like a couple
therapy” Bruce felt his hair standing on end at the craziness of this while Harleen was beaming for her brilliant idea.

“But we’re not a couple!” he protested exasperated.

The blond sighed.

“Of course not! However we have a situation that reminds that. For the time being, I keep Jack deprived of any stimulus that has to do with you so when your join sessions began the only exposition he’d get on you would be under controlled conditions and my guidance we will erase his obsession with you. Imagine our success, Mr. Wayne!” her eyes flashed fervently. “Imagine the relief for our society! The people will be safe and we will gain precious knowledge for other cases like Jack’s!”

Bruce’s eyes were blank but estimating the young therapist: it was obvious that she believed in her goal and was enthusiastic and really invested in Joker’s reformation which was great. Yet asking him to be in a session with Joker! He feared that Joker was manipulating her exploiting her good intentions; Joker was cunning.

He shook his head and licked his lips.

“I can’t do that! He…he forced me to…marry him…he almost raped me. He kills people!”

Harleen lolled her head on the side, hardly containing her frustration.

“We’ll take every safety measure – and your friend’s system is very effective. Mr. Wayne, I’m certain that with your participation Jack’s therapy will produce wonders. And it will help you as well. I mean, to reevaluate and get over the traumas Joker left you; also, if Jack stops being obsessed with you, you’ll be safe.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, Dr. Quinzel. How you’re sure that my presence there won’t feed his infatuation and increase his blood thirst?”

She smiled concealing her impatience resisting the urge to shake her feet nervously like a pendulum.

“Because we’ll have medication and I will be there controlling the situation – I assure you: I’m a psychiatrist with much experience with sociopaths.”

“I don’t doubt that but still I can’t agree.”

Harleen closed her eyes and sighed disappointed.

“Mr. Wayne…”

“Master Bruce, the lunch is served” Alfred’s cool voice entered the room interrupting deliberately the young psychiatrist. “Dr. Quinzel, would you honor us with your company?”

Her fingers clenched the armrest irritated by the interruption. She understood that her visit was over so she stood up.

“I’m afraid I can’t” she smiled sweetly. “I must return to the Asylum. Thank you for the invitation; maybe some other time. Mr. Wayne, please consider what we discussed.”

“Good afternoon, Dr. Quinzel” it was his only reply and Harleen yanked her head and followed
Alfred to the door.

Bruce watched her course to the exit with expressionless eyes and his lips pressed. As soon as Alfred closed the door behind her, he took his smartphone out of his pocket and with a brush on the side turned it into a tablet. He was ready to do his thing but Alfred’s light footsteps approached and the young man turned his eyes at him.

“If I may, I would suggest that you forget every bit of this conversation, Master Bruce.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows and chuckled.

“Someone told me that eavesdropping isn’t a polite thing to do…”

Alfred flushed a bit which Bruce definitely enjoyed yet the Englishman sustained his cool and stared nonchalant at his young master.

“For masters and young nobles but for a butler eavesdropping sometimes is a duty.”

Bruce snorted and returned his eyes to his tablet.

“It sounds like double standards…”

Alfred cleared his throat with dignity.

“The lunch is really served and Miss Kyle waits for you” Bruce cast him an exasperated glance but followed him to the kitchen. “Wash your hands, Master Bruce.”

Bruce let the tablet on the kitchen island and washed his hands at the sink, Selina watching him from her stool while Hero beside his bawl was licking meticulously his rear leg.

“That woman is crazier than Joker!” Selina snorted when her friend settled his chair beside her in front of his plate of Beef Wellington.

“Another eavesdropper…” he commented snidely and looked appalled the glass of milk by his plate. “Why Selina gets wine and I milk?” he protested taking his tablet ready to hack the archives with the footage from the Asylum’s cameras.

Alfred soundlessly approached him and grabbed his tablet.

“No games at the dinner table…” he said nonchalant and Bruce jerked his hands.

“It’s not games!” he objected.

Alfred nodded in emphasis.

“Even worse! As for your other inquiry, Miss Kyle isn’t on medication so she can drink wine with her meal.”

Selina smirked at Bruce and sipped from her glass teasingly. Bruce shook his head and huffed.

“On medication…The story of my life! At least I could have a can of soda instead of milk.”

Alfred looked at him with arched eyebrows.

“With the poor density of your bones, calcium is more necessary than soda.”
Selina chewed delighted a forkful of her meal and turned to her friend holding graciously the fork between her fingers.

“Don’t be put off, kiddo: eat your food and when you grow up you would be able to drink wine like the adults” she giggled and Bruce rolled his eyes but began eating.

His initial hunger had subsided considerably but he knew that eating was obligatory since there was a lot of medicine to take.

“Don’t tell me that you’re thinking what that shrink told you?” Selina asked staring at Bruce.

He shrugged.

“Perhaps she tries to help both her patient and the society.”

“Bullshit, sweetie! Couple therapy?! I think she shares Joker’s illusions.”

Bruce sipped his milk grimacing.

“At least, I took some useful info out of this.”

“Like?” she asked, chewing her food.

But then a melody came from Bruce’s tablet and Bruce jerked a bit because it was Clark’s ringtone. His eyes fixed on the “confiscated” gadget and Alfred sighed and gave him back the tablet.

“Hey, Bruce; how are you?” Clark’s voice sounded cheerful but slightly remorseful.

“Fine, Clark.”

“Just exhausted, huh?” Clark’s voice was now a bit deprecatory. “You couldn’t stay at the Manor, right? At least, you returned early” Bruce smirked realizing that Clark saw the footage from his car returning and didn’t knew anything about his visit to Ubu. “And your move elevated Wayne Enterprises’ shares – BUT that’s not a reason to repeat it, okay?”

Bruce rolled his eyes.

“You called to reprimand me?”

Clark chuckled.

“As if I could...No, I didn’t call for that” he swallowed. “Ugh! I want so bad to suck your lips…” Bruce could see him closing his eyes in delight. “I’m sorry I didn’t manage to come but Perry is bitchy...more than usual.”

“It’s okay, Clark.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I end with work.”

Bruce nodded.

“I’ll be waiting: Tony and Selina will be here for the council.”

He heard Clark huffing.

“Actually, I had other things in mind but…first thing first, huh? Well, babe, I have to hang up now.”
Take your medications and have a good rest, okay? And…and…wait? You have a session with Leench?"

His frown was too loud and Bruce chuckled.

“No massage from him, okay?”

Bruce smirked.

“Mmm…I’m not sure…Buy, Clark!”

He ended the call unable to conceal a big smile and Selina nudged his forearm.

“What’s new from the big bad alien?”

“He doesn’t want Matt to massage me…”

She knitted her eyebrows and grinned evilly.

“Gooooood! Let the blond babe massage you and see to manifest signs of great pleasure – that would make Superman a match to Hulk.”

Bruce shook his head smiling, smile that freeze when Alfred brought him his pills. He crossed out the exasperated question of how much longer he’ll have to rely on chemicals and took them calmly.

Alfred looked at his wristwatch.

“Now…off you go for your midday rest.”

But Bruce tightened his grip on the tablet.

“I have some work to do: I’ll take my nap when I’m done.”

Alfred’s expression became disapproving and stern.

“At three o’ clock mister Leench will arrive for your session so the time in between has to be dedicated to your rest in order to handle the effort.”

The young man rolled his eyes frustrated but then he had to let the tablet on the table because Hero hoped on his lap and demanded his caress rubbing his head to his hand.

“You promised to be a good boy, sweetie…” Selina remarked and Bruce huffed defeated.

“You’ll stay, right?”

Selina nodded.

“Master Wayne, lead the way to the master bedroom: I have to make sure that no detour will occur. And you don’t need to worry: Miss Kyle will stay and help me with the cleaning…”

Selina’s eyes bulged and her upper lip upturned in horror causing Bruce’s laughter.

Hero was kicking a small rubber ball between his front legs arching his back while Selina was sprawled on a sun chair. The steady sound of strong arms slicing the water of the interior pool made her look up.
After a delicious Alfred meal Selina stayed at the Manor while Bruce took a nap that was rather short both for her and Alfred’s taste. And then Matt Leench, Bruce’s physiotherapist, came for their session and Selina liked to watch and participate to her friend’s workout – that enabled her to restrain Bruce from overstretching himself: not that Matt didn’t do it, he was actually stern with his stubborn patient despite his more than evident admiration yet Selina was more effective and Alfred knew it. Besides, some workout was necessary for her too.

She had watched Bruce warming up, do resistance exercises, lifting weights and then even sit-ups under Matt’s protective and impressed stare – Tony had told her that the Avenger’s physiotherapist was a great professional but Selina would have been very gleeful to watch Superman huffing and puffing once again, boiling in his jealousy: that would serve him right!

“I want you to tell me as soon as you feel the slightest of discomfort, OK?” the physiotherapist kept repeating and Selina smirked because even Matt had understood Bruce’s disregard for pain when he wanted to achieve something. “We want to keep your muscles in good shape but we must be very careful with your upper spine.”

In the end, Matt had put Bruce’s legs in exoskeleton cases to do with the instrument’s help soft movements that would preserve the muscles’ near normal condition: he knew that Tony Stark’s goal was to enable his friend to walk again so the physiotherapist applied exercises that mimicked the walking movements - always in sitting position.

“What about doing this properly?” Bruce had asked determined and Matt squinted. "I mean standing."

Matt had pressed his lips in a tight line because he could feel his patient's impatience.

"I wouldn't risk applying so much pressure to your pelvis, Bruce. Your spine is still too sensitive.”

Bruce followed his trainer’s instructions and did his exercises calmly, determined and clenching his teeth because sometimes even now the workout was demanding. But seeing his legs in walking motion made Bruce’s eyes flash and it was as if Selina could hear him swear that he’ll walk again without the machine doing everything.

“I think it’s enough for today, Bruce” Matt had said patting his patient’s sweaty back.

Bruce looked at him under his wet locks.

“I can continue, Matt…a bit more.”

Matt smiled understanding his patient’s desire to walk again as soon as possible.

“I know you can, Bruce; but it’s enough for now – you didn’t work out for three days: we don’t want any cramps or strains or stiffness. And you’re tired after a long transatlantic journey” he smiled. “You know that weren’t for Tony’s energy internal casts you would be still on a bed completely immobile wrapped in hard casts?”

Or worse, six feet under…Bruce nodded thoughtful.

“We’ll volume up gradually, deal?” Matt inquired cheerfully to lift his patient’s spirits and wrapped carefully a big towel around Bruce’s shoulders.

Bruce sighed.

“Deal.”
Then they proceeded to the pool room where Matt accompanied Bruce in the warm water. Not that her friend needed any help: he slipped from his wheelchair to the pool with ease and grace, Matt waiting in the water. The pool had the normal depth because Bruce was a skilled swimmer even disabled. So Matt stood on the side and watched with pride his patient sliding to the waters.

Selina cleared her throat.

“It must be odd for the physiotherapist of the Avengers working with everyday people” she said slyly.

Matt shrugged.

“Although I enjoy my work with the Avengers, it’s my interaction with everyday people that gives me the greatest reward” he glanced at Selina keeping the corner of his eye on Bruce who continued swimming. “I believe that people without superpowers are the true heroes.”

Selina’s eyebrows arched.

“I absolutely agree with that… However it must be a one-of-a-kind experience to massage Hulk” she rolled her eyes.

Matt laughed.

“No, I wouldn’t dare that!”

Selina protruded her lips.

“And what about Captain America?” her eyes glimmered and Bruce stared at her grinning. “He needs training and massage too?”

Bruce chuckled understanding what his friend was thinking: that she gladly would change places with Matt.

“Well, he has enhanced strength and skills but still a physiotherapist can be of help especially after battles…I just can’t elaborate on this: confidentiality reasons.”

Selina nodded and watched Hero running from his corner towards his master; at the sight of the water the kitten braked abruptly and looked down at his master.

“C’me, join me, Hero!” Bruce told him but the kitten meowed unwilling.

The young man splashed a few drops on the animal which made some nervous steps backwards.

“Maybe Selina could join you” Matt commented.

But she shook her head.

“No way, handsome… I don’t have a swimming suit and I don’t owe you a great favor…” she winked.

Matt chuckled but then his smartphone from the gym room rang.

“Mmm…Selina, do you mind keeping company to Bruce?” he meant watching over Bruce just in case.

“Not at all, go…If it’s Captain give him a kiss!”
Bruce changed his body’s position into backstroke. He loved swimming because it gave him the sense of independence, of freedom, of normalcy.

“You’re quite fast” Selina said sitting at the granite tile surface. She admired him because although she was sure that demanded too much effort Bruce made it look easy.

“Yeah…” Bruce said grimly. “Like a turtle…”

Selina stroked Hero who was twitching his paw in the drops of water Bruce had sent towards him.

“A sea turtle” she commented arching an eyebrow. “In Finding Nemo they were pretty damn fast.”

Bruce placed his arms in the surface in front of Selina and lifted the goggles.

“Finding Nemo?”

Selina slapped her eye.

“I forgot you’re much behind in films…” Bruce was Falcone’s slave back then and he barely was given food… “The orphanage staff took us to cinema when it came out: it’s an animated film about a clown fish that crosses the entire ocean, has a lot of adventures and faces even sharks to find his son that was captured and kept in a fish tank…” she suddenly realized the similarities with Bruce and the possible child.

She bit his lower lip; from Bruce’s eyes could understand that her friend had already caught the similarities.

“I’m sorry…” she whispered but Bruce smiled.

“It’s a good movie?”

“It’s great! And the clown fish it’s accompanied in his journey by a female friend: Dory who’s a bit stupid but has a good heart.”

“It sounds worth watching…” he let go of the edge of the pool and slid into the water lowering the goggles over his eyes. “Matt should have known better when he suggested you get into the water…” he snorted. “Cats hate water!”

Suddenly, the arched roof of the swimming pool room opened and Ironman made his appearance as pompous as ever when the armor vanished and Tony dressed in his jeans and T-shirt fell completely ungracefully to the water splashing all over Selina and Hero.

“Yooo-Hoooo!” Tony exclaimed and hugged Bruce who was a bit unbalanced from the wave. “Ha! Like a wet cat, huh, Sel?!”

Selina gritted her teeth eyeing her drenched clothes; her eyes were spiting flames as Hero’s.

“Stark! You asshole!” she yelled. “You could have hit Bruce, you dork!”

Tony however was beaming.

“She loves me, huh, little guy? I’m simply irresistible, babe!”

Matt, who had heard the fuss, ran there worried; he closed his eyes and breathed easier seeing Tony Stark holding his best friend.
“Tony, what a nice surprise! But you could have hit Bruce!”

Tony rolled his eyes to Bruce who smiled.

“What are they talking about, Bruce? I had estimated everything about my spectacular dive to eliminate any risk: you know that, huh?”

“Of course, Tony… Selina, Alfred has stashed some clothes for you so you can change.”

She was drying Hero with a fluffy towel and glared at them fuming.

“Tell me that you don’t have any clothes for that spoiled Californian brat and he’ll be forced to walk around naked…”

Tony twitched his eyebrows suggestively.

“I love the way you think, babe…” he lowered his voice looking at her seductively. “Adam’s attire suits me perfectly and ladies love it too…”

She rolled her eyes and snorted.

“Yes, I suppose there are many perverts out there…”

Tony slapped his palm over his arc reactor and lolled his head supposedly hurt.

“You stabbed me in the heart, babe… Wait… That’s the arc. Have I told you that I’m a masochist?” he patted Bruce’s upper arm. “They were afraid that I might hit you – that would impossible: you’re great at swimming, buddy!”

“He believes that he is a turtle” Selina remarked.

“No way!” Matt protested. “He’s can be an athlete!”

Tony widened his eyes at his friend.

“A sea turtle like in Finding Nemo.”

Bruce yanked his head.

“I must see that movie…”

“In my cinema hall back at home; it’s been ages since the last time you came to visit.”

The younger man smiled but Matt clapped his hands.

“It’s time Bruce gets out of the water and you change clothes.”

Tony held his friend as Matt had taught him to help him out but Bruce tensed: he wanted to do as many things as possible by himself.

“Thank you, Tony but I can manage…” he said smiling.

But Tony was serious.

“I know you can…but I need to do this to loosen that knot in my stomach…to persuade myself that I can do something for you” his voice was too solemn for Tony’s standards; he brought his mouth to Bruce’s ear “other than contributing to your crazy plan…”
The younger man understood.

“You spoke with Lucius?” he whispered.

“Yup…He wants me in the project” he locked eyes with him “do you?”

Bruce pressed his lips but didn’t lower his eyes.

“I didn’t want you to participate in something that you don’t believe; in something that would bother and upset you…And you also have too many things demanding your attention and skills. But it wouldn’t have been the same without you.”

Tony hugged him and kissed his forehead.

“I won’t let you out of my sight again, kiddo and…my ego wouldn’t stand it if Lucius created something better than my things without my contribution” he lolled his head.

Bruce’s eyes sparkled and his lips trembled in a hesitant smile: he had the confidence that Lucius would make the best possible suit yet Tony’s participation was important because he wanted his best friend supporting his decisions.

“So…you’re in?”

Tony turned his eyes to the ceiling that had closed again and scratched his wet locks holding Bruce with one hand.

“It’s the least I can do: you taught me how to sustain and control Ironman with my mind’s power…”

Bruce frowned.

“I didn’t.”

Tony pouted shaking his head thoughtful.

“Exactly…you’ll say that when outsiders are around – I like to brag about that!”

“Tony!” Matt yelled. “Stop keeping Bruce in: it’s time for shower!”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“You can’t find respect in your employees anymore…” he sighed and supported Bruce to his waiting wheelchair at which point his eyes widened. “You emerged from thin air?”

Alfred wasn’t in the pool hall when Tony arrived and now was standing by the wheelchair holding a fluffy bathrobe. He knew the time Bruce’s swimming session ended and as every time he came just in time to wrap immediately and carefully his master in the bathrobe.

“Like master like butler, huh?” Tony smirked. “When are you gonna teach poor ol’ Tony the tricks, littl’ guy?”

Bruce pouted and nodded patronizingly.

“I’m teaching you too but you’re a late bloomer…”

Alfred gave one of his precious chuckles and Tony rolled his eyes sighing.
“My humor is used against me by my own pupil…alas! Where this world is headed?”

Suddenly, Tony felt a strong push and lost his balance ending up completely gracelessly back in the pool. He emerged to the surface rasping and saw Selina sniggering with a hissing Hero in her arms.

“Next time remember that cats hate water!” she snapped and turned graciously swaying seductively her beautiful hips heading to the showers.

Tony lolled his head to the side arching an eyebrow.

“And that cats have nails and…awesome hips! Wow!” he wolf whistled and winked to Bruce. “She wanted me to see the view from here…”

Matt from the other end of the space approached with his hands clutching his waist.

“Bruce, go make a shower and I’ll wait you in the gym for your massage.”

Finally!

He gazed all around him awed and touched: the cave walls, the working bench with the five screens showing footage from different parts of the city, the waterfall at the entrance, the Tumbler standing there neglected, the bats hanging upside down from the ceiling. The case with Batman’s suit: a new one Lucius probably brought at a point, because his previous was destroyed in the factory.

Everything looked different from this position, from the nest and cage of his wheelchair which however was to thank for being able to come here because the steep and rough surface would have made it impossible for a normal chair to move.

All these time he felt lucky and grateful that survived the collapse and the fire but being again down in the cave intensified that feeling, made his heart jolt in his chest and his back shiver…however at the same time the realization of his impairment became graver. Which on its turn galvanized his decisiveness to walk again and don the cape and the cowl. He used the chair’s capability to elevate and took reverently the cowl: he felt as if the inanimate that object stared back piercing him.

He placed the cowl back because he didn’t want his friends seeing how touched he was; instead, he wheeled the chair in front of the working bench and for a few seconds brushed with his fingers the keyboard and the mouse. It seemed as if it’s been ages…

Then he brought his iris to the niche at the bottom left corner of the central screen and the processor opened sending goose bumps to Bruce’s healthy spine.

Tony had a virtual meeting with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s sector directors and Selina was busy with something occupying Hero. So he was alone…He adored his friends but still he cherished some loneliness – especially, in the cave…though it always brought back memories of his escapees to the underground caves when he was at Falcone’s captivity. Maybe that was the reason he loved so much being in the cave: because he lived again all these emotions of the few instances of fake safety, freedom and oblivion the caves gave to the scared boy.

He placed his tablet on the bench and his fingers flew on the keyboard bringing on the screen the results from Lucius’ analysis. But first, he wanted to do something else.

“Transfer pictures 001 to 0020” he ordered and the tablet’s screen illuminated as the pictures of Dick’s stalker were moved to the central processor.
He tapped the keys giving the data to the face recognition software to cross the photos with public archives.

The whoosh told him that he was no longer alone; he took his eyes from the screen just as Clark was right next to him, his mouth nestled in his neck.

“You promised to not go hard at this…” Clark struggled to sound stern but his voice came out too sensual – after all, seeing Bruce working in the cave always aroused him.

“I don’t” Bruce replied nonchalant though Clark’s wet breath made his healthy body go in paralysis too.

Clark frowned and sniffed harder at Bruce’s skin.

“That Matt was touching you?” he rolled his eyes.

Bruce snorted and looked again at his screens.

“Of course; he is my physiotherapist: kinesiotherapy and massage is part of my sessions.”

Superman took gently Bruce’s shoulders and nuzzled his cheek that was so deliciously cold from the cave’s temperature.

“I don’t want him to massage you…I can do it” his eyes reminded of a kicked puppy. Clark could scan Bruce’s muscles and see that the physiotherapist did a good work with his patient’s paralyzed muscles and his healthy but sensitive ones – a remarkably good work because Clark could sense how relaxed Bruce’s muscles were. Damn!

“You’re not as reliable as Matt” a snarky voice came from the lift and high heels echoed to the stone along with light paws walking along. “He is devoted and he’d never abandon Bruce for two days… and Bruce really needs that massage!”

Clark stood up and regarded Selina with his arms crossed on his chest. The young woman smirking held his gaze with her blazing eyes.

“I’m sorry, Selina” Superman decided that Bruce’s friend was right to be pissed; after all, she had never abandoned Bruce despite all the dangers. “You’re right” he walked towards her “I’m an asshole!”

“Indeed!” she spat. “A super asshole!”

Hero was at Clark’s feet and the man squatted to take him but the kitten sped to climb on Bruce’s lap. Clark shook his head slowly getting up.

“Even Hero is angry with me” he huffed.

Selina patted him in the upper arm and twitched her eyebrows.

“So from now on behave, buster: you’re on probation!” she passed him and sat on the bench crossing her legs and looking at Bruce patting Hero who purred.

Superman ruffled his hair.

“Fair enough…” he shrugged and then laughed seeing Bruce working over his keyboard with Hero having climbed on his shoulder and rubbing his head on the man’s neck. “Another rival!” he sighed.
“You have no idea, pal!” Tony’s grumpy voice saluted him as the billionaire got out of the lift.

He met the scolding stare of Ironman before Tony proceeded to his friend. Clark pouted and followed.

Selina in the meantime had detached Hero from Bruce – not without resistance – and rolled her eyes to both boys.

“Boys, if you didn’t get it we have a meeting” she scoffed. “And we have already a nice show with a shrink here…”

Bruce didn’t stir being engrossed in the data on one of the screens.

“Why are you searching Oliver Queen?” Clark demanded with narrowed eyes.

“Because the Amazon Princess saved him from the island he was stranded” Bruce answered without turning.

Clark knew that already but Bruce searching him meant that his stubborn lover intended on making an inquiry about Diana. He huffed.

“You’re searching Diana…”

“Of course…” he replied indifferent for Clark’s underlying disapproval.

“Bruce, for Rao’s sake, she is our ally!”

However Tony’s main concern was other.

“Sorry to interrupt but what shrink?” he asked.

Twisting the stool into facing his friend was the easiest thing in the world but the wheelchair albeit of advanced technology needed a bit more effort.

“Dr. Harleen Quinzel” Bruce replied.

“Joker’s psychiatrist?” both Tony and Clark exclaimed and Selina clapped.

“You were in the school band or natural talent?” she chuckled.

Tony turned his eyes on the ceiling reminiscent.

“Those girl groups…” he sighed and then cleared his throat looking at his company. “You know how fond and caring I am of every cultural effort!”

Clark didn’t pay any attention and frowned.

“What did she want?”

“To mess with our nerves!” Selina spat gritting her teeth and Hero found the chance to swallow her finger mock biting it.

“She asked me to help with Joker’s therapy” Bruce said indifferently.

Tony crossed his arms.

“I don’t like that…Clarify.”
Bruce rubbed his chin.

“She suggested I participate in Joker’s therapy sessions in order for her to change his wrong perceptions about me and our …relation.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows and scratched his neck.

“I must congratulate Gotham for the choice of its shrinks…” he sneered. “First Crane, now her…”

But Clark was agitated.

“As in couple therapy?” his lips were twisted in disgust.

Bruce nodded.

“Exactly.”

Clark clenched his fists and his feet already hovered off the ground.

“I tell her one or two things!”

“Easy, tiger!” Tony stopped him. “You want all these rumors of Superman loving Bruce Wayne being inflamed?”

Clark met Bruce’s eyes.

“I personally don’t have a problem with that” he said nonchalant.

Selina hopped from the bench and erected her elegant body in front of him locking their eyes.

“Really now?” she cocked an eyebrow in sarcasm. “Are you sure? Perhaps your new friend would be heartbroken?” she pouted lolling her head on the side.

Superman’s gaze hardened and Bruce closed his eyes hearing his lover’s rasping breath as he was ready to retort.

“I refused!” Bruce’s stentorian voice echoed through the cave and Clark turned to him instead. “Of course I refused” he continued lowering his voice looking at Clark. “The good thing is that I learnt some things from our discussion: first of all, that Joker attacked an inmate on the news of my arrival.”

He pressed a button and the attack’s video played on the screen.

Selina clenched her waist.

“So…instead of getting your rest you were hacking…Wait till Alfred finds out!”

A crease formed in Bruce’s forehead under the reprimanding eyes of his friend.

“I did sleep; I just woke up sooner than schedule and did some work.”

Selina’s eyebrows knitted.

“Wait a minute! Your tablet was in the living room: Alfred knows you too well to let it in your room, so how?”

Bruce’s lips twitched.
“You can control the tablet from your watch.”

Tony whistled and slapped his thighs shaking his head.

“That’s preposterous, littl’ guy! WayneTech can’t have created THAT before Stark Industries!”

Bruce smirked, cocking an eyebrow.

“It seems that we can…” he inclined his head to Tony. “Good thing you’re a shareholder.”

Tony huffed.

“I want that gizmo in StarkExpo!”

Bruce shrugged and smiled wickedly.

“Why not?”

“Tell me everything about your gadget” Tony’s eyes sparkled intrigued.

Superman fumed; he jerked his arms upwards.

“Are we forgetting something?! We were talking about Joker, remember?”

Tony rolled his eyes clearly disappointed.

“Clark is right” Bruce commented. “Well, the inmate Joker attacked is Lou Garfield…”

“Any relation with my favorite smug, fat, sarcastic cat?” Tony asked and then looked at Hero’s big, round eyes. “Favorite animated cat.”

“No” Bruce replied and the man’s police file emerged on the screen. “He is one of his thugs; and before you ask why Joker attacked one of his thugs: Lou was at the Chickey’s factory and he shot the bullets that started the fire.”

Superman nodded slowly.

“Joker attacked him the moment the TV showed you disembarking the jet on the wheelchair…”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“And Joker holds him responsible for your impairment” Tony continued “which brings us to an unpleasant conclusion…”

“That Joker thinks you’re the Batman” Selina crossed her arms.

Bruce nodded.

“He hinted that in the factory. And obviously he wasn’t persuaded by the holograms, which makes urgent the built of a suit that would enable me to make some appearances as Batman so to disperse those suspicions.”

“I don’t like that!” Clark exploded. “I don’t care what Joker thinks! You won’t get out there while in this condition – this is madness! If it’s necessary that Joker sees Batman, I’ll dress up.”

Bruce shook his head patiently.
“That won’t work! The one time you did that Joker figured you out and that made him suspect the truth. And it’ll be safe: I trust Lucius and Tony; besides I won’t do anything too demanding.”

“Yeah, sure…” Clark snapped his head to the side to not look at Bruce’s determined eyes.

Tony lowered his head thoughtful and pouted.

“At least my intra-body tracker worked knocking out the nutcase before he killed the guy – however it took some time…” he mumbled skeptical “which it shouldn’t…”

Bruce pointed his finger at the screen.

“You told me that your system works on the basis that aggressive behavior is accompanied with arousal to some bodily functions” Tony nodded. “The problem with Joker is that he doesn’t function like most killers: I have some experience with him and believe me murdering is nothing for him – he doesn’t experience the physiological changes that are connected with violent behavior. It’s something absolutely normal for him.”

“However Tony’s system worked in this case and the man was saved” Clark commented.

“Quinzel told me that Joker’s reactions are more intense when it’s about me – perhaps the news of my paraplegia made him lose his control” he took in Clark’s pissed eyes. “Anger overwhelmed him and that saved Lou; however now Joker knows how the system works and won’t make again the same mistake.”

Selina rubbed her chin.

“But he can’t break out of Tony’s cell.”

“He can’t but he doesn’t stay there all the time: Dr. Quinzel decided that it’s better if he wanders free among the other inmates.”

“Yeah, but after the incident she must keep him away from the others” Clark commented.

Bruce pressed his lips and tapped a button showing footage from the common room with today’s date. They saw Joker talking with Crane on the couch.

Clark gritted his teeth.

“Those two together is bad news! What this woman is thinking?! Letting Joker plot with Crane?”

“And with his former thugs around” Selina pointed out.

“Obviously, Quinzel believes that isolation will make things worse or…Joker manipulates her.”

Tony yanked his head meeting Bruce’s eyes determined.

“What do you propose? You know him better after all.”

Bruce looked at the jester on the screen.

“Nobody can say that knows Joker…” he was thoughtful but then turned again to Tony. “What if instead of monitoring Joker’s bodily signals your system tracks the bodily reactions of the people around him?” Tony’s eyes flashed and a wicked grin dawned on his face. “So every time it senses terror knocks out Joker.”
Tony laughed triumphantly and shook his head.

“That’s brilliant, littl’ guy! And cunning!” he raised his index finger and shook it.

“But it’s difficult” Selina said.

The billionaire from Malibu turned to her pouting hurt and opened his arms.

“That hurt, gorgeous! Nothing it’s difficult for Tony – The Genius – Stark” Clark cocked his eyebrows exasperated which Bruce noticed. “Only Bruce understands my restless intelligence and offers me challenges! Thank you, buddy!”

“Perhaps we could ask for Quinzel’s removal at least from Joker’s treatment?” Clark asked.

“We could but that could provoke some uncontrollable results: Quinzel is the head of Arkham Asylum and it’d be difficult to be removed from her patient, plus she’d get defensive on us hardeining any cooperation with her; on the other hand, she seems to be really interested in Joker’s reformation and we want a therapist invested in that purpose.”

Selina leaned her waist on the bench and raised an eyebrow.

“Not if she is controlled by him…”

“I agree” Clark nodded.

Bruce drummed his fingers on the bench.

“That’s right but we can’t intervene so roughly to the Asylum’s function.”

“As if the mysterious mastermind of your attack wasn’t enough” Selina shook her head.

“We have some clues about the attackers” Bruce said.

Clark frowned.

“You told me that Diana ruined the evidence.”

Selina lolled her head on the side.

“Yes, but nothing is impossible for our detective…He slipped our tight security and took samples from the soil where some remains fell” Bruce stared at her with sparkling eyes “and from his clothes because the green fellas had grabbed him – am I saying these right?” she arched an eyebrow.

“Perfect!” Bruce replied ignoring Tony’s and Clark’s shared exasperated looks for Bruce’s sneaking activity. “Lucius and I searched the databases of labs – legal and illegal labs.”

“Why?” Clark asked. “From Diana’s description they sounded clearly extraterrestrial.”

Bruce bit his bottom lip because Clark had discussed the attackers with the Amazon and not him.

Tony slumped on a stool.

“And reports from the local sector of S.H.I.E.L.D. talk about signals of non-earth technology.”

Bruce nodded.

“The fact that the clues don’t remind anything we know or that the attackers looked like
extraterrestrial doesn’t mean that they are indeed extraterrestrial. For instance, our attackers could be the product of illegal experimentation.”

Superman clenched his jaw.

“Luthor.”

“Except he is in prison” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.

“That doesn’t stop him from ordering the attack from there” Selina offered. “I’m sure he’d want some revenge on Bruce and Superman.”

“Or some of his partners could be using the products of their association” Bruce remarked.

Tony ruffled his hair with both hands.

“League of Shadows. But, Bruce, we dismantled them: we destroyed their secret weapons, their bases and their members are in high-security prisons around the world. Also, their control over S.H.I.E.L.D. is over and their leader is missing or dead.”

“You believe that some cells managed to reorganize so soon after such a lethal blow?” Clark asked.

“There is always the possibility of them having some locations that weren’t included in the files I stole, like the base in Mt. Marcy. So” he breathed “Selina and me went to examine that possibility. We talked with the one man who was Ra’s right hand: Ubu.”

“And?” Tony asked with narrowed eyes.

“He doesn’t believe that those creatures were sent by any remains of the League. Also, he wants to relocate at the monastery at Himalayas to train people to serve justice.”

Tony frowned.

“I know he saved your life, buddy, but…”

“He almost died for that and without him you wouldn’t have found the secret base.”

“Correct – so he conducted Selina to reveal the location: and you, my lady, trusted him?” Tony pouted.

Selina met Bruce’s gaze and he nodded.

“I trusted Ubu because I already knew him: years before, while Ra’s loyal warrior he secretly trained me to help Bruce.”

Tony gaped and Clark nodded; it made sense that both Selina and Bruce trusted Ubu.

“So, Tony” Bruce cut to the point “I think S.H.I.E.L.D. can give him back the monastery: you may keep the supervision because there’s a chance someone wants to get him.”

“Okay…If you vouch for him, no problem; actually, I like the bald guy.”

“So if the League is crossed out where we stand?” Clark inquired.

“Lucius didn’t find anything in labs’ logs all over the world and the findings from LexLabs didn’t give anything. For the time being.”
“So Luthor has no involvement in your attack and neither does the League” Tony wrapped it up.

Bruce nodded.

“Furthermore, Lucius’ analysis showed that those creatures consist of matter and substances definitely out of this world.”

“Which agrees with the reports from S.H.I.E.L.D.” Tony added. “So some extraterrestrial dude decides to attack Bruce…” he looked pointedly at Clark “I wonder why?”

Selina shrugged.

“It could be your enemy too, Tony…” Selina remarked.

The billionaire lolled his head to the side.

“I have many enemies, doll, but they are from this planet even though some of them are ugly as aliens – no offence, Supes. On the other hand, we know who has attracted much alien scum to challenge him.”

Tony’s tone was a bit snarky yet Superman didn’t feel irritated: from the first moment he was almost sure that some enemy of his ordered the attack and honestly he just cared to find and smash him so Bruce won’t be in danger ever again…Well, at least because of him.

Clark sat on a stool, his hands on his thighs.

“Mongul? Lobo? Brainiac?” he counted some of the enemies he fought.

“General Zod?” Bruce offered.

But Clark shook his head in denial.

“Supes snapped his neck” Tony commented. “Everyone was talking about that then but you, littl’ guy, don’t know that because…well…” he twisted his lips “you didn’t watch much TV then.”

“Exactly, Bruce” Clark added but Selina was looking at her friend’s blank eyes.

“You said that you’ll check this…” Bruce said looking at Clark.

Tony yanked his head.

“Wait! I’ve lost some episodes here…”

Clark crossed his arms.

“Bruce has a premonition” maybe obsession is a better word “that Zod is alive – that I didn’t kill him but only knock him out.”

The billionaire from Malibu lolled his head and pouted staring at his friend.

“C’me on, Bruce, you can’t know that…”

Bruce inhaled and turned to them unfazed by their doubts.

“I can’t remember how I know this – maybe Ra’s told me so: he had made a lot of research about Clark. It’s better if he checks this.”
Clark pressed his lips: he didn’t like returning to deeds that haunted him till now but if that would soothe Bruce.

“Fine, I’ll do it.”

“So” Selina intervened “either is someone of Supes’ past enemies or a new, unknown one.”

Clark feared this prospect more because he didn’t know what they were facing. Damn! An alien enemy was more dangerous for Bruce because even as Batman he was fighting human villains and to make matters worse Bruce was now disabled.

“I fought Bagdana as well” Bruce spat reading his thoughts and Clark blushed. “Anyway” he changed the subject “we still continue searching LexLabs for any indication of his collaborators – he was involved in many shady business.”

“We can interrogate the son of a bitch” Tony said.

“There’s a spree of burglaries to labs in Metropolis” Clark said. “LexLabs, STAR Labs, everything – I know it may be irrelevant to our case but…”

“We can’t afford to neglect anything involving Luthor. And the burglaries weren’t local” Bruce added. “LexLabs all over the States have been raided the last months; police arrested the culprits – all of them local hired muscle yet the thugs didn’t say for whom they work.”

Clark brushed his chin.

“That’s the case in Metropolis too” Bruce seemed interested. “Metropolis’ police believe a new big gang tries to dominate the city’s underworld destroying the rivals: the Intergang. They have weakened the other gangs by executing their members and stripped them from their weapons; it’s a ghost gang that everyone knows that exist but nobody has seen it. They have aggregated weaponry and technical supplies for various illegal activities. My investigation had led me to believe that Intergang has recruited many convicted criminals succeeding their release: dangerous people like Johnny “Stitches” Denetto or Alistair Bendel - White. And…” he hesitated remembering what he heard from these two.

“What?” Selina asked and Clark felt every eye on him.

“I was watching those I mentioned and they were saying that their boss isn’t afraid of Superman” Tony arched his eyebrows smugly “or the Avengers.”

“Arrogant bastard!” the billionaire exclaimed insulted.

“And they said that after their boss’ win they will take their revenge on me using Bruce…” his eyes met Bruce’s relishing their strength and contempt for the threat.

“They can dream on it…” Selina scoffed.

“You suggest that Intergang has something to do with Bruce’s attack?” Tony inquired.

“Luthor could have been collaborating with an aspirational new local player…that would explain the raids in LexLabs” Clark shrugged.

“So we must find Intergang’s boss because even if the attack wasn’t his idea, he seems to be up to no good” Selina said.
“And either he is the big enemy” Tony added “or we are facing two villains” he protruded his lower lip “nice…”

“We have to keep our eyes open” Bruce said hiding his frustration for being confined unable to go out there, disguise and spy.

“Speaking of which…” Selina narrowed her eyes “where’s Hero?”

Clark chuckled because his super hearing knew already.

“Following Batman’s lead…” he pointed to the Tumbler.

Hero had climbed on the roof and was eyeing the bats on the ceiling with the cold determination of a predator. Suddenly he jolted against one of the rodents which flew away to the kitten’s dismay.

“Siblings’ rival!” Tony erupted in laughter and Clark flew to the Tumbler snatching the kitten.

“He just proved that I was right…” Selina said in a singsong voice.

Clark placed Hero on Bruce’s lap and remained squatted in front of him smiling. Selina pulled out of her breast pocket a folded paper that she opened and showed to Bruce giggling.

Bruce laughed too and soon everyone in the cave did the same.

On the paper Hero was painted perfectly with a black cowl covering his eyes and ears and a cape waving behind him. Hero stared at himself intrigued and meowed proudly.

“Congrats, buddy!” Tony cackled. “You found yourself a sidekick! The Bat-kitten!” Hero twitched his paw towards Tony and the billionaire pouted mock solemn “Okay, okay, what about Bat-Tiger!”

Clark was laughing and Bruce was engrossed looking his crystal blue eyes sparkling full of energy and life; suddenly, the dead eyes of Superman of his dream came returned causing his blood to freeze.

“Are you so cruel?” the Amazon Princess repeated in her cold voice.

Clark sensed that Bruce’s temperature decreased a bit and fear gripped his insides: hypothermia was a constant danger for paraplegics and today Bruce got really tired.

“Are you alright?” he asked searching Bruce’s blank eyes cupping the younger man’s cheek. “Is it your lung?” his other palm touched Bruce’s chest on the lung’s place.

Bruce shook his head and Clark’s palm lowered to touch the place where his spleen used to be; it was clear that the Man of Steel was scanning him.

“You did that: you put your egoism above anything else – above his wellbeing. Do you really think that you offered him anything more than agony, suffering and pain?”

“I’m fine” he spat shaking off the effect of the dream; he gulped seeing how worried Clark’s eyes were.

“The cave is way too cold and humid for you: time to get you upstairs” Clark snapped determined and patted Hero’s head as the kitten was licking Bruce’s hand.

“I have work to do” Bruce answered flatly and looked at the screen where the photo of Dick’s stalker was surrounded by information.
Tony cleared his throat.

“Don’t tell me your wonder-gadget can’t establish connection with the bat computer because I’m taking off the invitation for StarkExpo” he said playfully but sternly at the same time.

“And Alfred had baked cinnamon biscuits that wait for us…” Selina took Hero.

Clark who was looking at Bruce’s friend turned to his lover and cocked an eyebrow.

“We’re leaving” he said and made to take Bruce in his arms to his dismay.

“I can use the chair.”

Clark was hurt.

“I know but holding you gives me so much pleasure…”

“Exactly!” Bruce said briskly and turned the chair towards the lift. “You’re on probation, remember?”

Selina sniggered and growled satisfied before following her friend and Tony raised his eyebrows smugly.

“Right…” Clark sighed as the others left.
Chapter 21

I'd like to thank all of you for reading, commenting and leaving Kudos!

Leslie was perusing the latest shift’s reports on the clinic’s patients. It was late evening and the night shift had started. After three decades in this job, she was used to spending her nights in the free clinic reading reports, supervising the urgent happenings of a clinic located in the Narrows and tending to the patients. It wasn’t too difficult: during the hard years of Falcone’s reign she had transferred her home here since she had sold her apartment to sustain the clinic.

Now that things were ideal she still couldn’t change her old habits and that made her sympathize with her most challenging, stubborn and beloved patient, Bruce: she could understand his urge to return to his former life despite the difficulties he was facing right now. And although he sometimes frustrated her she deeply admired him… of course she was hiding this because then their wayward boy would be encouraged to exploit her soft spot.

She pursed her lips and detached her eyes from the papers; she rubbed the rim of her eye glasses: now that was a temptation! Being at Wayne Manor enjoying a perfect meal with Alfred, Bruce and his gang: she smiled fondly. After eighteen years believing the little angel dead, she couldn’t get enough of him, especially since a couple of months ago she had almost lost him again. Yet the people’s needs here were the priority over her personal happiness. And Bruce understood that perfectly because this was his life too…he almost died because of that.

She sighed and shook her head to focus again on the medical report she was reading.

Knocks on the door and Leslie answered because every now and then some nurse wanted to announce or ask something. Except it wasn’t a nurse.

“Good evening to my favorite doctor!” behind a really big bouquet of white tulips Thomas Elliot strut in the office.

Leslie blinked and Thomas’ face emerged behind the flowers crestfallen.

“Mmm… I’m not welcomed?”

Leslie took off her glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

“Of course you are, Thomas; have a seat. Your shift isn’t tonight, right?”

Thomas bestowed politely the flowers to her and sat at the armchair in front of her office crossing elegantly his legs eyeing Leslie who put the flowers on the desk rather untouched: Thomas smirked inside because he realized that the rough Narrows doctor wasn’t the chivalry-crap type.

“I’m allowed in the clinic only for the shifts?” he asked mock hurt, cocking his eyebrows and Leslie waved her hand dismissing.

“Not at all; it’s that I know how demanding your program is and I thought that you’d want to exploit the little free time you have for something recreational and reviving.”
Thomas smiled and nodded.

“And that’s why I’m here!” he opened his hands. “I wanted to see the most charming doctor and have dinner with her.”

Leslie shook her head: Tommy’s efforts to ‘seduce’ her were ridiculous. And his hair that till now was perfectly groomed and short, was left slightly messy and long, exactly like Bruce’s hair when landed at Gotham. Somehow she would bet that the moment Bruce cut his locks, Thomas would do the same.

“I believe that the perfect company for dinner would be some young, beautiful lady” Leslie remarked.

The young doctor grinned revealing his pearly white teeth.

“Oh if you were to leave your clinic for dinner it would be only for a dinner at Wayne Manor, right?”

Leslie put down the pen she was holding. She leaned towards her guest and narrowed her eyes.

“Tommy, what do you really want?” she asked in her cut-the-crap voice though softer than most times.

Thomas ruffled his hair laughing.

“I can’t fool you, huh?” he shook his head amused.

Leslie cocked an eyebrow and pierced him with her gaze over her glasses.

“You want to fool me, young man?”

“No, no, no…Nothing evil there: I honestly wanted to have dinner with you to enjoy your witty, intelligent company and asked you to arrange a meeting with Bruce” he straightened his gaze into dead seriousness.

Leslie leaned to the back of her chair and shook her head disbelieving.

“Me? Arrange you a meeting? Come on, Thomas, I’m not Bruce’s secretary…”

“And that’s the reason I want you to speak to him” he pressed his lips.

“You want me as a mediator… Why don’t you contact him personally? I think that this would be the best choice.”

He shook his head.

“He’ll refuse albeit, I’m sure, politely. I think he still holds for me the impression from his childhood – not that I blame him… With everything he’s been through I didn’t have the chance to correct those misunderstandings – and now he has more important things to invest his energy…but I need to make amends and maybe help him” his eyes were shining with honesty.

Leslie intertwined her fingers on the desk.

“I still believe that if you really want that personal contact asking for it yourself would be the best option. Otherwise it’d seem like we trapped him: do you want him to lose his trust in me? Not that I’ll ever agree to set up a meeting.”
Thomas lowered his head.

“If I really want that? What else would I want from Bruce?” he lollled his head on the side. “C’mere on, Leslie! I’m not Joker or that ridiculous League that hurt him so much!”

“Thomas, listen to me: if you want to approach Bruce, trying to make his people plot with you isn’t the right way: this will lead to the opposite result. Speak to him without mediators.”

He smiled.

“He’d never agree to meet me: he didn’t even let me help him with his injury! I could have helped: Superman knows that I have worked in a project about the most complex spine injuries with remarkable results.”

“What about Superman?” she asked frowning.

Thomas pressed his lips amused and shook his head: Leslie had an excellent poker face and was using it to deny that Superman was fucking the pure, innocent victim…Bitch please!

“Leslie, I’ve seen what the entire world has seen” she arched her eyebrows disbelieving “Bruce wrapped carefully in Superman’s cape, safely nestled in the superhero’s arms being brought to you for treatment – Superman’s eyes were leaking love and he was clearly unwilling to surrender Bruce to anyone” ugh! Thomas felt nauseated recounting all these but he managed to keep his cool face and the jeer out of his voice.

Leslie blinked and took off her glasses.

“I was expecting from a man of your intelligence and seriousness to not fall for gossip nonsense” she replied solemnly. “That story was made by a gossip reporter and since then people interpret the video according to Vale’s fairytale. Superman and Tony found and saved Bruce who was naked – the Man of Steel used his cape to protect Bruce’s dignity and since he was the first to reach him rushed to bring him back. End of story.”

Dr. Elliot felt his cheeks hot from Leslie’s comment about him being carried away from gossip but tried to conceal it with an uncomfortable smile. Not that he was persuaded by Leslie’s story that there was nothing between Bruce and Superman.

And judging by the way Captain America came to the clinic that day to transfer Leslie to Bruce’s secret location, Thomas wasn’t the only one who believed Vale’s story: Alfred and Stark wouldn’t have sent for Leslie if it was a simple medical issue…and Bruce’s sudden return after the incident cried that someone found the secret location of Superman’s darling and attacked Bruce so they decided to bring him back to Gotham for more safety. Brucie’s friends didn’t imagine that bringing him back in Gotham meant that he would be faced with other threats…

“Well, that doesn’t change that the project I developed in Metropolis’ hospital with Superman’s contribution makes miracles in the healing of the most complex spine injuries. I could help him walk again, Leslie! If only you made him reconsider his grudge…” his eyes shone fervently with honest interest “he’ll be benefited from this and I will soothe my conscience.”

Leslie lolled her head on the side and her narrowed eyes were exasperated.

“You must understand, Thomas, that isn’t a matter of grudge: it’s just that Bruce after everything he’s been through has a small circle of people he trusts and it’s difficult to accept new people; you must earn his trust and using mediators isn’t the best way. Believe me: if there was a chance you could help in this we’d have called you on board.”
Dr. Elliot twisted his lips: he doubted that this spoiled, stupid brat would ever stop whining about his Tao-Tao toy so Thomas preferred gaining the trust of Brucie’s loved ones: that way he would make a bigger impact to the pampered baby – by stealing one by one his guardian angels and isolating him.

“A cross-examination never hurt anyone – you know that” he waved his hand but in the end sighed defeated. “Anyway, I don’t want to upset him during the sensitive process of healing – since he isn’t willing to let go of childhood rivalries” he stared at Leslie’s still eyes and pursed his lips sad. “However, I want you to remember that I’ll be ready to help with whatever Bruce needs.”

Leslie smiled to her colleague.

“Thank you for your kind offer, Thomas. But have you ever thought that maybe it is you that haven’t let go of childhood rivalries?” Thomas’ smile froze. “Maybe you project your own feelings to Bruce; maybe your guilt and self-accusations make you believe that Bruce still hates you.”

Thomas laughed under Leslie’s scrutiny.

“I didn’t consider you a Freudian…” his eyebrow arched in slight sarcasm.

Knocks on the door interrupted their discussion and Leslie called them in squinting at the sight: a delivery boy much better dressed than the average came in with two big paper bags in his arms.

Thomas jerked his head towards the boy and gestured to Leslie’s desk.

“Ah! Put them there!” he said and stood up elegantly to shove a large bill to the boy’s hand as a tip.

The boy’s eyes flashed.

“Thank you, sir!” he beamed and Thomas revealed his shiny teeth in a big smile.

“Good evening, young man” he sent him away with a charming, void smile and the boy bowed before closing the door behind him.

Leslie was staring at the young doctor sternly.

“What’s that, Thomas?”

He pouted and gestured to the bags’ imprinted firm and logo of the most expensive restaurant in Gotham.

“Isn’t it obvious? Delivery food. I was sure that you wouldn’t accept my invitation to abandon your clinic for a dinner so…I brought the dinner to the clinic.”

Leslie pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I don’t believe that “Masa” does delivery” she snorted.

Thomas smiled wickedly.

“Not everyone is as adamant in their principles as you…When the customer is as prestigious and generous as Dr. Elliot” he leaned towards her in conspiratorial way “and when you put 500 bucks to the manager’s pocket” he whispered “everything can be done.”

“You’re sly, Dr. Elliot” Leslie said in a way that it wasn’t possible to say if she was teasing or accusing.
So Thomas decided to go along; he shrugged innocently.

“I’m a medical doctor: of course I am! And I came here intending to bribe you into arrange a meeting with Bruce…”

Leslie’s lips twisted.

“You make me feel like a pimp” she said in a snarky voice.

Thomas cackled.

“My Goodness! No, definitely not!” he brought his armchair closer and sat. “So since my attempt on bribery had failed so miserably, at least, let’s enjoy that meal” he cocked his eyebrows “don’t tell them but “Masa” is overrated.”

He offered her the elegant container, the fork and knife that accompanied the meal and Leslie wondered how much Tommy spent for that ‘bribery’ as how much getting to Bruce meant to him and for what reasons.

“You like to throw away your money, Thomas” she took a bit of food just to not insult him.

He pursed his lips and lowered his eyes.

“I admit that I like the fancy life but I assure you that other really important things, things that matter have become my priority” he brought his armchair closer and sat. “And that’s why I want to meet Bruce again, for him to see the change and for us to become the friends that my stupidity thwarted us to be back then.”

Leslie shook her hand in the negative when Thomas made to pour whine from the pricy bottle included in his order. She wished to believe in Thomas’ words but every time he spoke about Bruce she felt the same clench in her guts as when Joker uttered her boy’s name.

Hero was sitting on his back legs in front of the Victorian, marble fireplace watching fascinated the flames dancing around the logs.

“He loves watching the fire” Bruce said grinning.

“Yeah…But I’m waiting something else here” Tony arched his eyebrows.

“Right… Well, the WT Cosmos is our attempt to create something fresh and original to the high tech field” Bruce was brushing the shining tablet proudly. “Of course Lucius can explain better the utilities and capabilities…” he turned his eyes to Lucius who had dropped in for dinner since his employer had invited him during his morning stay at the Wayne Tower.

Lucius waved the offer off with one of his charming smiles.

“I think you’re doing an excellent job promoting our product, Mr. Wayne” he chuckled.

Much to Tony’s appreciation…Because he honestly relished his friend’s sparkling, enthusiastic eyes and his livid voice. Well, Tony knew that Superman dressed in one of the civilian attires he had stashed in Bruce’s bedroom was also absorbed in goggling at Bruce. Tony rolled his eyes: Supes had forgotten Bruce for two days and now he was acting like a lovesick teen – hypocrite! But deep inside he hoped that he was wrong and Clark really was the lovesick teen…
Bruce coughed in his fist to hide his shyness at speaking about his company's creation. In front of strangers or adversaries Bruce emanated confidence and strength because of his iron will to prevail but among friends he was demure.

“First thing first: this gadget doesn’t need electricity or battery – it runs on perpetual energy from solar panels that store energy for the night or the cloudy days. It activates with the pressing of your fingerprint unless you set other preferences and it can turn from a big tablet to a smartphone or a small camera with the touch of this spot” he pointed to a round azure light on the bottom of the frame. “The camera is of 200MP, zoom and properties of a professional one. The screen is unbreakable and unscratchable with definition that rivals a plasma TV.”

He looked at Lucius to take his approval and the scientist nodded.

“It has the memory, the speed and the qualities of a laptop, also it can connect with stronger processors” he shook his head “like my own down in the cave and can be operated from your watch. The Cosmos’s frame displays scenes from the universe.”

He showed the back side where planets, nebulas and stars combined pink, purple and blue high definition colors in sleek black background, moving slowly.

“Which can change according to one’s preferences” he tapped the frame and the theme changed to other scenes from the universe displaying different colors and formations. “And in case someone wants a different theme displayed, there’s the possibility of using their own photos or videos or themes from the net. You can also type either using the concealed keyboard” he brushed the screen and in the bottom half of it emerged transparent buttons with letters and symbols and Superman beamed showing that he had already used that “or vocal dictation – there’s also the possibility of dictation by brain waves. The tablet possesses the latest GPS, the known apps and the best multimedia playing.”

Tony scratched his temple.

“Nice…It’s too frustrating watching porn with every fucking – literally! -frame pausing…”

Alfred scowled at him and Tony shrugged innocently.

“I’m just commenting on the practicality…”

“And a great proportion of this creation was made by Mr. Wayne himself” Lucius commented and Bruce really flushed casting an uncomfortable glance at his trustee who chuckled.

Selina jerked her head and Hero writhed surprised on her lap.

“I knew that during your visits at Thasos you and Bruce were up to something.”

“Indeed, Miss Kyle” Alfred elegantly seated in his rocking chair remarked nonchalantly a bit annoyed. “If I knew I’d have banned Mr. Fox.”

Lucius laughed benevolently.

“I assure you, Alfred, I didn’t bother much my employer: the vast majority of work was made the previous months between chasing the Joker and plotting against the League of Shadows.”

Tony was leaning against the back of his ergonomic leather chair at his office in the Avengers’ Tower, his hands under the nape of his neck, gazing at the New York sky from the glass – bullet and rocket proof – roof. He had to admit that Bruce’s gadget had the most realistic depiction of natural
The door opened hissing and Pepper’s heels echoed to the shining surface approaching. He jerked in his seat.

“Shit! I must change the settings of that door: you could catch me doing inappropriate things…”

Pepper crossed her arms and shrugged one shoulder.

“It wouldn’t be the first time…” Tony arched his eyebrows and smiled with tight lips in mock regret. “And if you keep the door locked it’d count against you.”

Tony nodded.

“Right! That would put me on probation like Supes” he sniggered.

Pepper sprawled on the chair before Tony’s desk.

“Speaking of which I thought you’d stay at the Manor.”

Tony leaned on the desk.

“After the afternoon virtual meeting with the sub directors I had another one with some Congress people and senators here – they are conservatives those guys and prefer physical presence” he frowned crossing his arms. “I thought you knew my schedule by heart.”

Pepper ruffled her long hair.

“Yes, but you’re notorious for screwing such meeting for your fun.”

Tony lolled his head on the side pouting.

“Now I’m hurt! You know how responsible I am…” Pepper rolled her eyes and snorted “with things that really matter and this was crucial for S.H.I.E.L.D.’s and the Avengers’ future” he sighed “we need to re-establish their trust after the revelations about the League of Shadows.”

Pepper smiled.

“I’m sure that Bruce is very proud of you – he knows that you prefer to be with him than with those boring people.”

Tony brought his palms to his face.

“The little guy was always proud of me even if I didn’t deserve it…” he commented bitterly.

Pepper locked her eyes with his.

“Bruce knows you better than anyone” Tony pursed his lips and scratched his ear uncomfortable.

“You should have seen him talking about the new multiform tablet” he beamed and Pepper reflected that. “His eyes were so warm and enthusiastic; he even flushed during the description. Hehe! He is so passionate about Wayne Enterprises!”

“You blame him?”

“Of course not – he wants to establish his company’s status to avoid new threats. It’s his father’s
company and for so many years his murderer was running it tarnishing the respected name of Thomas Wayne. Bruce is happy with Wayne Enterprises’ successes because he feels that his father will be peaceful and justified…” he huffed. “And this gizmo is his baby…”

Pepper nodded thoughtful.

“So that tablet is really that good?”

Tony yanked his head huffing.

“Ugh! Stark Industries – that’s me – should have manufactured this first! The slim design, the unbelievable colors and graphics – even to the frame! – the utilities, the changing to smartphone and camera, the distant controlling from a watch!” he hit his palm to the desk.

“You’re not happy that Bruce’s company made that?”

Tony closed his eyes and lolled his head on the side exasperated.

“Of course I’m happy, Peps! I’m just an antagonistic bastard!” he laughed. “Kidding… I’ll include it to StarkExpo in the most prominent stand. And I’ll watch closely Bruce’s eyes glimmering from pride while WayneTech stand gets the spotlight. To the heck! I already pre-ordered one: I’m a shareholder and I deserve one before the public.”

Pepper smiled.

“I love the way Bruce makes your true self surface…”

Tony twisted his lips and ran his fingers through his hair.

“You had a nice trip from Malibu?”

“As always” Pepper answered nonchalant. “I’d prefer it if my destination was Gotham and saw Bruce and pals again but I have to prepare your S.H.I.E.L.D. reception.”

Tony stood up and slithered to her with a predatory expression.

“I prefer the term ‘party’ and…” he took Pepper’s hands and hoisted her with a wicked glimmer in his eyes. “Bruce told me to give you a kiss…”

He pulled her to him and rolled his eyes at their height difference. He stretched his body more, standing on the tips of his toes and cupped the back of Pepper’s head to lock their lips.

“Bruce told you to do that?” she asked through his mouth.

Tony closed his eyes.

“You have to scratch every detail? He did tell me but let it vague… I’m improvising here, girl!” he caressed her red locks and resumed the kiss.

His hands left her hair and slipped under her white, silken shirt feeling her soft abdominals up to her breasts while she cupped his face with both hands and deepened the kiss.

“ Exactly for how many people your office door opens automatically?” Pepper breathed her eyes slightly mocking.

Tony huffed frustrated but extracted his hand from the warmth of her body and press a button on the
desk’s phone.

“Nobody…” he whispered sensually in her ear and she giggled; Tony knew that whispering in her ear made Pepper go limp.

Pepper laughed as Tony pulled her shirt out of the brown skirt and began unbuttoning sucking the crook of her neck that bent to the side.

“Do you realize that your office has glass walls and roof?”

“Bullet and rocket proof” Tony mumbled hastily continuing his work gently.

“Everyone can see inside…” she pointed the words and wrapped her arms around his neck nibbling his ear lob.

Tony cocked smugly an eyebrow and shrugged one shoulder.

“Not seeing us: MARVEL AT US, babe!” he growled and pushed the silk off Pepper’s torso letting the fabric slip to the floor.

Pepper laughed.

“You arrogant motherfucker!” she said through gritted teeth and her hands unbuckled his belt lowering his zip and groped his genitals.

Tony goggled and bit his lips before passing his tongue over them.

“Ughhhh! You drive me crazy when you’re speaking dirty…”

“Only speaking?” she pressed more his genitals and he sighed aroused.

He clutched her hips and twirled her body to sit her on the shining desk, plunging his mouth in her bulging breasts. His fingers were so skilled that her black lace bra was undone in a second freeing her breasts. Tony enjoyed Pepper’s sigh of relief and sucked the soft freed flesh ending up to the erect nipples as his personal assistant unbuttoned violently his shirt and took it off from his strong built body; her breaths were heavy and wet causing goose bumps to Tony as her teeth grazed softly or more angrily his shoulders.

Though his mouth and head were absorbed in licking Pepper’s sweaty breasts and abdominals, his experienced hands heaved her skirt for him to settle between those endless, perfect legs that opened for him engulfing his pelvis. His fingers got tangled to the waistband of her black lace panties lowering it till her knees.

Pepper was fondling his buttocks as his tongue in her underbelly drove her breaths and heartbeat mad; her long, lean fingers caressed his fully erect length to urge him to do what he procrastinated. She yanked her head that had reached the desk and her nails grazed Tony’s back.

“Tony…” her eyes flashed feverish meeting his in the dark, demanding.

He thrust in her and she trailed his pectorals with her hot lips; her legs that still bore the red stiletto heels tightened their embrace around his hips to guide him to the rhythm of her rasps and need.

They were both drenched in hot, shining sweat; their breaths wetting the office’s air. Tony moved frantically causing Pepper’s fingers pull his wet hair increasing the hot fire inside him and the electric current over his spine as her heels grazed softly his naked buttocks urging him to continue.
Brunno Mannheim stood before the whole wall window of his office overlooking the glittering Metropolis’ skyline. His hands were behind his back and his stare was bored: he didn’t like anything human made and he would have already demolished the entire city and smashed under his feet every human like a pest weren’t for his obsession with perfectness and victory. So he was willing to wait and stick to the plan – his victory couldn’t be complete without his machine that evaded him.

However being restricted in this ugly human form was enraging: he took satisfaction imagining the horror of those inferior beings when Darkseid’s gigantic, majestic figure would walk in Metropolis feeling their bodies crushed under his feet. Their Kryptonian protector slumped in a pile of waste defeated would be watching helpless till the master of the universe finished him off.

Tony and Pepper were tangled together leaning on the desk catching their breaths and enjoying relaxation after the climax. Pepper’s legs were still perched around Tony’s hips so he fondled her sweaty hips, his lax member resting inside her. Suddenly, the holographic US map emerged at the desk’s side with the red light of alarm bleeping.

Tony sighed frustrated.

“Why the bad guys think it their duty to nettle me?”

He detached pissed and glared at the map while Pepper fixed her skirt.

“Metropolis” Tony said.

“That’s Superman’s city” Pepper remarked clasping her bra.

“Yeah, but he is in Gotham right now; we need to make sure that nothing happens till he comes – we can’t ignore a distress call, do we?”

His armor wrapped his naked body.

“Do you think it’s bad that I’m naked under the armor?” he winked.

Pepper having worn her shirt shrugged.

“Only if your armor falls apart…”

Tony pouted rubbing his chin thoughtful.

“That would definitely scare those sonovabitches! Not bad…Not bad at all…” he murmured and flew from the roof that opened immediately sensing his ascend.

“Tell me” the cold, gravelly voice of the tycoon – gangster cracked the darkness of his office that was located at his skyscraper’s top floor. “You insisted on stealth and patience and now you suggested we control Morgan Edge’s brain to do this. Not that I have a problem with anything causing human casualties” he cocked an eyebrow “actually, it was the first good idea you had to offer. But, tell me, what made you change your views?”

The column of swirling thin air slithered to the middle of the room before it shaped into Bagdana’s near human form.
“I didn’t change my views” the demon replied striding towards his partner “this is actually part of the plan.”

He was standing right behind Mannheim but the window didn’t reflect him.

“It’s entertaining” Mannheim barked “but why Edge getting all the satisfaction?”

“Because we want everyone to believe that he was behind the burglaries in the science labs all over the states. He is brainwashed to do what we want, use Luthor’s weapons and get captured or killed. Thus you’ll have both a rival crime lord neutralized and the search away from you: someone could connect the dots to you.”

Mannheim cackled and snorted.

“You’re too fearful, Bagdana…What makes you believe that they could discover that I’m behind the raids? You’re giving too much credit to these inferior life forms.”

“You better stop underestimating them: I suggested using a gangster because someone might already be investigating.”

Mannheim turned slightly his square head to him.

“Who?”

Bagdana’s eyes lost their redness and also their focus as if looking somewhere else.

“Batman. You want him misled.”

Bagdana couldn’t gain access to Bruce’s thoughts or monitor what he was doing yet he was sure that once in Gotham his favorite Bat certainly was investigating the burglaries at LexLabs: they were his property now and Bruce was always suspicious about Luthor and his shady partners. Despite their decoy-attacks to other labs as well, the demon was positive that Bruce would dig every detail unless they managed to draw his attention elsewhere.

Darkseid’s human thin lips stretched into a smirk.

“He is just a human” he said with contempt.

“Many people claim that he is a demon…”

“Then…what’s your verdict since you’re an expert?”

Bagdana licked his dry lips.

“He is a human but do not let this fool you: he discovered and revealed the League of Shadows’ scheme and sent Luthor to jail.”

Mannheim huffed hautfly.

“They are also humans” he waved dismissingly “your…Batman is good only in facing other humans. You weren’t defeated by him after all…”

Bagdana’s face was expressionless like stone and Mannheim left his position to walk to his desk.

“I don’t share your reasons but I certainly countersign Edge’s destruction – I’d prefer it if he is killed in the process but his incarceration for my gang’s crimes is a pleasure too. Besides I think it’s time
we stop the needless, stupid, fruitless raids to random labs and aim directly at our target: Luthor would be forced to tell me. My tolerance with this fool is getting short: I feel like he ridicules me from his cell.”

Bagdana was still gazing from the window, completely disinterest about his partner’s rambling.

Mannheim realized and looked at him sideways with a gleeful shine in his red eyes that made sharp contrast with his human features. Darkseid knew how to get back his minion’s attention.

“As for this Batman of yours, since you think so highly of him and since you want him and Bruce Wayne unharmed and unspoiled” he cocked a thick black eyebrow seeing Bagdana’s dark gaze fixed on him “I’ll have plenty of time to experiment on them to find what so special they hide.”

The demon without any movement made, was standing in front of Mannheim with his diamond sharp and shiny teeth bare.

“Our agreement was to keep them for myself” he was rasping and sparks accompanied every exhale.

Mannheim smirked.

“Of course. I have no interest in humans except to maim and annihilate them” he sniggered and walked to his private elevator.

It’d be so much easier and pleasant for his superiority to just vanish and reappear in his Mansion but people should see him acting like a human to not get suspicious – not that he cared much but he wanted his machine first to finish this properly.

Bagdana watched him through red slids till he was lost: he didn’t trust Darkseid – Hell! He was a demon and he knew better than trusting gods especially of Darkseid’s kind. But he was using him for his purposes as the new god was doing with him. Besides, he was sure that his partner definitely didn’t trust him as well.

“My probation terms include sleeping on the couch? Because I’ll choose the floor instead – it’s closer to you” Clark had asked half serious, half joking as he was buttoning the last of his pajama shirt, his eyes fixed on Bruce doing the same albeit slower and with more effort.

Bruce’s right hand had been for six years cripple and malformed, completely immobile and in horrid pain. Then Ra’s had fixed it perfectly into managing Batman’s fighting effortless and effectively. But even then fine movements were a problem.

After the factory’s collapse Bruce’s both arms suffered major fractures that were treated by Jor El and with internal energy casts into almost perfect mobility – but still more time was needed for perfecting fine motor skills. So the accumulative effect of the past and new injuries was evident in Bruce’s difficulty to manage something that for everyone else was mundane. The left hand had been perfectly restored but the buttoning required both hands.

Clark felt his body nervous to assist him but Bruce would surely feel bad and that wouldn’t help his case. So he watched fascinated Bruce’s concentration on his task.

“Paraplegics are prone to hypothermia so I want a heater by my side just in case…” Bruce chuckled and raised his eyes to Clark who saw the satisfaction in them for ending the buttoning without help.
Clark clapped.

“So I have to thank my Kryptonian physiology for this clemency!”

Bruce nodded and wheeled his chair to the bed; Clark knew better than helping him settle on the mattress so instead sprawled to his side pretending that didn’t watch his mate’s seemingly effortless shifting from chair to mattress.

Bruce covered his non-responsive legs with the blankets and took his tablet from the nightstand.

“Alfred permits that?” Clark asked playfully.

Bruce clapped once and the lights went off but for the tablet’s torch like lighting.

“He doesn’t have to learn…” Bruce answered nonchalant.

Clark slipped his arm around the younger man’s shoulders and Bruce cast him a sideways glance.

“What?” Clark shrugged. “You just made me your accomplice and I don’t like deceiving Alfred so I need some bribing” Bruce glared at him from narrowed, panther like eyes and Clark hastened to add “also, you said that you want me for the heat. And that light could harm your eyes, you know.”

“No: Cosmos screen has filters that eliminate the harm to the eyes even in complete darkness.”

Clark rested his head in the crook of Bruce’s neck enjoying the skin there and the perfume.

“Mmm…when I am allowed to publish my exclusive on Wayne Enterprises’ new wonder?”

Bruce was absorbed in scrolling archives on the screen.

“I think we’ll keep it for StarkExpo…”

Clark wasn’t annoyed in the least by that: the past months he was benefited by exposing many of Bruce’s secrets under the special Kryptonite’s sick effect so honestly he didn’t want to use anymore Bruce’s name in anything concerning his job as a reporter.

Bruce was now scrolling the list with the items found in LexLabs: some of them had a description or a name and some others only a question mark because their qualities and utilities were unknown and currently under research. Many items had in common the word ‘Kryptonite’ in their description. Clark would have shuddered if all these items weren’t in the safe hands of Bruce.

“Is there a Kryptonite paddle somewhere in that list?” Clark asked interested and Bruce turned to him perplexed.

“Why?”

Clark slithered his hands to Bruce’s back and nibbled the younger man’s neck causing a joyful increase to his heartbeat that peaked when Clark’s lips moisturized his ear.

“I was thinking that perhaps my probation would be shorter if some really deserved spanking sessions were added…Would that satisfy you?” he whispered sensually.

However his mood was instantly changed feeling Bruce tensing and Clark realized that his mate was reliving what he could only imagine… He had seen the horrific marks on Bruce’s buttocks from Falcone’s brutal spanking. He bit his lips and closed his eyes: stupid Clark!
But Bruce hearing his intake of air obviously realized Clark’s thoughts and shook himself.

“I didn’t know you for a masochist?” he asked with widened eyes and Clark decided to follow his lead into lightening the mood and took Bruce’s hand gently to touch it to his lips.

“From your hands I’d take everything…”

Clark thanked once again his Kryptonian physiology that made him independent of sleep and allowed him to watch Bruce’s face deep in sleep.

Those strong drugs caused drowsiness that although Bruce wanted couldn’t defeat. So the tablet lay on the nightstand having closed automatically after some time of being unused. Clark knew that Bruce hated his dependency on medication but he was grateful because those drugs eliminated the pain: even after almost four months Bruce would be in considerable pain without them.

And the medication granted him long, much needed restful sleep: Clark cringed only in the thought of Bruce’s sleep being disturbed every now and then from nightmares and flashbacks. He knew that Crane had tortured Bruce through this, administering substances that created horrible nightmares exactly the moment Bruce was falling in deep sleep. The insane doctor wanted to destabilize through exhaust his mental state to brainwash him.

He touched his lips to Bruce’s forehead: his temperature was a bit increased but that was in the limits of the young man’s ‘normal’ temperature changes.

He smiled watching each and every swallow, calm inhale and exhale of air from the youth’s barely open lips. Clark was completely immobile not wanting to change anything…

Because Bruce had his arms wrapped around Clark’s neck nestling his head to Superman’s broad chest. It seemed that his probation was suspended…

His palm cupped the place where Bruce’s heart beat calm and strong: he could hear that melody from thousands of miles away but touching the vibrating muscle was a whole different, fascinating sensation that made him go numb.

He took gently the stray locks that had fallen over Bruce’s eyelids and brought them to their place; his fingertips ran feathery his cheekbones to the jaw and Bruce unconsciously hid more his face to Clark’s chest.

“You loved me from then?” Clark had asked him once.

And actually it was a stupid question: Bruce loved him from then, when he was a scared child; he loved him from the footage of a shaking camera. And Bruce remained a child, even now…Well, he definitely refused that with his attitude all day long but when asleep, when his defenses were eased, without realizing, that child surfaced. The child that was declared dead; the child that was living an everyday, slow, horrific death in Falcone’s hands.

His eyes caressed Bruce’s face exactly as he was doing all the time during that month in the Fortress. His insides clenched on that memory and he kissed those lips as he did that night when Bruce succumbed to his injuries.

He remembered the small gray tombstone beside those of the Waynes… BRUCE WAYNE: from all the memories imprinted to his eidetic memory this humble inscription was among those he wanted to erase. He had demolished that stone but the memory still lay there prickling him.

Clark nuzzled Bruce’s neck with closed eyes: he couldn’t afford to lose that perfume, that flesh…
though he could catch that young physiotherapist’s scent even on Bruce’s neck. He sighed and kept rubbing his flesh to Bruce’s to scrub out that annoying scent: the only other acceptable scent on Bruce was Clark’s.

Of course he understood that a man confined in a chair needed that massage even to his neck; it must be uncomfortable and painful for even the healthy muscles…

His hands travelled feathery Bruce’s body that was touched to his; below the waist felt awkward reminding him that Bruce brought his body to him using only his arms. He slipped his hands inside Bruce’s waistband fondling the younger man’s taut, soft flesh ending to his genitals and then with the other hand touched Bruce’s anus feeling his hot blood rushing to his head.

He desired, needed to get inside that body: sometimes that inanimate sun of their planet system wasn’t enough – he needed the life giving power of his mate. He felt his fingers tremble to slither inside Bruce: if he prepared him very carefully penetration wouldn’t harm him – he’d be very, very cautious and besides Bruce wouldn’t feel anything…

Clark held his fingers just before they stormed inside and he pressed his lips: he couldn’t risk it and Bruce deserved to enjoy everything as much as he. Bruce should walk again. He withdrew his hands hastily and hugged him tighter…

When Bruce had told them that the man that Joker almost killed was the thug who caused the fire in Chickey’s factory, Clark honestly couldn’t blame Joker…

His eyes fell on Bruce’s peaceful face and he bit his lips ashamed: he couldn’t be like Joker and killing that mentally retarded man couldn’t have changed anything…

All of a sudden, his hearing caught something distant: people screaming and alarms going crazy. Metropolis’ subway. They might have gone to sleep at ten but now at midnight, Metropolis’ subway was packed with people coming or going to clubs or other events or to their night shifts.

Damn! He stared affectionately at Bruce who unconsciously had brought his hand over Clark’s heart. He had to go, though his body didn’t want to part his other half. Carefully, gingerly he disentangled himself and placed Bruce on the mattress muffling him meticulously with the blankets.

He stood up and cast another regretful glance at Bruce. Then he remembered something and flew to Hero’s basket.

“Hero, wake up!” he whispered and the kitten opened his eyes unhappy. “I need you to look after Bruce.”

Hero stretched his body graciously and silently ran to the bed, climbing and settling beside Bruce “I trust you, buddy” he said arching his eyebrows impressed and the kitten’s eyes glimmered in the darkness as if nodding.

Clark plunged a soft kiss to Bruce’s lips and sighed before launching for Metropolis from the open window that he closed before leaving.

“There are at least thirty armed people scattered around the main area of the central station, sir; some citizens are cowering behind the cashiers but the shooters roam the area and rake everything with bullets. Police cars are fast approaching but I’m afraid that there are already civilians dead or wounded.”
“Fuck!” Tony exclaimed gritting his teeth as his system got image.

He scanned the station for any explosives or gas and he was relieved but also surprised at not finding anything. Terrorists usually had some nasty surprises like these waiting.

“Do you want me to alert the Avengers, sir?”

“No, they’re scattered all over the planet and it’d be too late when they arrive – I can handle those motherfuckers” he was seeing their projection in his helmet’s systems: they didn’t seem to follow a plan or take some precaution as if the only thing they cared about was causing as much bloodshed as possible. “Wait!” their guns were prototypical and he immediately crossed them with the list of registered weaponry where they matched a specific LexLabs’ model Bruce had supplied to his data and the ministry’s logs. “Yup! Our Luthor-boy has a very broad social circle!”

He was hovering over the stairs leading to the underground station. He was trying to neutralize their ammunition the way Lucius had developed but they were still out of range due to the underground so he had to get inside first.

“I’m getting in, Jarvis.”

“I’m with you!”

Tony rolled his eyes and huffed because he knew the voice and didn’t need to look his indicators to identify it.

“I thought you were with Bruce.”

“Super hearing” Clark replied pressing his lips because he knew that inside the station people were dying or already dead.

Superman punched the air and rushed ahead of Tony who sped up to catch him.

Thankfully, upon realizing Superman and Ironman were there, the terrorists stopped shooting at people and opened fire against them while Superman had already stormed at a cluster of men scattering them with a punch.

“Showoff!” Tony scoffed sending a wave of electricity to a man ready to shoot a woman who ran scared hugging her baby.

He was ready to neutralize the firearms of those before him when he realized that Superman’s eyes were all red and at the point to hit the guns to melt them.

“Don’t!” he yelled at him. “You’re going to blow everything up! I’m on this!”

Superman didn’t lose any second: since he couldn’t use his laser beams he blew up and the icy wave from his chest catapulted five of them to the opposite wall. He surged against them to knock them out his face contorted from rage.

But then he felt the peculiar sense of hot stones hitting his back and he turned slowly to see two guys emptying their machine guns on him; their failure to harm the Man of Steel had infuriated them and the bullets kept falling like rain at him.

Tony had already defused the firearms in his range and turned to the men shooting at Superman. He raised his palm sending the waves to break down the machine guns and simultaneously his other palm sent laser beams to break the legs of a man who realizing that his gun was useless pulled out a
nasty looking knife and stormed against a teen. The man howled and collapsed, his knife scattered from another beam.

Superman was already on his assailants when the firearms silenced and it took only an uppercut to knock them out.

“'You welcome’ Tony remarked snidely at Superman, already storming at a ticket booth where the terrorists had covered; the Man of Steel snorted.

“If I relied on you I’d be dead now…” he said grabbing the knives of five men at once and crushing the metal like paper.

“So why are you whining about?’

Superman was catapulting his adversaries to the walls as if they were pests but some others had scattered among the frenzied civilians using their blades to cause harm rather than flee from the scene as if they didn’t care to escape.

“Sir, they are mingling with the crowd: you can’t use your firepower” Jarvis’s collected voice pointed out.

Tony rolled his eyes as his bullets hit the last man behind the booth adding him to the pile of moaning, useless terrorists.

“Tell me something I don’t know already!” he snapped and turned towards the yelling crowd who ran to nowhere.

Superman was in the havoc trying to fight every terrorist he could locate before they killed more people and Tony clenching his teeth decided to do the same though Ironman wasn’t made for close combat. Every time a yell of pain was heard both heroes were desperate, their enemies seemed to be endless and changing form like chameleons till their blades injured someone.

At least now police officers were engaged too barking orders to the assailants to surrender…to no avail. So truncheons were out and the cops began the same effort to separate innocents from terrorists.

“Sir, a train is heading to the station” Jarvis said.

“Block its system and stop it!”

Bagdana was alone in Mannheim’s dark office. He stood in front of the glass wall and his eyes saw to the mayhem at the subway. Yet his mind travelled miles away where the meaning of his existence was sleeping alone…

He felt the urge to go there but the protective vibrations of the damn diamond were powerful shielding Bruce and thwarting him to emerge there. He could only listen to his quiet breaths and his steady, peaceful heartbeats…

Superman got two men from their collars and snapped their heads together knocking them out – Tony was shooting beams from his fingers opting for precision and aware that bullets could cause more panic.
Panic was pushing people to the edge of the platform in their struggle to avoid the violence that had spread around them from good and bad guys together.

Superman’s and Tony’s eyes bulged as a horrific collective scream came from the rails. The people that crammed on the edge were pushed from newcomers and fell on the rail. And the clear sound of an approaching train filled the station with horror.

“Fuck! I told you to stop it!” Tony barked to Jarvis.

“I did, sir. But something intercepted my signal and reignited the engines. I’m trying to block it again but I can’t gain access to the control panel.”

“Shit!” Tony cursed drenched in his sweat and along with Superman whose face was disfigured from anger and horror dived there.

“Don’t be afraid, Dick; we’re almost there…”

The beams supporting the upper level creaked and moaned, the fire’s rage howling throughout the space. The smoke was too dense and acid; his lungs hurt because he used his cape to cover the boy and not himself. His heart was pounding from agony for the boy whose life depended on him but he willed it to beat calmly. His body was in pain and he felt that he would collapse at any moment like the whole building. Yet he clenched his jaw and kept running hiding the rasping of his breath to not panic Dick.

He managed to push the boy forward just a second before the final crack and the nightmarish sound of the entire upper level collapsing. Just a second before he was crushed to the floor: his spine shattered and there was pain, crucifying pain as if eighteen years of pain were accumulated.

He had hidden from Clark the truth because he was already too sad; he never told him how much it pained as the metallic rods, hot from the chemical fire, stabbed his legs and his fractured bones ripped his muscles or his broken ribs pierced his lungs and his spleen. And then when the fire rapidly defeated his armor’s protection and began eating away his flesh…

He never told Clark about the agonizing minutes before his nerves below the waist were dead; he never told him about what he was experiencing right now: the air ending at his lungs with every breath that burnt his collapsing organs and his heart pounding desperately to fight all the injuries and the pain from his upper body since his pelvis and legs didn’t exist anymore.

He was feeling every drop of blood oozing from his body like streams; he felt the blood trickling from his nostrils and mouth; he sensed the life leaving him and the hell of the burning building was swirling around him; the sound of the roof grunting and howling at the verge of falling and finishing him off filled him with dread and relief because his pain and agony would soon end…

His heart was now kicking his rugged ribs adding new pain; every rasping breath vomited blood; his head was spinning…He’d never see again his loved ones…

Maybe that was why he never told Clark about the pain: because Superman didn’t make it on time…He died in excruciating pain and agony at Chicky’s factory; everything else – the Fortress, the new Hero, the island – was a beautiful dream, a wishful flash during his dying moments. Bruce closed his eyes because the tombstone of this realization smashed his heart worse than the tone of debris.
The collective scream of horror was immediately replaced by yells of joy and Tony with Clark hovered in midair watching in disbelief.

“I could use some help here, Kal” a smug female voice greeted him.

Wonder Woman was standing with her legs spread wide over the rail in order to give more strength to her hands holding the train away from the fallen citizens that one by one got in their feet still numb realizing their luck.

“Of course!” Clark’s face relaxed in a brilliant beam and rushed to add his hands to the train’s front while the driver was meddling with his buttons to stop the engine.

Tony snorted.

“In what century they live? Obsolete fools!” he shook his head disapproving of his fellow heroes and used his waves to shut down the engines immobilizing the train. “Brains always beat muscle!”

He lowered to the ground helping people get on the platform; officers were there grabbing men and women to the safety and only when the rails were empty the amazon and Superman flew away to land on the platform were people already were cheering for Ironman who had deactivated his face plate to flash his magazine smile.

“He is in his element!” Superman chuckled eyeing his friend.

“Ironman” she snorted “I’ve heard of him: another arrogant man pretending the god!”

Superman frowned and turned to her.

“You’re unfair…Stark brags a lot, sometimes becomes a pain in the butt but he is honest and doesn’t give a damn about becoming a god: he enjoys what he is and really wants to help. People were saved thanks to him.”

She clenched her hips and cast a sideways glance to the billionaire; her eyebrow arched.

“You’re too generous in your assessment of the humans… Anyway, maybe I’m a bit frustrated that it’s been 24 hours since I last saw you and…once again a train was needed to bring us together” she smiled and Superman couldn’t fight his face muscles from forming a smile.

Suddenly, gunshots were heard from a kiosk behind the corner and Superman stormed to put his body between the bullets and the crowd that once again screamed. Diana flew behind the corner and Superman heard her bracelets clanging together before a man’s scream echoed through the tunnel.

Bagdana inhaled deeply and closed his eyes: he could create Bruce’s form in his mind but he wanted proximity – tonight he couldn’t resist his demanding need. He didn’t want to reveal that he was free now neither he could due to the black diamond’s protection. But his thought, his spirit could fly to him to suck his aura…Like he did when that Ubu’s repellents kept him away from the mountain where they tortured his Bruce.

Superman rushed there seeing the kiosk demolished and a man sprawled on the debris, his head bleeding. Clark was shocked to recognize Edge; he was an infamous gangster but definitely not a terrorist… And now definitely not alive.
Diana was supporting her impressive, proud posture on her spread legs, her hands clenching her hips. She turned her head to him, her face glowering. Suddenly, without any other word she flew to him and slammed her body to Superman grabbing his head and attacking his lips.

He was astonished at first, numb, doubting that this was happening but as Diana was massaging fierce and softly his lips he realized that his mouth was reciprocating enjoying the feeling. The sense of her smooth and taut breasts brushing his chest; the feeling of her so alive and warm hips rubbing to his groin…He closed his eyes immersing to the pleasant vibrations: he had missed the sensations of a warm pelvis on his own… His hands on their own slithered down to her waist to wrap her body closer to lose himself in her intoxicating perfume of every blossom of the world.

It was the sound of feet, almost silent feet, and in an odd way towered the last creaking of the roof. He opened his eyes just a slid; his breaths were now shallow, insufficient, hissing, burning his dying lungs. He wanted to clench his fists to gain some strength but the pain was too much and the burden of the debris smashing his arms.

He looked up: Clark hadn’t come, he was sure. But he couldn’t make out who was in front of him: the dense smoke, his failing eyes, his head’s spinning.

Slowly the fog cleared somewhat and he managed to eventually focus. It was a giant in the color of granite – a giant he knew from his fourteen years: a giant with silver spikes for hair and two ivory small horns. His red blazing eyes stared down at him and though the demon should be scowling at him, his eyes were sad.

“I could let you die and get your soul for eternity…” his voice was suave, soft but still managed to cover the nightmarish noise of the roaring fire and the collapsing building. “But I want your body alive as well…”

And suddenly the pain stopped and the building was a distant memory like a bad dream; he was among sparkling stars, hovering, held by two enormous, caring arms. His head was carefully placed on his carrier’s chest. He opened his eyes slowly to meet affectionate red eyes.

“You always knew that Superman never came for you; you knew that it was a big lie…”

Bruce shook his head in denial because he doubted if his lungs could sustain any voice.

Bagdana leaned and kissed tenderly his forehead.

“My poor boy…My precious soul mate…My eternal Lilith” he whispered and Bruce felt his body light as a feather – every care, every distress of the world distant. “Only your Bagdana is real…”

The demon’s square, meaty lips captured his, pumping life into him. Bruce was watching him unable to decide if he liked or hated this and this indecisiveness was agony.

“No!” he spat and took away his lips causing a sigh from the demon.

“You know I’m your destiny, Bruce! The Kryptonian is just a dream, a stupid dream and you’ll wake and you’ll suffer!”

“Liar!” he screamed. “Let me go!”

But the demon’s hold became tighter, stronger, incarcerating him. Bagdana’s eyes spat fires.
Jimmy Olsen followed Lois Lane to the subway station; it was midnight but she ordered him to be there ASAP. Her eyes were almost crazy as she waited for a chance to break the police line around the rolling stairs. Which happened when screams came from the station and the officers’ attention turned there.

Lois grabbed him from the upper arm and dragged him from the stairs almost crashing him to the floor.

“I hope you brought your camera” she yelled because with all this noise it was difficult to hear even herself.

“Always, Miss Lane!” he pulled his professional camera out of his bag.

She released him and her frantic eyes scanned the hellish scene.

“Start shooting then!” she barked and rushed among the scared people, her smartphone already in tape mode.

Jimmy took hundreds of shots: from the terrorists, the destruction, the dead bodies scattered around, the injured, the babies that cried in their parents’ arms, the officers handcuffing the terrorists that the two superheroes had knocked out and sending away the civilians that could still walk. He also shot Wonder Woman and Superman halting the train and Ironman blocking the engine and then helping people out of the rails.

Lois was gesturing now for him to come to her for taking photos but Jimmy saw Superman following Wonder Woman to the kiosk behind the corner and he knew that there would be something juicy there.

And he found it: Superman and Wonder Woman French kissing! His camera went on fire taking shot after shot.

Diana’s hips were glued to his groin that twitched appreciating the stimulation that was miserably missing all these months; because Bruce’s pelvis was wooden, with awkward temperature and muscle tone… He saw Bruce’s face nestled trustfully in his chest, his hand cupping Clark’s heart.

Superman’s hands jerked from Diana’s hips and held her shoulders detaching her from his lips though the pleasant numbness lingered torturing.

“Diana, this is wrong” he said though his lips did say the opposite.

She frowned and shook her head.

“Why, Kal? You’re a single man and I am a single woman; and I see in your eyes that you like me as much as I like you.”

Superman’s head dropped and he clutched his hips.

“Unless you’re lying and you do have someone” she accused him.

Clark yanked his head.
“No, but what you propose can’t happen, Diana; I’m sorry: you’re my ally and my friend but other than that…”

She shook her head and chuckled.

“This is…unreasonable…crazy… I know you enjoyed the kiss… though your lips had another scent besides your own” she smiled wickedly “an intoxicating scent of rare, sensual cinnamon mixed with orange and hibiscus – a scent I met again” her eyebrows arched in deep irony.

Superman gulped but his gaze became stern.

“You’re mistaken, Princess.”

She lolled her head on the side and smiled, her blue black hair sparkling in the artificial light.

“I’m glad I did because then you’d eventually come to see me as something other than a friend” she shook her head laughing and her feet left the ground.

She flew towards the opposite end of the tunnel but she stopped and turned her head to look at Superman with a shine in her eyes.

“How could I think even for a moment that you would kiss someone with such scent?” Superman narrowed his eyes. “Someone with your sensitive nose would be disgusted kissing someone who smells of so many different, horrible scents…Scents of other men… Brutal men who took everything and left so much filth…” her voice was hissing. “Some smells are too recent…” she shrugged. “See you soon, Kal” she brought her fist to her heart and flew away.

Bruce clenched his jaw and tried to writhe in the demons embrace but his body was completely paralyzed and Bagdana smiled.

“You understand now that everything you consider reality is a hallucination? You never came out of the caves” suddenly they were inside Gotham’s so familiar, so loved caverns; Bagdana nodded knowingly. “You belong to these caves, to my kingdom: to me!”

Bats rushed suddenly from every corner forming a cloud around them; the sound of their wings accompanying the demon’s joyful, triumphant laugh and Bruce felt defeated, overwhelmed, resigned…

A loud hiss towered every other sound…

Clark stayed dumbstruck: his olfactory brain center pushed to his nose the acid, aggressive scent of Bane’s arousal and climax when Superman held Bruce in his arms leaving Mt. Murcy…and then Ra’s Al Ghul’s and Falcone’s and Chill’s: odors hidden behind the seductive, enchanting cinnamon, but still there: his stomach twisted painfully.

But then hurried footsteps drove him out of his shocking realization and he remembered the distinctive clicks during the kiss when he didn’t have the will to part from Diana’s lips and body. Clicks of a camera. Jimmy Olsen’s camera.

The youth was walking hurriedly back to the crowd but the Man of Steel landed before him smoothly with his arms crossed and a smile brushing his face.
“I think you have something of mine…” he said calmly and stretched his hand to Jimmy eyeing his camera.

Jimmy wasn’t scared of Superman but he was shocked by his presence and he couldn’t deny his request: after all, Superman could burn his camera if he refused. He gave the camera.

Clark saw the photos he was interested in and deleted them. When he perused the entire memory of the camera and didn’t find anything insulting gave it back to Jimmy.

“Thank you” he said politely and knitted his eyebrows. “I’d appreciate it if you don’t share what you saw – you know, privacy…Daily Planet isn’t exactly a gossip rag, huh?”

“Oof course” the youth stuttered still numb.

Superman saluted him in military style and floated to Tony who turned at him frowning.

“Where were you?”

“They aren’t terrorists” Clark opted to change the subject. “They are gangsters of the Edge gang – a Metropolis gangster.”

Tony yanked his head pouting deep in thought.

“What are you thinking?” Superman asked.

“In the end, from up close it’s 8,4 not 8,5” he nodded in conviction.

“Huh?”

“You wouldn’t understand” he shook his head and flew towards the exit.

Bagdana had his eyes closed and through his spirit that had invaded Bruce’s bedroom was relishing the youth’s powerful yet suffering aura.

And then an aggressive, loud hiss revealed another presence and the demon in Mannheim’s office jerked as his kicked off spirit returned hastily to its master.

Bruce opened his eyes to pitch black; he was panting and his heart writhed in a body drenched in cold sweat. He couldn’t discern anything; he had woken up but to what? He knew nothing about his surroundings but for one was sure: Clark wasn’t there. So it was true: he was in the caverns, he could see a shadow looming over him. Two small circles flashed in the darkness and Bruce cringed cursing his useless legs.

But then his eyes adjusted a bit and he distinguished a form that he recognized as Hero: the kitten had arched his back in defensive-aggressive stance and his entire fur to his erect tail was standing on edge reminding spikes. Hero had hissed.

“Calm down, buddy. Don’t be afraid…” he whispered but he was holding his own heart; he was still panting and his right lung burnt a bit.

*You must not panic: the lung isn’t collapsing… just breath...* He began applying diaphragmatic, deep breaths maintaining eventually normal respiration and heartbeat.
He touched carefully Hero’s head and the animal seemed to relax. With his other hand he opened the
drawer and pressed his thumb’s fingertip for the second level to emerge. He wrapped his fingers
around the dagger’s hilt and it was like the Knife of Justice welcomed him. He switched on the lamp
at his nightstand.

He already knew that nobody was here but with the light on roamed the room once again. He
released the Knife and focused on calming the still growling animal.

“Sssssss, Hero; hush…It’s alright now…” he was caressing Hero along with his reassurance and
when the kitten calmed his posture, Bruce raised himself in sitting position and hugged him pecking
his pink nose. “Who was here, buddy?”

The kitten purred still shaken and meowed to his master but was unable to say anything, not that he
had seen something concrete; he only sensed something.

“It’s okay…your friend had a nightmare and his thrashing scared you” he looked again at the other
side of the mattress. “And where’s Clark?”

He took his Cosmos from the nightstand and pressed his fingertip in the reception at the down left
corner. The desktop immerged immediately and Bruce opened the internet browser: Daily Planet
was his home page and answered all his questions at once:

BREAKING NEWS (Update): the Metropolis’ subway attack comes to an end – 10 people dead, 90
injured.

There was a big photo of Superman and Ironman in action and another with Wonder Woman halting
a train with her bare hands just some feet before it squashed several people on the rails.
Chapter 22

Dick brought the can of beer in his mouth and took a long sip as his expressionless gaze was seeing but not perceiving the city that lied before him. Jason sat on the ledge of the rooftop his legs dangling and puffed in the air the smoke from his cigarette and his exhale, enjoying the clouds of fume the cold atmosphere created.

“Yar granny won’t smell the beer?” the younger boy looked up at his standing friend and downed the last of his own beer.

“I brush my teeth as soon as I woke up – she won’t notice anything; and she would be fast asleep when I slip to my room from the fire escape…”

Jason protruded his lower lip recalling how sweet and caring Ms. Turner was when a few hours ago he hesitantly went to visit his friend at their apartment. He wouldn’t have said no for a granny like her: she even baked them cupcakes!

“Ya know, Dick…It’s wrong to fool yar granny like this” Dick looked down at him frowning. “I like her…”

“I doubt you tell your mom about your night strolls…” he challenged him.

Jason shrugged.

“She doesn’t care much…” he looked at the sky “an’ has a lot on her head…It’s better now she works in the Haven but still takes pills an’ drinks to sleep…” he had dropped the pretended tough voice and unknowingly was speaking in his real, child voice.

Dick pressed his lips because he knew how difficult his friend’s life was; he sat down beside him.

“I’m not fooling my granny” he defended. “I just don’t want her to worry about me – she wouldn’t allow me to wander so late and then I’d have to run away…What she doesn’t know isn’t hurting her.”

Jason shook his head and brought the cigarette back to his mouth.

“Yep but I feel guilty” Dick cackled and Jason narrowed his eyes. “’Cause she trusts me an’ I pull ya down!” he scratched his messy locks “I mean, this is my world an’ I like it an’ it’s cool but ya’re different an’ don’t belong…”

Dick crooked his lips amused and sniggered.

“C’mee on, Jay: I’m older than you! I’m doing what I want, you don’t corrupt me…Corrupt…” he sneered. “We’re not doing anything wrong” he shrugged.

Jason was pissed from his friend’s mockery and sucked his cigarette to the end dropping it to the street.

“Yeah? Then why are ya sneakin’ out an’ don’t tell yar grunny?” he retorted.

Dick shook his head.

“Because she is overprotective and doesn’t understand. And I need this…I need to clear my head from everything, from the lies…”
“Yar granny isn’t lying!”

The older boy arched an eyebrow.

“How do you know? I know she is kind and sweet and caring and she does it to protect me but I feel that she hides the truth.”

Jason lit another cigarette.

“That Zucco guy made ya think like this…” he took a sip from his beer. “Ya trust him more than yar granny?” his voice was outraged. “Man, that dude is crap: don’t let him ruin yar relationship with yar granny.”

Dick sighed: Jason didn’t understand.

“He doesn’t; on the contrary, he always reminds me how important my granny is” Jason cocked his eyebrows and twisted his lips in disbelief. “Jay, he is my uncle” he locked eyes with the younger boy “he was my dad’s cousin and his best buddy and trainer: he said to me things that nobody else did and granny always speaks ill of him to drive me away as if she’s afraid of something.”

“Perhaps she is afraid for ya” Dick rolled his eyes. “Dick, ya don’t know this man: if he really gave a shit about ya why ya never saw him before?”

“Ugh, Jay! Granny hates him and mom hated him too so how was he supposed to approach me?”

Jason smoked gazing the city.

“If he was really yar daddy’s pal why would they hate him?” he glanced at his friend shrugging.

“Things are complicated, Jay…It seems that my mom and dad was fighting a lot and mom was gonna divorce him – maybe for that she didn’t want Tony near me then so I don’t learn. And granny continues that.”

“Zucco told ya that?” his eyes widened disapproving. “And ya believed him?!” he shook his head exasperated and laughed. “Man, ya’re a jerk if ya believe everythin’ he’s telling ya. Ya don’t know him!”

Dick’s head dropped.

“Mom did get married too fast after dad’s death…as if she didn’t care much…”

Jason lolled his head on the side.

“Don’t let him do that to ya, man…Don’t let him screw yar mom’s memory or what yar got with yar granny.”

Dick stared at the void deep in thought: Jay’s words had an impact. But he was so confused; some months ago he was careless, happy with his family, everything was simple and it took only one night to upturn his whole life and plunge him in shit.

“But he makes me feel nice” he remarked “he makes me feel as if I knew my dad.”

Jason closed his eyes; he could sense his friend’s suffering and struggling. He threw his second cigarette.

“This is his game, Dick! Of course he’ll make ya feel nice to gain yar trust an’ spit his poison!”
Dick lolled his head and cast a lopsided glance to Jason.

"'Cause you know so much about life, huh?" he spat snidely.

“I’m born an’ raised in Narrows, man! One of my rip-off nights makes for yar entire life!"

Dick started giggling on that and gave a one armed hug to his friend ruffling his raven hair: Jay made him forget his problems and laugh as he did with Brian.

“You can brag about your criminal life now that Batman is dead, huh?” he teased him.

“You don’t want him hear you saying that, kiddo!” a seductive female voice made them jump and turn behind.

They both goggled, mouths agape on a tall, lean woman with breathtaking curves swaying towards them with confidence and a sly smile on her red colored juicy lips. She was dressed in a black leather skin tight outfit that stressed out her body. Her eyes were covered by a leather mask that ended to two cat-like ears on her head. On her waist was rolled her whip.

“Fuck!” Jason exclaimed drooling. “Cat-freaking-woman! Holy fuck!”

Catwoman touched with her finger feathery his chin and pushed it up to close his mouth

“Are’nt you a bit small for that, tot?” she asked dragging her words amused and Jason gulped blushing because his eyes were fixed on Catwoman’s round breasts.

She lolled her head and rolled her eyes.

“I mean the rip-off, the fag and the beer…”

“Ow!” Jason exclaimed “that…no…no, I…I’m not” he stuttered.

Dick laughed and jumped on his feet, Jason following having found his cool.

“Can a girl have some beer, gentlemen?”

Jason gave her a can which she opened and took a large sip.

“Nice…” she huffed and gazed at the city with a sparkling in her eyes. “You, kiddo” she turned sharply to Dick “stop saying that Batman is dead.”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“Why? It is the truth! You were there: I remember you. Batman told you to take me out and you were distraught, crying because he was to die. And he did die when the building collapsed!”

Selina’s eyes flashed angrily and both boys were shaken.

“He’s alive and kicking” well, not literally, but definitely kicking in every other field. “I know better and since he saved your life” he stressed out every word “stop spreading lies about him!”

Dick flushed and clenched his jaw.

“I don’t lie! I just say what I saw to my pal!!”

The woman leaned to him.
“You didn’t see him die” her eyes widened “you presume that he died. But he didn’t…so drop it!”

Dick pressed his lips uncomfortable because he didn’t like being reprimanded but he was relieved hearing that the man who saved him was alive. Selina nodded and straightened her posture taking another sip from her can.

“He wouldn’t like you drinking…”

The older boy shrugged.

“Mind his own business! He’s not my dad!”

Selina cast him a glare and he gulped.

“Wow!” Jason’s eyes were wide. “I mean, I never bought Dick’s bullshit but still… So really the big bad Bat is still out ther’!”

The woman smirked and clutched her hips.

“So you might want to rethink your twockings – you don’t wanna him bust you!”

The boy sniggered.

“Nobody can bust Jay freaking Todd!”

Selina rolled her head on the side with a glance that said ‘bitch please!’

“I doubt it when you give your credentials so easily…” she snapped and Jason blushed.

“You’re a thief too: everyone knows that Catwoman is the best jewel thief” Dick commented snidely “but still you’re his ally” he cocked his eyebrows. “He never busted you!”

She smirked.

“Well, kiddo, thanks for the ‘best thief’; but I was a thief when Falcone was sucking the city – now things have changed.”

“Or maybe the Bat fucks ya…” the younger boy spat in a smart ass style and Dick gulped.

Catwoman glared at him and the smug smirk on Jason’s face vanished.

“You think you’re too smart and too mature for your age; you think that you’ve seen already the ugly part of life and I’m sure you saw much of it, as your friend here. But believe me there are uglier things out there you don’t even imagine and I wish you never get a hint of them” she grinded her teeth. “So stop doing the smart ass with things you don’t understand and be cautious with your rip-offs because as much as you brag there are guys you can’t outrun…Thanks for the beer!’’

She dived from the ledge and with a breathtaking combination of two front flips and a pike she landed graciously on the opposite rooftop; the two boys gaped at her impressed.

“Are you one of my father’s co-athletes?” Dick asked hopefully.

Selina rolled her eyes exasperated.

“How old you make me, kiddo?!” she spat to him insulted and with another dive she vanished into the shadows.
Oliver Queen, 35, made his more than unexpected appearance in Queen Consolidated’s yesterday memorial service for his father Robert Queen and himself, causing a great shock; he was declared dead two years ago after the shipwreck of the Gambit, the family’s yacht and the recovering of his father’s body.

The heir of the Queen Empire was accompanied by a mysterious woman who introduced herself as the legendary Princess of the mythological Amazons, Diana of Themyscira. The amusement and scoff of some Press members who covered the reception stopped abruptly when she left the ground and caught them in her flashing lasso; however the momentarily fear of the crowd was replaced with giggles when the lassoed reporters began confessing rather embarrassing things.

The gorgeous woman released the reporters and landed on her feet to watch with blazing eyes Queen’s speech.

Queen snidely thanked his company’s officials for the event and proceeded to express his gratitude to Princess Diana who found and brought him back. According to the Queen heir after the shipwreck he was stranded in a desert island.

“Princess Diana found me when I was at the verge of dying” Queen stressed out “she took care of me and brought me back to the States. In front of all of you, I’d like to express my gratitude to her.”

The Amazon nodded curtly and left the room flying while the guests goggled at the impressive woman.

The article was two months old.

Bruce played the video accompanying the article while catching with the corner of his eye the developments in Metropolis’ subway station from Daily Planet’s site that held the middle of his Cosmos’ screen. The third frame of the screen was covered with the information the computer at the cave had retrieved for Dick’s stalker whose photos matched with Tony Zucco. But before delving into the data he had something else to do.

He dialed Jim’s number: it was midnight but he knew that the Commissionaire didn’t leave his office until much later. Jim didn’t sound much surprised hearing Batman’s voice; on the contrary, in his almost expressionless voice Bruce detected some relief.

“Asylum needs your attention” he growled.

“Joker?”

“Many of his thugs are there and he associates with Crane.”

“Do you have any insight?”

“No, but Joker might be up to something.”

“Mr. Stark has taken measures.”

“We need to be careful with Joker and Crane.”

Jim’s nod was almost audible as his determination.

“I’ll put police officers guarding the asylum.”
“Nice.”

He ended the call abruptly in Batman’s style and his mind travelled to all the times he met Jim at the MCU’s rooftop and the icy wind flapped his cape.

Hero was sprawled right next to him licking lazily his front leg. Bruce petted his belly and the kitten began jerking his front legs to catch him which brought a big smile on the youth’s face.

If only Hero could talk…Bruce thought and his mind get lost for a moment in his nightmare: it was the first time after his injury at the factory that he dreamt of Bagdana and that discomposed him. He had stabbed the demon with the Knife of Justice and watched him evaporating and slithering in the depths of earth; Thor reassured him that Bagdana was trapped in Tartarus and Ubu told him that the wound from the Knife had weakened him so much that only another powerful deity could free him.

But Bruce always kept his vigilance – especially, since he could feel the Black Butterfly on his chest vibrating. On the other hand, after what he had experienced under Crane’s treatment he definitely could recognize the pattern of this nightmare: a flashback, a part of his real experiences, mingled with things that never happened but were his fears… Leslie and Lucius had cleared his system from the remains of the drugs but still some effect lingered. So maybe he should just forget the dream; or not…

He focused back on his info: Tony Zucco was a professional trainer of gymnastics before he retired, twelve years ago. He didn’t have a criminal record not even a traffic ticket yet his name was implicated in a dope scandal when the athlete he was training was found positive in illegal drugs’ use…

Bruce’s eyebrows arched. Zucco’s athlete was John Grayson…yes…Dick’s father. John firmly denied that he had used any illegal substance and claimed that he was framed or given the drugs without knowing. John was banned from sports events for some months but eventually came back with some successes – rumors had it that Zucco was downgraded by John Grayson and John had put himself under the trainer of the US national team of gymnastics. However, Zucco remained in the training team of John Grayson during his preparation for the world’s championship when in a tragic accident John died.

After that Zucco retired and there were no results from the media as to what he was doing all these years; Bruce’s other info came from IRS’s files that manifested that he enjoyed a quite opulent life thanks to some clever investments.

But what made the greatest impression to Bruce was that Tony Zucco was John Grayson’s cousin from his mother’s side. So the stalker was in fact Dick’s uncle…

Daily Planet had an update on the culprits of the station’s assault: there was the picture of a man that according to police was the mastermind behind the attack. He was killed during the battle with the law enforcers: the newspaper had an exclusive photo that you had to be of age to see – the man was sprawled on a mass of debris that used to be a kiosk and his head was cracked in several places.

They didn’t give a name yet but Bruce crossed the police snapshot with the archives of Metropolis’ police department and the name of Morgan Edge was displayed. Now Bruce frowned: Edge was one of Metropolis’ biggest crime lords and definitely not the terrorist type or the Joker type to get his gang in a blind hit like this. He was definitely deep in every kind of shit: drugs, gunrunning, smuggling, robberies, prostitution…But always money was the goal.

Wait! He zoomed in Edge’s photo and immediately recognized the firearm that was still glued in his dusty, covered in blood hand. He had seen it again in the logs of the items found in LexLabs. So
Edge was collaborating with Luthor? He couldn’t have gained access to these guns after Wayne Enterprises took the labs’ control because the guns were taken away immediately after the acquisition. Unless Luthor had a secret storage and informed his collaborator about the location.

Oliver Queen’s voice was loud, clear and had an angry hue when he declared in front of the reporters that were gathered to cover his memorial service his determination to control the Queen Consolidated without any mediator and boost the company to the top. The man was handsome: tall and sturdy, with slightly overgrown dirty blond hair and chestnut stubble; yet the most powerful feature in his face were his eyes: light brown with an angry, determined fire and darkness that they gave the impression of penetrating you to the core.

Clark was flying over the Wayne Estate; he felt actually tired as the events of the last hour weighted over his shoulders as much as his brain. He just desired a good sleep. On Bruce’s side… He closed his eyes: he hoped that the younger man was sleeping – he closed his eyes: he hoped that the younger man was sleeping – he wasn’t in the mood for talking or…cuddling or anything. His lips remained pleasantly numb after the kiss like his entire body and frankly that made him…pissed. It shouldn’t feel like this. So beautiful…

As Bruce’s dark bedroom came to view Clark sighed frustrated. The lights might be off but Bruce was awake. He bit his lips hard to chase away the feeling and opened the window to get inside. Bruce placed his tablet on the nightstand and Clark floated to him.

“You should be sleeping” he said tired.

“I woke up” the younger man answered shrugging and Clark sighed sitting next to him. “And I couldn’t sleep right away.”

“All these medicines are supposed to keep you asleep all night long” he rubbed his forehead. “So I must worry?”

Bruce shook his head frowning.

“Clark, what’s wrong?”

“Why, Bruce? You try to divert the discussion?” he sighed because he didn’t want to raise his voice. Bruce touched Clark’s shoulder.

“Your voice, your expression, your eyes…are you feeling alright?”

Clark jerked his head.

“Ten people died, Bruce! I failed!” It was true that he felt bad for the dead yet at the moment this helped him not thinking about the kiss.

Bruce nodded.

“I know, I’m sorry…” he took Clark’s hand in his and Hero rubbed his body on Clark’s ribs purring and Superman smiled petting the kitten. “But it wasn’t your fault: we can’t predict when a lunatic will storm somewhere and begin shooting people. You and Tony” he hesitated “and the Princess” Clark jerked a bit in the mentioning and Bruce narrowed his eyes “stopped them before killing more innocent.”

“I’m sure you still blame yourself because Joker killed the Phelps” Clark knew that Bruce noticed his stupid reaction at Diana’s name and wanted to make him forget it.

Bruce inhaled.

“It’s not the same, Clark. Joker killed them because they resembled my family: to send me a message.”

The Man of Steel nodded sarcastic.

“Of course! You always have a good reason to feel as you feel but the rest of us don’t have the right reasons, huh? These things always happen to send us a message, Bruce: whether they use our name or not!”

Bruce understood Clark’s mental condition: he didn’t like him speaking like this yet he didn’t want to follow.
“You feel better taking it on me?” he met Clark’s eyes and his lover sighed. “I don’t say that you shouldn’t feel bad for those who died: we never forget them – our failures stay inside us forever but they also urge us to be better. And there are the people that were saved thanks to you.”

Clark caressed Hero and held Bruce’s shoulders touching his lips on the younger man’s forehead. Which made him cringe because Bruce’s perfume reached his nostrils only this time the stench of other men hit him strongly. Thankfully, he managed to conceal his shock and displeasure and slowly detached.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you…I know that I can’t save them all but every time it hits me hard.”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded. Clark brushed his cheek.

“You should sleep: your body is in recovery and needs good rest.”

“You need rest too, Clark.”

He cocked his eyebrows and smiled a bit smugly.

“I don’t need rest, Bruce; sleep is necessary only to humans” he saw Bruce’s eyes darkening and regretful stood up and began undressing.

Bruce took his tablet again and Clark rolled his eyes buttoning up his pajama shirt.

“Tony told me that the firearms they used were made in LexLabs” Clark said “you’ll be in trouble?”

Bruce raised his eyes and shook his head.

“No; the moment Lucius found the weapons registered them to the ministry and destroyed them under governmental supervision. Of course, we stated that we don’t have any knowledge on the potential buyers before Wayne Enterprises acquired the labs.”

Clark slipped under the blankets and leaned over the tablet.

“You did the same with all the Kryptonite items?” he didn’t like the idea of even the government having those things.

“Of course not. Lucius just reported that we found logs about experiments with strange minerals but nothing specific. We don’t want that kind of knowledge to the wrong hands, huh? And we don’t know what the next minister or president will have in mind.”

Clark wrapped Bruce’s shoulders with his arm but didn’t kiss him as he’d do other times. Which didn’t evade Bruce.

“You always protect me, huh?” he noticed that in the middle of the tablet’s screen the Planet’s site was continuously updated with news about the attack.

He pressed his lips: he had deleted Jimmy’s photos and didn’t believe that the boy would say anything but still he felt antsy. He took gently but determined the gadget from Bruce’s hands and placed it in his nightstand. Bruce glared at him.

“Enough with your toy” Clark answered playfully but firmly.

“You’re on probation not me” Bruce snapped.

“You will be worse once Alfred finds out…Speaking of which: how he isn’t already here reprimanding you?”

Bruce sighed.

“He is exhausted with everything that happened the last months and taking care of me; he needs his rest more than me.”

Clark cleared his throat.

“Do you want me to ask Leslie’s opinion about who needs more rest?” he arched his eyebrows and Bruce lolled his head on the side glaring.

“That’s dirty!”

“No, the sly thing is that you take advantage of Alfred’s trust and instead of sleeping you play with your tablet.”

Bruce crossed his arms and Hero jumped on his lap.

“Sleeping on the couch just became one of your probation terms” the younger man snapped.

“You temperature is low…” Clark commented and rubbed his back. “And we must tell Leslie that your medication needs changing if it can’t keep you asleep.”

Bruce jerked.

“You won’t say anything! The drugs are already too strong; I can’t take stronger medication! I’ll be
turned into a freaking zombie!"
Clark placed his head in the hook of Bruce’s neck and nibbled the taut flesh fighting the aversion from the smells that now emerged along with his beloved cinnamon.
“Tell me what woke you up, Bruce; a nightmare?”
Bruce felt goose bumps from those lips massaging his flesh and closed his eyes.
“It was a bad dream, yes; nothing more” he petted Hero who purred; his kitten stopped the nightmare.
Clark couldn’t stand anymore the other smells so detached his lips; actually, this panicked him – how he wasn’t able to discern those smells till now and suddenly, after Diana’s remarks they became so strong that nauseated him? Maybe till now he was under the shock of almost losing Bruce and that affected his senses into obliterating anything unfamiliar but now as he recovered from the shock his perception was able to catch every detail.
Or that night’s happenings afflicted him into imagining things or exaggerating the existing ones…
One thing was sure though: he wouldn’t touch Bruce much tonight because his aversion worsened with every new contact and Bruce would eventually realize and interrogate him. And Clark wasn’t in the mood for that.
“An extremely bad dream if I can judge from the layer of sweat on your body…” maybe this was the reason he perceived the stench of Bruce’s abusers. “What you saw?”
Bruce lowered his eyes to Hero who had sprawled on the mattress.
“It’s better not discuss this right now…” he frankly had no mood to go back to what experienced during the dream – plus, Clark had had too much this night; he didn’t need more upset.
But unexpectedly Clark grabbed his upper arms and turned him to face him; Hero stood surprised.
“This is a part of my probation too?” he asked without the playfulness of the other times because now he felt really pissed and the article about Oliver Queen in the tablet fuelled his anger.
Bruce narrowed his eyes.
“Of course not” he answered completely calm. “I just don’t want to cause you more distress after everything that happened tonight besides nightmares is something usual for me.”
Clark fixed his eyes on Bruce’s almost accusingly.
“You never speak to me about your nightmares” Bruce frowned because Clark had never mentioned something like this before. “You never speak about your years in Falcone’s captivity.”
Bruce tensed.
“You were there during my testimony at Falcone’s trial…you listened when I narrated to Tony what they did to me…”
Clark closed his eyes remembering that night when he unnoticed overheard Bruce sharing with Stark one of the many torture sessions Falcone put him through. But that didn’t quench the fire that burnt inside him on the contrary it flared angrier clenching his fingers around Bruce’s upper arms.
“Stop that!” Bruce snapped staring at Clark’s hands and he released him.
“I always learn those things through someone else” Clark exclaimed. “Because you spoke on the trial, because you entrusted them to Stark…You never spoke to me alone, you never shared, as if you don’t trust me.”
Bruce’s eyes widened.
“Is this jealousy?”
Clark squinted.
“Why not? I found you reading an article about Oliver Queen!” he grabbed the gadget and showed it to him: the video accompanying the article was paused in Diana’s proud face.
“Are you jealous of Oliver Queen?” Bruce spat disbelieving. “I don’t even know him!”
Clark huffed and placed the tablet back on the nightstand. He ran his fingers through his hair.
“I didn’t mean that” he replied calmly. “I know your search for him has to do with Diana and that proves that you don’t trust me” Bruce frowned gaping. “Another token of your lack of trust: if you trusted me as you do your friends you’d believe me when I say and that she is honest in her intentions to help people and fight for justice… and that there’s nothing between her and me” he exhaled “but you insist on your stubbornness to suspect and imagining things.”
Bruce’s eyes were cold staring at him and Clark shook his head exasperated.

“Did you investigate Pepper? Of course not!” he answered his own question. “Would you investigate someone who’d become Selina’s friend? No, because you trust them; you trust their judgment.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side and pressed his lips.

“I didn’t investigate Pepper because she worked years for Tony and had already proved who she is; and, yes, I’d investigate a new friend of Selina if she changes immediately after his/her appearance.”

Clark’s eyes darkened and his frown became deeper.

“I changed?” he asked almost outraged but Bruce stared at him unfazed. “Why? Because after so many days that I was glued to your side I felt like staying away for a bit to calm myself from your stubborn, uncaring decision to come back?”

The younger man didn’t hasten to retort just continued looking at him with the same intense way.

“You believe that you didn’t change?” he inquired.

Clark shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Nothing has changed, Bruce” yet his mind stabbed him with the sudden perception of the other scents mingled with Bruce’s.

“Really, Clark?” Bruce’s eyes were locked with his and Clark felt irritated like being interrogated.

“Really, Bruce!” he arched his eyebrows and his voice was mocking.

He was ready to say more, the fire inside him was pushing words to his mouth. Words that would hurt Bruce – words that didn’t deserve to Bruce. And the younger man was staring at him with eyes narrowed and estimating, almost not breathing and Clark knew that Bruce was on the verge of shutting himself away.

Superman made to cup Bruce’s cheeks and kiss him but he jerked away and Clark dropped his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Bruce…” he rubbed his eyes. “These last months had their toll on me even though I didn’t realize till now. And then the attack against you…and tonight…”

“What happened tonight, Clark?” Bruce asked concerned but staying at a distance; cold as his body temperature.

Clark for a moment thought of admitting everything about the kiss and what he felt – Bruce would understand. But then…No, Bruce wouldn’t understand because he was an abused child, a traumatized youth and he’d consider the kiss a betrayal – a token that Clark didn’t want him anymore. He’d be hurt and their relationship would be damaged if not over because Bruce was stubborn and defiant and proud…And Clark didn’t want to lose him.

This silence only made Bruce’s sense of wrongness stronger.

But suddenly the Man of Steel wrapped him in his powerful arms and rubbed soothing circles over his back.

“I love you: do you remember that?”

“I try…” Bruce mumbled.

Clark closed his eyes and kissed Bruce’s neck.

“I must warm you up” Clark chuckled “I’m your heater, remember?”

Bruce pressed his lips and detached his body keeping their eyes locked: there was a piece of ice in his guts. He touched Clark’s cheek and the older man kissed it.

“I’m still your Sun, Bruce?”

“Am I still your Star, Clark?”

In front of Clark’s eyes, the snow covered forest of Palisades emerged again and Bruce was before him, half naked, trembling from Flass’ attack. He enveloped him again with his red cape.

“Can I call you Star?”

“Always, Bruce: the only Star I need on my sky” he bit his lower lip and sighed. “I’m sorry I behave like an ass… maybe it is because this is the first time I feel something so strong and I almost lost it once and…” he yanked his head frustrated. “There’s no excuse! Ugh! I miss the Fortress! We were alone, away from everything…”

The ice in Bruce’s guts melted though he felt sad for Clark’s suffering.

“We couldn’t stay forever there, Clark…But we’ll make it…” he looked in Clark’s eyes. “If you still
want this.”
Clark shook his head sighing.
“Don’t say that, Bruce...Of course I want it! I can’t imagine my life without you...”
Bruce pressed his lips: he believed Clark, this moment. Yet...
“Clark, I want you to know that if anything changes, if your feelings change, you can tell me right away; don’t lie to me ever” the green stars inside his irises flashed determinedly. “I want you to be happy...even if that means that you’ll be with someone else.”
“I can be happy only with you...”
Clark hugged him caressing his locks; the contact with his body had normalized Bruce’s temperature.
Thank Rao! He feared that the nightmare had an impact on Bruce’s recovering body: he couldn’t bear it if anything happened to Bruce, especially after what happened with Diana.
Suddenly, he took in the change in Bruce’s breath: defeated by the day’s fatigue and reassured from Clark’s cuddle, he was sleeping relaxed, trusting as a child. Clark smiled and carefully placed him on the mattress muffling him with the blankets. His eyes caressed Bruce’s face.
“I’m sorry, Star” he whispered and then he saw Hero looking at him from Bruce’s side. “I’m sorry, buddy” he sighed because the kitten’s glance seemed to him accusing.
Luthor’s transition from deep sleep to awareness was nightmarish; all of a sudden, he felt his throat being crushed and no air reaching his lungs. Held by his throat he was shoved to the wall of his small, isolated cell; his legs dangled above the floor.
Reflexively he tried to grab the hand that choked him but the clenching became tighter and he almost lost his senses from the lack of air to which point his attacker allowed the tiniest of air to flow just to keep him conscious.
In his shock, Luthor took in the total darkness of his cell and the complete, creepy silence in the corridor and the entire prison. It was obvious that nobody in the prison had noticed the breach or his attacker had paid heavy to be allowed the entrance.
As his bulged eyes slowly adjusted he made out the enormous, square silhouette in front of him and the glimmering of the dark eyes that glared at him.
“Mannheim” he croaked raspy, panting.
A smirk curved the rough face of the gangster.
“Admirable perception!” he sniggered and tightened his grasp causing Luthor’s squeal.
“W...what do you...want?” he whispered closing his eyes.
“Straight to the point...you’re a clever boy, Luthor” Mannheim jeered. “I wonder how you ended up here...” he sniffed at him.
Luthor clenched his jaw and cursed Wayne for bringing him to this lame position.
“I get you didn’t find what you were looking for?” he asked slyly taking advantage of the slight loosen in Mannheim’s grip.
He gasped as his body was shoved to the opposite wall and crashed to the floor; he caught his breath watching the enormous shadow approaching him with slow confident strides. He was once again heaved by two hands grabbing his collar.
“I want my order” the gangster hissed low but more threatening than ever. “My machine.”
Luthor cackled because he would never permit himself being intimidated.
“So your raids went wasted as your thugs, huh?”
He was hoisted higher and his former partner’s grinding was loud and freezing his spine. Luthor could see that the gangster’s eyes had become flaming slits.
“I can cut you in pieces and let you die slowly begging for mercy – nobody will care...”
“You’re definitely well connected, my friend” Luthor kept his voice steady though sweat drops had spread all over his face; but he knew that showing your fear was the worst you could do with these people.
“Where is my order?!” he tightened more his grasp and Luthor felt his body get icy cold and aching without any obvious reason.
Lex controlled his breath trying to keep his composed demeanor so that he managed to negotiate; he
knew that when people like Mannheim took what they wanted in the vast majority of the cases you ended up dead.

“You seriously expect me to give you the answer so simply? I’ll be dead right after” he shook his head and raised his eyebrows “I’m not so stupid. What guarantees I have?”

Darkseid felt the urge to burn with his breath that pest yet there was time for that after he got what he wanted. His eyes stabbed Luthor’s gray orbs and invaded the human’s mind.

Luthor felt the strangest thing in his life; his mind going entirely numb and falling apart, every terrifying thing he experienced coming to stab him again and then in a storm, moments from his corporate life, from his work in the lab; a flash of the night he lured Bruce Wayne in his suite and then again the lab.

Darkseid released from his energy’s grasp Luthor’s mind: there was nothing, no machine. His nostrils emitted fume but the human was still enough dazzled to notice. He gritted his teeth and Luthor yelled feeling his bones burning.

“You tricked me, you lousy maggot!” he hissed in Luthor’s face and the human screamed feeling his heart being clenched by invisible hot fingers. “You took my money and didn’t make my machine!”

Luthor gasped and wheezed but even in the fog his mind was he knew what he must do.

“You really believed that I’d have your…order in one place? Or so obvious for you or the authorities to find and investigate?” he wasn’t aware that Mannheim had invaded his mind but he knew that the gangster did something to him; maybe he had injected him with some drug while asleep.

“Speak!”

“If you kill me you’ll never get what you want.”

“I doubt you ever created it.”

“I did but I took my precautions, Brunno: I have worked with many of your kind and I know how devious you are. Your machine exists…but in many, separate pieces scattered to various LexLabs – completely unnoticed between the other ordinary stuff. If you want your machine whole only I can gather the pieces and assemble them to form your machine.”

Mannheim frowned.

“LexLabs belong to Bruce Wayne now…”

“That didn’t stop you from raiding them, right? You just didn’t know what to look for while I know: such petty, tedious things that the stupid brat and his people won’t notice. You just need to get me and Mercy out of here and I’ll give you the machine. You do have the connections to manage that, right?” he asked slyly, smirking because now he felt back in the game.

Darkseid cast another glance to him and the tycoon went unconscious. The new God knew that the next morning Luthor wouldn’t remember anything or even if he had some recollection he wouldn’t be sure if it was reality or dream. On the other hand, Darkseid was sure about what he was to do.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, mister!” Lois hardly containing her wrath in whispers towered Clark who was absorbed in his office’s screen finishing an article.

He closed his eyes downhearted and slowly turned his head to face a glaring Lois with her arms crossed over her chest shaking from her nerves.

“Restroom now!” she ordered him and Clark hadn’t another option than following under the amused eyes of their colleagues.

Once in the toilets Lois locked and turned to Clark fuming. Clark fixed his glasses with his characteristic clumsy way.

“They’ll think that we’re doing…nasty things locked in the toilet…” he shrugged, grinning uncomfortably but Lois rolled his eyes.

“While you’d prefer to be locked with someone else, huh?”

Clark shook his head.

“I guess our Jimmy isn’t the trustworthy type…” he smirked and leaned on the sink crossing his arms. “Is there a chance this not going public?”

Lois huffed exasperated.

“Is this the only thing you care about?!”
“Of course! Imagine if Bruce hears it…”
She pursed her lips.
“If that means kicking your sorry ass, I’m on!”
Clark closed his eyes and yanked his head.
“What matters most is that hearing it will upset him and he is in the middle of his recovery – this can have a bad impact on him.”
“You should have thought that sooner before you celebrated your victory with an after battle smooch with that bitch!”
He shook his head sighing.
“Don’t call her that, Lois! Thanks to her tens of people were saved.”
Lois nodded.
“So you took it on you to express our collective gratitude…” she remarked snidely and Clark pressed his lips.
“It wasn’t what Jimmy and you think…”
“I thought that cheaters say that to their mate” she snapped cocking her eyebrows.
Clark jerked upwards.
“I’m not a cheater, Lois! Diana doesn’t know I’m with Bruce and thought that she could…” he searched for the appropriate word “kiss me” he opted for the most realistic description.
“She doesn’t know but you know it, right? Unless you forgot it?” Clark lolled his head on the side.
“Jimmy told me that you dove in the kiss and fondled her!” Clark could sense her hair stand on edge.
“And so much for Jimmy’s word…” he mumbled ruffling his hair.
“He didn’t want to speak – the infamous solidarity between males…” she snorted rolling her eyes.
“Don’t tell me you tortured the answer from him?” he arched his eyebrows and Lois clenched her jaw and widened her eyes.
“I asked him what was so interesting behind the corner and he told me about Edge; then I asked about the Amazon and you and he blushed and replied that you two fought Edge which was stupid: two super heroes against a mere gangster? Give me a break! So I took the camera to see the pictures and there was none of you two “fighting” the mobster or of you two at all – I expressed my puzzlement on that and” she shrugged one shoulder “I scolded him a bit for not taking a shot of the two super heroes together and in his dread stuttered that he did shot some frames but Superman deleted them.”
Clark’s head dropped and he closed his eyes shaking his head in disbelief: Jimmy, Jimmy… Lois nodded.
“As you guess it was easy from that point to extract the answer…”
“You’re devious, Lois!” Clark regarded her through narrowed eyes.
“How dare you, buster! You cheat your boyfriend who struggles to recover from his injuries and call me devious!”
“I didn’t cheat Bruce, I told you! Diana rushed to me and kissed me and…” Lois’ angry eyes were fixed on his challengingly “okay, I was surprised and delayed in my reaction but Jimmy must have told you that I pushed her away…”
Lois lolled her head and twisted her lips arching an eyebrow.
“Not exactly ‘push’.”
“I couldn’t slap her, could I? I’m the boy scout, remember? And she is my friend and ally and doesn’t know that I have a relationship.”
His friend clenched her waist.
“Why you didn’t tell her?”
Clark sighed and pulled out his glasses to rub his eyes.
“Because Bruce and I decided to keep our relationship secret to avoid new attacks” this was one of the reasons; the other was that he didn’t feel it right to admit to Diana that he was in a relationship with a mortal; and he really enjoyed her company and respect – if she learnt about Bruce (she didn’t think very highly of him) maybe that would change things, and he didn’t want to lose the relationship he had with her.
Lois shook her head: protecting Bruce was understandable since Superman’s love interest was always in his enemies’ target. Yet she couldn’t be sure that it was only this.

“The Princess isn’t one of your enemies, right? Supposedly she is your ally and friend so you can trust her with that sensitive information, RIGHT?” she widened her eyes in emphasis. “Or you can’t trust her?”

“Of course I trust her, Lois! But till now there was no reason to speak to her about my personal things…” Lois was glowering at him demanding an answer “but now that things took that turn I’ll tell her to end that thing, satisfied?”

“And Bruce? He should know.”

Clark raised his palm in a stop sign.

“No! What happened last night was an accident and there’s no reason to cause Bruce so much turmoil – and for nothing! Lois, please, you don’t tell him…”

She pressed her lips and blinked uncomfortable.

“I hated it, farmer boy! I feel like a backstabber – knowing and not telling him…Like your accomplice!”

Clark held her shoulders and locked eyes with her.

“I didn’t cheat on Bruce! And it won’t happen again! Diana will hear the truth and all this crap will be over! So why disturbing Bruce’s peace and recovery? He is happy, Lois, for the first time in his life: why ruining that without a solid reason?” he lowered his eyes. “He opened his heart to me and let himself fall in love: imagine the pain and the results if he feels that his love was betrayed. Which didn’t happen, I swear!”

Lois closed her eyes and gulped.

“Yes” she glowered at him “I can imagine the pain and the trauma, can you?”

Clark bit his lips.

“Of course – I promised that I won’t let anyone hurt him again including myself: the League of Shadows almost killed him and I hated myself for being unable to protect him. Only the thought that I can become the reason for him to suffer makes me hate myself” he rubbed his forehead. “I promise you, Lois, this won’t happen again.”

She nodded but her eyes were cold.

“If you don’t end this I’ll take matters in my own hands…” she said determined.

“You’ll tell Bruce breaking his heart?”

Lois lips twisted in aversion.

“You’ll be the one who will break his heart, you dork! And there’s something worse than speaking to Bruce.”

Clark frowned.

“Speaking to Ma Kent: she won’t be happy learning that her son is a cheater who fools his mate.”

Now Clark hated that option as much as Bruce learning.

“I’m not fooling him!”

Lois leaned to him.

“Then clear this mess ASAP!”

She stormed to the door, unlocked and left without a glance behind. Clark slumped to the sink and shook his head determined: this must end.

Bruce entered the kitchen with Hero on his lap; he had to take him from the floor because as soon as they exited the bedroom the kitten ran to the hidden passage to go to his pray down in the cave. It was hardly half past in the morning but when he opened his eyes half an hour ago, Clark had already left. So he performed his morning routine and took the lift to the ground floor and the delicious smells of toasted bread and pancakes led him and his kitten to the kitchen.

As he knew already from the voices Leslie was there chatting with Alfred.

“Are you up already, young man?” her disapproval was clear in her eyes as in her voice.

Alfred also didn’t look happy but hastened to serve pancakes to his young master before readying his milk.
“Good morning, Leslie, Alfred” Bruce greeted instead of replying immediately and led his chair to the island. “If I wasn’t up I wouldn’t have the pleasure of your company during breakfast, Dr. Thompkins” he winked and Alfred shook his head grinning and filled Hero’s bawl with his food. Leslie smirked and fixed her eyes on Bruce.

“Flattery won’t help you, buddy.”
Bruce shrugged pouring some honey to his pancakes.

“That wasn’t flattery but truth, Leslie: I detect some insecurity?” he arched his eyebrows.
The tough doctor laughed and sipped from her coffee.

“You’re good, kid…To be honest I came here for a good breakfast after the night shift and to see my stubborn patient – but I hoped your sleep would last longer.”

Alfred placed the glass of milk to the table.

“Thank you, Alfred” Bruce said though he didn’t like milk.

“You’re most welcome, sir.”

“So the reporters are finally gone?” he turned to Leslie who was studying him.

Leslie stood up and approached him.

“No, they’re still out of the gates waiting for you – good thing they don’t know the secret back road to the Manor. Let me see you…”

Bruce had anticipated it but hoped that he might avoid it. Leslie cupped his jaw and carefully opened his eyelid to observe his eye.

“You didn’t sleep well?” she asked professionally. “You have sleep disturbances and you can’t sleep more in the morning?”

Bruce felt Alfred’s concerned glance and huffed.

“I slept rather well…” but Leslie felt with the back of her hand his cheeks pointing out the paleness and he lolled his head on the side defeated because he didn’t like lying to them. “I woke up once during the night but other than that my sleep was restful.”

Leslie watched his iris.

“Is your head hurting?”

“C’mone, Leslie…You’re here for a visit – forget you’re a doctor” her eyes were stern and Bruce realized that this wasn’t a persuasive point “No” he hurried to answer “no headache.”

Leslie nodded relieved and sat in a chair next to him while Alfred after hearing the answer turned to the toaster to remove the bread slices.

“What woke you up?” Leslie asked.

Bruce sipped from his milk.

“Clark at some point left to stop the attack in Metropolis’ subway and I must have felt it and that caused…” he stopped abruptly because Leslie and Alfred were frowning at him.

“So you’ve already made your search since you know about the attack…” Leslie remarked disapproving “you woke up and instead of trying to sleep again you played with your little gadget – we must confiscate that thing” she yanked her head to Alfred.

“Then we’d have to find a way to lock him out of the cave because he’d reside there” Alfred replied grimly.

Bruce took a bite from his pancake relishing the delicious taste.

“You’re overreacting! I just couldn’t fall asleep at once and I was worried about what made Clark leave so abruptly so I searched a bit – that’s all.”

Alfred shook his head and brought Leslie a glass of fresh juice like the one he served to Bruce.

“What was it?” she inquired flatly. “Flashback or nightmare?”

The young man stared at her: he didn’t want to speak about that yet Leslie was his doctor and Alfred…well, he didn’t want to worry him but lying to him was worse and he doubted that the clever man wouldn’t figure.

“Both” he replied nonchalant.

Leslie pursed her lips.

“Like the dreams you had when Crane experimented on you?”

He nodded. He was relieved that Leslie didn’t ask about the content of the dream and she looked
rather troubled rubbing her chin.

“Do you think that the results of Dr. Crane’s ministrations are permanent?” Alfred asked keeping his compose but he crossed out the term damage that came to his mind.

“What I think is that the devastating injuries from the incident and the long coma probably will make longer the time necessary for the aftereffects to stop.”

Bruce preferred that than the permanence of this situation.

“Leslie, is there anything you can do to eliminate the effects? Master Bruce needs quality sleep and those dreams upset him.”

“We won’t intervene to Bruce’s brain” Leslie answered with conviction and Bruce nodded his agreement “Joker’s psychotropic drugs, the concussions and Crane’s sick experiments are more than enough: a new intervention might damage rather than heal. Human brain has the ability to heal itself. Besides I believe that it is only a matter of time before this effect stops entirely.”

Alfred pressed his lips; he’d like to believe that yet he was worried and Bruce’s eyes on him told Alfred that his young master understood his feelings.

“Isn’t alarming the fact that these strange dreams reappeared now after so much time?”

Leslie looked at him and then at Bruce.

“It is most possible that this happened because Bruce’s medication needs readjustment – probably, his organization got used to them so the drugs don’t have the same effectiveness anymore.”

Bruce wanted that change but the way Leslie spoke gave him the impression that they had different goals.

“I wanted to talk to you about that change, Leslie; I think that we can decrease the dosages after all this time: the danger has passed.”

Leslie frowned.

“And why you ask that?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Because my reaction and adjustment time when I woke up are too slow.”

His two surrogate parents exchanged glances.

“That is normal, Master Wayne” Alfred remarked and Bruce huffed shaking his head.

“Not for me” he retorted. “I need to be aware of my surroundings even when asleep so my reaction time is fast.”

“The Manor is safe, Bruce and at your side lie the most powerful man in the whole planet” Leslie stressed out.

But Alfred approached his young master.

“Do you believe that someone was in your room last night, sir?”

Bruce licked his lips uncomfortable; it was difficult to answer that. There was nobody in his room when he woke up yet Hero was hissing rather distraught and he remembered a shadow towering him and the sense of threat. Of course it might be due to the nightmare’s effect…

“That’s the problem! The drugs make my senses slow and I’m confused; it is difficult being alert at once” he noticed their concerned faces. “No, there wasn’t anyone in my bedroom but I don’t like losing my vigilance.”

Leslie took a large gulp of juice.

“Bruce, you know that I can’t sacrifice your good rest and healing for that” she arched her eyebrows “at least, in this stage: the critical phase might have passed but we have still a long way to come and your body needs the medication” she pressed her lips. “If we lower the dosage you will be in considerable pain and the danger of infections greater; I’d never consent to that.”

Bruce tapped his fingers on the granite surface measuring his options.

“We can at least make a try” he looked at Leslie’s adamant eyes. “It’s been almost four months and I was treated in Superman’s Fortress with alien medicine so maybe I won’t experience pain and my organism’s defenses will be strong enough.”

“No” Leslie spat and the finality was both in her entire face – she wasn’t willing to make any experiments.

Alfred was glad about his friend’s strong stance but also felt for his young master. So he decided to
make an attempt at lifting his spirits. He pulled out of his vest’s pocket an envelope and gave it to him.

Bruce took it frowning: it was clearly an invitation.

“I think I finally have a solid reason to avoid social events, Alfred.”

His butler smiled cleverly.

“I’m sure you would want to attend that, sir.”

The youth opened it interested: Alfred was right…The image of the Haven’s kids locked in Joker’s horrible metallic cage flashed before his eyes and then the joyful evening at Martha Wayne’s Park during the opening ceremony; Billy and his painting. A smile stretched his lips.

“The kids of the Haven invite me to their Thanksgiving party…”

Alfred reflected his smile.

“You’re their guest of honor along with Master Anthony.”

Leslie patted Bruce’s shoulder.

“Alfred and I are invited too: those little devils made me promise that you’ll come” she twitched her eyebrows. “You won’t make your favorite doctor a reneger…”

Hero meowed at his feet and Bruce grinned.

“I can’t do that, can I?”

Leslie leaned back at her chair.

“For an instance I thought it was from Tommy…” she gulped the rest of her juice.

“Tommy?”

“Thomas Elliot: he tried to persuade me to fix a meeting with you.”

Bruce eyebrows arched.

“Really?”

“He wants to make amends for his bullying behavior back then. All these months he was asking about your condition and expressed his interest to examine you or at least look your reports.”

Bruce drank at last what was left from his milk.

“You didn’t show him, right?”

Leslie rolled her eyes.

“Of course not, kid! Don’t insult my medical integrity.”

“I’m sorry. Alfred told me that he called many times at the Enterprises to ask but I don’t want to see him or have a meeting – at least, for the time being.”

“Do you consider that polite, Master Bruce?” Alfred commented and Bruce met his gaze.

“Maybe not but I don’t feel the mood to see him.”

Leslie took a pancake and bit.

“He offered to help with healing your injuries; he mentioned his work with Superman at Metropoli’s General Hospital.”

Bruce nodded remembering that night in the greenhouse when Clark used that experience to heal his injury.

“I know” he muttered. “But I don’t want him in this.”

Leslie shook her head.

“It is your decision, Bruce; yet he indeed offers his help voluntarily in the clinic and the Haven…”

“You say that he is changed?”

“I can’t answer that, Bruce: it is true that he has been through a lot of things and eighteen years has passed – he isn’t a kid anymore. That, of course, doesn’t mean he doesn’t have flaws…”

“You work with him, Leslie, interact with him: you think he is honest?”

Leslie locked eyes with her favorite patient and recollected how she felt every time Thomas spoke about Bruce. He didn’t want to be unfair to Thomas yet her gut feeling was almost never wrong.

“No.”

Joker had being escorted back to his cell after the breakfast and that was unusual; he hadn’t finished yet with poking fun at his inmates and he was watching a rather fascinating episode of Willy The Coyote: he loved how the stupid thing always ended up at the bottom of the canyon and the fucking
bird made fun of him. This bird reminded him of himself – it had his smile all over: in his next life, if
he wasn’t born as the Joker, he’d like to be born as the Road Runner.
“Biiip biiiip!” he yelled and erupted in a fit of giggles sketching the cartoons on the cell’s ceiling.
“I’m glad you’re in good spirits, Mr. J.”
He jumped from his bed and gave a big bow.
“Ooooowo! Dr. Harley-quin! What an ho-nor to poor ooool’ me!” I thought our sessions were at
evening now.”
Harleen sat at her chair outside the cell and Joker tilted his head on the side studying the blondie –
she was a bit antsy.
“No, that was irregular; our sessions always were held at the morning and we will stick to that.”
Joker pouted.
“But I looooooove ir—regul—arity!”
Harleen crossed her legs.
“And chaos that’s why we need to apply some regularity to your daily program.”
Joker’s upper lip twitched in disgust.
“Regularity is oooooverrated! Irregularity sells more: look at cartoonoons. If a cat eats a mouse
nobody would give a shit but when the mouse beats the puuuussycat to a pulp the cartoon staaaays
80 years! Wow!”
“Mr. J, what cartoons were you watching when you were a child?”
Joker leaned to the interior wall of metallic bars and looked at her with a Cheshire smile.
“A twooooold question…” he said nasally. “Well done, Dr. Harleyquin! Either you want to make a
sooooolcial study on how the violence in cartoons correlates with ir—regular behavior during
adulthood or you want to explore my traumatic childhood” his green eyes pierced her. “Rrrrrright?”
he smiled broader.
Harleen was annoyed that he guessed her purpose yet that increased her admiration for the man.
The regular thing for you would be not answering my questions – but you love irregularity” she
said keeping her gaze steady.
Joker yanked his head and raised his finger.
“Gooooooood one, doc! But I’m sooooore regular that sometimes I go regular!” he began giggling
and hoping in his cell under Harleen’s calm stare.
She knew what Joker needed to be glued and cut the crap: if she had managed to bring Wayne
here…But Bruce was so scared, so biased and hard on Joker that refused blatantly.
“You give the impression that you’re afraid to speak about your past.”
Joker stopped on his heels just when he was to jump again, he stayed immobile with his posture
slumped and he turned his head to look lopsided at Harleen; his eyes sparkled devilishly. He
understood that she wanted to challenge him.
Dr. Quinzel felt thrilled by this stare and believed that she had achieved her goal to provoke Joker to
answer.
He walked back to the bars and supported his arms there; he stabbed her with his eyes and licked his
lips.
“I’m not afraid of anything, Harley-quin; I just prefer the present – it’s much more fun. If you want
someone stuck in his past, call Brucie. It is why I chooooose him, wewewell! Besides the obvious
reasons, to teach him how to escape from his past like I did” he grinned remembering the Bat. “But
maybe the fascinating thing has aaaaalready done that…” he said slyly.
Again his infatuation with Wayne, Harleen thought frustrated.
“For a man who loves continuous flow it’s strange that Wayne is the only thing you’re not willing to
change: he is the axis to your existence.”
Joker cocked an eyebrow and showed her his ring finger though it didn’t have anything on.
“He is my wife and I’m a traditional man sooooo my wife is the axis around which I spin…” he said
completely sober. “Youuuuunderstand that I can’t stay here while he is out there: I’m a metal
drown to the magnet.”
Harleen felt pissed from Joker’s devotion to that man.
“And what if he doesn’t care?”

Joker shrugged one shoulder and pouted.

“I like the challenges—it’s what makes him soooooo fascinating: like a mountain top to be
conquered. I feel for the poor baby and I want to help him” he smirked inside knowing that the next
would have an impact to his doctor. “For his sake, I could speak about my past…” his eyes

glimmered.

Harleen felt shudders: she knew it! She knew that if she managed to bring Wayne to a session with
Joker, the criminal’s mystery would be solved.

“And if he wasn’t willing to come here?”

Joker shook his head and twitched his eyebrows.

“I understand myyyyy boy: who would want to get in that shitty place? Noooooo offense, Dr.
Harlequin… So I go to him…you know, like the Mohamed and the mountain?”

“You can’t get out of here, Mr. J” she retorted though she would be interested to achieve those join
sessions even if that meant that Joker would be free…She scratched that thought shocked with
herself: no way! That was preposterous! Unacceptable! Joker wanted to drag her here to make her
assist his escape.

Joker smiled evilly, his eyes fixed on her.

“You know, Harlequin? You’re my favorite shrink” he cocked his eyebrows “aaaaaand I have a
vaaaaaaaast album of experiences with them…”

She felt flattered by this yet she knew better than fall for his tricks.

“Then why not speaking to me? Trying to co-operate?”

Joker ruffled his locks; oh! His sweet shrink was so starved for her bones!

“Dr. Harlequin” he knitted his eyebrows.

Harleen twitched believing that now he would speak about himself.

“Yes?”

“I heard that you drive an old fashioned beetle” Harleen’s disappointment was hardly concealed. “I
used to have one – niiiiice cars. But I think that you should mount something wilder” he darted his
eyes to his body and inhaled deeply. “A pink Harley Davidson: the rooooooad king! He! He! He!
That will make you myyyyy Harley Queen!” he batted his eyelashes innocently “or you’d prefer it
with i instead of double e to match with your reeeeeeal surname? Huh?”

Harleen stood up.

“Our session is over” she said sternly “since you don’t want to talk seriously. See you tomorrow.”

Joker watched her leaving with a predatory shine in his eyes.

“But I’m speaking seriously, Harlequin…”
“Hey, Rachel, how are you?”

A surprised gasp on the other end of the line – a happy gasp.

“How are things there? Any issue?”

“Bruce! That’s…that’s awesome! I didn’t expect that…”

Bruce smiled.

“You didn’t expect me to call? By the way, am I keeping you from something?”

“No, not at all – I mean, I’m at work but I’m doing a break right now… Hmm…Yes…I thought that you had too many things to look after now you returned to Gotham” she laughed lighthearted.

“You’re my friend, Rachel, and you saved my life risking yours – I think you more than deserve a long distance call.”

He could imagine his old friend rubbing her temple uncomfortable, her other hand clutching her waist.

“I meant to call, Bruce…I mean after we spoke while you were abroad. Yet seeing you with the wheelchair made me think that you’ll need some time to rest from the trip…By the way, I’m really sorry for your injury.”

“I know, Rachel; thank you. How are things there? Any issue?”

She chuckled.

“You’re kidding me? You arranged everything perfectly: Steve works at a Wayne Enterprises’ subsidiary here in Toronto; I work in a real estate company that the owner is Tony Stark’s friend and Harvey” she hesitated because Harvey’s adventure was partly her doing. “He works as a consultant – he is aware that you had some involvement in his hiring because the entire Joker incident and his suspension aren’t the best recommendation. You take care of everyone except yourself…”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I just had some misfortunes…” he chuckled “but I was also lucky – it could be worse. And all of you deserved some peace. However I miss you all: Mr. Petrou’s job awaits him always. Give him my regards.”

“He’d be very happy to hear; he was heartbroken when he saw you on the wheelchair and he was ready to call but I” she gulped “it was my fault: I told him that it’d be better if we gave you some time to settle your more urgent affairs.”

“Rachel, you, - all of you -, are my friends: so don’t hesitate to contact me for anything. It’s my pleasure to hear from you.”

“Maybe we should return – I mean if you returned after all the terrors you experienced there, why not us too?”

“This is your decision to make. On the other hand, Garcia plans to put on vote Harvey’s comeback to DA’s post – if that is what Harvey wants.”
She laughed.

“There’s nothing Harvey wants more than serve justice…”

“I don’t know…I think marrying you tops that?”

Rachel sighed.

“Bruce, I still don’t know if I’m made for these things…”

“Time will show…I’m sure Harvey is more than happy just being with you.”

“At least, he seems too” she snorted. “The other sure thing is that if we decide to marry you’ll be the first to know since Harvey wants you as his best man.”

Bruce smiled.

“Only Harvey?” he asked slyly.

“Me too…I want to see you again, Bruce: the moment we found each other again my faults forced me and Harvey to flee.”

“The important thing is that you are alright – every other thing can be fixed.”

“I guess so…Mmmm, Bruce, thank you for calling but I must return to work.”

“Sure.”

“Take care of yourself and get well soon, huh? Give Alfred my love!”

“I will. My regards to Mr. Petrou and Harvey: tell them that whenever they decide to come back, I’ll be here for everything.”

Rachel gulped.

“Thank you. Hope to see you soon!”

“Me too.”

The moment Bruce hanged up someone knocked on his office’s door. It was Ms. Philips with some manila files in her arms containing paper work that required his signature.

Both Alfred and Leslie didn’t want him daily in the Wayne Tower yet Bruce was adamant about being there even for a couple of hours. He didn’t want anyone, ever again, to spread rumors that would endanger his father’s company.

Of course he had with him his Cosmos in order to do some other ‘extracurricular’ work.

“Is that all, Ms. Philips?” he asked while reading the last report under the approving eyes of his secretary.

“Yes, Mr. Wayne; that’s all for today.”

Bruce grinned.

“Great! Thank you, Ms. Philips” he handed her the papers.
Yet his secretary lingered.

“Do you want me to bring you something, Mr. Wayne? Some brunch or milk…”

Bruce lolled his head on the side and chuckled.

“Alfred called and gave you instructions about what I should eat, right?”

The woman seemed a bit surprised for his insight but soon got over it.

“He also told me to remind you to not wear yourself out and to return to the Manor before noon.”

Bruce nodded with a stoic and amused expression.

“As you can see, Ms. Philips, I’m not doing heavy duty so…” he lowered his voice collusively “if Alfred secretly calls to get updates, please tell him that I’m following doctor’s orders.”

Ms. Philips smiled also amused.

“Your dedication to the Enterprises is truly inspirational but you need to be careful, Mr. Wayne.”

“I know, Ms. Philips.”

When his secretary left the office Bruce turned to his tablet. His presence at the office shouldn’t keep him away from his investigation. He entered the database of Metropolis’ police: Gotham was his main priority, always, yet those people used Luthor’s guns so if Morgan Edge was indeed Luthor’s collaborator then the lab raids could be explained. And if this mobster had bought guns, could he have bought also those strange beings that attacked him? Could Edge be the Intergang’s leader?

But above all, Clark was active in Metropolis and being Superman didn’t make it safer so Bruce wanted to eliminate as many dangers as possible.

He doubted that Edge was the leader of Intergang. Intergang was a ghost gang and hit so openly and stupidly didn’t suit them; more so with their leader in the battlefield! Not even the most fanatic terrorists act like that: they use people-tools to execute their plans. On the other hand, Edge wasn’t a terrorist but a known gangster; he had his own gang so the Intergang scenario should be crossed out.

If Morgan Edge was alive he could have given some answers or his sudden change in tactics could be explained through psychological evaluation. But he was in the scene and although the super heroes were there and the outcome was decided he chose to stay and fight: well, that was completely out of character – mobsters had one thing in common: fleeing when things go awry and save their ass. He knew that from Falcone and his colleagues.

Bruce perused through the files from the shooters’ interrogation. Incoherent rants: most of them refused that they had done anything, others mumbled some extremist clichés that definitely didn’t understand; according to the police officers and the FBI they seemed to be in confusion and shock. Which was usual for amateurs or people with mental disorders who do such things, yet these people were thugs: attacking or even killing was their routine yet always having a professional reason not just spilling blood…

He pressed his lips and scrolled down the data scanning those thugs’ testimonies without finding anything explaining the massacre or who ordered it other than admitting that they belonged to Edge’s gang; which was the same pattern from the thugs who raided the labs: admitting they belonged to a gang but not knowing who gave the order.
His eyes narrowed on an entry: officers reported that Morgan Edge was killed in a fight with Wonder Woman and Superman and judging by the wounds it was the former that did it.

Bruce twisted his lips: Clark’s friend had a bad habit of killing people while being able to apprehend them; and mostly when useful information could be taken from them. He rubbed his chin: he definitely didn’t like her role in that but Clark was there; he saw everything. If something was amiss he’d have noticed…

He shook his head: Clark was very fond of her so Bruce doubted if he’d think ill for anything she did. He told off Bruce just because he was investigating her through Oliver Queen. Clark had changed… Maybe it wasn’t because of the Amazon but because of the adventure they suffered all these months. Maybe Clark was emotionally tired of living daily the weakness of a human being and when he met her, he was happy meeting someone like himself… Maybe it was just temporary.

And then he opened the site of Gotham’s Gazette for catching up with the news from his city but there as well, the last night’s assault was head news. They had pictures from last night via the Daily Planet so Bruce returned there: photos from the massacre, the injured, the officers, the super heroes saving the day and photos from the kiosk where Edge was killed.

Bruce knew that both Superman and Wonder Woman was engaged in battle with him yet there was no picture of them together. Which was odd. Jimmy Olsen had covered the massacre and from what Clark had told him, the youth always shot hundreds of pictures from an incident – besides there were loads of shots from other scenes of the incident; so since he was in front of the battle scene he definitely would have taken a lot of pictures especially with the two superheroes – that would be a big hit for the Planet.

Yet there were only pictures of the ruined kiosk and Edge’s body. Strange…Bruce tapped his lips. As if some pictures were emitted… But why? He recalled Clark’s odd behavior last night: fine, he was definitely affected by the deaths of so many people but… There was always a ‘but’ when the Amazon Princess was involved…and Clark gave him the impression of feeling uncomfortable, upset. Perhaps those photos were the answer for everything: perhaps Clark was disappointed with his friend and ally killing with such ease Morgan Edge?

 Somehow he doubted that: after all, Clark had scowled him because supposedly he didn’t trust him about Diana. Bruce wanted to ask Jimmy about the photos but he couldn’t and there wasn’t a reason why the boy would answer him honestly. At this point Bruce wasn’t sure that even Clark was honest with him.

He shook off the bitterness that slyly slipped in his heart.

The door opened slightly and Bruce tensed ready to confront an attacker though he knew that the Tower had the highest security in Gotham – yet last year’s Joker attack didn’t support that.

A face popped and Bruce relaxed immediately.

“Am I interrupting something?” Selina asked playfully.

“Come in.”

She closed the door and crossed graciously the room to slump in the armchair opposite Bruce’s desk. Her eyes sparkled gazing at the big, built-in fireplace which was lit enhancing the temperature of the room.

“I love this fireplace!” she turned her face to Bruce who grinned. “And now Alford can be relieved
that you are warm enough.”

Bruce lolled his head.

“Don’t tell me Alfred sent you?” he asked amused.

Selina shrugged.

“No, but I’m sure he is worried and would prefer it if you stayed at the Manor.”

“I don’t want to settle in the “ill person” psychology.”

“As if you ever had such psychology…” she rolled her eyes smiling.

“I’m not ill, Sel, but paraplegic – I want to readjust” he inhaled deeply “and there are things to be done” Selina was nodding though a bit exasperated. “I missed you.”

She put her legs over the armrest.

“C’me on, sweetie… I was with you last night…”

Bruce’s lips twitched in a smile.

“I guess I got spoiled in Thasos and I expect that you’d sleep at the Manor and eat breakfast with me” he cocked his eyebrows. “I know I’m selfish…”

Selina pressed her lips.

“You’re not selfish, sweetheart, and I had a great time being with you 24/7…but…” it was difficult to explain and the truth was that she still wanted to be all the time with him carefree after all these years’ agony and misery.

But Bruce nodded smiling because he understood without her even telling.

“You need your independency…I understand and I want you to do what you feel: when you’re happy I feel happy too.”

Selina’s eyes flashed touched; she shook her head.

“I know you do…and…I missed you too…And Alfred’s cooking of course! And Hero…Mmm…maybe I’d come and stay the weekends as kids do. Speaking of which, I was cat-strolling last night and I saw your protégé.”

“My protégé?” his puzzlement was genuine but Selina rolled her eyes.

“Little Dick Grayson.”

Bruce frowned.

“You said ‘cat-stroll’ so Catwoman saw him so it was real late.”

Selina gave him the thumbs up.

“After midnight. He was on a rooftop with a pal – a little smartass punk” she smiled amused on the remembrance. “They were drinking beer and the little rogue was smoking.”

Bruce intertwined his fingers on the desk and leaned towards her.
“Dick is drinking? That’s awful!” he shook his head and a deep wrinkle formed on his brow. “And the other boy was smoking…”

Selina jerked her legs off the armrest and leaned towards him.

“Don’t you dare blame yourself for Dick! Besides every teen does such stuff… He has a tough time but his grandmother will help him.”

He sighed.

“Poor Ms. Turner! I’m sure she doesn’t know anything…” he pressed his lips. “I wish I could do something…speak to him but he hates me. Maybe Batman could do that…”

Selina shook her head.

“Dick believes that Batman died at the factory – he was saying that to his friend. I told them that Batman is alive” she shrugged “he might believe me because he remembered me.”

Bruce arched his eyebrows.

“He isn’t so wrong” he said thoughtful. “Batman almost died that night and weren’t for Superman… What about the other boy?”

Selina chuckled.

“Oh! He is one of those charming Narrows’ urchins. His name is Jason Todd, I think he is a little younger than Dick and… the little fella is a pilferer” she winked “and has a big mouth.”

Bruce ruffled his hair.

“You think that the boys are in trouble? Maybe the other boy is deep with the wrong kind of people…”

“You mean Jason?” she laughed and shook his head. “No, he’s very independent to be working for others and I think he is a nice chum and Dick seemed at ease with him – actually, they remind me of us a bit…”

Bruce smiled.

“Except the beers and the fags… Remember the guy who stalked Dick and his grandmother the other day?” she nodded. “His name is Tony Zucco and is Dick’s father’s cousin and trainer.”

Selina arched her eyebrows.

“His uncle… Then why he didn’t go to them and stayed away?”

Bruce pursed his lips and shrugged one shoulder.

“Maybe he doesn’t get on with Ms. Turner: there are some gray areas in his relationship with John Grayson, Dick’s father. I read that there were rumors that John wasn’t satisfied by his coaching and degraded him; yet Zucco remained in his team till the end. Sure thing, Zucco has the means to live an opulent life.”

“So what does he want from them?”

“I don’t know; maybe he wants to help the kid after his family was murdered.”
Selina lolled her head on the side with a stare yelling ‘bitch please!”

“We live in Gotham, Bruce… Because you care for the kid and act as his secret guardian angel doesn’t mean that everyone thinks like this.”

Bruce looked at his hands.

“However I wish we have to do with the better case scenario: Dick deserves to have caring people around him…Of course I must find more info about this man.”

He was deep in thought and Selina wanted to change the subject.

“I saw the money you put in my account” she locked eyes with him. “What were you thinking, sweetie?” her voice was accusing. “It’s too much! And I’m not doing any of it for money!”

“I know, Sel, but I’m occupying you all the time and that forbids you for working” he felt awkward speaking about such things “and you actually work for me – so giving you a check is proper and eases my guilt.”

Selina shook her head slightly amused.

“Speaking of which” Bruce continued with new energy “since you’re my bodyguard…”

‘And chauffer…” she remarked slyly and Bruce nodded.

“I’m invited to the Thanksgiving party the Haven’s children are throwing and I need not only a bodyguard but also some company.”

Selina chuckled and cocked an eyebrow.

“I understand the need for a bodyguard because these fellas are really devious and dangerous” Bruce laughed. “The day after tomorrow, huh? Wow! I can’t believe that this time of year has come…” she twitched her lips. “Not that it made much sense the previous years…”

Bruce pouted and shook his head thoughtful, his mind going back to all these endless years in Dolcetto when days seemed the same in their ugliness. Or worse.

“Your first Thanksgiving in freedom” Selina sighed and then jolted from her armchair full with energy “we must make it special!”

Bruce grinned broadly.

“I’ll spend that day with all of you and without fearing that Falcone or Ra’s might see us – it will be special… And we’ll share with the kids at the Haven.”

Selina came to him in a playful manner and sat on the desk beside him.

“And…you have also the hot super hunk to make the day even more special, huh? Or I should say the night? Even if he won’t be with you at the party, I’m sure he’ll wait eagerly to wrap those sculpted hands around you after…”

But Bruce’s eyes became blank for a second as he recalled the last night. Selina noticed immediately and cupped her friend’s chin bringing his eyes on hers.

“What? He didn’t wise up? What has he done this time?”
“Nothing, Sel. He had a hard time last night with the hit in the Metropolis’ subway: ten people died” he pressed his lips. “He was sad and a bit shaken.”

Selina pursed her lips.

“You’d tell me if he did?” she inquired disbelieving. “Or you’d try to protect him?”

Bruce chuckled: protect Superman from Selina’s wrath…Actually, it made sense – when Selina was angry not even Superman had a chance!

“Don’t worry, Sel. Everything is fine.”

However deep inside there was a toxic doubt that he struggled to silence. Thankfully, his Cosmos played the tune for Clark’s calls and offered the perfect escape.

“Hey, Bruce; how are you?”

“Perfect, Clark.”

Selina rolled her eyes and stood from the desk slithering to the armchair in front of the desk to give some privacy.

“So perfect that you are in Wayne Tower working” disapproval was evident. “You didn’t sleep well last night so it’d be better if you stayed home.”

“You’re watching me?”

“Your heartbeat is my favorite sound and I can locate where the beating comes from unless there’s lead. But you’re changing the subject.”

“I don’t feel tired, Clark” he took in Selina’s snort. “And…”

“Never mind…” Clark cut him with a sigh. “I called to tell you that I won’t come tonight…”

Bruce could picture him rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“It’s everything alright?”

“That’s everything alright.”

“Of course not, Bruce…” he snorted. “So I want to be in Metropolis to watch closely in case the remnants of Edge’s gang want revenge – Gotham isn’t too far yet it’s better if I’m in Metropolis. I’m sure you understand.”
Of course he did…yet even when he was in Greece, in the other corner of the planet that didn’t stop Clark from coming. He pressed his lips but finally shook his head because even silently he was whining like a spoiled brat: innocent lives were more precious than his indulgence.

“Absolutely, Clark; I was looking at the photos Jimmy shot from the incident and I noticed that there are no pictures of you and the Princess while fighting with Edge…”

It was a grunt that?

“Listen, Bruce, I really don’t have time for your detective muscles stretching…”

Bruce frowned and Clark heard the abnormal intake of air.

“Jimmy’s camera collapsed or something; at least, that’s what he told me” he replied calmer and softer.

“The kids at the Haven invited me to their Thanksgiving party.”

“Have a great time, Bruce: I can’t be there either as Clark Kent or as Superman since our relationship is secret. So I’ll go have dinner with Ma.”

Bruce nodded.

“That’s nice…She must feel pretty lonely especially during holidays; give her my greetings.”

“She’ll be pleased. And then I’ll come to spend the rest of the night with you” it was the first time Bruce could discern a smile in Clark’s voice.

“Okay, Clark: I just hope you find time to drop by sooner…”

Clark huffed.

“Me too, Bruce. I have to go now…”

And with that the dial was ended. Bruce still gazed at his tablet’s screen rethinking their conversation.

Selina coughed to draw him out of his thoughts. She looked at her Fendi wristwatch – Bruce’s gift.

“Time to go home, sweetie. You don’t want Alfred worried and reprimanding.”

Bruce shook his head; his neck felt a bit stiff and his eyes stung from the lack of sleep.

“I suppose you’re right…”

Alfred leaned for his young master to wrap his arms around his neck and slither in his wheelchair which wasn’t the one Clark made for him but Tony’s – they didn’t want people suspect that his wheelchair was of alien technology though Tony’s creation was much out of the ordinary too. For once, there were no visible wheels but they were built in the sides.

Snow was heavily falling and Alfred muffled carefully Bruce’s legs with the quilt blanket because the 28th of November was a very cold night; the assembled reporters pushed the Haven’s security men to approach. There was no official notification that Bruce would attend the party that wasn’t a social event after all, but the most cunning of the Press figured that the young tycoon would want to
be with the kids that night: his soft spot for those children was known.

When Selina who arrived sooner informed them about the flock of awaiting reporters, it was Bruce’s decision to not evade them: he’d speak to them in order for them to leave the kids and the guests to enjoy themselves. So he led his chair to them with the control screen on the armrest.

All the cameras flashed at once and microphones were stretched to him.

“Mr. Wayne, is your paraplegia curable?”

“The League of Shadows did that?”

“Is Superman really in love with you?”

Selina hidden behind a wall laughed on that though she felt annoyed by those maniacs bothering Bruce.

Bruce raised his hands appeasing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I promise to answer all your questions in a press conference. But not here. I’m sure you’re sensitive enough to feel those children’s need to celebrate Thanksgiving as homey as possible. So I’ll be grateful to you if you let us spend that night as every other person” he saw their expressions softening. “I’m sure your families will be more than happy to have you with them for the dinner” he smiled cordially. “Happy Thanksgiving!”

They returned the wish and closed cameras and microphones, gathering their stuff to leave: nobody wanted to seem rude or insensitive with Gotham’s orphans and everyone preferred to spend the night with loved ones. Since Wayne promised to answer their questions they could grand him that small favor – besides the majority of Gotham had a soft spot for the tortured Prince and the reporters didn’t want to become hateful – their relentless chase the last days had caused already uproar.

“Thank you” Bruce smiled.

Alfred took the handles and turned the chair towards the building.

“Sometimes having inherited Lilith’s charm isn’t so bad, right, sir?” the British whispered and Bruce chuckled.

The party was hosted in the Haven’s highly equipped gym obviously for having enough space. As they were ready to enter, Selina intercepted them and like a flash leaned and kissed Bruce’s cheek.

“You play them in your fingers, huh?” she took Bruce’s kiss closing her eyes. “Yet I think that they were happy enough with your pictures because you’re gorgeous!”

Bruce eyed her body.

“You’re very beautiful, too, Sel!”

She smirked and shook her head.

“Hm…Casual attire, darling: skin tight skirt, wool turtle neck blouse, long coat. I’m Mr. Wayne’s nurse so I must be sightly” they had agreed to present Selina as his nurse.

Alfred cleared his throat.

“You’re gorgeous too, Alf!” Selina chirped and gave him a kiss.
“Well, I’m most grateful, Miss Kyle but what I wanted to tell is that it’s bloody freezing here so better conclude that discussion inside” with so much cold Alfred felt almost regretful for bringing Bruce here.

Right on point a good looking young woman came to them smiling and led them inside. The vast gym was decorated with wreaths made with dried flowers on the walls under long ribbons reading ‘Happy Thanksgiving’ and ‘Give Thanks’; some turkeys made from multicolored paper were hanging from the roof along with pumpkins while the floor was covered with leaves made from brown paper.

At the far end there were two long tables with every kind of traditional delicacy from turkey to pumpkin pies and beautiful round shaped candles inside lanterns made the scene warmer. A band played joyful music.

Bruce was gaping around because it was like reliving some of his childhood holidays …before Falcone.

“Wow!” Selina exclaimed as impressed as Bruce.

The social worker smiled.

“The kids made all these! They were so happy and they wanted to give their thanks…”

But Bruce was now looking at the other half of the space where gymnastic equipment where set. The gym was so big to allow the party taking place without having to remove those but there were people with athletic wear around the organs.

“The city’s gymnastics team offered to make a show for the kids…”

Selina gasped seeing what Bruce was now seeing: almost thirty kids rushing to them laughing, among them Billy who was the older – a young man actually. Bruce knew most of these children either from the opening ceremony or the night Joker captured them. Thankfully, the rest of the kids remained scattered around the place and only after hearing the commotion approached.

“They’re really dangerous…” Selina chuckled in Bruce’s ear but he was smiling around.

On the opposite corner of the gym, Dick with Ms. Turner and Jason waited among his teammates for the performance to start. The commotion caught their attention and Ms. Turner smiled.

“Bruce is here and the children surrounded him…” she was looking there yet Dick felt that these words were for him. “They really love him…”

The boy snorted to Jason.

“They don’t know who he is; if they did would have run away…” his voice was filled with poison and Ms. Turner stared him with disapproval.

“Dick, you’re unfair! If you tried to be reasonable you’d understand that Bruce did nothing wrong” Ms. Turner protested.

Dick shook his head mocking and Jason pursed his lips disapproving.

“You always make excuses for him!” he snapped to his grandmother. “Ugh! You don’t want to see the truth!”
Ms. Turner looked him almost desperately.

“What truth, honey?”

But Dick shook his head and seeing Jeff waving at him darted away. Ms. Turner lowered her head and Jason patted her back.

“It’s alright, Ms. Turner…He didn’t mean to yell at ya. He loves ya.”

The old woman turned her eyes to the boy and smiled.

“I know, Jason…” she cupped his chin. “I’m glad he has you. Where’s your mom?”

Jason a bit uncomfortable from the caress craned his head looking for his mother.

“There! She works here an’ every employee was invited to the party with their kids.”

A young man came out of the mass of kids bumbling around Bruce.

“Br-Br-Bruce, h-how are y-you?” it was Billy.

“I’m fine, Billy, thank you – everything is so very beautiful!”

“You-you-you like it?!” the mentally retarded youth asked with bulged eyes. “We-we did it our-our-ourselves: all the kids!”

Bruce realized that his eyes were on the verge of watering because he was so touched from all these children’s happiness.

“Then I think you deserve a reward…” he grinned broadly and looked up to Alfred.

“Most definitely, sir!” he pulled out his cell and pressed a button.

Several men and women dressed in Wayne Enterprises’ uniforms entered the gym carrying packages wrapped in shiny paper and multicolored ribbons.

“For you” Bruce said loudly and the Haven’s kids turned ready to rush to the gifts.

But the teacher coughed loudly and miraculously she was heard; tens of sweet faces turning to her.

“What do we say?” she asked half amused and half reprimanding.

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne!” an out of tune chorus yelled and Bruce bit his lower lip to not laugh loudly.

“You welcome! Happy Thanksgiving!” he gestured to the waiting presents and the crowd of eager boys and girls looked first to their teacher and after she nodded they stormed there where social workers and teachers distributed the gifts.

“Alfred, do you think that the presents would be enough for the kids from the gymnastics’ team? I didn’t know.”

Alfred smiled reassuringly.

“Do not worry, Master Bruce: the presents are more than enough.”

Bruce gazed at the giggling boys and girls, both orphans who lived in the Haven’s village and
children of the employees and the other beneficiaries.

The social worker who had escorted them excused herself and headed to the commotion to help her colleagues.

“Why that boy isn’t with the other kids?” Bruce gestured with the head towards a raven haired boy with blue eyes.

Selina chuckled.

“Because this, sweetie, is no other than Mr. Jason Todd: he is a man so he can’t be acting childish…”

“Then his parents must be working in the Haven – because although the party is open for every kid in the Narrows from what you said, I don’t think he’d come.”

Selina lolled her head and raised an eyebrow.

“I’m surprised he did come even with his parents…” she snorted.

Something twitched in Bruce’s guts.

“Maybe Dick is here too and that made Jason come…” he stretched his head but being seated in a chair made it difficult to see to every corner of the vast gym – especially to the far end where the athletes were warming up. “He trains in the city’s gym and he is a member of the junior team.”

Selina leaned her head to Alfred winking.

“Did he sound proud to you?”

The butler grinned and Selina nodded.

“I knew it wasn’t my impression…”

Then Bruce caught a glimpse of Ms. Turner.

“Yes, Dick is here…” but that made him feel a bit unease: he knew how much the boy hated him. “I hope at least he has fun…” though he doubted now that he had appeared.

When Bruce turned his head Leslie was there chewing a piece of pie.

“Oh! Here you are!” she squatted in front of Bruce. “I didn’t know that it would be so cold tonight” she touched her hand to Bruce’s forehead to assess his temperature.

“There was no chance I wouldn’t have come, Leslie! And I’m fine. Now, I’m hungry so let’s see if the food is any good.”

“Actually, it’s delicious!” Leslie said standing.

He had hardly eaten a piece of turkey when he heard a ripple of enthusiastic cheers and the kids left the presents and gathered in front of the entrance. Bruce couldn’t discern what was going on but then a red and gold android flew above the youngsters who goggled.

“Anthony Howard Stark…” Leslie said shaking her head mock disapproving. “Who else?”

Bruce smiled.
“He knows how to make an entrance, huh?” he asked winking.

A fuming but stunning as ever Pepper Potts emerged from the commotion and approached them.

“That Stark!” she rolled her eyes. “Always showing off!”

“He gives joy to the kids, Peps…” Bruce came to his friend’s defense.

Pepper shook her head and huffed.

“With you as a lawyer he knows that there’s nothing to fear…”

Yet she immediately smiled cordially.

“I missed all of you; how are you? Bruce, is everything alright?”

“Perfect, Peps; I’m glad you could make it: the Haven is your creation as well.”

“I didn’t do anything…”

Leslie shook her head.

“Of course, you did, dear: I was there, remember?”

“Miss Potts is modest but we all know her contribution to all of this” Alfred smiled.

Selina chuckled.

“And only the fact you have to do with Stark all the time is enough…”

Pepper cast a sideways glance behind her where Tony got awed exclamations from his fans.

“Tell me about it…” she cocked her eyebrows.

And then she leaned and hugged Bruce planting kisses to both his cheeks.

“If I didn’t trust blindly both of you, I’d misapprehend your stance…” a cocky voice came behind them as Tony strutted there.

Pepper stood and frowned at him while Bruce smirked.

“Is the veteran facing an age crisis?” he remarked snidely.

Tony’s eyes bulged and his mouth twitched.

“What age?!”

“You want me to state your age?” Pepper said arching her eyebrows crossing her arms.

“Oh! No way, missy! This is a secret of highly national importance…Mmm! Pumpkin pie! It’s been years since I last ate…Yummy!”

Suddenly, the band stopped and the social worker who had escorted them walked in front of the gymnastic organs, the spotlight following her.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, the local team of gymnastics was so kind to offer us a demonstration of their talent. Please give them a warm welcome!” she clapped first and the whole
gym erupted in applause.

The athletes some of them senior and some of them junior, just kids, performed impressive programs in pommel horse, still rings, high bar, vault and balance beam. Many times the acrobatic moves caused screams of excitement or made the audience hold their breath.

For Bruce the most challenging was watching Dick Grayson executing a particularly complex and difficult set of exercises on the high bar with giants (revolutions around the bar), release skills, twists, and changes of direction. His eyes were narrowed and he barely breathed as the boy jolted high above the bar to hold again the bar in the last second.

Alfred who had sensed his agony squeezed his young master’s shoulders.

“Master Bruce, you should relax” he whispered and Bruce turned his eyes on him.

“They shouldn’t let so young kids do such things…It’s dangerous!” he protested and Tony looked at him confused.

“He is young mister Grayson” Alfred explained and Tony nodded because a couple of months ago Bruce almost died to save that boy so his intense reaction was understandable now. “If I may, sir” the British lowered his voice “you do more dangerous things.”

“I’m trained, Alfred…” he replied though his searching eyes had located a familiar face: the man that had stalked Dick.

Tony cocked an eyebrow.

“He is trained too, buddy; his coach wouldn’t have let him do these things if he wasn’t perfectly able…”

Bruce gasped as the boy jerked to the air, made two backflips and landed on his feet causing the enthusiastic applause and the cheers from the crowd.

“His grandmother must be very proud” he remarked catching Ms. Turner applauding her grandson tearful.

Selina lolled her head on the side.

“She isn’t the only one…” she commented smirking with her eyes pointing Bruce.

Dick ran to his coach who covered him with a towel and sent him to the showers. Bruce saw Ms. Turner suddenly striding to the other side of the gym.

“Where is she going?” Selina asked frowning.

Bruce nodded towards a man standing in a corner watching from the shadows.

“Tony Zucco was watching Dick’s performance…” Bruce whispered to her because their friends were occupied watching the athletes performing.

Ms. Turner had to bury her pride on her grandson as soon as her eyes fell on Zucco sneaking on the boy from a corner. She covered the space between them with furious strides and stood before him.

Zucco didn’t change his position from leaning his back to the wall with his arms crossed. A faint smirk was formed over his face that was covered by the shadows. He watched amused the old lady approaching.
“Well, hello, Ms. Turner! Happy Thanksgiving.”

She pursed her lips and her eyes flashed.

“What are you doing here?”

He pouted innocently.

“It’s obvious I think…I marvel at my nephew.”

Ms. Turner raised her index finger angrily.

“Leave Dick alone! I won’t let you destroy him as you did with his father!”

His eyebrows jerked upwards and he gestured to himself.

“Me? Destroyed John?” he said exasperated and the sound of the music and people talking muffled it. “John was my relative and my friend: I wanted the best for him.”

But Ms. Turner didn’t buy that; she knew him.

“You slipped illegal substances to his water and stole his money!”

Zucco’s eyes bulged and his face contorted.

“That’s a lie! I didn’t steal his money: I heard of some good investments and I shared my info with him: it was his decision to invest on these companies! And I didn’t give him illegal substances – John never believed that; it was never proved!”

Ms. Turner frowned.

“John had degraded you and was ready to fire you when he died in that accident” she growled.

Zucco sniggered.

“Are you going to accuse me of that too? Accusing someone of murder needs proof, Ms. Turner!”

“You know how to cover your traces but I don’t need proof to know who you are! And I want you away from Dick!”

Zucco lolled his head on the side and looked her smugly.

“Or else?”

Ms. Turner clenched her fists.

“I’m not a scum like you to threaten you; but I’ll tell everything to Dick so he stays away from you.”

Zucco laughed.

“I don’t think he’ll listen to you…I detect that he is rather displeased with you; on the contrary he is very fond of me so I think that your effort will lead to the opposite result…”

Ms. Turner’s breath became pants to the man’s amusement.

“I can go to the police.”
He shrugged a shoulder.

“I’m the boy’s uncle and that would make Dick angrier with you; he could even sneak out to find me…The boy loves my company…”

The old lady jerked her head clenching her jaw: indeed, Dick had a soft spot for that man to the point that he didn’t believe her.

“What do you want?”

Zucco widened his eyes innocently.

“Me? What could I want other than being close to my nephew? Besides, what could a pensioner have that I’d want?” he frowned. “Though…that apartment you live, Dick’s clothes, his gadgets are pricy for your financials” his eyes shone wickedly.

Ms. Turner shook her head.

“You want money – say how much you want to leave us alone and I’ll give you.”

He smirked.

“I wonder…where you’d find the money” he cocked his eyebrows “if supposedly that was what I wanted. Poor John lost almost all his money, Mary’s new husband wasn’t wealthy and you…well, you are only a pensioner with no other fortune – John had told me.”

Ms. Turner’s eyes were cold: so that was his catch. He smelt money and came to cash in endangering her grandson’s wellbeing.

“It’s none of your business! Tell me how much and you’ll have it.”

Zucco licked his upper lip grinning. He met the old lady’s eyes.

“Why taking a portion when I can get everything?” he hissed like a real snake. “The boy is the goldmine…”

He walked away from her leaving her in a state of shock; her eyes bulged and her heart began pounding cutting her breath. Only one thought prevailed in her brain: Zucco had targeted Dick and like John he wouldn’t leave the boy alone till he extracted everything he could. She remembered with dread John’s tragic accident: the inquiry, the investigation, the assumptions…But nothing was proved and John would never come back to meet his unborn son: her heart convulsed in the suspicion that Zucco could do the same to her grandson if he thought that there was nothing else to take or was afraid of being exposed.

She sought support to the wall.

Superman was hovering over Metropolis watching everything. His hearing was focused on catching the familiar voices of Metropolis’ thugs: they were chatting about Edge’s crazy deed and either they laughed for his blunder or the wisest of them cursed him because police hardened the security and their vigilance all over the city.

Thankfully, there was no hint of violence in the city as if the blind hit at the subway had never happened. He landed on the *Daily Planet*’s rooftop under the globe’s model. Two days now he
wanted to meet Diana and tell her everything about Bruce and him but she didn’t show up.

He just returned from a wonderful dinner with his Ma: she was so happy that her son came to spend the holiday with her and more when Clark gave her Bruce’s greeting and wishes. She told him that she’d like to meet the young man…

Superman smiled: he could imagine Bruce’s reaction – he was so shy and uneasy with meeting new people. Especially, Clark’s mother. But maybe Clark could manage to persuade him.

He closed his eyes inhaling the cold air; unlike Gotham, there it wasn’t snowing. His mind went to Bruce and his outing: he knew the man’s love for those kids but still maybe he should have stayed inside; his organism was too sensitive.

Clark arched his eyebrows: nobody could change Bruce’s decision to attend and at least he hoped that the young man had a great time right now.

“Ms. Turner?”

The old lady heard the voice like it came from another world but it made her feel safe.

“Ms. Turner, are you alright?”

She turned to see Bruce Wayne staring at her worried. Ms. Turner smiled reassuringly.

“I’m fine, dear; thank you…”

Bruce turned to Selina who was watching the old lady as much worried.

“Selina, can you bring some water and Leslie?”

His friend nodded and hurried to the long tables.

“That wasn’t necessary, Bruce…” the old lady panted but Selina was already gone.

Bruce gestured at the chairs; he would have supported Ms. Turner but being on a wheelchair didn’t allow him.

“It is better you’d sit down, Ms. Turner” and since he couldn’t do much he gave her his hand to grab.

Her smile was fool of gratitude as she followed him to a secluded corner of the gym. She sat down and slowly her breath returned to normal.

Dick had just come out of the showers dressed in his casual outfit when Jason rushed to him.

“Wow, man! Ya’re fantastic!”

Dick blushed.

“Thanks, Jay!”

“Ya must be hungry: fancy some turkey?”

Dick chuckled.

“I think you fancy the turkey…”
Jason shrugged pouting.

“I tucked in tons when I was with mom – but there’s always room for more!” he rubbed circles over his belly.

Dick put his arm over the boy’s shoulders smiling.

“What have you seen my granny?”

Jeff, the coach, who was talking with some girls he was training heard him and approached.

“I saw Ms. Turner during your performance but then she went somewhere…” he craned his head.

“Ah! She’s there” he pointed at the chairs in the corner.

Dick frowned seeing his granny slumped in a chair: he couldn’t discern much because people were moving around and children were dancing again after the demonstration.


She shook her head still smiling stoic and waved off his worry.

“I’m fine now, my child…”

Selina who just arrived gave her the glass of water and she took it with a smile.

“Thank you, my dear girl.”

Bruce looked at Leslie that came along.

“Leslie, this is Ms. Turner: she is a bit pale, can you…”

“Of course, Bruce.”

“Ms. Turner, this is Dr. Leslie Thompkins, my doctor. She can examine you – just to be sure.”

Ms. Turner sipped from her glass and shook her head.

“Who doesn’t know the best and kindest doctor in the city; but I’m fine now, Dr. Thompkins, and I don’t want Dick panicked.”

Leslie sat in the chair beside her and narrowed her eyes.

“He won’t have a reason to panic if we examine you making sure that everything is alright.”

Ms. Turner closed her eyes and suddenly a boy rushed there kneeling before her; his blue eyes searched scared her face for any trace of illness.

“Granny, what happened? Are you feeling alright?”

Bruce gulped uncomfortable and his eyes darted to the other boy that came with Dick. Their eyes met for an instance and the boy turned decisively his head to Dick.

“I’m fine, sweetheart” Ms. Turner told him caressing his face. “I just felt a bit dizzy and Bruce with his friend helped me” Dick’s mouth twisted ugly on the mention of Bruce’s name and cast him a sideways hostile glance before driving all his attention to Ms. Turner. “And Dr. Thompkins is here…”
Leslie despite the woman’s objection had already touched her fingers to the old lady’s wrist to calculate her pulse.

“Your granny’s pulse is normal now and her color is back but I suggest that you take her to a hospital for a checkup.”

Dick nodded.

“Can we leave now, granny?” he didn’t like being so close to Wayne. “Are you up to?”

“We can stay a bit more” she replied wanting to make Dick stay with Bruce in hopes of him changing his mind for the man.

But Dick narrowed his eyes and stiffened reading her intention. And it was so easy for Bruce to understand and feel a painful clench in his guts.

“I have school tomorrow, granny and Jay’s mother waits us – also, you need to rest…”

Ms. Turner pressed her lips sad and stood up, Dick helping her. The old lady turned to Bruce.

“Thank you, Bruce, and all of you” she looked at Selina and Leslie.

“There’s no need to thank me, Ms. Turner” Bruce met Dick’s cold stare. “Congratulations on your performance, Richard.”

The boy jerked his head away and made to leave but he came across Alfred who carried two presents.

“All the athletes took their presents, young master Grayson: this is yours” he gave him the package smiling and turned to Jason. “And that is for you, sir.”

“I don’t want anything bought with his money!” Dick spat and threw away the gift storming away from them Jason following.

Ms. Turner lowered her head.

“I’m sorry for that…” she said shaking her head.

“It’s okay, Ms. Turner” Bruce replied. “I understand.”

She pressed her lips and patted his shoulder.

“You’re such a good boy: I hope Dick sees it soon…It was great meeting all of you” she smiled. “I must find them now, excuse me. Good night!”

“Good night, Ms. Turner…”

Selina kneeled at Bruce’s side and hugged him.

“Don’t mind him, sweetie…he’ll regret it someday!”

Bruce held her hand.

“No problem, Sel: I just want the boy to be happy – if that means that he’ll hate me, let it be.”

Leslie stood up.
“He should learn who pays everything for him…” she said grimly annoyed from the boy’s attitude.

But Bruce looked at her determined.

“No way, Leslie! He won’t find out ever!”

“What’s the matter?” Tony strolled to them with a glass of fruit punch in one hand and a turkey leg in the other. “A furious little brat – I think he was Grayson - ran into me and almost toppled me and then another one…”

Pepper followed him.

“And they didn’t even ask for an autograph…” she snorted and Tony nodded.

“Exactly! Gotham’s youth are hopeless!”

He frowned seeing Selina cuddling Bruce.

“You finally decided to shoo Supes and admit your feelings for Sel” she cast him a death stare. “Or something happened.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Nothing really…”

“Don’t give that to me, little guy…Unless you don’t trust your Tony” he cocked his eyebrows complaining and Bruce huffed defeated and told him. “What an ungrateful brat!” he spat outraged.

Bruce lolled his head on the side.

“He’s a good kid, Tony” his friend nodded in a manner implying the opposite. “Alfred” he looked at his butler “can we go? I feel a bit tired.”

“Of course, Master Bruce. Let me bring your coat.”

Impressed exclamations and excited giggles filled the gym and they looked around to see the reason: which wasn’t so difficult since a really huge – six feet tall - torte, with many layers, was pushed inside by several delivery boys. It was orange, in the color of the pumpkin and decorated with cream and white chocolate. Drooling kids stared awed at the candy.

Bruce exchanged frowned puzzled looks with the others because none of them had ordered that. But then an impeccably dressed man with a beautiful young woman at his arm entered the gym and approached the teachers and social workers talking to them.

“Thomas Elliot…” Leslie mumbled shaking her head. “And Kelly, one of our nurses.”

Thomas took the microphone that one of the staff gave him.

“I hope I’m not ruining anything…” he chuckled. “I’m Dr. Thomas Elliot, if you don’t know me already. Well, I was thinking that Gotham’s children deserve everything someone has to offer, so since my old friends Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark generously offered so much, I decided to add a little something.

Bruce cocked an eyebrow on the ‘little’ and met Tony’s eyes that had an amused shine.

“I used to do such mummeries…” the tycoon from Malibu snorted.
“Used?” Pepper cast him a haughty look.

Selina leaned to Bruce’s ear.

“He reminds you of someone?” she snorted.

Indeed, Bruce remembered that he had a suit like this; the one he wore at the police’s ball. And Thomas’ hair was groomed like his. He nodded.

“Before I shut up to let you enjoy the cake I’d like to say something I wanted for much time. I’m happy that Bruce Wayne, our angel of the Narrows, came back from the dead and Hell to give a ray of sunlight in our lives and inspire us into being better people.”

Bruce lowered his head and rubbed his temple annoyed. He absolutely hated that and if he wasn’t trained to control his respiration he’d be panting now feeling so many eyes on him. His other fist was clenched as his jaw: he wasn’t doing anything from what Eliot was saying.

Tony was frowning too because that was like re-watching Luthor the day of the opening ceremony: the scumbag was saying the same things to flatter Bruce and create an alibi.

The women of the company weren’t much convinced either.

But Thomas was grinning broadly.

“I admit that I was absorbed by myself all these years despite the fact I helped a lot of people. However my personal dramas kept me away from Gotham and made me close my eyes to the city’s misery. And then I heard about Bruce’s return and his generosity to the city and the people. I thought: hey! If Bruce can put the other people’s misery above his traumas I can do it too. So I returned to my homeland to offer whatever I can to Gotham and her people in need…” he shook his head. “And the children are the priority here because the children are our future so we’re obliged to make those cute faces bear huge smiles… The smile of one kid is worthy of all our efforts…and Bruce taught me that.”

Inside he was smirking in disgust because he hated children; especially, those with cute, sweet faces like Brucey. However, he had to play his act to the end.

“For that, I donate five hundred thousand dollars to the Haven hoping to help the brilliant work Bruce Wayne started…”

“Actually, Tony started the Haven…” Bruce mumbled between his clenched teeth.

“At least, he chose a different amount of money…” his friend whispered to Bruce’s ear sniggering.

Thomas beaming opened his arms to the gaping crowd.

“Please, applause those who created that Haven for Gotham’s less fortunate: Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark!”

The entire gym echoed from the loud clapping and Tony waved to the people.

“A bit of standing ovation never hurt anyone…” he said to Bruce through gritted teeth forming a stunning smile.

But Bruce was tense.

“Master Bruce, is everything alright?” Alfred who just returned with Bruce’s coat immediately took
in his young master’s upset.

Bruce nodded and took hastily his coat to wear it; Alfred helped him.

“Calm down, little guy” Tony said. “It’s not bad being praised and you know that there are far more for which you should be praised.”

The younger man ran his fingers through his hair.

“I’ll bid good night to the kids and the staff and I’ll return home – Hero is alone.”

Selina winked.

“Do you think he found the way down and terrorized your other pets?”

Bruce smiled.

“Thankfully, they are out…”

Tony laughed.

“I’d like to watch the little fur ball in action…”

As Bruce was congratulating the staff for the party and saying his goodbyes, many of the kids left the huge dessert and came to him. Among them Billy.

“You-you leaving, Br-Bruce?” he asked disappointed and the same was evident to other little faces.

“I’m a bit tired, Billy…But for Christmas we’ll throw another bigger party!”

The faces around him lit on that.

“Bruce, are you leaving already?”

Bruce turned to the voice’s direction to see Thomas Elliot with his date. His childhood ‘friend’ approached detaching himself from Kelly and stretched his hand for a handshake.

“I’m sure that after eighteen years you can’t recognize me” he smiled “But I’m sure that Leslie informed you.”

Bruce took his hand grinning.

“How are you, Thomas?”

The young doctor’s became broader.

“Brilliant now that I finally met you again…” he shook his head. “My…You’re more gorgeous in person” Bruce’s smile faltered and Thomas bit his lower lip. “I’m sorry – sensitive topic…” there was some irony that Bruce didn’t miss

Thomas turned to Tony.

“Tony! I’m so happy to see you after all this time! Of course I know all about your action. Wow! From our childhood you were the protector of the weak!” he shook hands with Tony who stretched his lips in a tight smile. “I remember how you’re constantly saving littl’ Brucie from the bigger boys and…me…”
Tony’s smile now was genuine.

“That’s still the most entertaining part: crushing the bullies!” he nodded.

Thomas laughed but inside he was gritting his teeth: *that bragging arrogant bastard!*

“Miss Potts!” he took her hand elegantly and touched his lips on the back of the palm. “You’re dazzling as ever!”

“Thank you, Dr. Elliot” Pepper answered.

“Call me Thomas, my dear. And who’s that beautiful young lady?” he asked looking at Selina who rolled her eyes but only inside.

“She is my friend and nurse” Bruce replied “Selina Kyle.”

Thomas was ready to kiss her hand too but she pulled it abruptly from his grip. The young doctor licked his lips a bit irritated but smiled.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Kyle.”

*I can’t say the same…* Selina thought and Bruce who was looking at her smiled knowing what she was thinking.

“Me too, Mr. Elliot.”

Thomas was upset for his title’s omission.

“It’s Dr., dear…but after all I prefer being called just Thomas. Leslie, finally I see you in a context different than the clinic; I hope you’re having a great time.”

“I do, Thomas” she nodded.

“Alfred! So nice to see you again after all these years!”

“Likewise, Dr. Elliot” Alfred replied in his pride, collected demeanor.

“You must be very happy now you got Bruce back: everyone knows how much you love him” *he was always running to you whining...* Alfred didn’t answer and Thomas finally remembered Kelly.

“Oh! This is Miss Kelly Lawrence.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Lawrence” Bruce said smiling. “But I must be going now.”

Thomas pouted.

“Of course. You’re still recovering and you have already taken so many responsibilities – as if anyone would blame you for resting.”

“Some things have to be done.”

Thomas nodded and gave him again his hand.

“I’d like to see you again, Bruce and you, Tony, for some catching up.”

Bruce smiled.

“Sure...Thank you for everything you did for the kids, Thomas” he shook his hand.
“It’s really nothing, Bruce – my pleasure…”

Alfred pushed the wheelchair to the exit and Thomas watched them.

Superman heard soft feet landing graciously behind him; he knew who it was – he had come to recognize the breath, heartbeat and perfume. Clark crossed his arms and yanked his head inhaling deeply: suddenly, the thing he was eager to do those two days, now seemed too difficult.

The Princess walked proudly towards him and stood by his side.

“Happy Thanksgiving” she said. “I learnt that this day is an important holiday for humans in this country” Clark nodded. “So – though you’re not like these people - I’m hoping that seeing me will make the night special for you” she cocked an eyebrow.

Clark looked at her.

“I’m always happy seeing you…Actually, I wanted to talk to you.”

Diana smiled.

“So you changed your mind about our kiss…”

Clark licked his lips and closed his eyes.

“No, Diana; I didn’t and I wanted to talk to you about that.”

Her displeasure was clear in her face but quickly she regained her smugness.

“Talk to me then.”

Clark pressed his lips; his heart was drumming in his chest.

“What happened in the subway – the kiss - must not be repeated, Diana. We can’t continue that” she frowned and Clark met her enchanting eyes. “I have an affair.”

Her eyebrows arched and she pouted.

“I know you’re not with Lois Lane” then something flashed in her eyes and her mouth twisted “don’t tell me it’s Wayne after all…”

Clark clenched his jaw for the contempt he saw in her face.

“Yes, we are together.”

The Amazon crossed her arms and nodded.

“You denied it several times…”

“We wanted to keep it secret – you saw how much Bruce’s connection to me threatens his life.”

She cocked an eyebrow mocking.

“Is just that? I’m not one of your enemies neither I would ever betray your secret.”

Clark nodded.
“I know but still…”

Diana wasn’t listening anymore: she erupted in a jeering laughter that hurt Clark.

“Excuse me…” she said when the laughing fit stopped. “But I’m content because your hesitation to admit it shows that you’re aware of how ridiculous this is. Superman, Kal El of the noble House of El, in a sexual relationship with Bruce Wayne of all mortals! For Zeus sake, Kal! How can you being trapped in this?!”

Clark was fuming.

“I wasn’t trapped! I love him and he deserves it!”

She shook her head.

“You forget his past?”

Clark jerked his arms in the air.

“It’s his past that makes him the bravest, the best human being I ever met!”

“Please, Kal! That’s nonsense! His past? He was a pleasure slave all his life – a whore! His body is overused, sucked up: his flesh carries the memories of all these filthy men that fucked him daily! He must be infected by many disgusting diseases!”

Clark knew that Bruce had gonorrhea.

Diana shook her head.

“Oh, Kal! His body isn’t worthy to take you inside: you’re pure as the sun, great like the Olympians – you can’t degrade yourself in this man’s body… I know about some enchantingly beautiful slaves who grant their masters some really breathtaking moments of carnal pleasure…But only to that point: beautiful beings like Wayne are made only for being used for pleasure and nothing more. However now his use is over: he is an overused, filthy whore whom even a mere human wouldn’t condescend with; and you are more that all these mortals together: you’re a walking Sun. Heck! Even Falcone would have gotten rid of him sooner or later…”

Clark closed his eyes; his temperature had increased from anger and embarrassment.

“Stop calling him a whore! He was captured by Falcone and held prisoner all his life: they were raping him!”

Diana nodded patronizingly.

“Fine, I understand that you feel for that poor victim; for the tortures he suffered. But the fact that he was abused doesn’t change the fact that he is a whore.”

“He is not!” he hissed and his eyes took a red hue.

But Diana didn’t seem shaken; she held his shoulders and looked him deep in the eyes.

“I know stories from my era: of many princes who were captured at childhood and became slaves and whores…it is tragic but can’t be undone. And once a whore always a whore – Bruce’s body is unholy, Kal; he defiles you…He is beneath you…”

Clark shook her hands off of him and turned his back to her; Diana yanked her head and watched
cold.

“You don’t know him…”

“And I don’t want to know him: I saved him once; I might do it again but I don’t want any more contact with him. I guess this was the way he tricked you into fall for him: you saved him and he touched you with his drama queen story” her voice was jeering.

Clark’s face contorted and his fists clenched; he was sick and tired of her insults. He turned to her and the air of his movement waved her hair.

“He didn’t trick me! I was the one who pleaded with him to accept my love!”

On that her eyes widened in surprise and while Clark expected her to admit her mistake, she began cackling again. Superman’s cheeks became hot.

“And you fell for that? My dear Kal, you’re so innocent…He might have been captured and imprisoned but this doesn’t change the fact that he grew up in a whorehouse. The only teachings he had – even unconsciously – were of whores seducing their potential clients; and he knew deep inside that his ass was the only asset he had to survive. So even without his will; even without knowing it he used what he was learning from his environment. Cheap whores were all the family he had but even the cheapest whore knows how to emanate some charm to a client. And Wayne has also his extraordinary looks to add to this allure: willingly or not he used the tricks he learned all these years to make you bent for his sad story and think that you’re in love with him… While in reality you just pitied him.”

Superman’s face was trembling from anger that deformed him and a fire of another kind deep inside ate him slowly – the doubt, the irrational doubt, that maybe she was right. He grabbed her upper arms but the Amazon regarded him pitying him.

“That’s disgusting, Diana! Bruce is the purest being I ever knew: he’d prefer to die than using his looks to save his life – even when a child. He never tried to allure me! He resisted my advances!”

“That was his best trick! Persuading the others that he is a wild mountain to conquer! Oh! You’re in denial, Kal! Even if he doesn’t want it that whorehouse is his childhood and first youth: all his experiences come from them. He was forged hearing whores seducing their clients, their tricks soaked his body and mind – even if he wanted to he couldn’t shake off his whore self…”

Clark remembered the sensual, breathtaking dance Bruce did on his going…that was masterful and not the feat of an amateur… And Ra’s definitely trained Bruce as his whore and to seduce other men too: Ra’s’ enemies. Ra’s was training Bruce to seduce Superman…

Diana smirked smugly as if reading his mind. Her eyes sparkled amused.

“Do not have a worry, Kal El: I would never fall as low as to compete with a whore for a man – even if this man is you!”

His lips twisted in wrath and he took off before he acted violently. He flew away from her. His destination only one: the Wayne Manor, Bruce’s bedroom, Bruce’s holy body; his salvation, his life giving sun. He wanted to forget all these things he heard; to quench the doubts that burnt inside him.

Diana let her arms fall loosely to her sides and watched Superman moving away. Her face was curved by a glorious confident smile and her eyes shone gleefully.
Bruce sat before the fireplace petting Hero who was sprawled on his lap. He was pondering over everything that happened that night. Yes, he was really tired though he enjoyed the children’s cheerful fuss. But his short encounter with Dick, Ms. Turner’s collapse and Elliot’s presence made him tense.

Even though the window was closed and he was turned to the fireplace he caught immediately the sound that he had connected with happiness…

He wheeled the chair to the window and opened for Clark who immediately lifted him gently from the chair along with Hero who meowed; Clark and brought them to the bed keeping his lips locked with Bruce’s which opened to take in his hot tongue.

“I love you” the Man of Steel breathed.

“I love you too” he replied and saw flabbergasted Clark in a blur taking Hero and his basket, leaving the room and returning without the kitten. “Why you did that?”

Clark untied the belt from Bruce’s robe and slowly removed the cloth off him.

“We don’t want him to see what is to follow…” he said playfully already unbuttoning Bruce’s pajama shirt.

Bruce couldn’t understand Clark’s sudden enthusiasm but he was certainly grateful for the change: the last days Clark seemed so uninterested. But suddenly his wristwatch beeped and his body tensed.

Clark felt it immediately and locked eyes with him inquiringly.

“Jim has turned on the Bat signal!” Bruce said and Clark felt the younger man’s relaxed body becoming iron ready to jolt upright despite the impairment.

Clark touched his palm on his chest and returned him to the mattress.

“I’ll don the cape and cowl” he said determined. “No madness this time.”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed and flashed.

“It wasn’t madness with the children, it was necessary!”

“Now it’s not” he stood up.

“Jim knows the Batman.”

“I’ll stay in the shadows” he spat and stormed out of the room and to the cave.

Bruce brought his body in sitting position, wore his robe and slithered in his wheelchair that in the meantime had come to the bed. He rushed out of the room and to the secret passage. Hero whom Clark had left to the corridor ran to him and Bruce took him in his lap.

Clark had dressed in super speed but still Bruce caught up with him before he flew out: it was so awkward for him seeing Batman.

“Be careful!” he yelled and Batman turned his head with a smile so unfitting to him.

“Go to your room and rest – you’ll need it for when I come back!”

Bruce rolled his eyes and huffed. There was no chance he’d return to the bedroom. He led the chair
to the computer and Hero jumped off his legs sniffing around and storming to the walls.

“They are out, Hero! And you should not attack the bats: they are our friends” he tried to reason with the kitten as his fingers hacked into the police’s frequencies to find what was wrong.

In the meantime, as the results flooded the screen, he pressed the button that would stop Batman’s hologram from appearing – Lucius had given him the control now he was back. He turned to the results: there were several alerts for burglaries, brawls, domestic violence but among them only one alert could have made Jim lit the signal.

“Arkham Asylum…”
Chapter 24

The sting in his neck shocked him: it was the same he had felt in the Manor before his entire body went paralyzed; he knew that Ra’s injected him again to keep him unable to react and fight.

Bruce didn’t know where he was: except from the paralysis his head was dizzy, muffled in a thick fog. He was just vaguely aware that Ra’s had took him away from his home, the Wayne Manor – exactly at the moment he thought that he got it back; he shoved him in a car to what must be a private airport. There two men came to meet him and Ra’s dropped him over his shoulder and embarked a small plane.

Bruce wanted to struggle, to writhe making his mentor’s effort difficult but his body was completely unreactive; stubbornly immobile. He could have screamed but Ra’s had gagged him: the only positive thing was that the Leader of the Shadows had given him the antidote to Crane’s fear toxin – after some time and after Al Ghul enjoyed himself watching his disobedient student suffer from nightmarish images.

He heard the plane’s engines turn on hoping against hope that something would stop Ra’s…but in vain… Superman was completely subdued by the Kryptonite, Alfred was wounded and Tony didn’t know anything about his friend’s new adventure.

He felt a jolt in his stomach and from the corner of the window he could glimpse he saw that they had taken off. He clenched his jaw and fought the tears that threatened his eyes: he lost, he was defeated the moment he believed that he had won – that his plan worked and at last he could be free…

It was torture, all these hours on board; counting every minute that took him away from Gotham and his loved ones. Far away as the minutes dragged slowly…He was so close to achieve his goal; so close to triumph over all his enemies…and now he was captive once again – a slave…No, never, ever again he’d become anyone’s slave no matter what.

Ra’s every now and then was staring at him, a huge smirk all over his face. His wild satisfaction beamed: he managed to capture the one who planned his destruction. His League’s branch in Gotham and his plan to destroy the city was ruined but he still got his prize…And now he devoured seeing in his student’s face the realization of that and the emotions that tainted him even though Bruce was trained to conceal them.

Bruce never lowered his eyes before his teacher’s stare – he wasn’t afraid of him. He might be feeling a wide range of negative emotions but terror wasn’t among them: Ra’s caught him but didn’t hurt fatally his loved ones. Fine, he was ready for his revenge which certainly would be horrid yet Bruce had the console that Gotham was free from Falcone’s reign and saved from the slaughter Ra’s had planned. And he had the chance to speak again with Tony after all these years; he had met Superman: a smile formed concealed from the gag: he was his Star… Plus, he didn’t have to pretend the frightened, subservient slave anymore.

He knew that Ra’s wouldn’t kill him: he’d have done it already. And his punishment however cruel would let him the opportunity to prepare his escape. If he had managed all these after eighteen years of captivity he could make it now as well. He just had to keep his courage and his mind strong because his mentor had already hinted that he was going to attempt to control his brain and will with drugs or League’s long tested methods.
Despite the fact his determination flared up his courage, exhaustion and disappointment was eroding him slyly; the thought of what he had planned for the day after his liberation ached.

The shaking was unstoppable as the car sped up to its destination. He was thrown in the trailer, Ra’s Al Ghul always with him. The man’s eagle eyes always fixed on him amused; Bruce hated that stare even when he still believed that the man would help him gain his freedom. When he realized that the lion-like man would never allow him to be free that hatred became even stronger, fuelling his passion to defeat him and Falcone.

The same acid bite in his heart, mocking him for his failure, for his inadequate plan: he wasn’t good enough... No, he shook off that thought: nothing had ended...

He could see outside from the trailer’s dusty door windows: Ra’s didn’t care about Bruce seeing where they headed – on the contrary, this was his purpose: Bruce realizing how far Ra’s was going to take him from his city and sinking into despair.

He could see only sand for endless miles. A desert; of course, the League had its net all over the world. It wasn’t difficult for Ra’s to hide in a hole till his enemies stopped searching. But Bruce knew that both Tony and Clark wouldn’t stop; plus, he wouldn’t stop either: he could and would save himself again.

His wild eyes watched Ra’s taking a small, plastic bottle out of the mini fridge and standing from the bench. The tower-like man kneeled beside him and removed the gag; Bruce at last was able to breathe easier. Yet his first action was to yank his head away from Ra’s who smirked and fisted his locks immobilizing him.

“I thought you’d cherish some cold water after so many hours” the Demon’s Head arched an eyebrow. “I don’t want you dehydrated. At least for now.”

The cool aura the bottle emanated and the water’s light smell was tantalizing to Bruce who hardly stopped his tongue from licking his dry lips. Yet he knew better than taking water from his mentor who was a master in poisoning. So when the rim of the bottle touched his lips, he fought the powerful urge to drink and jerked his head more.

Ra’s closed his eyes disappointed and tightened his grip, yanking Bruce’s head violently towards his.

“If I wanted to poison you, child, I wouldn’t have used tricks: I’d have done it openly and enjoy myself immensely...” his voice had the familiar hue of mixed affection and sneering that always confused the young Bruce. “I suggest you take that generous gift because it’ll be the last for long...” a crook evil smile dag his half face.

Bruce bore his stare to Ra’s in a battle of wills and then with pride began swallowing the water slowly though his dried body wanted to take it all at once. Ra’s was watching him with a smile on his face between amusement and real care.

“Generous gift...” Bruce cocked his eyebrows in sarcasm. “You never make gifts and your supposed generosity is a trick to gain what you want.”

Ra’s caressed some water drops on Bruce’s jaw and neck relishing the contact. Bruce could resist only by thrashing his head yet Ra’s’ grip was strong.

“You know me so well, Bruce...” he hissed continuing his caress. “I am the one who was fooled by his student” he shook his head. “I underestimated you even though I considered you my best ever student. And though I’m outraged about your treason, I’m also thrilled about what I still have in my
hands. So you’re right: the water wasn’t a gift to you: it just serves my purpose to keep you alive and
tame you – for real this time.”

Bruce clenched his jaw and his lips formed a tight line.

“You’ll never succeed that! I’m not your slave or pet – I won’t ever again serve you!”

Now Ra’s grabbed his chin continuing his hold on Bruce’s hair with the other hand.

“I love challenges, Bruce” he breathed “you’re my life’s biggest challenge and most fascinating –
especially now I know everything…The unyielding spirit under the compliant body I fucked
whenever I desired…” he smirked.

Bruce bared his teeth.

“You know nothing about me…” he growled.

Ra’s’ grasp on his chin loosened and his gray eyes dove into Bruce’s.

“Batman’s infamous growl…” he mumbled not a hint of anger there. “I was so blind not suspecting
that my wayward student, my untamed possession was the mysterious demon of the night – but I
didn’t think that you were still untamed: I believed that your punishment the last time was enough”
he smiled. “But on the contrary, it was the motivation for you to perfect yourself and your plan…”
he squinted. “Why bats, child?”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed, glimmering menacingly.

“You bragged that you know everything now… Asking that just implies the opposite…Your
ignorance and your stupid, empty arrogance.”

Ra’s released Bruce and sat again on the bench.

“In fact, Bruce, I know why your persona of revenge was a bat – even if you don’t know… As a
matter of fact, it’s so obvious that I laugh at myself for my blindness…It was natural for you to go for
something nocturnal: a demonic element of the night – even unconsciously” he cocked his eyebrows
to Bruce’s defiant stare. “After all, night, demon and wings are in your DNA – as well as irresistible
charm… Every answer in your seductress ancestor…”

Suddenly, the scenery changed and he was dragged outside the van into a military camp:
rectangular buildings surrounding an enormous space where ninja clad people and soldiers trained.
A tall building towered the other buildings and although simple it was obvious that it housed the
leader. Bruce instantly pegged the watchtowers and the men there and the vehicles in the carports at
the far end of the yard.

Ra’s dragged him to the pole exactly at the compound’s center. Bruce turned his eyes to him.

“Is this how you consider taming me?” he asked because this pole’s use was obvious.

Ra’s chuckled.

“I’m too predictable, huh?” he said and threw Bruce on his knees in front of the metallic pole.

Bruce would have struggled but the paralysis was still too strong and his head’s moving range was
minimal.

Some of the people who were training came closer to help their leader yet he waved them off. He
grabbed Bruce’s wrists, stretched his arms above his head and closed each wrist to the metallic shackles that hanged on the top of the pole. After that, he shackled Bruce’s ankles as well.

“Of course, you are an expert in every kind of torture and I know that you aren’t afraid of pain – yet I must entertain myself and…punish you” he whispered gleefully in Bruce’s ear.

“You can torture me as much as you want to have your…entertainment but you won’t tame me – you won’t make me serve you again with or without my will. Tortures or whatever brainwashing technique you have will fail!”

Ra’s traile Bruce’s sweaty neck with his finger.

“My brainwashing techniques have been updated…” he breathed making Bruce’s skin ripple.

“Crane…” he cracked an ironic smile.

“Exactly but I’d never rely only on a psycho doctor for the success of my plan…” Bruce frowned. “I have another ace in the hole to keep you grounded till your taming is over…and forever.”

There was a confident shimmer in Ra’s’ eyes that Bruce didn’t like at all; it was a bad omen or a bluff. Bruce wouldn’t make again the mistake to believe Ra’s so easy.

The Leader of the Shadows detached and clapped his hands.

“First, a traitor must be punished for his treason: usually, the punishment for this is death but I know that for you death isn’t the worse thing…And I won’t give up on my investment so quickly…”

He gestured with his fingers and Bruce saw Bane coming out from the shadows of a carport. The giant was strutting, highlighting his enormous body and his bulging muscles. His face as always was covered with black silk and Bruce wondered how he handled it with the unbearable heat of the place.

Before his eyes floated Bane’s horribly deformed face that day Ra’s ordered Bruce to beg the giant to…use him… Nausea pierced angrily his stomach enhancing the existing nausea from the long trip, the heat and the drugs Ra’s used to immobilize him. Maybe Bane’s face in this state couldn’t feel the temperature’s changes. Which was actually a blessing since this heat was really annoying after Gotham’s cold.

Bruce looked at Ra’s with contempt.

“You didn’t think of anything original?” he cocked an eyebrow and shook his head. “So much for your resourcefulness: borrowing from the criminals you despise…”

Ra’s smiled.

“There’s not much originality when you want to chasten your disobedient property – yet you’ll get to know my…original ways soon.”

Clenching his jaw wasn’t enough to subdue the devastating pain that flooded his entire body beginning from the deep line that was burrowed from his left shoulder blade to his right kidney. Yet he managed to swallow the scream that wanted to escape his lungs. Maybe if he could clench his fingers too he’d have achieved to fight the pain better.

Ra’s made a gesture to Bane to hold and fisted Bruce’s hair.
“It’s not original but it’s definitely entertaining…” his tongue licked his ear and Bruce head butted his mentor since now his head had more mobility than before.

Ra’s laughed but there was irritation; he didn’t expect that from Bruce. He threw Bruce’s head to the pole and moved away.

“Continue!” he barked to his minion.

The pain was reaching unknown levels as the whip tilled his back; he kept his mouth stubbornly shut and his teeth gritted not wanting to give the satisfaction to Ra’s who was watching avidly for any hint of weakness; neither to the crowd of ninjas and soldiers that have gathered to watch the show nor to Bane. The giant’s breath revealed his enthusiasm for what he was doing and his wrath because he failed to make Bruce scream or beg.

But he wasn’t going to give them the pleasure…even if the pain made his body convulse and his heart pound desperately in his chest. His jaw and teeth ached from the clenching and his breath was burning in his lung. He could hear his flesh shatter and blow in hundreds of little particles; he could hear every drop of his blood showering the soil. But he swore that he’d endure as always…Even though every lash was stronger and more devastating than the previous.

“I have a large collection of whips from all the eras of the humanity’s torture history” Ra’s scoffed. “Guess who’s going to try them? So, child, I suggest you let some screams out of your system because you’ll do it sooner or later and it’ll help you fight the pain…”

His voice reached Bruce’s ears shattered between the hair rising sound of the whip ripping the air and then his flesh exploding under the weight.

“You wish…” Bruce growled through gritted teeth, his eyes already seeing red from the pain and his mouth tasting copper.

Suddenly, the sound stopped and the hot air of the dessert grazed his bleeding wounds.

“I can skin him alive with the whip” Bane hissed to his master who obviously ordered him to stop.

“I’m sure” Ra’s retorted amused and a bit contemptuous “but if you’d do this then what you’re going to whip in the afternoon? Let the pain sink in…”

Bruce on the verge of losing consciousness didn’t hear Ra’s approaching so the hand petting his wet hair was a surprise. His mentor’s eyes were in his and Bruce met his stare defiantly.

“That’s all?” he asked in a throaty voice.

Ra’s smirked and caressed with his finger Bruce’s hot, sweaty cheek.

“Bring salt for his wounds…” he ordered in a nonchalant way and although that panicked his heart Bruce kept his stare unfazed.

Even when the acid, stinging pain throughout his throbbing back intensified in a mind crushing way causing his eyes to water and his teeth to grind. Yet the pain wasn’t recessing in the least and his body shook.

“I can’t let you faint…” Ra’s whispered and his sadness sounded almost real “you must absorb the pain in every cell of your body and mind and then the other things that await you…”

He brought a small vial to Bruce’s nostrils that stung and made his brain jolt with energy. Energy
that just fuelled the pain locations to impale his cranium.

His hands and legs were tied in a way that his chest touched the pole and that became a new torture to add to the rest as the boiling sun that now was burning exactly above his head had heated up the metal. His flesh was already burnt by the contact while his back was totally exposed since his T-shirt was rags hanging around or stuck in the fresh wounds.

He was dizzy and his head ached as if the pain from his wounds wasn’t enough. And thirst had dried his neck making it hard even to swallow the little saliva he was left. Sometimes his head weakened slumped to the pole for support but the hot metal made him jerk causing worse stings from his open wounds where various insects already crawled.

Sweat ran his body…The shackles binding his wrists had heated up so much that the metal burnt his flesh; actually, his entire body felt as if broiled. Yet he couldn’t faint even if he tried…His boiling mind brought back the cold weather of Gotham that he had left behind only a few hours ago.

He was alone in the yard; till now there were many people training or making chores but as the hours passed and the noon arrived, nobody was out except the guards on the watchtowers around the camp. It was better this way because all these hours they were drinking water or washed themselves in the wells – Bruce had desperately counted and re-counted the ten wells that were scattered in the vast yard until he realized that this made his thirst and body heat worse and his eyes were unable to see clear.

Bruce now that nobody was going to see and jeer him closed his eyes and licked his dry lips. The only positive thing was that slowly his body seemed to overcome the paralysis from Ra’s’ drug – with full mobility he might be able to escape.

It was really a shock when he felt a presence right beside his head. He opened again his eyes mastering their defiance only to be met with a chuckle. Ra’s. Dressed in a clean all white training outfit; he looked rather cool and refreshed. Probably, he had just showered and drank loads of cool water…

His mentor’s hand fell hard on his back which cried not only because of the open wounds but also because of the burnt flesh and the salt going deeper. Bruce bit hard his bottom lip until it bled and Ra’s ran his thumb over the dry flesh.

“Your master can be really forgivable and generous if his slave admitted his fault and begged for forgiveness…”

It was difficult to find his voice in the dry well that was his throat.

“You really believed that you could bend me so easily?” he saw the reflection of his eyes in Ra’s orbs and was relieved to see still power in them. “I’m not your slave…”

Ra’s’ annoying smirk made its appearance.

“Yes…It’s too easy and too soon for your admirable willpower to kneel before me. And yes, you’re not my slave” he laughed “though if your pride allowed it you’d admit that you’d beg to be one of them now…You see, my servants and slaves are inside this time of the day, well fed, well hydrated and without any pain.”

Bruce snorted.

“Serving you is the worst pain anyone can get!”
But then he felt a tiny pinch in his neck and his body went limp and paralyzed again. Ra’s fisted his hair and made Bruce look him in the face.

“The effect of the drug I shot you with was almost over so I had to make you harmless again…”

On hearing ‘harmless’ Bruce yanked his head to butt Ra’s but this time he avoided him; the drug’s effect was too strong and the motion too weak. Ra’s smirk was triumphant.

“Not this time, child…” something stabbed the inflamed skin of his neck and Ra’s showed him a syringe “mixing business with pleasure…Dr. Crane suggests that his medicine has better use when the subject is tired and in pain…I’m going to break your body and mind and reshape them as I want.”

And invisible as he came, Ra’s disappeared leaving him with only company the burning sun, his collection of pains and his headache that was throbbing for hours due to the heat and now became worse obliterating everything around him.

The hissing and horribly crushing sounds of the thick, heavy leather string of the whip reached as a distant echo to his drumming head; the pain although excruciating wasn’t enough to make him scream as his former master wanted or come back to his surroundings.

Of course, it was afternoon: the sun although still hot began slithering to the west but the heat was unrelenting.

Every new stroke was stronger as his body went weaker stroke by stroke. Every howl of the lash, every devastating blow crushed his chest to the pole. People were gathered around the pole staring, clearly savoring the torture: his body’s desperate writhing, his clenched jaw, his blood raining the dry sand, his defiance that only prolonged the torture.

He convulsed as the merciless burning of the salt filled the gashes left by the lashes. This time Bane sniggered in his ear, his nail digging the bleeding flesh.

“Finally, the whore getting what he deserves…” he hissed. “You now wish Chill had finished you off that night in the sewers…”

“Not really…” Bruce panted but his voice was surprisingly steady. “I’m glad I didn’t miss your League’s failure in Gotham…”

Bane’s enormous hand clenched his blood stained locks and hit his forehead to the pole.

“Is still early, bitch…You will beg for mercy soon – the mercy of death…”

Liquid slithering in the middle of his forehead – blood. The first hammers of migraine.

“You’re too little to make me beg!” he spat in his torturer’s face and Bane left him cursing.

Now the heat had recessed the cold invaded rapidly his body; his hot flesh cooled pleasantly but soon he began trembling as the nights in his cell down at Dolcetto’s basement. He thought that cold would be the best thing for him yet now his bones felt like shattering – his teeth rattled.

The compound had scarce lighting for not drawing unwanted attention and from what Bruce caught they also had some kind of protection from satellites…As the night crept the cold gradually became freezing and Bruce though he knew that tomorrow would change his mind prayed for some warmth. The blood slowly dried and now froze in his wounds but the pain hadn’t decreased to the slightest.
And he was hungry: pangs tormenting his stomach after the nausea of the day. Thirst was skinning his brain…

This time he heard Ra’s light footsteps: the lion-like man made circles around him inspecting his work. Yet Bruce noticed something else: his old mentor held a leg of roast chicken. Bruce all these years had almost forgotten the taste of well cooked meat or anything cooked; it was Ra’s that fed him properly to sculpt his body. And now that crust looked so tantalizing and the smell made his stomach churn and his mouth watering.

But Ra’s smirk made Bruce shake himself: he wouldn’t give him the pleasure. He gazed at the black sky instead; the stars glimmering while the moon was just a slice.

“It’s for the dog anyways…” Ra’s snorted and threw the meat on the soil.

A dog rushed from a hangar and began devouring the roast flesh. Bruce didn’t let his eyes dart there though only the wet sounds of chewing was enough for the pangs in his stomach strengthen as his migraine.

Ra’s came closer and kicked Bruce’s knees to draw his student’s attention.

“Gobi desert is the worst desert in the planet: during daytime it may reach temperatures of 119 Fahrenheit degrees to fall at – 40o degrees at night” he arched an eyebrow. “The best place on earth to harness your unbowed slaves.”

Bruce stared at him unfazed.

“Is that how you believe you’ll break me?” he retorted defiantly. “I’m used to the cold…”

The Leader of the Shadows chuckled and his eyes flashed in the dim lights of the camp.

“Of course you are, my warrior” he snorted and Bruce unable to react saw again the shine of thin metal – a needle stabbed his neck and hot liquid flooded his veins. “Goodnight.”

It was colder than anything he had experienced; maybe it was the sudden transition from extremely hot to extremely cold; maybe it was the drugs Ra’s injected him. But his mind became misty and in his exhaustion he didn’t have the mood to make it clear up. His body was paralyzed, able only to feel but not move so he couldn’t try to escape.

As the mist slowly lifted Bruce cursed the blazing sun that even in the dawn was burning the place. The camp had awakened from the first light colors of the dawn and everyone was engaged in different chores: brushing the military cars and vans, the artillery, the premises; some of them sparring. They cast fleeting glances to him but nothing more: their interest was picked only during his whipping hours.

After three days Bruce had learnt his brutal program: twenty lashes early in the morning, twenty at afternoon and twenty at evening. With different whips every time: the worst till now the cat o’ nine tails each tail with spikes. That made him finally scream: it was during the third part of his daily ‘treatment’, at the final ten blows, each blow stronger than the last one…His flesh roasted by the all day sun; the blood spilt from the morning had exhausted him – the hunger digging his insides. They were giving him some crumbs and some drops of water to not die and to worsen his hunger and thirst. Fever fuelling everything…

No, it wasn’t just three days… Was much more because he had a full beard by now…

It was the fifteenth or sixteenth stroke when his teeth unclenched and he screamed with all the
assembled pain of those days. He could feel Ra’s who was standing behind him closing his eyes in relish; the audience gaping surprised but not in the least disinterested. Bruce knew how to keep his audience’s fascination: during the last strokes he just groaned; he’d have fainted but his punisher didn’t allow him that temporary relief.

Suddenly, between the reality of his surroundings and the dim world of his blurred mental scenes’ hurricane, he heard feet approaching. He pushed his brain to focus on the environment and saw small feet walking on the perimeter that was stained with his blood.

He lifted his head and saw that his visitor was short but well built, dressed in blinding white clothes that would suit to an Arabian Prince. From the feet Bruce concluded that his staring visitor was a teen or younger.

He couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl because the head was covered in white scarf with only the eyes visible: blue eyes in sapphire’s color sparkling gleefully conveying to the prisoner contempt and even hatred. Bruce wondered who that kid might be: the eyes weren’t similar to Ra’s. They were almond shaped with long, silken eyelashes.

His visitor sent him a last scornful look and turned away from him retreating to the building that was Ra’s’ residence. So definitely the kid was someone important for the Leader of the Shadows…He tried to make his brain riddle this but immediately confused scenes of his past and present made his cohesive thoughts scatter. That migraine was the worst he had experienced till now. And the fever was a hot, howling wind that broke the chains holding things together…

It was dark around, the dim lights blurring more his vision. He heard the echo of many feet approaching the pole and blinked several times to clear his eyes. His audience was gathering again for another show.

And then Ra’s was next to him unlocking the shackles from his wrists and ankles; his body completely uncontrolled collapsed to the soil and Bruce saw up close thousands dried drops from his blood. He wondered what new torture his mentor had prepared for him and wished his body wasn’t paralyzed so he could attack him.

Ra’s twisted his arms behind his back and handcuffed them while he used rope to tie his elbows. Finally, he stood up heaving Bruce along.

“My men need different entertainment – educational recreation” he said snidely. “So I decided to let them meet the Bat” his smirk was broad “and grant myself the pleasure of watching your true skills. You’ll face them with tied hands but I release your body.”

Bruce was staring at him expressionless: he was in pain, weak, ill yet it was still a chance. During Falcone’s imprisonment he donned the cowl and faced criminals in similar condition: while Ra’s was training him, Bruce realized that his mind filled the gaps of his body’s suffering.

He glared at Ra’s and his mentor smiled.

A touch to his neck was the only thing needed to feel his control over his body returning – and it was a great feeling even if his arms were tied and at least ten opponents among them Bane waited to beat him up.

Ra’s stopped supporting him and Bruce tottered and fell on his scraped knees but he clenched his jaw and stood up; he staggered a little more till he maintained his balance.

The Leader of the Shadows walked away, gesturing nonchalant to his minions.
“Let the show begin!” he snorted.

Bruce’s eyes flashed seeing his opponents, circling him like hungry wolves: he read in their eyes the ambition to make the stubborn prisoner break so to win their Leader’s praise.

The pain from endless days of torture, the burnings all over his body, the hunger and thirst, the shivering from the fever, everything was put in a dark corner deep in his mind to not interfere with his battle. His hands were tied but he still had his legs, head and teeth to use.

He clenched his teeth and ducked the punch one of them launched to his face while in the same time kicked another who attacked him from behind. The first man made to punch him again but this time Bruce head butted him in the chest using his impetus to catapult his opponent on the two men who were charging behind the first. But he couldn’t waste more time on them because several others were simultaneously attacking from behind, right and left.

Bruce closed his eyes and jumped to the air astounding his opponents who felt the force of his legs and fell back. Yet that wasn’t enough for Bruce who propelled his legs to kick chests, necks, heads and ribs like a mill of flesh. As he went for landing his knee broke a jaw the same time the back of his head hit a ninja attacking from behind.

It felt so great: the power, the thrill of the fight, the wave of iron will flooding his body washing away all the eroding things. He planted his feet on the ground and with a final twist he got rid of the handcuffs and the rope binding his elbows.

Ra’s clapped, smirking.

“Well done, Bat! They took a great lesson but they are just trainees: you’re not done yet…”

Bane with his toned, broad chest naked trotted to him; his eyes shone gleefully.

“I’m glad you passed them unscathed because now you won’t say that I smashed you because the others exhaust you. And you lose your restraints so you won’t whine about that being the reason you lost.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side, his fists clenched on his sides.

“You talk too much, Bane!”

His old trainer growled and charged at him with his enormous fists ready. But Bruce while looking at Bane had the corner of his eye estimating the distance to the camp’s gate where a van was parked – conveniently ready to leave.

Bruce jumped at the last moment before Bane’s fist squashed his liver. His bare heel stabbed the giants’ nape. It seems that the driver was ready to leave for some mission but stayed to watch the show. And then on the balcony of Ra’s’ residence the same white clad figure watched. Bruce felt the mystery fascinating him but there were more urgent matters.

“C’mon, Bane” Bruce spat as his feet touched graciously the soil. “It’s easier when your opponent is paralyzed and you only have to maneuver the whip, huh?”

“You’re a warrior or an exotic dancer, Bat?” Bane sneered. “Or you’re afraid to measure your power with mine?”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow and Ra’s did the same.
Bane bared his teeth and stormed again this time keeping his eyes locked with Bruce’s who didn’t avoid him; this time he stopped the giant’s fist with his hand and he kicked Bane in the ribs only to have his foot slapped by the giant’s other hand the same moment that Bane launched his head to smash it to Bruce’s forehead; the younger man dodged and his own head found Bane’s neck.

Bane growled and retreated a bit coughing and moving his head to shake off the impact of the hit. Bruce watched him hearing more men crawling closer to attack him.

“No!” Bane barked. “This whore is mine!”

Bruce smirked.

Bane this time attacked with a stampede of punches targeting Bruce’s torso. The younger man met every punch with his hands blocking them yet Bane’s foot fell devastatingly on his kidney. Bruce grunted because there the skin was many times flayed by the whip and the wound was still open.

His breath was cut in his lungs and his eyes saw red but he didn’t need his vision to duck Bane’s grip that wanted to break his cranium taking advantage of his momentary weakness. Using his former trainer’s attempt to hit him as distraction he kicked him with his calf in the belly.

Bane growled surprised and Bruce jumped in the air, his legs stretched to blow his opponent’s chest. But his trainer caught Bruce’s feet before they made contact and pulled Bruce to him but the younger man used the force of his pull to head butt again the giant and twist out of his grip kicking him in the face.

The giant staggered but an instant before Bruce jolted away he clenched the younger man’s hair and drew him to his chest choking him with his other forearm.

Bruce’s breath was instantly stopped and his eyes began watering, he tried to punch Bane to get some release but the giant just tightened his grip.

“What is it, little Bat?” he sniggered. “Now that acrobatics are over you have a hard time?”

Bruce felt that he was seconds before fainting and behind the mist of his eyes watched the men getting closer to have their fun afterwards; their fists and legs ready to break all his bones. He felt dizzy but still the van was in his focus…

It was now or never…He closed his eyes and focused…he managed to make his hands that hanged limp on his sides grab in a swift movement Bane’s neck and use the press point to make the giant’s body paralyze. He grinded his teeth and heaved the giant over his body and crushed him to the men that had approached.

In the fuss of curses and confusion Bruce ran as fast as he could towards the van. He was a foot away when something pierced his neck and he collapsed at once: Ra’s…

He heard Bane’s footsteps and he was heaved from his hair to get dragged before Ra’s feet who nodded with respect.

“You’re a great warrior, Bruce…But I couldn’t let you escape: now it’s more urgent that I tame you” melancholy was again all over that smug face as he cupped gently Bruce’s chin.

“You won’t!” Bruce spat and Ra’s caressed his bearded cheek with affectionate shine in his eyes.

With an abrupt nod gave his order to Bane who tossed Bruce into the waiting men. His arms were clenched behind his back and the man holding him stretched Bruce’s torso.
Bane stood before him; his naked torso glistened from the sweat of their fight and some bruises had already begun to appear. His eyes showed his wild joy.

Bruce knew what to expect so the first punch in his exposed face was hardly a surprise though it almost broke his nose. Blood flooded his nostrils and became more when the enormous fist hit again his nose. Now his nose was definitely broke and he felt like the night Chill sank him in the sewers. His former trainer hammered his mouth next tearing his lips and shattering his jaw – the taste of copper was nauseating and the blood was choking him.

And then the giant began breaking his ribs with his palm stretched forming a blade: one at a time, the cracking sound sickening. His stomach was next taking the giant’s fury in a stampede of punches.

Bruce couldn’t do anything else than be the receiving end; his body was completely paralyzed and held tight by a minion. He felt the pain flooding every cell of his body and mind…His mind that once again filled with mist and blurred images of his father and Ra’s smiling at him…until a new blow made his body twitch in his holder’s arms and fall. The blood like rainfall slithered through his neck to his chest that was sparsely covered by the rags of what used to be his T-shirt.

At some point he collapsed, almost unconscious but still with a clouded perception of his surroundings though everything seemed far, so far away.

Like Al Ghul whose face loomed over him but through a thick veil; his torturer looked sad.

“I wish your spirit would break so easily as your flesh and bones…”

The rest felt unreal as in a dream – a dream where you could feel pain and touches. People carried him in a cool place and he was put in liquid – not exactly water but he honestly couldn’t be sure. Every particle of his body screamed in agony as hands washed away the fresh and dried blood, the dust that covered him. Even washing his hair was agony; his migraine worsening with every brush, the images twirling inside getting faster in their mixing, more absurd, meaningless.

He was leaving and coming back…

New stinging all over and Bruce realized that they were applying medicine in his injuries: he was used to this as all the years under Ra’s’ wing they always smeared things on his body. He moaned as pressure was applied to his ribs – he’d have coughed but he didn’t have the strength. They were gauzing his wounds but this was honestly too much: he didn’t want to be anchored in reality anymore and darkness was once again his haven…

His eyelids flattered weakly permitting light invade his eyes. He could feel his body erect, stretched spread eagled; his wrists and ankles were tied but he could also feel a depressing weight around his neck: a collar, he concluded, though his skull was echoing from hammers. He was dressed in soft, clean clothes and his face was clean shaven.

Someone was there…

Bruce opened his eyes and something clenched his heart: he was inside a shining cage that hardly contained him in its asphyxiating dimensions; the cage was in the middle of an enormous bedroom elegantly decorated similar to the suite where Ra’s claimed him for the first time. He looked at the presence outside his cage; it was the same white clad child, this time his face uncovered: his face, because it was a boy though his raven hair was reaching his shoulders.

He was a very beautiful boy at his twelve years, strongly built. His cheekbones were high and his
eyes almond shaped. He reminded him of someone but that spiteful sparkle in his icy eyes was ruining the connections.

The door opened and Ra’s dressed in a white attire like the boy’s strutted to them beaming.

“I see you met your warden, Bruce” Ra’s chirped. “Let me introduce you” he put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and he yanked his head arrogantly. “This is my son, D…The Prince…” he made a dramatic pause stabbing his eyes to Bruce’s “of Shadows…”

Bruce couldn’t discern the rest of the boy’s name because his ears buzzed worse that exact moment: Ra’s’ son? He wondered as his mentor patted the boy’s shoulder. As far as Bruce knew Ra’s had lost his wife five years before he took him under his wings; he haven’t heard anything of a new wife.

“D…, you can leave us now” Bruce still couldn’t discern the rest of the name as if someone was lowering the volume to torment him.

He watched the boy retreating out of the room, their gazes met for an instant as he closed the door.

“Just the two of us…” Ra’s said circling Bruce’s cage “my pet-bat in a golden cage…” he taunted but Bruce didn’t even look at him.

His mentor unlocked the cage and pressed a button on the roof releasing Bruce from his restraints, even the collar; yet he didn’t have any control of his body. Ra’s wrapped his arms around his waist, heaved him and dragged him to the king sized bed.

Bruce clenched his jaw.

“Not even think about it!” it was easy to figure what Ra’s wished to do.

“I wish I could, child” he chuckled “but it seems that you defeated me in one thing” his mouth touched his ear “I can’t command my body stop pleading for yours: isn’t it ridiculous? Being enslaved to my own slave?” he whispered moisturizing his ear “But I need you, Bruce…I wish I didn’t but I do…you give me more life than the Lazarus Pit…”

Bruce jerked his head but not away as Ra’s expected but to hit his mentor’s forehead. The momentary shock made Ra’s grip loosen and Bruce collapsed, every injury yelling in agony.

Ra’s instead of being angry, chuckled and squatted next to him clenching his upper arm.

“Charming…” he said slyly. “Let’s consider this as foreplay…I always suspected the fire burning inside you, the inferno waiting the chance to explode but I thought that you were subservient to me. All this time, I was fucking Batman believing that I just penetrated a caged canary; only smelling the fire, the power and get more enchanted by the unknown…Now I’ll have the pleasure bending your defiance, your pride, your powerful spirit; the fire that always infatuated me.”

Bruce shook his head.

“You won’t get anything! The only thing you managed was to exploit a frightened kid, as much as the perverts you supposedly punish. You won’t touch me again!”

Ra’s heaved him with one hand grabbing his upper arm and the other clenching his locks.

“I couldn’t let your body rot anymore even if you deserved to be left to feed the worms; but this body is too precious to be wasted in your stubbornness; and I need that spirit becoming mine.”
He tossed him on the mattress and Bruce’s teeth grinded from his despair to resist.

“You’re sick and twisted…” he growled as Ra’s turned him on his back and began undoing his black training robe.

His torso was naked now and Ra’s watched with eager eyes; he was ready to plant his mouth on Bruce’s neck but the younger man jerked his head butting him once again causing much pain to himself as well. Ra’s roared.

“I love it! Subduing your resistance – taming the wild animal: my distant ancestor slew the demon and I will tame the spirit and body of that demon’s last descendant!” his eyes shone fervently.

Bruce shook his head pitying him.

“You’re crazy!”

The older man smirked.

“I saw your beautiful mark on your right foot’s big toe, the one that this bastard, Falcone chopped – you remember the little leaf?” Bruce’s eyes were fixed on him and it was obvious that Ra’s relished that. “The mark of Lilith… I should have taken you from the moment you were born…”

Ra’s’ lips were trailing his neck, sounds of lapping filling the room; demanding hands fondled his torso aggressively, feeling every ripple of muscle as if it was the first time. As his tongue licked the younger man’s pectorals and his teeth grazed his nipples, his hands slipped under Bruce’s waistband and lowered his training pants.

Bruce attacked his ear biting with all the might his nausea gave to him. Ra’s grabbed his face with both hands and captured his lips violently tasting his own blood.

“My Bat demon…” he roared thrilled. “Your body gives me energy, life! You’re mine…”

“I’m not!” he panted and thrashed his head trying to escape; Ra’s’ ruling hands pushed his pants off his pelvis and groped his testicles. “You can’t keep me here! You know that I’ll run away!”

Ra’s was nibbling his abdominals and Bruce could hear the man’s heart beating frantically in overflowing desire.

“Yes…” he mumbled between licking and sucking the taut flesh. “I know you’ll try to run away, unwilling to serve your rightful master…”

“You’re not my master! I don’t have a master!”

But Ra’s didn’t seem to be listening, his fingers already penetrating Bruce’s anus sending the youth’s heartbeat to peak.

“But this time you won’t run away; you won’t want to escape…”

“Of course I will! Ugh!” he gritted his teeth and yanked his head desperately in hopes of getting some opening to hit Ra’s who was opening his legs. “Stop!”

He felt Al Ghul’s mouth sucking his thighs’ insides and bile filled his mouth.

“You won’t want to leave me…” his fingers played inside him as he always liked to do “because I’m your father… You always knew that; you trusted me from the first moment because you sensed that I’m your real father…”
“No!” he stretched his neck trying to breathe since Ra’s ministrations were sickening him. “You’re not my father…”

“Really now…” the older man hissed and his fingers became more painful, stretching and digging his rectus. “Are you sure? Your memories aren’t so clear, right?”

It was true: from the day Ra’s brought him there the memories of his dad became blurred with the lion-like man; Thomas’ face taking Al Ghul’s features; the few happy years of his childhood echoing from Ra’s caring voice.

“It’s a lie! Crane’s drags make that to my memory but I won’t ever believe it!”

He saw the older man’s eyes sparkling above his groin.

“You don’t believe it now but as I continue giving you drugs what I want you to believe will become your only reality…And having your father – that’s me – fuck you won’t seem pervert to your harnessed mind.”

Bruce thrashed and his head’s power pulled along his shoulders.

“You won’t harness me with cheap tricks!”

Ra’s smirked with his confident way and Bruce felt his thighs stretched. His old mentor invaded him with one swift, strong movement that made him clench his jaw to fight the pain. He kept his teeth gritted as the lion-like man began thrusting in a steady pace each time more painful than the previous.

Bruce controlled his breath because he didn’t want to give the satisfaction to Ra’s who was panting, his sparkling eyes and beaming face betraying the pleasure he was feeling. Bruce dreaded that indeed his body was giving energy and life to this man…

“It’s the last time you touch me” he said determined. “Crane’s poisons will fail.”

Ra’s pushed harder and Bruce felt as if he was impaled by a hot metal; images from his first time with Chill in the alley and the countless times they put things in him swimming before his eyes and re-opening the wounds in his heart.

“Every time it pains like your first time…You’d never learn to make it easier for you…Who was your first, Bruce? Falcone or that filthy gorilla Chill?” Bruce didn’t answer and Ra’s chuckled. “You won’t leave me again, child, with your will…”

Bruce tried to keep his focus on what Ra’s was saying and not in the thrusts that hammered his insides and made his body writhe.

“Because you wouldn’t want to abandon in my hands…your son!”

Bruce’s heart gave a really painful kick and his breath stopped abruptly.

“My…what?”

Ra’s sniggered.

“Your warden…He didn’t remind you of anyone? Of course you didn’t look in many mirrors when you were at his age but still the resemblance is striking; he has your eyes minus the emerald stars, he has your cheekbones, your lips; your extraordinary beauty – even his scent borders your.
Unfortunately, he doesn’t have Lilith’s mark which still makes you unique. He is perfect though…As I wanted him…”

Bruce shook slowly his head in negation.

“You’re lying…”

“I told you that if you were a girl after Bagdana used you you’d have been with a baby…But then I thought it better: you didn’t need a womb to give me a child…and Luthor’s technology made it possible: your DNA that had absorbed the demon’s seed, and my DNA…”

“All these are filthy lies: you just took another innocent child and use him to manipulate me!”

The older man fisted his hair and lifted Bruce to have their bodies glued; their eyes collided and Ra’s smirked.

“You know it is true, Bruce…You know it because apart from the striking resemblance you feel your connection with my son…Our son, Bruce. With our child I have you eternally bound with me!” his eyes shone evilly as his ejaculation burnt Bruce’s insides. “As long as this child is alive I’ll be alive as well; you will always see me in the shine of his eyes…”

The dark haired boy tossed a bowl with water through the bars of his cage. Bruce was slumped on the floor, his arms and elbows tied behind his back and the collar around his neck with a chain connected to the bars. His brain was heavy with tons of thoughts and taunting images.

“Drink!” the boy ordered angrily in his still unripe soft voice; yet his smugness eliminated the softness of his child voice. “Like an animal…” he sniggered “even that is too much for you. My puppies’ life is more worthy than yours!”

Bruce noticed that the boy had only a slight accent. He wanted to stand up or at least kneel yet he had no control over his body. So he met the boy’s eyes with his stare: indeed, there was much resemblance.

“You’ve been born here?” he asked wanting to learn more about the boy.

The boy snorted; he crossed his arms and raised his head arrogantly.

“You honestly believe that I’ll speak with you?” he chuckled. “As if you were equal? You’re just a filthy traitor, an ungrateful whore; I understand that father has needs and you’re really beautiful but you’re not worthy of his lenience and grandeur.”

“Ra’s Al Ghul just uses people – I didn’t betray him: he lied to me. He used me. I was captured by villains and Ra’s Al Ghul came to me with promises of salvation and justice for my parents’ murder…”

The boy made a stopping gesture with his hand.

“I don’t care for your backstory or…your lies…I’m your warden: I know your crimes and that’s all I want to know.”

“He never freed me from them” Bruce continued unfazed by the hatred in the boy’s eyes. “He just used me for his needs and trained me to serve his purposes.”

“You should consider that your honor!” the kid said haughtily, his eyebrows cocked.
“Really? Being the slave of someone who collaborates with every kind of criminal to achieve his goals? Someone whose idea of justice is annihilating entire cities and slaughtering innocent people?”

“Shut up!” the boy in a swift movement had a shining blade touching Bruce’s neck. “I might seem too young and naïve to you but I’m not – I was trained as a warrior from my five years and I have no hesitation to cut the throat of lowlifes like you” he hissed. “You won’t speak again about my father because you defile him!”

Bruce clenched his jaw and yanked his head proudly.

“I’m not scared of death, young Prince; I have died many times in my life – every day was a horrid death…”

The boy pressed his lips.

“Do you expect me to take pity on you?” he raised an eyebrow. “You deserved everything you suffered – and you shall suffer even more for what you did to my father!”

Bruce shook his head as little as much as the chain permitted.

“Your father…He just uses you as he did with me. You’ll realize eventually.”

The boy growled and moved his small sword just to nick Bruce’s neck.

“I’m his son! I’m a Prince: don’t speak for me and don’t compare yourself with me, you scum!” he was panting and his eyes despite their coldness had something else like curiosity.

Maybe the boy was intrigued about him as Bruce about him.

“Father loves me!” 

Bruce nodded.

“I’m sure…but he has his unique way to ‘love’ people as long as they’re doing his job!”

The boy returned the blade under his clothes and turned his back furious, ready to leave. He spat on Bruce’s body.

“I’m belittling myself only by listening to you, whore!”

But then Ra’s opened the door and walked towards them; he was smirking.

“What is it, D…? Is he creating problems?”

The boy took Al Ghul’s hand and kissed it.

“No, father; I don’t listen to him – he is filth! You should kill him!”

Ra’s eyes fell on Bruce. His satisfaction glowed.

“You’re trying to turn my son against me, Bruce? Really?”

“Just telling him the truth” he retorted.

“D…, leave us…” he patted the boy’s back and he left.
Al Ghul unlocked his cage, untied the chain of the collar and dragged him outside holding the chain. He lifted him on his feet and pushed Bruce face first to the bars.

“You’re intrigued by him, huh, Bruce? You know he is part of you – you care for him even though he hates you…” he pressed his body hard on Bruce. “Finally, I have the means to keep you bound to me…”

His hands found swiftly Bruce’s waistband and pulled the pants down along with the underwear. Bruce felt Ra’s’ aroused groin rubbing on his buttocks and jerked his head to hit him but his mentor grabbed the chain and immobilized painfully his head.

“Still fighting me?” Ra’s’ lips nibbled Bruce’s cheek and something sharp pierced his temple – a needle; something acid burnt and slowly the burning invaded his brain stirring the blurred images that disoriented him.

The pain from Ra’s’ thrust was excruciating; this time the older man didn’t waste time to prepare him, besides this was his preferred way. Bruce grunted and as if that triggered Ra’s, he started thrusting cruelly, still holding tight the chain stretching Bruce’s neck for his mouth to suck and lick.

“You know, child; if you surrender to me, you not only would be spared from the pain but also we would be a lovely family…” he licked the youth’s cheek. “Our Prince would learn to love you as much as his father…”

The boy was pacing nervously before his cage.

“Eat!” he ordered but Bruce really had no appetite; his head felt completely unfamiliar on his shoulders and his stomach was clenched.

As soon as his bones mended after Bane’s onslaught, Ra’s had his minions beat him every now and then – not as severely – but enough to keep him in pain. But what bothered Bruce was that he had difficulty remembering his father’s face – the real face; because Al Ghul’s face had replaced it. He needed to escape…but he couldn’t leave the boy behind: Ra’s was right in that. Whether the boy was indeed connected with him or not, he couldn’t leave him in Ra’s’ manipulation: D…was already trained and a fanatic.

“I don’t want to eat” he replied calmly. “I’m not his slave or his whore: he just took him when I was in your age and used me…He tortured me when I tried to escape and he threatened to kill my loved ones: innocent people who hadn’t done anything wrong. Just to make me not try to run away again…but I fought him and almost defeated him.”

The boy shook his head irritated and clenched his jaw so much like Bruce was doing it.

“I just want you to know the truth – so he doesn’t brainwash and continue using you…” his arms ached stretched behind his back and he was tired from the beatings and his agony to free himself and the boy.

His warden frowned.

“What do you care?”

Bruce licked his lips. He couldn’t tell him what Ra’s revealed because it was too soon and probably D won’t believe him.
“Because you remind me of myself” he smiled – it was true. “I don’t want Ra’s exploiting another kid.”

The boy huffed and shook his head amused.

“He isn’t… I’m his son while you’re…nothing! I don’t know why you’re fooling yourself believing that you can seduce me as you did with father or that I could buy that I need your help from all people!”

“Because he is indeed one of your begetters” Ra’s chirped suddenly.

A nasty frown creased the boy’s forehead as the color left his face. Bruce fell deeply sorry for him and was furious because Ra’s obviously was poking fun at both of them.

“Father you’re kidding me…” the boy’s eyes were locked with Ra’s and for the first time Bruce saw weakness there.

Ra’s smiled and flounced till the cage where he cast his smug glance on Bruce.

“Not at all, child… Your half DNA is indeed his…” his eyes sparkled gleefully in a staring combat with Bruce whose face was distorted from wrath.

The boy shook his head in denial, running his hand through his locks.

“No…” he mumbled almost desperately. “He…he is a man and you too…he can’t have delivered me…You…you told me that my mother was royal, special…”

Bruce wished he could stand up and hug the poor kid. Ra’s blinked and nodded.

“I didn’t lie: Bruce is special – his parents came from the oldest and noblest families of Gotham… and entire humanity’s; he is more than special…of course he didn’t carry you in his body neither gave you birth: you were created in a lab with the DNAs of him and mine” Ra’s laughed.

“Everything he told you is true: his parents were killed by a mobster who spared his life and held him as his sexual slave. But I knew already who Bruce Wayne was and I persuaded the mobster to… lend him to me. I couldn’t let the last descendant of an ancient demon in the wrong hands…”

The boy’s frown became deeper.

“He is not!”

Ra’s patted his shoulder.

“He is, child…I summoned another ancient demon and he copulated with Bruce leaving his entire seed in his body. You see now, D… that I couldn’t let the opportunity go waste? I took his DNA: a DNA that combined the genes of an ancient demon, the sperm of another demon and Bruce’s extraordinary beauty and skills that I was discovering rapidly. I mixed it with my DNA and using Lex Luthor’s know-how I set off to create my perfect offspring…Several of the embryos died sooner or later but one survived…the strongest, the most special…You, my son…”

D growled.

“He is too young to be my…my…whatever!” he spat.

Ra’s Al Ghul bowed his head slightly.

“When I summoned the ancient demon and he copulated with Bruce, he was fourteen years old” he
waved his hand. “You see now that the ages match? Besides” he arched his eyebrows looking in the boy’s stormy eyes “your father wouldn’t lie to you.”

The boy clenched his fists and rushed out of the room without a word.

Bruce lifted his head and glowered at his old mentor; his eyes flashed angrily.

“You’re heartless…” he growled. “What you gain from his suffering?!”

Ra’s squatted and caressed Bruce’s forehead holding him still with the chain.

“He can take it: he is tough” he smiled. “You’ll be proud of him as we raise him together to serve the League of Shadows.”

“Never! I’ll take him away from your poisoning!”

Ra’s grabbed his face with both hands and captured his lips to a painful kiss, shoving his tongue deep inside, conquering his mouth and throat.

“No, child…You’ll stay here for all your life to be with your child and protect him…because D… won’t ever leave me…”

The boy looked daggers at him as Bruce writhed from the pain in his head – every explosion in his head released a flood of false memories that progressively was more difficult to make out their falseness…to the point his breath became pants from his agony. He had to escape.

“I know you’re disappointed with what Ra’s told you…” he managed to control the pain to address his guard and son.

The boy pursed his lips.

“I’m not disappointed…I’m disgusted…” he pursed his lips “I would cut your DNA of me if I could even if I was horribly maimed for the rest of my life …but father thinks so high for your qualities that I’ll use them to give him the joy you ungratefully deprived him of.”

Bruce gulped and huffed.

“You don’t belong to him, D… You spent your entire life here; you know nothing about the outside world because Ra’s doesn’t want you to develop your independence: he may say that you’re his son and that he loves you and you’re a Prince but actually he loves you to serve you and he needs you to keep me here…”

The boy planted his foot on the floor.

“He’d love me even if I couldn’t serve him and I don’t want to know anything else for the outside world – I know the only thing that matters: the world is corrupted and father struggles to clean it and I shall continue his work.”

Bruce shook his head.

“He says that but in reality he is as corrupted as those he opposes: he is collaborating with terrorists and mobsters like the one who killed my parents and abused me. He admitted that!” he inhaled.

“You’re a clever young man, you can see the truth; you can’t believe unquestionably everything Ra’s says… There is corruption to the world, sure, but there are also good people, innocent people, brave men and women who fight injustice everyday…”
He saw doubt in the sapphires of the boy; D…was thinking about all that.

“Why your father doesn’t let you see the world? Meet other boys and girls of your age? Why he keeps you here constantly as if you’re a prisoner? Doesn’t he trust your intelligence?”

D crossed his arms and stared at the window behind Bruce’s cage. Bruce smiled though it took much strength.

“I was held a prisoner for almost all my life…but I knew that outside my prison, lay my city…Gotham is a wild city…beautiful with her unique kind of beauty…It has many skyscrapers but also old beautiful buildings, decorated with gargoyles watching the streets; there are rivers crossing the city: at nights the city’s lights are glimmering on the waters…and parks that are packed with people chatting and children playing…You feel the air of danger but this only increases the charm of the city. When Ra’s began training me I swore that I’d fight criminals and bring them to justice, clear the city and help people be happy again…”

The boy didn’t look at him but his eyes were interested.

“I accepted being used by him because I naively believed that it was the least I could do to save the city and myself; the least gratitude I could show to my savior. And then one day he told me that he planned to destroy Gotham and slay all the people, good and evil; he wasn’t going to let me be free ever again…That was why I tried to escape him because he is a liar, cruel and twisted. I think that you’d love Gotham. And there’s Alfred who loves me as if I was his kid” he smiled on the memory “and there’s Selina, my best friend, and Tony who fights crime and…Superman, the strongest being on Earth who devoted his life to protect humans…and Leslie, and Lucius…I’m sure you’ll like them and they will love you…”

D…turned his eyes to him; he was deep in thought and craved for some human contact outside the micro-world of the camp.

“You like puppies?” Bruce asked smiling. “I had a kitten once…when still around your age; a good friend of mine had found him very small and weak and ill” D was looking at him really interested. “We saved him and my friend – Selina – was bringing the kitten every night secretly and we played…”

D pressed his lips.

“You still have the kitten? I mean back at Gotham…”

Bruce inhaled.

“No…They discovered that I had a kitten and killed the poor thing…”

The cage was a blur and his head was a throbbing muscle. He couldn’t stay more…If he stayed more Crane’s drugs would control his mind – Bruce sensed that he was hardly resisting anymore.

He was tied and his body paralyzed but he sensed that he had the power to move his limps if he used his mind’s power. He knew that in a couple of minutes D would come to give him his night food and after Ra’s would arrive for another dreadful night.

D entered the room and approached the cage where Bruce lay slumped. He left the disk and he was ready to speak when he felt a hand covering his mouth.

He turned his bulged eyes and saw something that made him gasp. Bruce was holding him and lying in the cage at the same time.
“Hush…” Bruce whispered “we’re leaving this place…”

“How?” the boy whispered his eyes darting from the form in the cage and to the man that held him. “You’re indeed a demon’s descendant!” he gaped “Nobody else can manage the reflection technique – father told me…And you moved and freed yourself from the bindings though father had paralyzed you and they beat you frequently and…”

Bruce turned the boy to look him in the eyes.

“You’ll be free, D…You’ll see the world and Gotham and you’ll be free to make your own decisions.”

The boy nodded and they ran to the door; Bruce knew that outside two guards stood. He didn’t want to knock them out because either slumped in front of the door or disappeared would raise the alarm; so he opened the door and as they turned expecting to see D, Bruce used his skill of temporarily affecting his enemies’ perception.

They ran to the corridor and then to the attic; Bruce looked from the window at the carports. He opened the window and along with D climbed to the roof. Bruce felt the suffering of all this time hardening his moves but he put everything in the back of his mind and continued slithering like a shadow through the roofs with his son…

They slipped at the first carport and Bruce smiled seeing the tank he was seeing all his days at the pole. It was locked but Selina had taught him some very useful and…illegal things so he easily got inside, D after him. He checked the indicators and the vehicle’s gas tank was filled; he pressed his lips. With the tank they’d easily broke the gate and leave.

He could hear the first angry roars from Ra’s and the alarm howling.

He turned to his son; his eyes were sparkling in the dark.

“Now it’s the time, D – we’ll make it…” he ignited the engine.

But now he noticed that the boy’s eyes were cold, blank.

“I can’t let you leave… My sister, Talia, warned me about your tricks” he hissed coldly and Bruce grunted as a blade stabbed his kidney and another his stomach.

Bruce held his son’s upper arms feeling his energy evaporating as the copper taste filled his mouth. His eyelids had almost buried his vision with the boy’s gleeful, cold eyes his last impression of the world…

Alfred heard the cave’s lift and rushed there wearing his robe. Someone was coming upstairs from the cave. Could be Master Bruce? But he hadn’t heard him going down… He was getting old. He bit his lips: and that boy…

He opened the passage and saw the empty lift; now he was more worried. He jumped in and rushed down.

Upon stepping out of the lift his mouth gaped: Hero was running from the lift to Bruce who was slumped on the computer bench.

Alfred ran to his young master and scared took the youth’s face in his: thankfully, he was just asleep.
He took off his robe and muffled meticulously Bruce who was cold. He looked at the kitten which had climbed on the bench and then jumped to his master’s lap.

“You sent the lift upstairs, huh? To alert me” he cocked his eyebrows “You’re a unique kitten, don’t you? You’ll be handsomely rewarded, master Hero.”

He took the handles of the wheelchair and embarked the lift. His heart beat with agony throughout the way to the master’s bedroom.

Alfred was ready to transfer Bruce on the bed when he heard a noise outside the window and saw Batman floating there. Of course, it was Master Kent.

He opened for him and returned to the bed only to find the fake Batman already there lifting Bruce and placing him gently on the mattress.

“He slumbered in the cave, huh?” Clark asked pissed but mostly worried. “You need rest, Alfred: leave our naughty boy to me. Don’t worry.”

Alfred made to object but finally left the room: Master Kent knew how to take care Master Bruce – he did it alone for an entire month, the most difficult month.

Clark was staring at Bruce’s sleeping face when the younger man began panting; tears running from his eyes. With a really painful gasp Bruce’s torso jerked upwards before Clark could stop him and his sapphire emerald eyes popped open.
Two strong hands were clenching his upper arms sinking him to the mattress despite his struggle; his mind had lost control over the bottom half of his body and the pain in his upper half was spiking especially in his stomach and kidney. His hand cupped his stomach but his priority was to escape those hands. Ra’s had again his hands on him…

His eyes were covered by a water veil and he blinked nervously to chase away the tears; he would have used his hands but they were trapped by the force holding him.

The water had subsided from his eyes and the vision in front of him made his heart beat frantically: Batman was staring at him through white lenses. He knew that this couldn’t be true: another clue that Ra’s captured him again and gave him a stronger dose of Crane’s poisons to blur his perception into seeing Batman so to believe that Batman was someone else, not him. Ra’s’ face blended with Batman’s.

“No!” he clenched his jaw and thrashed desperately though that worsened the pain from his various injuries. His mind was racing setting off to make his body to work even from the waist and down.

Clark got panicked realizing that Bruce hadn’t fully gained his awareness: he was still living in his nightmare. He could apply more strength and still him but that would bruise the human bad or worse break his still healing bones; also, Bruce’s heart was already pounding and if he became more violent he might cause something nasty… And there was pain in the younger man’s brain: pain from different areas where Clark couldn’t discern any injury.

His eyes behind the lenses widened because he sensed Bruce’s brain waves became more intense than usual – and that wasn’t good… Bruce was ready to apply his mind force to the paralyzed part of his body.

Hero stood on the mattress looking nervous at his master and began meowing. But Clark doubted if Bruce in his condition could hear him.

Superman’s despair urged him to do the only thing he could think: he wrapped the shivering man in his arms, nestling his head in his shoulder and caressing gently his wet locks – he cursed the gloves that thwarted a closer contact but at least he had deactivated the lenses.

“Bruce, it is me, Clark…” he pleaded. “You’re safe now; I’m here…” but the struggling became stronger, more frantic and panicked.

Clark’s voice was reaching his ears but he knew that it was a lie; another hallucination Crane’s drugs and his mind’s desire created. He must get out of that powerful hug, from this mind numbing caress before they harnessed him again.

“Let me go!” tears ran from his eyes and he hated it because he didn’t want Ra’s sneer him; he tried to escape that gentle hand.

“Please, babe, don’t hurt yourself… You’re in the Manor; it was a nightmare…” Clark’s voice was soft and affectionate and Hero meowed and rubbed his head to Bruce’s stretched palm.

And then Clark began murmuring the melody he used to sing every night at Bruce’s side when the human was fighting for his life in the Fortress of Solitude; maybe Bruce would remember that sound and realize that he was safe. His hand massaged tenderly the back of Bruce’s head.
The sweet murmur reached his ears spreading a numbing sense of safety where everything seemed clearer. A nightmare… He realized that there was an animal’s head rubbing his palm – a familiar meow. Clark gave him Hero some months ago when he woke up from the coma.

And that smell so strong that prevailed the smell of Kevlar… Clark’s natural perfume. He blinked and his eyelashes pushed away the tears: it was definitely his bedroom as Alfred redecorated it after Ra’s’ defeat. And the paralysis he felt was from injury not drugs…The Joker… The factory…He began breathing through his diaphragm slowly and calmly…

Clark was indeed holding him…He had worn Batman’s armor to go to Jim’s call…And now he was rubbing soothing circles to his back that still hurt. He relaxed his body; he was ready to apply his mind’s force to his marred legs and this was a mistake.

He patted Hero’s head and caressed Clark’s shoulder blade though he felt weak.

“I’m okay now, Clark…” he said calmly controlling his shaking.

But Clark though he sensed the man’s caress and the relaxing of his muscles, was afraid to let go in case this was a trick to jolt away once finding the chance. He cupped Bruce’s head with both hands and locked their eyes.

“Tell me the date, Bruce…”

Bruce’s eyes sparkled and Clark felt the dazzling effect but stayed adamant.

“November 28th 2015…” but then he remembered that it was after midnight “no, 29th.”

Clark closed his eyes relieved yet he didn’t let go.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Wayne Manor, Master bedroom” Bruce answered.

Clark sighed in relief and planted a kiss in Bruce’s cold cheeks, the salty taste of his tears so delicious that he felt the urge to lick but instead he compromised with nuzzling that smooth cheek.

Bruce’s heart slowly was finding the normal pace as if the soft kisses and the purring from Hero were guiding. He felt calm and content being enclosed in Clark’s arms yet the echo of the pain was still there and he didn’t want his mate to realize.

“Don’t try to hide your pain from me…” Clark said. “Where does it hurt?”

Bruce stilled his eyes in Clark’s.

“It’s not real pain: my body just reacts to the dream…”

Clark wasn’t satisfied and though a minute ago he hadn’t found anything alarming in Bruce’s body, placed him carefully on the mattress and scanned meticulously.

“You see?” Bruce asked and his seriousness broke when Hero began nuzzling his face. “I told you it was nothing. Hero…Hero…” he protested chuckling but in the end petted the animal.

Clark trapped Bruce’s body between his arms and loomed over him seeing himself reflected in Bruce’s eyes in the menacing form of Batman. The view of Batman in Bruce’s eyes was so arousing that he wanted to make Bruce forget the nightmare in a rather sensual way.
Batman’s face lowered and Bruce felt soft but demanding lips claiming his lips. He tensed and the eyes of the Bat were fixed on his eyes.

“You have hypothermia – I must warm you up…” Clark said mimicking Batman’s husky, sexy voice. “Hero, go to your basket…”

But the kitten was stubborn as his master and remained there so Clark rolled his eyes in a completely non-Batman way and for the second time that night took the kitten and the basket to settle them in the drawing room. He was back in less than twenty seconds – bless that super speed – and he sank again his lips to Bruce’s neck; the vein there beat rather excited.

“You took Hero out!” Bruce protested with a deep frown that flared up Clark’s already crazy heartbeat. “Stop doing that!”

“The drawing room is very warm; he’ll be alright…” he said hastily to continue sucking Bruce’s collar bone. “I always wanted to fuck Bruce Wayne wearing Batman’s armor…” he grunted sucking the cold flesh that with that phrase became colder.

Clark frowned because along with that drop in temperature, Bruce lolled his head to the other side blocking the access to his neck; his breath was angry.

“Joker was saying things like this!” the younger man snapped without looking at him. “He wanted to have a threesome with Batman and me…”

Clark chuckled on the absurdity of this but immediately swallowed it because Bruce fuming used his hands to move away from him. Clark cursed himself: he laughed with one of Bruce’s traumatic experiences a few minutes after the man had endured an awful nightmare. The nightmare’s impact worsened the impression of his laughter because in other circumstances Clark was sure that Bruce would have laughed too.

Bruce wanted to take off of him the gloved hands that held tenderly but determinedly his upper arms. But he realized that he was overreacting – Clark didn’t jeer him…Actually, himself had laughed sometimes recounting Joker’s futile fantasy. Yet he wasn’t up to this tonight and Clark expressing such a…desire made him feel uneasy.

“Okay, babe…” Clark nibbled his nose keeping his fervent eyes locked with Bruce’s. “We return to the good old nudity…”

In less than a second his completely naked body bent over Bruce who felt dizzy not only from Clark’s breathtaking body but also from the speed of his movement and…the images of Ra’s’ naked body from the dream. He didn’t want to show weakness; he didn’t want to let a nightmare render him powerless. He touched his fingers on Clark’s bulging biceps.

But Clark didn’t need to hear it to sense that Bruce was anything but aroused. He ruffled his own hair and blinked.

“Okay…fine…” though in his groin nothing was fine. “Let’s talk about your nightmare or was it a flashback?” it was so difficult speaking about these things when your body was so close to Bruce’s body and yelled to be allowed to get in – at least, he knew that after listening to Bruce’s flashback any appetite for sex would be replaced with disgust.

Bruce let his head sink in the soft pillow; he didn’t want to speak about those dreams to Clark – the Man of Steel was too bright to be messed with his darkness. He rubbed his temple.

“It was one of those bizarre dreams between flashback and nightmare: reality and thoughts and
projections of my fears.”

Clark pursed his lips and nodded.

“Crane’s drugs…”

Bruce found the distraction he wanted.

“You found him?” falling asleep had stopped him from following the developments.

Scarecrow stood amidst the sewer’s narrow, rusty tunnel with his arms spread: he made it. His smirk under the sack mask wasn’t visible to anyone but anyway there was nobody there to see him except some rats. He was a genius… Who would have guessed that ol’ Jeremiah’s Mansion had a secret chamber that led to the city’s abandoned sewers?

His smirk became wider and the light blue of his orbs glimmered from the holes of the mask even in the deep darkness; this part of the sewers was not only forgotten and unused those days but also was made of lead and other old, unhealthy, rusty metals that would blind every scanning eye or machine. Scarecrow knew that Superman was Wayne’s stud and would search for him; the same went for Stark too. Both of them would want to recapture him to avenge what he did to their pet. And there was always the Bat-man: more dangerous than both of those morons.

But Scarecrow wasn’t going to linger to the sewers: a mastermind like him deserved a better establishment than those stinking tunnels. Away from the places those stupid cops would be looking for him: in the old industrial area where the blessing interferences were even stronger. The Police had cordoned the place after Joker’s arrest.

The remembrance of the jester made his face contort from aversion: the idiot thought that could treat him like a tool, like a puppet; that Jonathan would serve his moronic purposes; that Jonathan would be his minion! Scarecrow, a genius like Scarecrow, being the minion of a clown. He would have spat but the spitting would have smeared his own face.

He laughed; he cackled loudly much differently than Jonathan’s restrained, smug chuckle. Joker never believed that Jonathan would manage to ruin his plans. But Scarecrow beat the arrogant clown; he ruined his intention to escape because now Police and the Asylum’s staff would tighten the security; the clown would stay trapped in his box and the Scarecrow would be free to finally show that city his true power. Because till now Crane was only the guy running the errands of the big ones – but now it was his turn to be the biggest one.

“Take that, Joker!” he hissed and imagined twisting sadistically the clown’s testicles as Joker had done to him numerous times. Not that this kind of revenge suit a brilliant scientist like him but the moron needed to taste his own techniques before Jonathan showed him that there were worse things…

His plan had been brilliant and Jonathan’s cringing attitude was the best covering in order to nobody suspect anything. His ordinary orderly fell ill abruptly and with no obvious reason: he sniggered… only he and Ted knew the reason: some of his most ordinary toxin slipped by Ted’s hand to fellow orderly’s food and in a few hours that ox collapsed. And Ted was the only available to replace him.

After the lights went out to the inmates’ cells, Crane got cramps in his stomach and his new orderly came to escort him to the infirmary – it was so convenient (and so preplanned that Ted had also the night shift in Crane’s sector.) In the middle of their route, in a corridor badly lit, since most of the
lights went off this time of night, Crane sprayed the unsuspecting orderly with his fear toxin sending him to a beautiful journey to the Terrorland. He did that because he didn’t want the officials to realize that Ted was plotting with him all this time; that he was his man. He wanted to protect Ted not from kindness of course, but because he needed loyal minions and because he doubted that Ted if pressed by the Police wouldn’t sing – not that he knew anything but if the man stayed free then Scarecrow would find a new use for him…

From there it was easy for Crane to maneuver in the Asylum’s corners; he knew the place as the back of his hand. He reached the basement and from there opened the passage to Jeremiah’s beautiful laboratory – Ted didn’t know the passage nor the place so even if he squealed he wouldn’t know to lead the cops or whoever else there.

He found his Scarecrow mask there and put it; it was like returning home…

Crane had studied and explored the place and knew that Jeremiah’s hideout ended up to the old sewers…

And now he was there free having brought with him some of his creations that were stashed in Jeremiah’s shelter. Of course he could return to the old laboratory whenever he wanted to but for now he’d walk to the old industrial area that wasn’t too far from here and the best? Some of the old sewers’ bifurcation led to that exact area…

So it’d take only some walking in the filth to reach his destination and begin orchestrating his next steps without mind numbing pills that might have not quenched his genius but didn’t let it unfold its intelligence to the fullest. And without that pest clown trying to force Crane to work for him and his stupid obsessions. He had his one and only obsession: fear. And psychopharmacology, his beloved science would help him explore; experiment and rule this drenched in fear city.

Clark yanked his head backwards, his eyes rolling to the back of his head: of course, he had to report for his outing as Batman.

“I told you to return to your room and sleep and you remained in the cave to do your investigation: for Rao’s sake, Bruce! The cave isn’t the proper place for you to linger: you see, what happened: you dozed off and stayed in the cold! You could have frozen there!”

Bruce pressed his lips; he detested being reprimanded for doing his job, especially from Clark. His eyes were indeed frozen and unmovable staring at Clark.

“I hadn’t intended to stay much but my medication is too strong and at some point lulled me.”

“Your medication just exposed your scheme…and it wasn’t for Alfred who found you, you could be ill – if you don’t fall ill by morning!”

Clark huffed because he didn’t like seeing that unreadable expression in which Bruce resorted when he felt disappointed or pissed with someone he loved. It was like a frost barrier was built between them.

“What am I going to do with you, Star?” he saw Bruce’s eyes leaving their icy stillness.

*Star…*Bruce felt a warm wave inside him hearing that calling…Lately, Clark used that small word too rarely if not at all.
Clark licked his lips because he loved that sparkle in Bruce’s eyes.

“I’d have told you everything…” he arched his eyebrows. “But you couldn’t wait, huh?” he smirked evilly and tickled him in the ribs causing a giggle. “Control freak!” he laughed.

“So you found him?” Bruce managed to regain his seriousness.

Clark bit his bottom lip.

“No, the Asylum staff and officers searched the entire premises and I scanned carefully the establishment and I searched every corner of this damn…” he swallowed hard seeing Bruce’s insulted glare. “Every corner of Gotham…But no trace of Crane. Who would have thought that he of all the inmates would escape? When Gordon mentioned the Asylum I thought Joker.”

“Before I slept there was no report of casualties: is this the case?”

Clark brushed tenderly Bruce’s cheekbone.

“We were lucky; the orderly that was escorting Crane was only sprayed with a gas that knocked him out. Police investigates how the gas reached Crane. Don’t worry, Bruce; it’s a matter of hours we’ll find him and thankfully, he isn’t of the dangerous ones…”

Bruce’s eyes became blank, deep in thought and Clark understood…Crane’s drugs and experimentation tortured Bruce when he was captive and still now his Star was faced with the consequences in a period where he needed all the calmness and rest he could get.

“Crane conducted experiments to the Asylum’s patients: poor, tormented souls whose suffering was exploited and worsened to satisfy the twisted imagination of the man who was supposed to soothe their pain. He wore a scarecrow mask and sprayed people with a toxin intensifying their worst fears…”

Clark nodded; Tony had told him that Crane had at some point used the same toxin on Bruce too…

“I’m sorry” he said softly massaging Bruce’s shoulder “He is indeed dangerous” Clark corrected himself. “And we’ll find him before he hurts anyone else.”

Bruce refocused on Clark’s beautiful face.

“What you told Jim? Because I don’t want to make a blunder when I’ll talk to him and reveal that there are two different Batmen.”

Clark narrowed his eyes.

“I stayed in the shadows and just shook my head or give one word answers; you can’t say something that we’ll show you’re not the man he spoke too” he pursed his lips. “Tell me that you’re going only to speak to him through phone…”

Bruce shook his head.

“We must find Crane and of course I must be in contact with Jim through phone” he acknowledged Clark’s grim look manifesting that he already knew Bruce’s intentions. “But you can’t dress every night as Batman – you have Metropolis, the entire planet…”

Clark however shook his head.

“You don’t believe I can ferret him out, huh?” he asked accusingly.
Bruce smiled.

“Gotham and her bad guys aren’t ordinary…”

“Neither am I…” he said slyly and slithered his lips all over Bruce’s neck. “I have super hearing, 100 different types of vision, super speeding…”

“Yet you didn’t find him tonight…”

Clark closed his eyes a bit pissed and huffed.

“Some things need their time…”

Bruce’s eyes were glimmering with determination.

“I was thinking…”

“No!” Clark cut him abruptly, his face contorted. “No! No! No way!”

Bruce shook his head exasperated.

“At least, let me finish” Clark could think another way he’d prefer to let Bruce finish – more pleasant and sensual and safe.

“I know what you’d say.”

“No, you don’t!” Bruce spat and stubbornly supported his body in his elbows to sit. “I can take the Tumbler and patrol the city searching for Crane – inside the Tumbler I’m completely out of danger.”

Clark rolled his eyes and slumped on the mattress: he had feared that hearing Bruce’s nightmare would ruin entirely his erection but this was much more effective. He shook his head.

“And you’ll stay in there…” he said frustrated in complete disbelief. “You won’t come out… Bruce, nobody is gonna swallow that shit and nobody is gonna agree with that so forget it.”

Bruce’s face was of stone; his eyes narrowed like a cat ready to attack and Clark always felt a pleasant fire in his groin seeing that stare. He touched feathery the younger man’s cheek and Bruce stubbornly yanked away.

“It’s only one week you returned to Gotham and already you work too much: you wake up early, go to the Enterprises and then train with your physiotherapist before exhausting yourself with investigation. And now you think to prowl Gotham during the nights…When do you plan to sleep?”

“Only till Crane is busted” he snapped dryly avoiding the answer to the last question.

Clark jerked his head and his hand moved to Bruce’s neck caressing the throbbing vein there.

“And” he continued “your sleep is disturbed by nightmares…How long do you think you can last like this?” he inquired in a low voice. “Your body will collapse, Bruce and all of us the people who love you won’t last through this.”

Bruce knew that but he also knew that he wasn’t doing anything so extreme: he had to be himself at least with that minimum of effort. He moved his body to distance himself but Clark’s arms of Steel were trapping him between them. Clark cupped his face and turned it to bring their eyes together.

“You can’t expect me to idle around because I’m paraplegic” Bruce retorted. “People all over the
world without my resources are doing the same – and more!”

Clark nodded.

“After their recuperation…You’re still healing, babe: just don’t let your self-sacrifice ruin everything.”

Bruce frowned: he hated the term ‘self-sacrifice’ when attributed to him.

“My what?! I’m not self-sacrificing!”

He thrashed in Clark’s hands and the older man touched their foreheads together: for Clark the most important thing right now was that Bruce shivered from hypothermia without giving a shit about it… well… and Clark was aroused like when he didn’t know Batman’s identity and his defiance and vexatious attitude excited him.

Bruce felt Clark’s lips claiming his like the thirsty soil sucks the rain; it was soft, sweet and passionate as every time and Bruce followed nibbling that flesh and allowing Clark’s tongue enter his mouth. The last days Bruce enjoyed every time Clark manifested his passion; he felt relaxed and relieved because his fears were denied. He wanted Clark’s love but tonight unlike other nights he didn’t feel for it so he hoped that Clark kindly would settle for kisses and soft touches.

Yet with dread his body’s healthy part felt Superman’s strong, unstoppable desire: Bruce smelt the perfect body’s arousal; he felt dread because he didn’t want that tonight and also he didn’t want to deny this to Clark who had needs that he neglected for four months…

Clark took hold of his upper arms and lowered him on the mattress, unable to detach his sucking mouth from the human’s lips; their tongues’ play was so pleasant. His hands hastily pushed the robe off Bruce’s body; his disappointment and frustration were huge when he realized that there was a second robe: Alfred of course had muffled him in his own robe… His body was screaming in impatience wanting to meet Bruce’s naked flesh…

And his despair made his kisses stronger, almost violent to Bruce’s neckline and then on his collar bone… He wanted to be slow and gentle but that fire inside him fuelled his hands to undo the buttons of Bruce’s pajama in super speed. Because his chest, his breasts needed to touch, to rub with Bruce’s taut but deliciously smooth breasts – he had to warm the human who now shivered more.

“We need to stop hypothermia, Bruce” he mumbled licking his lips which action ended up licking Bruce’s breast since his mouth was sunk there. “I must fix your temperature…” as in agreement his torso began moving sensually on Bruce’s; his insatiable hands fondling Bruce’s ribs.

Bruce closed his eyes and cursed through his teeth; the taste from his nightmare was so strong in him that his insides were in the prospect of an intercourse. He lolled his head on the side but Clark took that motion as an urge for him to suck more his neck. And Clark’s ministrations were so passionate and strong, almost violent as Ra’s in his nightmare and Bruce’s breath was pressed.

“Clark…” but Clark continued probably believing that this was a moan. “Clark, I’m not in the mood…”

Now that hurt…But Clark understood Bruce’s hesitation: he just had a nightmare and he was still upset. He lifted his sweaty face, his messy hair framing his fevered eyes and regarded Bruce’s so beautiful, so irresistible face…

“…beautiful beings like Wayne are made only for being used for pleasure and nothing more.”
He shook off that voice and noticed that Bruce frowned obviously taking in something.

“I’m here for that, babe…” Clark panted because his groin was really impatient, throbbing viciously. “I’ll change that mood…” he cocked his eyebrows “this is a job for Superman…”

His hands grabbed on their own accord Bruce’s waistband and lowered at once both pants and underwear and…oh! His groin relished the contact with that soft pelvis! So much that he inhaled deeply and his mouth was suddenly sucking Bruce’s abdominals panting because his length was already erect and he wanted to get more from that shivering, so pleasantly cold body.

“I need you, Bruce…” he whispered huskily. “I need to be inside you again…Your body is sacred: a temple of Sun – I need that energy you give me…And besides you don’t feel anything below the waist…I’ll do everything…”

Bruce frowned because Clark was raving…He had no feeling under his waist and though Clark’s head thwarted him from seeing he was hearing everything: the clothes being dragged to his knees, Clark’s groin rubbing his… Now he had to use all his control to stop his breath from becoming pants; he could feel for Clark’s need but just…

“Not tonight, Clark…” he said not too loud because Clark even in this state could hear everything.

Clark heard but his body’s screams were ferocious and his length throbbed hungry and pained…

“That was his best trick! Persuading the others that he is a wild mountain to conquer!” Diana’s solemn, scientific voice told him again.

Bruce’s eyes widened when instead of Clark detaching himself, he saw Superman’s head covering his genitals and heard the so familiar sound of powerful fingers clenching his thighs and his anus being spread.

Clark held Bruce’s thighs bringing them to touch his hips: he needed to feel real contact as when his body rubbed with Diana’s hot, strong, delicious, round shaped hips. But Bruce wasn’t able to do it himself so Clark would do it for the weak human: he began rubbing the unresponsive thighs to his stretching the anus he wanted to conquer.

Bruce’s heart gave a painful jolt and his stomach filled with nausea. The realization almost frozen his brain: Clark didn’t care about what he told him and was going to penetrate him without his will…

But then the part of himself that they were telling him that was going to destroy him made him clench his teeth and grab Clark’s wet locks using them as support to heave his torso.

The smell from Bruce’s entrance was so intoxicating, alluring him to cross that mystic entrance that avoided for four torturous months…His fingers clenched stronger the dead thighs as his frantic heartbeat buzzed in his ears…His length was drawn there like the metal to a magnet, like a fly to the fire…Bruce was pulling his hair; Clark smiled: of course, once again he managed to help Bruce overcome his past and moan for more, even though he wouldn’t feel his ministrations in his rectus.

But then the pulling became stronger and Clark sensed anger; he raised his glimmering eyes, his hands were holding Bruce’s legs heaved…Bruce’s grim, flashing, angry eyes sent a stone to his chest.

“Not tonight, Clark!” the voice wasn’t too loud but strength and resolution made it pure steel; and the emerald stars in Bruce’s orbs was like molten gems ready to explode. Not only anger was there but also bitterness.
Clark realized that he was grabbing Bruce’s thighs, his saliva coating the younger man’s genitals and his rock hard erection was already poking Bruce’s anus that with dread remembered that he hadn’t lubed or prepared in any way. The Man of Steel flushed and felt his heart stopping. What was he doing? No, he didn’t even want to acknowledge what he was ready to do…and Bruce’s body was colder than before…

He touched Bruce’s legs gently on the mattress biting his lips on taking in his fingers’ marks.

“Clark…”

He couldn’t even bear Bruce’s eyes; he took softly the younger man’s hands that still were fisting his locks and kissed the palms but stood abruptly up because that erection made him want to cut his penis.

“I’m sorry” he said without looking at Bruce and used his super speed to get in the bathroom and fix that annoying erection.

Bruce hastily took his underwear and pants from the floor where Clark’s impatience had tossed them and wore them continuing with his pajama shirt and robe; now he was realizing how cold he was – his body trembled violently and even his teeth rattled. The sound of the shower filled the room and he closed his eyes; he didn’t want things to get like this but Clark seemed like being in a trance like the days he was affected by what Ra’s had done to his body.

Bruce shook his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose; maybe he shouldn’t have engaged in a relationship with Clark… These things weren’t for him; he knew it.

The bathroom door opened and Clark appeared dressed in a bathrobe. There was no erection and his face was calm albeit crestfallen and broken.

Bruce watched him coming closer and couldn’t stop the defensive expression from his eyes.

But Clark wasn’t annoyed by that; he was angry with himself. Bruce was shivering from hypothermia and he almost…took him against his will!

“May I sit?” Clark asked shyly pressing his lips.

Bruce lolled his head.

“Funny you ask that…”

Clark closed his eyes and nodded snorting for himself.

“While I didn’t ask you for the other…”

The younger man shook his head and gestured for him to sit.

“You know you don’t have to ask for the other as well…but tonight I just…”

Clark nodded.

“You weren’t in the mood: that nightmare upset you and I…didn’t listen; I ignored…I didn’t care…” his face contorted in self disgust.

“Clark, you should ask Jor El to have a check on you.”

He frowned but Bruce continued.
“Your behavior has changed the last ten days…It might be just fatigue from all this adventure, from all the care you took of me” Clark opened his mouth to retort that he doesn’t get tired but Bruce touched his fingers to Clark’s lips – Bruce loved these lips. “Emotional fatigue, Clark…or some kind of PTSD. Or could be something else…” his mind was racing and in its race strange connections were made with events of the last days; of mobsters behaving out of character, of Amazon Princesses flirting Clark…

Clark nibbled Bruce’s fingers.

“You’re thinking Diana…”

Bruce’s smile was bitter but for Clark was better than nothing.

“Yes…because you seem to be infatuated by her…”

Clark shook his head in negation.

“No, Bruce: she is my ally, my friend…I don’t deny that I have a good time with her but I’m not infatuated” Bruce nodded disbelievingly and Clark held his upper arms and looked him in the eye – he knew that it was the time of honesty. “You were right, Bruce.”

Bruce frowned.

“She had other intentions about me…She…she kissed me on the lips…”

Bruce nodded pressing his lips.

“In Metropolis’ subway station, the night of the assault at the curve where Morgan Edge was killed.”

Clark was flabbergasted.

“You knew?”

Bruce pressed his lips in a tight line.

“It was curious that you two got secluded behind that wall to fight a single man; and then Jimmy Olsen having pictures from the scene and not one of you two together…” a faint smile trembled in his lips. “And then you telling me that Jimmy’s camera broke down and this was the reason he didn’t take shots of you two…though some of the pictures were obviously taken after the supposed breakdown” his eyes flashed piercing Clark’s. “You deleted those pictures.”

Clark pursed his lips: it was so hard having a relationship with the World’s greatest detective.

“Why you didn’t confront me?” his voice was a bit pissed because he had embarrassed himself lying.

Bruce felt his body freeze but his stare was fervent.

“I wanted to give you some time to tell me yourself…but you didn’t.”

Clark ruffled his hair.

“I tell you now; I could have hidden it but I chose to be honest.”

“Or you just thought that I’d find out eventually and wanted to manifest your honesty to prolong what we have” he crossed his hands, his face was grim. “Really, Clark: what do you want me for? I don’t even satisfy you.”
Clark blinked and caressed Bruce’s upper arms.

“I love you, you know that: I didn’t tell you that night because I wanted to clear things with Diana first…”

“You liked the kiss?” Bruce demanded acknowledging the throbbing pains from his nightmare seizing his body again.

Clark shook his head: how he messed things so much?

“I…” he couldn’t lie “at first” Bruce just pressed his lips and gulped but Clark tightened his grip on his upper arms. “But then I pushed her away – I hated what happened - and I told her that it was wrong.”

“You still deleted those photos…”

“I deleted them because I didn’t want you find out by the news and the gossip, stupid shows: I wanted to correct this mess and then tell you things as they really were. I told her everything about me and you.”

Bruce was rubbing his temple; the scenes from his dream with Diana blaming him for Clark’s misery replayed.

“Selfish human, do you believe that you’re worthy of him? You’re worthy of his love and misery?!”

“And I explained that I love you and that nothing can happen between me and her. Is any better now?” he whispered suavely, his finger brushing Bruce’s neck.

“Are you sure?” Bruce asked.

“W…What?”

“Are you sure that you don’t want to be with her?” Bruce couldn’t forget Clark’s strange behavior since he met the Amazon and when he was with her Clark was obviously content unlike with him. And as his dream haunted his mind Bruce couldn’t blame Clark if he indeed wanted – besides, he had admitted that he liked the kiss.

Clark cupped Bruce’s face with both hands and his thumbs caressed the cold skin.

“If I wanted why I’d make all this fuss to hide it from you only to reveal it when I ended this nonsense?”

Bruce’s gaze pierced him.

“Because you still can’t decide… Because you’re confused.”

“No, no, Bruce; don’t even say that…” he hugged him and he was shocked by how cold Bruce was. “I’ll go to Jor El to run every kind of test on me to see what’s wrong – if anything. And you’ll see that from now on everything will be like before; like when you woke up from the coma…” he smiled “remember?”

Bruce reluctantly rested his tired head on Clark’s shoulder. He closed his eyes.

“How can I forget?” he whispered and the different pains all over his body, echoes from the nightmare, made his breath light.
Clark rubbed soothing circles on his back.

“Then can I ask you to forget everything bad I did?” he caressed the back of Bruce’s head. “Do you want me to never see her again?”

Bruce exhausted but without letting that be shown moved his head from Clark’s shoulder and looked at him.

“She is your ally…Besides if you need to kick her out completely to be…” he huffed “faithful to me then things are too serious: you’re already in love with her…”

Clark panicked on that and cuddled Bruce desperate.

“No! I’m not in love with her! It’s you that I love!”

Bruce shook his head.

“You need to keep her around but with a safe distance between you - since you’ve told her about our relationship this distance won’t raise any suspicions and we’ll gain precious time. Do not trust her before we investigate her and find out who she is and where she came from.”

Clark frowned.

“You think that Diana did that to me?” he hardly hid from his voice how ridiculous he thought this was.

“Everything started when she arrived and though it can be a coincidence, we must investigate her: we don’t know anything about her.”

Clark thought that Bruce’s attitude was bitchy and this paranoid suspicions of Diana doing something nasty to him was just jealousy: fine, she was attracted to him and maybe Clark was a bit attracted to her but that was normal – things like this happen all the time without ruining true love and without being the product of malicious deeds… However he felt relieved that he wouldn’t have to never see Diana again; he might not want her as a romantic partner but he wanted her as an ally and friend and maybe in the meantime Bruce having satisfied his paranoia and found nothing awry with Diana, would accept her.

But now he realized that Bruce’s brain was filled with pain signals.

“You’re in pain though there’s no injury…”

“It’s from the nightmare” he said nestled in Clark’s flesh. “My mind unfortunately sometimes projects the pain from there into reality.”

“I know I didn’t earn it but…if you spoke to me about the nightmare maybe you’d feel better” he cupped Bruce’s face and looked him with his puppy eyes.

Bruce blinked and gulped; he didn’t want to speak about his demons.

“Bruce…I know I was late to talk to you about what happened but I did because I trust you. You, on the other hand, never talk to me about your dreams – and I know how much they trouble you.”

Bruce licked his lips.

“Remember the night we executed the plan to take over Falcone and Ra’s Al Ghul?” Clark nodded. “Remember that Ra’s had made it to the Manor and paralyzed me while he crippled you with
Kryptonite?”

“Yes; it seems like ages ago…”

Bruce’s eyes sparkled.

“Well, in my nightmare Tony never came. Ra’s took me away from Gotham to one of his secret bases” Clark frowned. “He punished me for my treason and used Crane’s drugs to control my will” Bruce didn’t want to speak to Clark about his suspicion of Al Ghul having created a child with his DNA – he didn’t want to trouble him with a vague possibility. “There I met someone I ended up loving and trusting” he took in Clark’s jealous expression and snorted. “Not romantically. In the end, I managed to overcome my injuries and incapacity; I ran away with…that person and when I was ready to take him and myself away, he stabbed me in the kidney and stomach…”

Clark nodded thoughtful.

“What a dreadful scenario…I’m grateful everything went smooth that night and that awful man didn’t take you again…” he caressed with his thumbs Bruce’s temples. “We must talk to Leslie about the dreams to do something with your medication because it seems that it can’t offer you the quality sleep and rest it should…”

Bruce shook his head escaping Clark’s hands.

“No, I don’t want any more drugs; they already make me too sleepy and slow.”

“I doubt it…” but he saw Bruce ready to retort and touched his lips. “We must warm you, babe” Bruce’s eyes widened angrily thinking again of Clark’s forced ministrations “a hot shower will help with your hypothermia” he sighed “and you wore your pajamas from the floor; that’s unhealthful” he scratched his head “and is my fault but we’ll fix it.”

He made to touch the buttons of Bruce’s pajama but the younger man stopped him with a sharp glance. Clark pressed his lips.

“Okay…” he realized that he deserved that, being forbidden to strip Bruce. So he raised his palms in surrender and watched Bruce slipping to his wheelchair and going to the bathroom.

Clark didn’t follow him though his body once again kicked him; hearing the soft sounds of clothes being slithered on Bruce’s skin and then discarded at the floor, excited him; even more when the sound of the shower’s waterfalls reached him mingled with the ethereal sound of water drops grazing Bruce’s naked flesh.

He clenched his head and huffed; to forget his body’s desire he set off to prepare new clothes for Bruce. Warm underwear and pajamas. But then he slapped himself: the human was trembling from hypothermia – what if he collapsed in the shower. Of course, he’d have heard the sound if he had fallen but Bruce made shower sitting so he might not have fallen.

Clark ran to the bathroom – the water was still running and he hesitated. But then he listened carefully and Bruce was sleeping.

He opened the hydromassage cabin, closed the water and took the sleeping man in his arms carefully: how could those stupid drugs make Bruce doze off like this and then letting him being tortured by nightmares? He cursed: Crane’s experiments. He swore to find the insane shrink and make him cure what he did to Bruce.

Bruce in his sleep wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck and nestled his head in his shoulder so
trustingly, so exhausted from everything that he did. Clark felt his heart warming: Bruce loved him so much and he always failed him.

He muffled Bruce in a fluffy tower and took him to the bed where he dressed him admiring his body and cringing on the signs of the past injuries and the bruises of his own fingers. At least, now Bruce didn’t feel the pain from his dream and his temperature began rising. Clark placed him in his side of the bed and tucked him meticulously with the blankets.

He had something to do; with super speed he rushed to the drawing room and brought Hero back to the bedroom. The kitten looked at him complaining.

“Sorry, buddy; I’m an asshole! But I promise I’ll fix everything” he whispered and placed him next to Bruce who was fast asleep with all his vitals radiating exhaustion.

Then Clark took off his bathrobe and lied beside Bruce spooning him tight and softly. He didn’t dress because he wanted his alien temperature warming the human without a second pair of clothes in between. He nuzzled Bruce’s warm cheek closing his eyes.

“Cheap whores were all the family he had but even the cheapest whore knows how to emanate some charm to a client. And Wayne has also his extraordinary looks to add to this allure…” Diana’s voice returned to spoil his moment.

Clark slapped himself hard in the face to stop his mind recounting Diana’s speech.

“I’ll go to Jor El, Bruce; and if anything is wrong I’ll fix it. I’ll be a better man for you…”

It was easy for Joker to sniff the oddity in the atmosphere of the morning Asylum and he didn’t need the stroll in the corridors till the cafeteria to be sure that something happened last night. He was the Agent of Chaos; the Prince of Irregularity so he didn’t need alarms and sirens to sense that something was of.

His orderly, Scott, for instance, was stiffer and duller than usual and that said a lot since a brick wall was more exciting than him the good days. He giggled loud on that thought and good, ol’ Scott flinched and tightened his grip on his upper arm as if thinking that he’d start running. Maybe it was just that? Some loony hit the road?

“Easy, muckoooox; this velvety skin bruises aaaaaa lot: I use the program for the sensitive in the washer.”

The orderly rolled his eyes and just grunted pushing him ahead. Joker shook his head nodding with his eyebrows arched.

“You know: brooooooad vocabulary is what I loooooove in you!”

The scent of disturbance was dense in the cafeteria and Joker loved disturbance of every kind but this was a booooring disturbance. So whoever caused it was amateur and lacked any talent…

He took his disk from the orderly serving and scanned the huge space: his boys, Joker’s littl’ clowns were all there, and the other usual regulars. He scratched his hair which all this time itched very much without their nutritious green paint. Anyways, he’d ask Johnny boy: he was a gossipy so he surely knew what happened.

But as he approached Crany’s favorite corner he realized he wasn’t there.
“HEHEHEHEHEHEHE! Oh, booooy! Jooooohnny tries to steal the show heeeere…Nah-nah, that’s bad…Every--one knows that the clown al--ways steals the show!”

He sat in his usual chair because he was so irregular that sometimes went for regularity and stared at Crane’s empty chair with a menacing sparkle.

“I guess you think that you outsmarted me and got away…” he shook his fork in the negative, took a bite of scrambled eggs and chew. “No way, buddy…You played with Brucie…the only reason you’re still alive is that I need you to get in his beautiful mind and make it scrambled like those eggs; if you’re not to work for me you’ll die, Johnny boy…”

He was sure that Crane’s goal was to escape first and make Joker’s escape more difficult or even impossible. But Johnny despite a shrink didn’t know anything about him. His attempt to make a fool out of the jester made Joker angry, so angry that he started laughing again and jolted to his feet hopping like a schoolgirl to a table where his goons were eating.

When Scott came to manhandle him to his cell for his session with his Harlequin he was watching Bugs Bunny kissing Elmer Fudd on the lips and Joker was giggling slapping his thighs. He didn’t like to copy others but he glued his lips to his orderly making loud noises. The orderly tried to detach him but Joker let go instantly twisting his lips in disgust.


The other orderlies laughed and Joker bowed.

“You know, gents. That was a huuuuuuge sacrifice for youuuuur enter--tainment: he truly tastes like poop…” but Scott grabbed him from the upper arm and dragged him. “You’ve got nooooo humor, musky ox…”

The giant gritted his teeth.

“I have much humor: it’s 1,200 volts; do you want to try it?”

Joker giggled.

“Though I appreeeeeciate your effort to entertain me because it’d be a heeeeeeluva kick I don’t want my shrink waiting…” he pouted thoughtful. “I’m a true gentle--man.”

His orderly huffed and shook his head; now that the initial anger passed, he regretted speaking like that to Joker. He knew how dangerous the man was even if he behaved like a stupid clown; also, he was sure that it was a matter of time before Joker escaped and spread again his terror. And he didn’t want the nutcase to have a grudge on him: Scott had a family and remembered the Phelps family…

So he let Joker’s arm causing the jester’s grin.

“You’re a smart guy, huh?”

The orderly didn’t answer and stayed silent tolerating Joker’s singing all along till his cell. On Joker’s approach the metallic bars opened automatically and then the same happened with the energy beams that formed the second barrier. Joker twitched his eyebrows proudly.

“Doors open for meeeee wherever I go! Hurrayyyyyy! Happens all the time but each time I get a hard oooooon.”

His orderly didn’t say anything and once both barriers shut again he left saluting Dr. Quinzel that
was coming.

Joker clapped with enthusiasm seeing her.

“Gooooooood mooooorning, Haaarlequin!” he made an impression of Robin Williams. “And it’s a good morning, huh?” his eyes glimmered evilly and innocently at the same time.

Harleen took the chair from the corner and dragged it in front of the cell. She sat down and set her small recorder on.

Joker cocked an eyebrow.

“Right on business, huh? Soooooo it’s not a good morning for you, huh? Cranes fly to the open sky…” he sang.

Harleen knew that Joker had already figured out; maybe Crane had said it to him. So she didn’t find the reason to not show her cards.

“You two spoke a lot: did he mention anything?” she asked grimly.

Joker cackled.

“Noooooope! Johnny boy was intro--vert – not like me… Hehe! I hope now you realized how misunderstood I am” he pouted and blinked cutely. “Stark put aaaaall this shit on me and it was Crany the real meeenace – pour, pour Joker…”

Harleen didn’t answer and kept her face expressionless: she wouldn’t make Mr. J the favor to follow his tricks.

“The day you attacked Lou Garfield you were speaking with Dr. Crane” she wanted to search the possibility that Crane triggered the attack along with the news footage. “What were you talking about?”

Joker squinted and scratched his head.

“Lou Garfield? Who’s that?”

“Your former minion” she looked him in the eye.

“Oh! You mean Poooorky!” that was his name in Joker’s gang.

“What’s the reason you attacked him?”

Joker’s face opened in a Cheshire smile. He raised his index finger and shook it.

“Nah…nah…nah…You’re asking about Craaane and now you ask about Po--porky? Youuuu, doc, con--fuse me…” he whined.

Harleen shook her head.

“Not at all: Crane was in the scene; you two were talking before you attacked the man: so why you did that?”

“It’s none of your business…” Joker hissed completely serious; his eyes flashing.

“It was something Crane told you?” she insisted.
Joker lolled his head on the side frowning.

“Do you interrogate me?”

She met his gaze.

“It’s better me than the police or worse…”

Joker cocked his eyebrows and giggled catching the meaning of that worse.

“Worse? You mean bееееetter, Harlequin, ‘cause, nooooo offense, but between youuuu and the woooorrrse, I prefer that tall, dark, pointy eared worse! HaHa!”

Harleen cocked an eyebrow.

“Are you cheating Bruce?”

Joker exploded in a loud fit of cackling and Harleen watched him annoyed but without showing it. Joker fell on the floor and hugged his belly still laughing twitching his legs: cheating Bruce with Batman! He stopped abruptly, stood up and approached the energy barrier dead serious.

“This is personal and we’ll solve it with Brucie as soon as I’m out” he pursed his lips and shook his head. “Couples have some issues…”

Harleen stretched her body.

“You know that you won’t leave these premises unless reformed” Joker rolled his eyes and made a noise with his lips. “Or Crane’s escape was planned by you so he helps you out?”

Joker’s eyes widened mock hurt and slapped his hands on his chest dramatically.

“Meeeeee? Aaaalaaaas!” he exclaimed. “You offend me, Dr. Harle--quin: Joker doesn’t need the help of a nutcase…Byyyyyy the way…Do you fancy being our couple therapist once I be reunited with my hoooooney?”

Harleen lolled her head.

“Mr. J, you must concentrate on your reform and therapy and forget all about escapes and…being with Bruce…”

Joker shook his head purging his lips as if cajoling a baby.

“Oooohh, Dr. Harlequin, don’t be jealous of Brucie…He is the most fascinating thing in this booooorrring world – once you meet him” his eyes drilled hers “aaaaand see what I saw, you’ll want toooo analyze him as much as I…Well, I noooot only analyze him buuuut anal--yze…” he winked. “But for you it’s only analysis, okay?”

“My interest here is you, Mr. J.”

Joker touched his heart in a theatrical way and shook his head.

“I’m flattered, Doc…”

Harleen pressed her lips.

“So let’s speak about you instead…I think that you have to say more interesting things than anyone.”
The jester pouted.

“Deeeeeeefinitely! You know the oooone about Superman and Batman’s shampoo?”

Harleen arched her eyebrows.

“I mean the real Mr. J, not the jester” she leaned towards him and Joker became solemn. “Once we had started a very constructive discussion about your childhood.”

Joker yanked his head and regarded her calculating.

“Thaaaat discussion began in relation to Bruce” his voice was nasal and flat. “If I geeeet Bruce opening hiiiiis heart I would do the same…” he licked his lips feigning that he felt uncomfortable.

Harleen knew that already; she sighed inside: if Wayne wasn’t a coward and had agreed she would have achieved miracles. But he refused.

“We have to work alone, Mr. J; you must detach yourself from Bruce.”

Joker twisted his mouth and jerked his hands upwards.

“I’m doing every--thing to manage get attached to him” he leaned his head to her with a sly expression in his eyes “you know what I mean: very- very intimately” he made a very talkative and very rude gesture but Harleen kept her composure. “And youuuuu sugest to de-tach?” he stressed the word exaggerating his mouth’s movement.

“We can’t force him to participate in a session with you.”

Joker shook his head pouting.

“Of course we can! After all, the boy is in suffering after all the shit he experienced: it’s youuuuuur duty as a therapist to help him even if he denies it” he licked his lips piercing her with his acid stare. “Dr. Harlequin, would you join our couple therapy if I…mmmm…persua--ded Brucie to take it?”

Dr. Quinzel felt in the air the dangerous criminal coming to the fore; she could understand what he meant: calling and pestering Mr. Wayne was the lighter option.

“You’re not allowed to contact anyone while in here” she retorted.

Joker cackled and rubbed his nose.

“Oh! Dooooc! Who said anything about allow---ed ooooor being in here?”

The young psychiatrist fixed her eyes on him.

“If you try to escape and hurt again Mr. Wayne you’ll fail and probably hurt yourself – leave that man alone: he has suffered enough. It’s time to reform your life and the best start is by acknowledging your past.”

He crossed his arms and looked at her blankly: hurt himself… With Stark’s stupid tricks? Now he knew how Stark’s littl’ security bullshit worked and he knew also how to overcome it. Stark and all these idiots believed that they were smarter than him but you can’t be smarter than the chaos; you can’t be smarter than something that doesn’t follow any routine.

He smiled like a devil and his eyes shone as devilish.
“Is this the reason you don’t want to tell me about Crane’s escape? Because your plan is to escape yourself, find him and use his help to…” she arched her eyebrows “cure Mr. Wayne?”

Now Joker’s smile became broader, his teeth glistening.

“Dooooooo I look like a man of plans?” he shrugged. “John–ny boy sold me… I didn’t know anything.”

“Prove it then: talk to me about your childhood.”

Joker tilted his head to the side.

“Do you want my oooooorigins movie?” suddenly he erupted in a fit of giggles. “Huhuhuhuhuhuheheheheee! I’m afraid I soooooold the rights to Warner Bros! Ahahahahahahahahahaha!”

Harleen nodded.

“Have it your way, Mr. J” she stopped the recording. “We’ll have plenty of time to discuss things. I let you calm down and think about it.”

She stood up, dragged the chair to the corner and turned to leave.

Joker smirked: not so soon, dear.

“What dooooo you want to hear?” he cocked an eyebrow seeing her stopping. “That my dad–dy was a drunk and abused me? Or that I was an orphan raised up in a horrible, filthy orphanage? Or that I grew up in a perfect American family but I was born rotten and ran away? Which version suits better your diatribe?”

She turned to him with an interested stare.

“Which version is the truth?”

Joker pouted and blinked.

“Nooooone! I’m still working on it…”

Selina slipped graciously inside the drawing room from the window. Her friend was there, sat in Clark’s wheelchair, wearing his robe above his jeans and blouse. He was absorbed in his tablet and Selina smirked thinking that she would startle him.

Bruce who was perusing a ton of information in his Cosmos lifted his head not surprised at all.

“It’s supposed to be burglar proof…” he smiled. “Tony’s thing…”

She cocked an unimpressed eyebrow and walked closer.

“Not Catwoman proof…” she widened her eyes for emphasis “Big mistake!”

Bruce nodded.

“You know…we have a door and you’re always welcome and I already heard your car.”
“Uhu…” she agreed. “But sometimes it’s too tempting and I need to stretch my legs…” she squatted to hug Hero who ran to her.

She sat on the armrest of the couch relishing the sweet warmth from the fireplace; she looked at Bruce while Hero slithered to her shoulder.

“You seem pale and tired…That’s the reason Alfred locked you inside?”

Bruce chuckled.

“You went to the Tower?”

She shrugged.

“I’m your bodyguard and nurse and…” she frowned “you came up with anything new for me?”

Bruce shook his head in denial. “So I have to know where my boss is so I went to your office and your secretary told me that you stayed home” Selina blinked. “Is everything alright?”

Bruce huffed.

“I suppose you know about Crane’s escape” she nodded. “Jim lit the signal and Clark wore Batman’s suit and went; I stayed in the cave to get intelligence about what happened” he rolled his eyes seeing Selina’s stern look “and those damn drugs made me doze off there…Hero pushed the button of the lift sending it upstairs alerting Alfred” he opened his hands “and Alfred took me back to my bedroom. I woke up this morning running a little fever and Alfred raised the alarm…I worried him too much last night so I decided to give him a break today and stay at his watch.”

Selina detached Hero from her shoulder and kissed him in the nose.

“So our Hero is a true Hero” she laughed as the kitten licked her face. “And Alfred must be celebrating for having you here…”

“Not when he is glued on his tablet, Miss Kyle” Alfred came in carrying a silver tray with brunch for two. “Good morning, Miss Kyle; maybe you can reason with him to really have some rest?”

Selina widened her eyes.

“Is anyone capable of doing this?” she asked and Alfred sighed. “At least, he reasoned with himself and stayed inside.”

“Only to appease me and Leslie; he slept for God knows how many hours in the bloody cave and his body went in hypothermia” he shook his head. “If Hero hadn’t notified me…Of course, young Master Hero for his feat will get a big salmon fillet for lunch.”

He brought the thermometer in Bruce’s ear and looked at the indication.

“Thank Goodness, it’s almost normal.”

Bruce turned his eyes on him.

“I’m fine, Alfred. Don’t worry…”

But the kind man shook his head and sighed making Bruce’s heart break.

“Miss Kyle, would you make sure that your friend will eat and take all his medication? I have some chores to take care…”
“Of course, Alfred” she took a bite from her turkey sandwich.

Alfred couldn’t keep his cold demeanor towards Bruce; the youth returned to him from Hell only ten months ago and the dark, nightmarish past had still its frostbite mark on the British’s heart. He pressed his lips meeting at last his young master’s eyes.

“We shouldn’t have attended the party…” he said clearly blaming himself. “Perhaps your fever resulted from last night’s cold.”

“C’mon, Alfred” Bruce rubbed his forearm “it was so beautiful and I had a great time and the kids were happy” his eyes became like a puppy’s. “We couldn’t disappoint them, right? The fever was entirely my fault – I’m sorry: I didn’t intend on staying so much down there but the drugs made me sleep.”

Alfred shook his head.

“Please, do not apologize, sir; but for Goodness’ sake you must be more careful” Bruce pressed his lips and nodded. “Thankfully, Master Kent took great care of your hypothermia” Selina widened her eyes amused to Bruce. “Please, do have your rest, sir…”

Bruce held Alfred’s hand.

“I will…Thank you for everything, Alfred.”

“I did nothing, Master Bruce…If you need anything, ring for me.”

As the butler left the room Selina slithered closer to Bruce and kneeled by his side with a hungry expression in her eyes.

“Master Kent took great care of your hypothermia?” she laughed. “So finally he overcame his fear of shattering you? Is the fever the remnant of a really hot night and not of cold?” but suddenly worry shadowed her eyes “Did he cause you any pain?”

Bruce tilted his head and chewed his bottom lip: that kind of discussion made him uncomfortable, even with Selina.

“He wanted to…you know…” Selina chuckled with his shyness “but I couldn’t…”

She frowned.

“Why?”

“I saw a nightmare…and as every nightmare of mine it was very real; I saw that nobody stopped Ra’s that night from taking me away from Gotham and in one of his secret bases…”

Selina inhaled deeply because she could imagine what that awful man would have done to Bruce if he succeeded that night and her friend nodded.

“And also there was a kid…My son and Ra’s’ and he hated me but I had managed to make him…at least, I thought so…it felt like he came closer to me; that he liked me. But then when I tried to escape and take him with me, he stabbed me…” he rubbed unconsciously his stomach.

Selina brushed his forearm sad.

“You believe that the dream is an omen?”
He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“What I saw was just a projection of my thoughts and the events of the previous day: being with so many kids in the Haven triggered the dream and Dick’s…” he hesitated “dislike made me see the boy so hostile – not that he wouldn’t be hostile, if exists and has grown up with League’s and Ra’s’ propaganda. But it’s obvious that the boy was a projection of Dick” he chuckled bitterly. “Imagine that even the boy’s name began with a D, I couldn’t hear the rest…”

Selina felt his sorrow and kissed his cheek.

“How you felt? I mean about the boy…”

Bruce shrugged one shoulder.

“There was an instant bond between us…like…I knew that boy years…I liked him and his harsh words pained more than any curse I’ve heard all these years” he recounted to Selina what D was telling to him. “And when he stabbed me I really wanted to die…”

“The super-hunk learnt about the dream?”

“I woke up in his arms, so yes, he wanted to learn and I told him.”

“About the possible child?”

“No, everything else but that; I told him that I made a friend who stabbed me in the end” he shook his head. “I don’t want to tell him or anyone else about the child unless I found him/her – I don’t want to cause them more torment…” he arched his eyebrows. “They have enough to bother them because of me…”

Selina nodded and Bruce took his own sandwich and bit.

“We were right” he said indifferent.

“About what?”

“About the Amazon Princess being in love with Superman.”

Selina rolled her eyes and snorted.

“In love…More that she begs for a super fuck…But how?”

Bruce was looking at his tablet where he had hacked the database of the prison where the League members from the Gobi desert base had been jailed.

“Clark admitted what I already knew…”

“And you didn’t tell even to me…” she added accusingly “which is?”

Bruce lolled his head.

“I didn’t tell you because I wasn’t sure and I didn’t want you to get aggressive” Selina prompted him to continue with her eyes. “The Amazon kissed him behind the wall in Metropolis’ subway station.”

Selina jumped on her feet and Hero jerked away surprised.

“The bitch! The fucking witch! People were dying around and she only thought of smooching with
Supes! Ugh! I must get her! Wait, wait…” she cocked her eyebrows “she kissed him? He didn’t?
And the missing pictures you mentioned in his phone call were indeed missing, huh? And his job,
I’m sure! The sly motherfucker!”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“He admitted that at first he liked the kiss…”

Selina’s eyes bulged and her face became red.

“The scum!”

“But then he pushed her away and told her that it was wrong. And, yes, he deleted those pictures
because he wanted to tell me himself.”

Selina clenched her waist and huffed and puffed.

“He is taking advantage of you! He is playing you like a fool! He didn’t tell you!”

Bruce rubbed his temple.

“He talked to her about our relationship; he wanted to clear everything before confessing what
happened.”

Selina after her outburst felt regret; the only thing she managed with her reaction was to sadden more
Bruce: her sweetie didn’t know anything about these things. She squatted beside him and hugged
him, Hero approaching them.

“You believe him?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I don’t know what to believe, Sel…I…I…Clark’s eyes seem so honest, so clear” he didn’t want to tell
her about what Clark almost did to him last night. “I know that he loves me – at least, this is what he
believes as well; he doesn’t want to hurt me. But I feel that something is wrong…” he met Selina’s
caring eyes “and he promised that he’ll go to his Fortress and run some tests to see if anything is
off…and the fact that he admitted all these – even with delay – and promised, makes me believe in
him.”

Selina touched her head to his shoulder.

“You always believed in him…” she mumbled. “You love him so much that I’m scared, sweetie; I’m
afraid that he will hurt you…”

Bruce petted her hair.

“Don’t worry about me, Sel” he chuckled. “An entire building fell on me and I survived…And
Clark’s heart is of gold and he cares about me…” at least he hoped so. “He wouldn’t have spoken to
her about our relationship if he wanted to be with her instead.”

“So you gave him another chance…”

Bruce sighed.

“She kissed him; he stopped her.”
Selina couldn’t hold back her retort.

“If that’s true because he deleted those pictures…”

Bruce ran his fingers through his hair.

“Indeed. But time will show…It’s up to him: I love him, I…I need him but if he continues like this” he inhaled and shook his head. “I’ll finish it.”

Selina looked at his eyes and was happy for the determined shine in there but also she was really worried for the consequences if Clark betrayed his trust and love. Because Bruce had made many leaps of faith with Superman and she knew that the fall for him would be devastating. So she really hoped that Superman was honest; from the beginning…

“He should be running behind you jealous and not you being worrying about Clark loving someone else…”

Bruce frowned.

“What do you mean? I don't worry: if that is what he wants...he is free.”

She pouted and twitched her eyebrows playfully.

“Okay, okay... I just mean that you’re so beautiful that jaws drop when you appear and drools have to be moped…so why not reminding that to Supes? He seems to believe that you’re his possession and has you in his safe for whenever he fancies playing again with you. Maybe you should make him feel threatened…” she pursed her lips. “If he plays with the Amazon bitch you can play to…”

Bruce blushed and pressed his lips.

“You know that being…desired disgusts me…the only one that made me feel comfortable with his desire was Clark…I…I can’t flirt, Sel…I can’t play that game…I never wanted to be in such situations…” he waved his hand. “Love and everything…it’s only for Clark that I engaged in that and…it already began to…”

“To?”

He smiled to her patting her hand.

“To not stir the emotions it used to.”

She cupped his face and kissed him.

“Believe me, relationships have their lapses but then things become better.”

“Or worse…” Bruce chuckled and kissed her cheek.

She laughed and handed him his glass of juice and his pills.

Bruce huffed.

“I wanted my medication decreased and now I have my antibiotics increased; Leslie took blood sample for analysis and I have an appointment in the clinic for tests.”

“That was prearranged” she shook her index finger sipping her own juice. “As a multiple injury patient you need to be tested at least twice a month…”
Bruce dropped his head and looked at her amused.

“You parrot Leslie now?”

Selina chuckled and downed the rest of her juice.

“I’m adaptable and inquiring, baby.”

Suddenly, hurried footsteps sounded from the corridor and Selina tensed. Bruce frowned.

The door opened and a flushed, fuming Tony stormed inside.

“They’re gonna release Luthor!”
“That’s preposterous!” Selina spat with her narrowed eyes flashing.

Tony’s eyebrows twitched upwards.

“That’s an understatement, Sel” he shook his head.

Bruce was calmer than both of them so much so that Hero was pacing back and forth in his lap purring.

“How do you know, Tony?”

His friend walked closer and took one of the carrot slices that accompanied Bruce and Selina’s brunch.

“I’m S.H.I.E.L.D.’s director, little guy; I have connections” he lolled his head to the side, cocking his eyebrows smugly and chewed the carrot slice. “Not bad…” he murmured. “Well, actually” his voice became conspiratorial “it’s Peps’ connections…” he shook his head rolling his eyes. “Those guys in Justice Department don’t think so high of me…yet…” he huffed.

Selina chuckled and lifted an eyebrow.

“It must be your public orgy at the Museum…”

He crooked a smile and widened his eyes.

“No, actually that increased the number of tourists” he jerked his arms in the air “I was the exhibit with the most visitors, kitty!”

Bruce brushed Hero and smiled but his eyes were serious.

“So what Peps learnt?”

Tony scratched his goatee.

“Yeah, that…” he sighed returning to what had upset him. “One of her pals there informed her that there’s a decree for Luthor’s immediate release; the guy knew my personal interest on the case and called her as soon as the order came to their office.”

Bruce frowned and put Hero on the sofa to search at the news’ outlets for any coverage.

“It’s not known yet…”

Tony sat at the armchair next to him.

“No; it’ll take some time – hours – for the decree to be put into effect.”

Bruce nodded and rubbed his mouth with his finger.

“Based on what? I mean they need a legalistic rationale and these things must pass from the judge.”

Selina sat on the arm of the couch and crossed her arms watching Tony shaking his head infuriated.

“That’s the most outrageous! His attorney had made an appeal about mental instability and horseshit
but the psychiatrist’s evaluation didn’t persuade many so it was pending for more evidence – which would have taken months.”

“Then?” Selina asked.

Tony pursed his lips and then leveled them.

“This is an immediate order coming from the highest levels” he twisted his lips angrily. “Peps’ connection didn’t know exactly from whom but his department is in a haste because they just can’t ignore that order.”

“We knew that Luthor had very esteemed and powerful friends but till now nobody managed to achieve his release…” Bruce brushed some keys on his tablet’s screen to enter the Department of Justice’s secret database. “I wonder what has changed and who so highly situated would risk his status and reputation to save Luthor’s ass…”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I can always burst in Blackgate and beat the shit out of Luthor till he spits the name…” he shook his head. “I can’t believe that our system is so corrupt that frees so provocatively a scum like Luthor that was found guilty by court and jury!”

Bruce shook his head.

“I’m sure Luthor would get his newspapers and TV stations to find and ballyhoo very loud and reasonable reasons to justify his release…” his voice was dry.

Tony punched the couch.

“I have also friends in the higher levels of hierarchy and my own newspapers and stations to make them regret that!” his black eyes flashed and his voice was a growl. “I’ll expose their intention and the outcry will make whoever did that to take it back!”

Bruce stared him resolute.

“You will expose Peps’ informer…”

Tony slapped his thighs and shook his head.

“They won’t know my source and I doubt they’ll dare to touch him.”

Selina cocked an eyebrow.

“If they are so corrupt to shamelessly order the release of a convicted bastard without solid reasons I don’t think that they’ll hesitate to punish the guy who ruined their surprise.”

Tony huffed.

“Then sit and watch as Luthor gets away?” he growled. “That’s fucking disgrace!”

Bruce moved his wheelchair to face his friend and Tony’s eyes softened: seeing Bruce moving relying on the chair’s help always made his chest hurt. The younger man patted his shoulder.

“We’ll wait the official statement of Gotham’s DA office; then you can use your media army to face Luthor’s paid reporters.”
Tony cupped Bruce’s hand on his shoulder and pressed his lips.

“I expected this to infuriate you more than anyone else…”

Bruce’s other hand unconsciously touched the spot in his cheek where Luthor’s ring had left the ‘L’ that was engraved on the gemstone when the tycoon from Metropolis had slapped him in the face. During the month of his treatment in the Fortress Jor El had erased the mark but Bruce remembered it too well; as the violent kiss Luthor had forced upon him.

“It does because Luthor has been cooperating with Falcone, Ra’s Al Ghul, Talia and many other known and unknown criminals. Yet this will be our chance to take the wraps off the man who set the wheels in motion to free Luthor.”

Tony nodded pursing his lips.

“So you think that this isn’t Luthor playing his biggest ace in the hole?”

“He is yet I believe that the order wasn’t made from someone who was pressed by Luthor” his eyes were introspective and Tony smiled.

“Why not?” Selina said hugging Hero. “Luthor must be desperate to get out; especially, since all these months he failed to do so and LexLabs are in your control.”

Bruce rubbed his chin and turned his wheelchair to face both of his friends.

“Exactly because I took his labs and the 20% of his corporation four months ago he’d have exploited sooner this powerful agent who can order his release without giving any reason; he certainly would want to be outside in order to make damage control and fight back: Falcone was telling that Luthor isn’t a man who waits when he has a great weapon at his disposal.”

Tony stood up.

“Maybe he wanted to leave this till the very end when everything else failed; usually, we keep our strongest weapon for when everything other didn’t work out. I’m sure he didn’t want to reveal how high his connections reach.”

Bruce shook his head.

“I doubt that a person with such status and power in society would risk to be exposed for bailing out a convicted criminal; especially, in such outrageous way.”

Tony took another carrot slice.

“Those are quite good – I didn’t believe they would…” he commented on the carrots. “Anyway, perhaps our man knows that nobody will discover his identity: even in the Department nobody can say who ordered that; so either they are trying to cover that big guy or…”

“They really don’t know” Bruce said with a wicked smile.

Selina jolted to her feet too holding the kitten.

“How is this possible, Bruce?” she asked dumbfounded.

Tony stared at his friend interested.

“Clark told me that in Metropolis some really nasty criminals were released from jail in similar ways,
without anyone be able to say who ordered it. Of course, they weren’t such limelight names like Luthor but…”

Selina frowned.

“You mean the Intergang?”

Bruce smiled.

“How you know about that?” Tony asked her “This is supposedly classified as highly confidential.”

Selina rolled her eyes and locked them with Bruce.

“A cat slips in places where no man can and there she hears too many things that even CIA would kill to learn.”

Bruce lolled his head towards Tony with a grin.

“She found me first when the League took me – thanks to her connections…”

“Touché!” Tony admitted.

The young woman let Hero on the thick carpet and crossed her arms.

“Even in Gotham there are rumors about a big new gang in Metropolis that is recruiting the worst scum regardless if they are in prison or out – of course, nobody knows much but they say that many of Gotham’s muscle that was working for the local mob, after the ‘big three massacre’ moved to Metropolis in hopes of getting hired by the new, big player.”

That coincided with Tony’s and S.H.I.E.L.D.’s intelligence. He turned to Bruce.

“So you believe that Luthor was working with the Intergang and now the ghost big boss pulled some favors to free his partner?”

“I can’t be sure of that” Bruce answered his glance fixed on Hero who was stretching but otherwise abstracted in his thoughts. “I just say that the fact remains that Luthor in his despair has changed two attorneys the last one using the trick of the mental instability to achieve a release with restraining conditions. If the man that ordered his release was in his list of friends this would be the perfect opportunity to exact his power pressing discreetly so that Luthor’s appeal becomes accepted but he/she didn’t. Instead while his appeal is suspended, this decree comes from nowhere, totally irrelevant to the instability pledge, and demands his release. And that reminds me of Clark’s sayings about Intergang. And something else…”

“The burglaries at the LexLabs…” Tony offered.

Bruce nodded.

“That wave of raids began from Luthor’s labs approximately when Luthor was imprisoned and I acquired their control – of course, later other labs were raided too but it seemed like someone was trying to make us believe that LexLabs weren’t actually the target. So maybe someone is looking desperately for something in the LexLabs but the raids hadn’t any result since we changed the security and already have secured the most peculiar items of unknown use. So maybe Luthor truly played his last ace by having info that his partner wants too much and the only way to get it is by securing Luthor’s freedom.”
Tony loved hearing his buddy manifesting his detective thinking and from Selina’s smile she loved that too.

“So it was Luthor’s powerful collaborator that recruited the guy with the authority to order Luthor’s release” the older man added.

“And manage making everyone ‘forget’ who gave the order like what happened with the thugs who raided the labs or the shooters at Metropolis’ subway assault.”

Tony paced.

“If you connect Luthor’s partner with the assault and the raids then we speak about Morgan Edge because he was the one who ordered the hit. And he is dead. So our boy has the luck to get the order for his release before his savior was killed.”

Bruce tapped his fingers on the armrests.

“I’m not convinced that Edge is Intergang’s ghost big boss or that he indeed ordered the blind hit in the subway” he pressed his lips in a tight line and shook his head “it just doesn’t fit the man…”

Tony lollled his head.

“Maybe he got mad.”

Bruce lifted his eyebrows.

“We won’t find out thanks to the Amazon Princess…but still I’m not convinced. His henchmen’s interrogations are ravings or people say that they don’t know how they got there.”

“As with the guys that made the burglaries to the labs” Selina offered and took the carrot slice Tony gave her like a flower.

“Exactly!” Bruce beamed. “So even if Luthor gets released we’d have the opportunity to watch his movements and get a glimpse of the mysterious man behind all these.”

Tony raised his eyebrows.

“Even if gets released? You believe that Gotham’s DA will manage to block this; especially, since he isn’t Harvey Dent?”

Bruce brushed the Black Butterfly on his chest under his clothes.

“We’ll see…” he mumbled. “Either way we’ll get what we want.”

Tony snorted.

“What we want?” he cocked his eyebrows.

Selina watched Bruce.

“Either he stays in prison where he belongs or is free to lead us to the bigger fish and thus get once again in prison along with that dangerous new menace. So there’s no reason anger takes the better of us” he grinned to Tony.

The billionaire from Malibu made an impressive dive into the couch and set his hands behind his neck.
“It’ll be too bad for your plan if I break his mug?”

Selina sat at the armchair next to Bruce.

“I don’t like admitting it but I must agree with the playboy…”

Tony cocked an eyebrow smugly and tapped an imaginary hat.

“Thank you, my beautiful lady!”

Bruce looked at both of them affectionate and smiled.

“Actually, I think that this would serve perfectly our plan to look outraged and defeated…But you’ll be in trouble…”

Tony waved indifferently.

“Next time Harvey and Jimmy was looking at the wall and didn’t ‘saw’ my magnificent punch to Luthor’s ugly face” he pouted. “I’ll do it in a similar way and I’ll combine once again work and fun.”

Bruce glanced at the screen of his tablet that was covered with data from the Mongolian prison where the Leaguers where transferred after their base in Gobi desert was conquered. He didn’t find the information he wanted and actually only Tony could provide him with any possible additional intelligence.

“Hm…Tony…”

The Californian squinted.

“I don’t like that look…Damn! It’s exactly the same as I remember it from our childhood…” his cheerful voice dropped a bit from emotion and Selina smiled. “Don’t keep it in, littl’ guy!”

“When you, Clark and Hulk attacked the League’s base in Gobi desert in Mongolia did you find any children warriors?”

Tony’s face became dead serious because his friend’s face became a shade paler, a sign that this was important for him. He racked his memory to give an honest answer.

“Is what you look for at your tablet?”

Bruce could have hidden it but he doubted if Tony’s mind would take that dark detour suspecting that Al Ghul created a child with his DNA.

“Yes.”

“No, there was no kid warrior or any kid; everyone was adult” Tony sensed that there was something crucial there for his friend. “May I ask why you ask?”

Selina petted Hero’s belly to not show anything to Tony.

“I had some suspicions about the League training small kids to become brainwashed warriors…”

Tony crossed his arms.

“No, this is what ISIS does. In none of the bases we raided were any children” he lolled his head on the side. “It seems that you were the only kid that Al Ghul exploited” he said grimly.
Bruce nodded.

“I’m glad…” if they did find a child, his uncertainty would have ended; but at the same time this didn’t mean that the child didn’t exist. Yet he could feel a temporary relief from the fact that no kid suffered what he did.

Tony stood and squatted before him.

“Are you alright, buddy? When I left in the morning Alfred told me that you were still sleeping and I was happy but now I see you’re pale.”

“It’s nothing serious, really… I just slept on the cave and I got some hypothermia.”

Tony yanked his head and sighed exasperated.

“I heard on the news about Crane’s escape and Batman’s appearance last night and I was reassured that since Kent did the job you were alright! Damn it, Bruce! Getting hypothermia in your condition is dangerous! And why nobody notified me?” he gritted his teeth really pissed.

Selina knew she had to intervene.

“Calm down, handsome; they didn’t inform me either. Alfred and Leslie had as their first priority taking care of his fever and when everything went smoothly they thought that there was no need to raise the alarm. As for our buddy not speaking about his sufferings…well, you know him…”

Bruce looked at her disapproving and Selina winked and shrugged innocently; then he locked eyes with Tony’s.

“Because it wasn’t something serious to worry you; we’d have told you in the lunch.”

Tony shook his head.

“As you told me you were alive only after eighteen years?” he spat.

The younger man put his hands on Tony’s shoulder.

“You’re doing so many things for me that I feel bad to distress you every time I have a little fever… I’m fine” he chuckled. “If I was very sick I’d have called you – you know how I love to throw up in your presence…”

Tony closed his eyes and dropped his head; he just couldn’t fight the broad smile off his face. He caressed Bruce’s hair.

“I must return to the Tower: we work on your spine pieces with Lucius” he winked “and I want them to be finished soon to see you walking again” he cupped Bruce’s cheek. “You’ll call me if you need anything, huh?”

Bruce leaned to his ear.

“You know, this would be an insult to Alfred” he whispered and Selina chuckled. “You’ll come for lunch, you and Peps, right?” he asked with a shine in his eyes.

“You betcha!”

When Tony left the room Bruce took his Cosmos and called Clark.
The reporter had on his screen the Gotham Gazette site hoping to read a positive development on Crane’s escape – that is to say, his arrest. But nothing… so he just minimized the window to continue his article when his smart phone rang with Bruce’s ringtone.

He teetered his way out of the office to get some privacy more so since Lois’ curious eyes were on him.

“I was ready to call you, Bruce” he said in his true, no stuttering voice. “How are you? When I left you were a bit warm but it didn’t seem serious…” uttering this, made Clark realize how indifferently he had acted: a bit warm? That could evoke to something serious and he not only didn’t stay with Bruce and left but also didn’t even inform Alfred.

Bruce almost heard Clark biting his bottom lip.

“Alfred called Leslie and she increased my antibiotics; she took some blood sample just in case; but all in all, it was indeed nothing serious: the fever already fell” he answered in a breath.

Clark yanked his head closing his eyes relieved. Yet his apathy that morning was another sign that Bruce was right and he had to be checked.

“I’ll do what we discussed last night as soon as I finish here…”

Bruce nodded.

“Well, I didn’t call for that…I trust you after all…” however last night came back to him to prickle. The moment he realized that Clark wouldn’t stop…That instance his chest clenched from that dread of being violated but it was worse than all the other times together because there was also the hurt of betrayal: having the man you believed that loved you doing the exact same thing that your abusers did.

Clark couldn’t discern any irony on Bruce’s voice even a talkative inhale of air since Bruce could perfectly control his vitals into not showing his emotions. Yet his eidetic memory made him see again the younger man’s face when he was ready to penetrate him against his will: Bruce’s face was cold as his entire body, stony in anger however in the flashes of his eyes behind the veil of anger and determination, there was the hint of little Bruce’s terror every time his abusers raped him and…the bitterness of being betrayed by the man he trusted.

“Thank you…” Clark whispered, the coldness of his voice targeting himself but thinking that Bruce would take it differently he smiled. “So you wanted to hear my voice, babe?”

Bruce cleared his throat and Selina stared at him curious.

“Uhu…But there’s something else Tony learnt: someone really powerful – and really elusive – ordered Luthor’s release.”

Clark’s teeth clenched.

“No! That is impossible! There’s not even a rumor around…”

“Peps has some connections in the Department of Justice and they informed her about that – the decree will arrive at Gotham’s DA at any moment.”

“Damn! We’ll expose them at the Planet; we’ll vilify them.”
Bruce shook his head.

“No, you do nothing. I just wanted you to be ready when the news comes out – it’s better if we don’t reveal our knowledge before the DA announces it officially. We don’t want them to know that we have informers; and this way we would be able to watch Luthor’s movements and find his associates.”

“I still I hate it that this man will be free after everything he did to you!”

“I know – he is convicted by a court of law after all. But…we must use that to our own interest.”

Clark ruffled his hair but nodded.

“Okay…I get that you’re at the Manor; nice! You need rest after all…Well, I’ll drop by after my visit there and we’ll talk this better.”

“Be careful, okay?”

“I’ll be…for you…”

Jim Gordon was reading Montoya’s report on Ted Bradley’s testimony; the Arkham Asylum’s orderly was transferred at Gotham’s General Hospital after being sprayed with Crane’s toxin and for the entire night it was impossible to be inquired by the police. His doctors were adamant about that and his condition was definitely unfit for any coherent answers.

Fortunately, Mr. Fox of the Wayne Enterprises had the antidote since his employee’s encounter with the insane psychiatrist had made the brilliant scientist able to decompose the toxin to its ingredients and create an antidote. So Bradley was in position to testify early in the morning.

Not much actually… The man was still shaken from what he experienced under the toxin’s effect and the shock of being attacked by a patient ‘as obedient and mild as Crane’. He told Montoya that his colleague who was appointed with Crane fell ill and he was the only available to fill his position; last night he had the night shift so when Crane began whining about stomach cramps he took him to the infirmary. The Asylum’s Head, Dr. Quinzel, had made it clear that the inmates must be well cared and after Crane’s orderly fell ill Ted thought that maybe Crane was contaminated with the same virus.

All of a sudden, Crane turned and sprayed him with something that made him see horrible scenes and collapse in a fit of spasms; he had lost completely any contact with his environment and he thought that he was again in the shipwreck, ten years ago…He almost drowned then and he watched many people die that way or burn alive as the ship exploded…

Montoya had asked him if he saw the direction Crane took but he said that the only thing he saw was flames eating the ship’s walls and the dark, cold ocean. Which was confirmed by the doctors who examined and watched him all night: the man was in delirium.

When he was asked if Crane had acted strangely the last days, the man shrugged saying that his colleague, Martin Sanders, was the orderly responsible for the fallen doctor. Ted only knew that Crane was speaking with Joker because he was seeing them.

And of course he had no idea how the toxin was found in Crane’s hands.

In the meantime, the GCPD was looking for Crane scouring the city though it was a difficult mission
since the man wasn’t a common criminal to have his hideouts in the Narrows or the Decks. And he was an introvert man without friends and places where he frequented; of course, they already put his apartment in discreet surveillance in case he ended up there but Jim doubted that: from the times he dealt with the man, Crane definitely seemed a clever man to do that mistake.

Maybe he had managed to leave Gotham or he was going to attempt that so from the first moment he order to put checkpoints in every exit of the city and alarmed neighboring cities and states. But that had no result yet…

“Which means that either he has already reached another city under our noses” Jim said in his calm but firm voice to the officers gathered in his office at MCU. “Or that he is going to attempt that later when he believes that our vigilance will be lower; or he has the intention to remain in Gotham believing that the hideout where he is right now is safe.”

On the wall behind his desk a projector played the footage from Crane’s transfer to the infirmary and his attack to the orderly; however after the first feet the former doctor ran after the orderly was out he was lost from any camera.

Bullock scratched his neck.

“He definitely knew that loony bin better than anyon’… So he knew how to avoid the security cameras.”

Another younger officer intervened.

“We searched the place thoroughly; no trace of him or the way he left the building.”

“Maybe ol’ Jeremiah’s ghost took him” Bullock snorted and cocked an eyebrow. “I’m sure they’ll have loads to share…”

Some officers chuckled but Montoya twisted her lips with disapproval to her partner while Jim was perusing the info Asylum’s security had sent him about Crane’s visitors. Which was none because Crane had no visitors; the doctor had no family after all and no relative or friend ever made an appearance.

“Will find him, Commissionaire” Montoya said to her chief. “Every cop has his picture and teams are searching the entire city; it’s a matter of time before we return him to where he belongs.”

Bullock made a step forward.

“And though a sonovabitch he isn’t as dangerous as Joker…”

Jim left the report he read, this time about Crane’s orderly Martin Sanders, and fixed his eyes on his trustee.

“Tell that to Wayne…” he said dryly and Bullock nodded. “The man is insane and has a talent in creating dangerous toxins: he tortured his patients when he was the Head of Arkham Asylum; he provided highly hallucinatory drugs to Falcone which were sold to people, collaborated with the League of Shadows to torture Wayne. So we can’t afford to wait he strikes again.”

“Of course, Jim” Bullock answered.

Montoya began recounting to her colleagues what Crane’s psychiatrist had said to her when the phone rang; Jim lifted his index finger to make her stop and answered the call.
It was Robert Hatchet, Gotham’s temporary DA after Dent’s resignation. Jim’s eyes darkened as his frown deepened.

“Thank you, Mr. Hatchet.”

He hung up and dismissed his officers with a gesture.

“Be careful: this guy is dangerous – do not underestimate him. Keep me constantly updated” his officers nodded and departed. “Montoya, Bullock stay” they halted interested. “Close that door!” he said arching his eyebrows.

His trustees approached intrigued.

“What’s going on, Jim?” Bullock asked chewing his toothpick.

Jim took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“DA is going to release Luthor…”

“No way! He is bought too?” Montoya exclaimed.

Jim shook his head.

“All this time he does everything to keep Luthor behind bars.”

Bullock frowned.

“Then?”

Jim pouted.

“He received a decree from the Department of Justice that can’t be ignored.”

“From whom?” Montoya said clenching her waist.

“Nobody knows but it’s too high in the hierarchy and worse: the law makes it obligatory to abide by the order.”

Bullock rolled his eyes.

“Don’t tell me the President risked a scandal and his ass for that scum Luthor?” he fumed.

Jim put again his glasses.

“I don’t know if it’s the President but definitely someone very high…” he mumbled.

“Even the President isn’t above the justice!” Montoya protested.

Jim placed his hand on her shoulder.

“I didn’t say it was the President but the Department makes it clear that the order is covered by the law – even if that law is unfair… The DA is giving a Press Conference to announce it.”

The veteran officer stood before his window and watched Gotham underneath living her daily routine.

“What are you thinking, Jim?” Bullock asked.
“That the tide changed again” he sighed. “After the deaths of the crime lords and the League’s arrests our city found her peace for some time but now it feels like something is coming. Again.”

“We’ll stop it, Commissionaire, as we always do” Montoya said determined and Bullock nodded frowning angrily. “And we have Batman.”

Jim smiled to both his trustees and nodded.

Luthor’s grey eyes glimmered and his smirk was icy. His attorney, Larson raised an eyebrow: as a matter of fact, he didn’t except a different reaction from this man – he was sure that his client was already plotting.

“Right now Gotham’s DA office announced that they will hold a Press Conference; obviously to announce your release.”

Luthor punched the metallic table clenching his jaw.

“How?” he asked then looking at his attorney suspiciously. “Last time you told me that your appeal for release due to insanity was put in pending; what changed?”

Larson shook his head pursing his lips indifferently.

“I have no idea: I just got a call from the Department of Justice informing me that your release order is ready. They didn’t say more but I think it’s the result that matters.”

Luthor gave a grin and his teeth shone. He had already an idea about who had managed that small miracle when his esteemed friends had failed till now: so that nightmare wasn’t a nightmare after all…He had really hit the jackpot with Mannheim this time.

“How much it’ll take to be out of here and back to Metropolis?”

“I don’t think that it will take much time; usually, it needs a month or two, but since that decree commands your immediate release and there’s no way to block it, I’d say no more than a week.”

Luthor nodded.

“Mercy Graves along?”

Larson shook his head.

“Certainly. But perhaps for her it’ll take a bit more.”

Luthor pierced him with his icy stare.

“Take care that she gets out the same day as me.”

“I’ll do my best, Mr. Luthor.”

Luthor smirked and inhaled deeply.

“I want to be at the head of the board at the annual meeting to face that brat” his smirk became meaner. “If he dares to leave his Manor now that he is pegged in a wheelchair. I bet the bastard won’t have the courage to look me in the eyes once he knows I’m free again.”
Well, Larson was a lawyer, he was paid by Luthor who was his client but he didn’t like hearing horseshit. As everyone, he had learnt the story of Bruce Wayne and being the last period between Metropolis and Gotham he watched some things. So he raised an eyebrow at Luthor’s comments because Wayne wasn’t a coward in any way and even when he was aboard healing his wounds, he took great care of his newly acquainted LexCorp shares and LexLabs.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Luthor, but Mr. Wayne from the day he returned in Gotham goes daily to his Enterprises and Mr. Fredericks had handed him every responsibility” actually, he wasn’t sorry at all, especially when his boss’ bottom lip trembled slightly – a hint of a great anger that Luthor managed to keep in control. “As for the later, it remains to be seen…”

He looked at his Rolex.

“The Press Conference begins in half an hour and I must be there. I’ll inform you for any news.”

Bruce was watching on the 60” plasma TV in the living room the DA approaching the auditorium under a loud murmur of questions; Luthor’s media had already spread rumors about ‘justice finally served’ and Luthor being vindicated in a triumphant way. So when the DA’s office announced the Press Conference Gotham’s media began raving about it and Tony’s news sites and stations blasted the possibility of Luthor’s release citing every major crime the tycoon was found guilty of: the video of Luthor harassing Bruce at Tony’s party almost a year ago and Bruce kneeling him in the groin was a great stroke. Now that Luthor’s media leaked the news there was no risk of exposing their informer.

Bruce’s eyes were completely still, focused on the screen, Alfred on his side and Hero lying on his lap rubbing his head on Bruce’s arm.

He knew that Luthor’s release would serve their purposes so Luthor’s joy would be futile yet his stomach was clenched reading the caption on the bottom of the screen:

“Lex Luthor exonerated and released?”

Bruce had worked for his arrest and conviction; he had gathered the evidence; he had endured his attack. And the worst: he knew the man’s crimes and that man had being convicted by the court only to be discharged and free to do the same and continue his collaboration with the menace that managed to overcome the law. Because this wasn’t an acquittal as Luthor’s media presented it but a blatant and provocative show off of power and corruption; well, show off indeed but without the person behind it really showing off.

Of course, he/she (Talia came to his mind as a recent example) was too clever to reveal his identity and being targeted from law enforcers – because still there were honest and dignified people who wouldn’t like that: he never had forgotten that even in Falcone’s cage…

Alfred was watching too and from his slight frown it was obvious that he was really pissed: Luthor, although unknowingly was serving Bruce’s plan, did plot to surrender his young master to the League of Shadows.

Watching Robert Hatchet settling with ease in front of the auditorium, Bruce got the impression that the man was rather content and not grim as Bruce expected him. Harvey had vouched for this man but what if he was wrong?

“As several of news outlets had being hinting the last hours, the Department of Justice forwarded to
Gotham’s DA office a decree for Lex Luthor’s immediate release…”

The uproar that till now was boiling under the surface exploded in a confusing fuss of angry exclamations and questions.

Robert raised his hand for them to silence.

“The order demands from Gotham’s judicial system to accept Luthor’s release without further examination” he inhaled deeply. “And we are obliged by the federal legislation to abide by that decree…”

Bruce’s heart would have been drumming in his chest if he wasn’t trained to control his heartbeat; on the other hand, he was sure that there was a ‘but’ coming.

“But in our great country’s 1788 Ratification of the Constitution, 1791’s Seventh Amendment there’s a paragraph that gives to Gotham’s highest judge the right to not accept as orders the decrees which lack solid reasoning in their claims and intervene to decisions already taken by the courts of law; therefore this decree has the power of an appeal” the temporary DA heaved a really old looking parchment with the infamous seal and signs.

Bruce pressed his lips in a tight but content smile while the crowd in the Press Room cheered or protested since there were some reporters from Luthor’s media.

“Thus Gotham’s judicial system will re-assess Mr. Luthor’s case; but until the Gotham’s court new verdict, Mr. Luthor will remain in Blackgate Prison” he clenched the papers he was holding. “The said paragraph and our official announcement will be distributed to all of you. Thank you.”

“This was a very satisfying development, right, sir?” Alfred said and Bruce turned to him smiling.

“Right! And I know who I must thank for this.”

Alfred lifted an eyebrow interested and watched his young master taking his tablet and making a call.

“Harvey, it’s Bruce Wayne.”

Harvey on the other end laughed.

“How are you, Bruce?”

“I called to thank you for stopping Luthor getting loose.”

“Damn! How you figured this out?”

Bruce chuckled.

“Well…I thought that only a Gothamite would have known such a tiny and ancient detail to the law.”

“When Robert called to inform me about the decree, I remembered my old university professor – an avid law researcher. He told me about that forgotten but never repealed paragraph. Hm…Bruce? It was actually your great-grand father, Solomon Wayne, whom we have to thank: he was such a great man of the justice and such fervent fighter for the country’s independence that the law makers made that exception to honor him and his city.”

Bruce’s eyes were lost back to his dream about Nemesis and her fleeing priest. Her words echoed”
“...and your descendants shall bring justice...”

Harvey’s voice shook him out of his thoughts.

“Of course, this will be only a delay” Harvey added. “We know that someone really powerful wants Luthor free and it’s a matter of time before he presses more people into freeing Luthor.”

“Sure but at least Luthor will stay in prison and out of criminal action a bit more...and...his expression when he learns the news will be priceless...”

Harvey snorted.

“I wish I could see his face...”

“Thank you, Harvey; more so because you confirmed my belief that you never stopped caring about Gotham.”

A pause.

“Gotham knows how to keep bound everyone that is associated with her” he answered thoughtful.

“So...if the people of Gotham vote that they want you back are you willing to return?”

Harvey was deep in thought.

“I don’t know, Bruce; I have to think my father and Rachel...Joker targeted them...”

“I understand...and I am with you whatever you decide – I want you to know that.”

“Thank you, Bruce...” he stared absent minded at the coin he kept rubbing in his palm.

Darkseid was pacing the vast hall under his Mansion; the fires in the vessels framing the tiled corridor to his throne flared up till the high ceiling every time the new God passed them, fueled by his wrath.

His enormous fists were clenched and his minions were cowering around; Granny Goodness closer but still with her head bowed. Real flames were emitted from his nostrils.

Bagdana suddenly emerged in the middle of the corridor just two inches away from the gigantic God who had his real form. Darkseid looked at him furious but the ancient demon didn’t seem shaken but rather amused. He made a bow that Darkseid knew that was sarcastic.

The demon’s presence made him roar and some pillars cracked making the entire building shake and dust twirl around.

“You’re amused!” Darkseid accused his partner.

Bagdana pouted his big lips.

“Why not?”

Darkseid gritted his teeth and stormed at him; Bagdana not even flinching and at the last moment Darkseid changed his course to crush in his fist the necks of three Parademons whose bodies he threw carelessly at the far corner. The new God lolled his head towards Bagdana who smirked.
“I thought you could kill them with only one breath?” the demon asked mock innocently.

“I enjoy the physical contact more” Darkseid growled.

Bagdana shook his head.

“Fair enough…”

Darkseid calmer after taking his anger on some of his minions crossed in a few strides the hall and sat at his throne.

“I’m sure you already know the reason of my wrath.”

Bagdana stretched his perfectly sculpted granite colored body.

“Though earth matters aren’t my main interest sometimes I keep myself updated – especially, when my ally has open businesses.”

Darkseid’s stare was on the floor but his eyes sparkled.

“Master!” he commented.

Bagdana raised an eyebrow as if he didn’t catch that.

“It’s Master not ally!” Darkseid elaborated grimly. “Do not forget that!”

The demon shrugged.

“As you prefer it…You must want Luthor free way too bad.”

Darkseid clenched his fist and turned his eyes up to pierce the demon.

“Of course! Otherwise I wouldn’t have bothered! He owes me something; once I get it he’ll have the same fate as every other human.”

“You trusted that double-crossing worm?” Bagdana remembered the way Luthor had touched Bruce and sent him to that cursed woman. “You should have known better and crushed him with your foot…”

Darkseid’s bottom lip cracked his face with a smirk.

“I will; his release would have made that sooner but even my power was thwarted!” the last word was roared and Darkseid’s fist’s reflection demolished a pillar that Granny hurried to rebuilt with a movement of her hands.

Bagdana’s grin was jeering and somewhat proud.

“Gotham is a tough place even for almighty new Gods!”

Darkseid stood furiously.

“Gotham and Metropolis will be the first cities I’ll smash!”

The demon’s stare now was so intense that flames danced in his orbs; he locked eyes with his ‘master’.

“Don’t forget what I was promised…” he hissed like a snake.
The new God blew in front of him and a round crystal emerged out of thin air with Bruce’s image in the center; the youth sat in his wheelchair between a bunch of happy kids. Bagdana’s eyes focused there unable to resist Bruce’s beauty and charm that emanated even through Darkseid’s mirror.

“He is a lame sample even for human standards – a miserable weak cripple…”

Bagdana smirked with the new God’s stupidity and ignorance.

“Everyone has his eccentricities” he chirped “and demons even more.”

“Luthor will be free whatever Gotham or anyone else does; my plan will be executed perfectly: those pests won’t stop Darkseid.”

The demon couldn’t care less about Darkseid or human beings as a whole; the only thing that mattered was getting Bruce and extirpating Superman.

Alfred opened the door for Tony and Pepper and the billionaire bowed to his assistant letting her enter first; Alfred cocked an impressed eyebrow on that gesture of gallantry.

Tony patted his shoulder cheerful.

“I’m happy, Alfie; and I’m always a knight with ladies – I made Ironman inspired by the Medieval knights.”

“You told me your inspiration was C-3PO from Star Wars; you just added red to not be kitsch…” Pepper remarked snidely and Tony sighed rolling his eyes.

“Me and my big mouth! She uses her knowledge against me…Fancy that!”

Alfred closed the door.

“Where’s my little guy?” he opened his arms in the air as Pepper was already kissing Bruce.

Pepper took Hero from Bruce’s lap and let Tony hug his friend. The billionaire from Malibu lifted Bruce off his chair for a second and the younger man laughed.

“You rugby team won?” he teased him.

“No; Luthor was fucked right in the ass!”

Bruce blushed and Alfred coughed.

“So much for the gallantry…” the butler sneered and retreated to the kitchen.

Tony squatted and ruffled his hair.

“You need to put on some more weight, little guy…” he commented. “Don’t tell me you don’t feel excited after what happened at the press conference or you didn’t watch it?”

Bruce nodded.

“You know it’ll be only temporary though: his powerful protector would eventually set him loose.”

But Tony’s mood wasn’t spoiled; he lolled his head on the side.
“Uhu…But then – as you said – we’ll watch his steps and find this big guy and send both of them to the joint once and for all” he touched his lips to Bruce’s forehead. “Your temperature is normal – of course, Alfie told me but you know me: I want to know things firsthand.”

Bruce smiled.

“I did enjoy the Press Conference.”

“Oh! I wish I could see that motherfucker’s shit face when his lawyer tells him the news…” he huffed, his eyes taking a wishful glint; but then he remembered something. “You’ve got mail, buddy…” he gave Bruce an envelope.

The younger man frowned; it was a very formal invitation. He looked at Tony’s eager eyes and opened it.

“Invitation to a party at the Avengers’ Tower…” Bruce mumbled.

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“It’s the event of the year, little guy; and I want you there! It won’t be the same without you there…”

Bruce licked his lips uncomfortable and Tony understood.

“C’mon, buddy…You went to the kids’ party…” he pouted making the puppy eyes. “Can you bear breaking my heart? Peps always says that I’m a big kid…”

The younger man sighed.

“I can’t let you down, can I?”

Tony hugged him caressing the back of his head.

“No, you can’t, kiddo; I’m so lucky! Alfie, is the lunch ready?” he yelled towards the kitchen. “I’m starving!”

Bruce let his childhood friend lead him to the kitchen feeling his heart warm from Tony’s cheer; he was touched that his friend could get happy so easily and radiate his joy all around lightening even Bruce’s world.

“Is yar granny okay?” Jason asked Dick after he sipped his Irish coffee.

“She went to the hospital for some tests – I had to threaten her that I wouldn’t go to school if she didn’t show me the receipt today. And she did exactly that.”

Jason shook his head.

“She loves ya, man; ya’re lucky…”

Dick nodded and took a sip from his juice.

“I know, alright…” and wanting to change the subject. “How’s your mother?”

The younger boy shrugged.
“’kay, I guess…She still drinks but not so much to get sick…”

Dick gulped sensing his friend’s well hidden hurt.

“Maybe having a good job and enough money make her not wanting to drink as before…”

Jason twirled his straw in the glass.

“Guess so…From the day Wayne got her to work in the Haven, she has changed…She doesn’t cry in her sleep an’ stopped hangin’ around with these creeps who passed her pills; for a time she was sellin’ drugs for them to give her stuff…Pigs arrested her an’ she ended up in the joint for a bit.”

Dick pursed his lips: Jason had a tough life from the day he was born. So he could call himself lucky that he got to have a happy family even for so little.

“Wayne helped many people like my mom, ya know…” Jason said making bubbles blowing with his straw.

Dick rolled his eyes and huffed exasperated.

“Jay, don’t even start with that! Or I’m leaving!”

Jason shrugged and crossed his arms nonchalant.

“Cool down, dude! I’m not tryin’ to defend him or somethin’; I’m just sayin’ what I know. An’ ya saw the kids…they love him an’ they say that kids have instinct.”

Dick crossed his arms too.

“Well, I’m a kid too and my instinct tells me he’s a fucking hypocrite! He pretends the nice guy to…to…to fool people and not see his true face.”

“What for, man? He doesn’t gain anythin’: the others gain from him.”

“Exactly! He buys them to become popular, to make people forget what he truly is…to forget his past.”

Jason crooked his lips and cocked his eyebrows.

“It’s not his fault Falcone used him like this; Wayne was younger than me when that dickhead got him.”

Dick fumed; he leaned towards his friend.

“Yes! But it’s his fault my family died! If he had stayed Falcone’s prisoner my parents and Brian would be here now and my Granny wouldn’t be forced to cope with all these!”

Jason shook his head challenging.

“Which ya make worse for her with yar insist on hangin’ out with that loser Zucco!”

“He’s not a loser! He is my uncle and my father’s friend.”

“I think yar Granny is right ‘bout him – ya should listen to her. I live in the Narrows all my life an’ I can smell rotten fish…”
Dick rolled his eyes.

“Yeah…but you failed to sniff Wayne’s bad smell…”

Jason lolled his head.

“Maybe ‘cause he doesn’t have one!” he wasn’t particularly fond of the guy nor he wanted to defend him but Dick had pissed him with his stubbornness to not hear him or his granny.

Dick growled and jumped to his feet.

“I thought you were my friend not his! Did he buy you out with that petty gift? Like those whiny littl’ brats?”

Now Jason’s eyes flashed angrily and he jerked upright clenching his jaw and fists.

“Nobody can buy Jason out, ya dork! Ya’re fuckin’ moron! I’m tryin’ to get ya think but ya’re stuck in yar bullshit!”

Dick cocked his eyebrows sarcastic.

“Littl’ Jay can think and I can’t…what humbug!”

The other customers from the tables around looked at them sternly and Jason answered the stares with a glare of his own.

“What do ya look?”

But Dick sat in his bench and gestured to his friend to do the same.

“Sorry” he mumbled to the people around. “You’re acting like my granny: she struggles to brainwash me about Wayne and chased away Tony, the only person that made me feel a bit loose and happy. You’re my friend, you should be more understanding.”

Jason crossed his arms and fumed: he felt a pang from Dick saying that Zucco was the only one who made him feel better; he hoped that Dick enjoyed his company more.

“Yar granny didn’t chase him away: he was at the party last night – I got a glimpse of him.”

Dick frowned.

“And why he didn’t come to say hello?” Jason shrugged. “Ugh! Sure he didn’t want to have a quarrel with granny – he is much considerate.”

“Yeah…Sure…” the younger boy snorted. “Yar granny!” he craned his head towards the register where Ms. Turner was paying their drinks.

Dick shook his head.

“Yeah…She told me that she’d come to pick us: now that that loony Crane escaped she’s afraid. As if he knows me personally or gives a damn about me. If it was Joker in his place however, I’d pray he’d come to get me…”

Jason rolled his eyes and snorted again.

“Why? What would ya do? Kill him? Ya don’t have a gun an’ I doubt ya’d use it; me on the other
hand…”

Dick laughed.

“Yeah, Dirty Harry in a miniature…” he sneered.

Ms. Turner approached the two boys and offered to take Jason home but the boy refused because he had his bike which made the old woman twist her lips disapprovingly.

“You must be careful with that thing, Jason; it’s quite dangerous and you’re too young to have one of these.”

Jason yanked his head proudly.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Turner; Jason isn’t afraid of anythin’ an’ knows his shit…” he blushed “I mean… thing.”

“Your mother must be very worried…”

Jason scratched his head uncomfortable.

“Nah…” he smiled bitterly but then shook it off. “She knows her son is a tough nut! Good night, Granny…mmm…of Dick! See ya tomorrow, Dick!”

“Good night, sweetheart” Ms. Turner greeted smiling and watched him affectionately as he mounted his bike, wore his helmet and left.

On the way home, silence fell inside the car. Ms. Turner glanced at her grandson.

“Are you angry with me, Dick?” she asked softly.

The boy turned to her startled.


She smiled.

“Because I like Mr. Wayne.”

Dick lolled his head on the window’s side and watched the cars passing the street that was already lightened by multicolored lights since it was already twilight.

Mr. Turner bit her bottom lip.

“Why do you hate him so much, honey?”

Dick huffed and rolled his eyes: as if she didn’t know!

“For once again: Because he is the reason my family was murdered by Joker! Because if he never had appeared I’d be still playing with Brian! We were playing together just a few hours before he was tortured and murdered! For God’s sake, granny; you already know…”

Some tears rolled from Ms. Turner’s eyes on the memory of her little grandson: he was such a cheerful little boy and so sweet! And if she had taken him with her along with Dick, her little angel would be alive and maybe his parents too…
Dick caressed her arm gulping; he realized that he wasn’t the only one who felt pain.

“Mr. Wayne, Bruce, was at Brian’s age when Falcone kidnapped him, chopped his toe, killed his parents, shoot him and jailed him abusing the poor kid daily for all his life.”

Dick crossed his arms frustrated: he didn’t want to listen about Wayne.

“Why are you telling me all that? I don’t care! I wish Falcone had killed him with his parents! Then my family would be alive!”

“If Falcone had killed Bruce or if Bruce was still Falcone’s captive, Gotham would have been still under the reign of terror of this mobster and all the children which last night were so careless and happy would be still in that horrible old orphanage hardly surviving; the Narrows would be still a place where people starved to death or die from cold or Falcone’s thugs. You know that in the Haven all these people have found accommodation, training and a decent job? Weren’t for Bruce, Jason’s mom would be bullied by Falcone’s thug and probably in jail away from her boy and Jason would lose also his mom.”

Dick stared at her.

“Jason spoke to you about his mom?”

Ms. Turner shook his head: yes, the boy had opened his heart to her.

“I’m telling you all these to make your golden heart soften a bit about Mr. Wayne” she continued. “To set aside your dislike for just a bit and see him as he is…He didn’t do anything, Dick…I’m sure he suffers too because your family died due to Joker’s lunacy. He is a good man, Dick.”

“Can we not speak about him?” he snapped and retreated to his memories of his family even if these memories made the pain worse when he returned to the cruelty of his reality.

Ms. Turner clenched more the wheel hoping that her grandson would eventually let free his kind heart to feel for Bruce Wayne and understand how wrong he was in his hatred.

Superman was flying south to Gotham. He had just stepped out of the light blue examination chamber at the Fortress of Solitude.

“The indications show nothing wrong” Jor El said to him in his deep, solemn voice. “However, our systems are set to Kryptonian conditions and Earth has her peculiarities so I’ll need to monitor you for some time. There are still things I don’t know about this planet and her ways.”

Superman smiled relieved and happy that he could shove that to Bruce’s face to prove him wrong and paranoid in his suspicions and assumptions about Diana. Of course, in this case it was all Clark’s fault – his character that needed fix; maybe fatigue or PTSD?

“Jor El, you know I don’t have the luxury to stay here for monitoring; I have a daily job to maintain and with Bruce’s injury I got too many sick leaves.”

“There’s no need for you to be constantly here – once a day would be enough.”

Superman huffed; he didn’t consider it necessary since the examination failed to show anything but he ought to make it sure. For both his and Bruce’s sake. So he nodded.
“What is it that worries you, Kal El? What happened to make you suspect that something is off?”

Superman licked his lips in uneasiness: he didn’t want to admit it to Jor El. He was ashamed of himself.

“Lately, I’m not myself” Jor El’s frown was deep. “I act a bit strange…in relation to Bruce and he, …we thought to make sure that there’s nothing external affecting me.”

“As with that special Kryptonite and the substances Bruce’s body secreted…” he said thoughtful.

“I don’t know if it is something like that or something else or nothing at all…I just wanted to be sure.”

“In order for us to be sure, you must undergo examination every day for some time” Superman nodded. “And in the meantime, you should be extra careful.”

He was floating over Metropolis to check his city just before he headed to Gotham. Suddenly, a beautiful, mind numbing smell dazzled his nostrils and paralyzed his body. He frowned because it wasn’t Bruce’s cinnamon flavored perfume.

His body turned towards the aroma as if a powerful magnet had drawn the steel. He knew that perfume.

His eyes relished the spectacle of Diana’s tall, muscle bound body with its sharp curves; her rich, round breasts, her hips, her perfect calves enclosed in skin tight boots. No, he should be angry with her for every word she uttered about Bruce.

So he clenched his waist and looked at her forcing his eyes to take a glare. But the woman was unfazed; she smiled broadly and her teeth shone in the darkness since Metropolis’ lights were feet under them.

“I see you’re still angry, Kal El” she said in a slightly sneering voice and Clark was lost in the shine of her blue eyes.

“Of course I am. The way you spoke about Bruce was…”

She cocked an eyebrow and twisted her ruby, heart shaped lips.

“The truth” she cut him. “But you’re in love with him so I must respect your choice, right?”

Superman watched her narrowing his eyes. The Amazon Princess floated next to him and as the wind sent her perfume in his face, he felt his heart stopping.

“Well, how is the Prince of your heart?” Clark would prefer it if her voice wasn’t so filled with sarcasm.

“He is fine” he answered coldly. “I’m sure he’d appreciate your interest.”

She chuckled.

“I doubt it…He is clever to achieve conquering the heart of the finest of this world” Clark frowned at the ‘conquering’. “I’m sure he wouldn’t want so close to you someone who is impervious to his charm…”

Superman involuntarily heard again Bruce’s speech about keeping Diana under watch because they supposedly didn’t know anything about her or her intentions. But not get to close to her or show any
trust. The same feeling of ridicule crashed over him. Maybe Bruce’s paranoia wasn’t paranoia after all; maybe it was just plain jealousy and an effort to make Clark suspect her so that Bruce wouldn’t have to worry about losing him to her.

A rush of anger hit him: could Bruce do that? Endangering such a valuable ally to succeed his selfish goals? But then he shook himself because Bruce never had selfish goals.

“Actually, Bruce prefers people who don’t drool over him.”

She snorted.

“Then why is he with you?” she cackled.

“I’m not drooling!” Superman spat. “I love him for his personality; for his value – for me he isn’t a piece of meat.”

He turned his back to leave though that perfume that seemed like being extricated from every flower in the world made it more difficult than it should be.

Diana touched her hands on his shoulders and Superman shivered; an electric current running his spine to his brain.

“You’re going to him…”

He nodded abruptly.

“I hope that at least he satisfies your needs…and he does not torment you all the time with guilt that’s not yours” she whispered and her velvety breath smelling of flowers caressed his neck.

Superman turned his head to her frowning.

“This isn’t an appropriate discussion: this isn’t your business!”

She patted his shoulders and he felt her strength.

“Touchy subject, huh? He made your gallant heart fall for him and now leaves you thirsty…unsatisfied, famished…But it is your choice, Kal El” she pouted. “Maybe he makes your life difficult because he is jealous of me…If that’s so, you can assure him that I have no love interest in you: I’m an Amazon not a wrecker of couples…All this human pettiness is beneath me.”

Superman shook his head, his lips in a tight line. He was both happy and disappointed with Diana’s last words: the lack of interest from her.

“That’s the best, Diana…I wish things were different but I love Bruce so nothing can happen between us. However I will be honored with your friendship and alliance.”

She smiled and her smile was the purest smile in the world.

“The honor is mine, Kal El” her fist hit her chest in the place of her heart and Superman’s heart gave a jolt.

From far, thanks to his zoom vision, saw Bruce on his wheelchair before the fireplace working in his shiny tablet; Hero was sleeping on his basket.

The window opened automatically at Clark’s approach and in a blur he put the tablet on the table reading what kept Bruce up till now: information about the two orderlies closest to Crane. He gritted
his teeth: he had forgotten that scum; he cursed the timing because an Asylum escapee was the least Bruce’s recuperation needed.

Bruce glared at him.

“That’s unfair…using your speed to take my tablet and read what I was working on.”

Clark lifted him and was happy to find that his temperature was normal.

“If you wanted you’d have stopped me” he replied calmly. “And what is unfair is you working late instead of sleeping. That day was fool of intense moments.”

As he placed Bruce at the mattress flat on his back, the younger man raised his torso.

“I was waiting for you…”

“You shouldn’t…Tomorrow is Sunday and I will stay the morning” as he was looming over his face, he nibbled the younger man’s lip.

Bruce giggled because Clark’s hands that had him trapped between them touched his armpits tickling.

“I wanted to learn what Jor El told you…”

Clark lolled his head on the side.

“I’m astounded you didn’t hack the Fortress’ crystals to find out” he planted small kisses all over his nose.

“Hm…That’s a good idea…”

Clark cackled smugly.

“On your dreams, buster…you can’t pass the Fortress’ firewalls…”

Bruce smirked evilly and his eyes sparkled menacingly.

“You want me to try?”

Superman got rid of his suit in a flash and his eyes sparkled self-proudly seeing the younger man admiring his perfect body; aroused by Bruce’s craving eyes sucked long Bruce’s neck.

“I don’t want you defeated and heartbroken…” he continued arrogantly moaning.

Bruce wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck and fondled his shoulder plates.

“You know I won’t be” he said challengingly.

Clark chuckled but didn’t answer; his focus on lapping the minimum of chest skin that Bruce’s neckline left exposed. He’d have started unbuttoning the buttons but he was afraid of himself; his reverie from last night that made him almost violate Bruce gave him cold feet and he could feel some slight inhibition in the man beneath him too.

“I want to spread butter on your body and gobble you…” he groaned with his mouth deep in human flesh.
Bruce moaned because Clark’s power made his heart beat joyfully before a cold grip clenched her reminding him of last night.

“Don’t tell me that in Krypton you ate human beings?” he inquired between joking and worrying.

“Mmm…I doubt they ever got such a yummy sample like you…I’m the luckiest of my species…”

His hands drifted again lower and Bruce tensed feeling again the anger and dread of their last encounter. But Clark stopped abruptly when his fingers matched the bruises on Bruce’s thighs: he didn’t need his sight to know they were there. He closed his eyes and slumped at Bruce’s side. He wouldn’t touch Bruce before that reminder of what he almost did disappeared.

Bruce was both sad and relieved that Clark didn’t proceed. Sad because he felt the man’s regret for his deeds.

“They’ll soon vanish…” he said guessing the reason of Clark’s abrupt stop. “What Jor El said?”

Clark had put his forearm under his head for support and stared at the ceiling.

“I hope that at least he satisfies your needs…and he does not torment you all the time with guilt that’s not yours…”

He sighed.

“That there’s nothing wrong: you were wrong. The effect your body had on me was the first and last external influence. Nobody is messing with me as was the case with you…”

Bruce could detect some aggressiveness.

“Then?”

Clark raised his torso.

“I’ll visit the Fortress every day repeating the exams to be sure. But probably is only something psychological so I’ll work it out.”

Bruce supported himself in his elbows and rose from the mattress.

“Together, Clark. We’ll work it out together” his voice was adamant and Clark smiled.

He grabbed the human’s torso and locked their lips in a long, passionate kiss. Clark unlocked their tongues before the last air was finished in Bruce’s lungs and laid him gently on the mattress.

“Now I must take care that you never undergo hypothermia again…” he chuckled and spooned Bruce’s body.

The younger man brushed his face with eyes that shone.

“Clark, you’re so beautiful…”

“Thank you…” he whispered and his lips trailed Bruce’s neck.

Suddenly, as in a nightmare a mixture of foul smells attacked Clark’s nostrils wrecking Bruce’s intoxicating perfume and turning it into a disgusting pong. Clark’s hypersensitive smell could discern the scents of Falcone, Chill, Ra’s Al Ghul, Bane, Talia and some others unidentified.
“He was a pleasure slave all his life – a whore! His body is overused, sucked up: his flesh carries the memories of all these filthy men that fucked him daily! He must be infected by many disgusting diseases!” Diana’s voice echoed in the chambers of his mind filled with worry for him.

And truly: Clark could see all these different people using Bruce’s body in disgusting ways. He had seen Chill’s erection hammering Bruce’s insides and then being cleaned by Bruce’s obedient tongue. That same tongue that only seconds ago was tangled with his…He felt his hairs stand on edge…

He could bare that smell and stop breathing to not cause Bruce’s suspicions; it wasn’t Bruce’s fault, right? He didn’t want to sadden him; to make him return to those days he considered himself filthy. Even though this smell made Clark think that Bruce… No; he brought back the most beautiful perfume his mind offered first: all the flowers of the planet blossoming in the clear spring’s fields…

Bruce tensed feeling Clark’s discomfort and the healthy part of his spine froze. He cupped Clark’s jaw.

“What is it?”

“Mmmm…I was thinking…why don’t you change your perfume?”

Bruce frowned.

“You know I rarely use cologne…and I thought you loved my natural smell…”

Clark sighed and ruffled his hair.

“Of course I do, babe! But a change never hurt anyone, huh? Try something flowery. Maybe a bath foam.”

Bruce felt awkward and stupid for discussing such meaningless things when he could do so much useful work.

“I won’t change my bath foam” he retorted; it was the foam his mother used to bath him with.

Clark collapsed on the mattress huffing.

“You know…using the foam your mother used to wash you when you were a kid won’t bring her neither your childhood back …”

Bruce supported his body on his elbows and loomed over Clark. His blood was boiling.

“If you want someone with flowery perfume, go to him…or her!” he stressed out the last word.

But Clark wrapped his arms around Bruce’s torso and brought him on his own body; he kissed him on the forehead.

“I don’t want anyone else, babe…It was just a suggestion; nothing more.”

Bruce thrashed in his arms and Clark relished the resistance; he caressed his locks planting soft kisses to his cheek.

“You said that we’ll work this out together, Bruce” he whispered.

But Bruce was feeling a tight knot with big prickle making his insides bleed; it was the same not of all these days never leaving his insides…
“Maybe you don’t want that after all” he replied sternly and his eyes flashed.

Clark closed his eyes because as Bruce’s heart beat onto his heart a deep pain was transmitted; suddenly, that stopped and Clark knew that Bruce hid his pain out of pride. The Man of Steel touched the human’s heart.

“God, I do want it, Bruce. I don’t want to lose you…”

But Bruce’s eyelids were too heavy from fatigue and drugs and emotion. And as in the years of Falcone’s captivity, sleep offered an escape. He preferred his caves and his bats but he couldn’t reach them now and that made his healthy body spasm urging him to set it in motion to get there: his body knew that he had the power. Yet Bruce was aware that doing that would only make things worse… So he fell asleep on the body he still loved and struggled to keep trusting…

Clark closed his eyes, the feeling of Bruce’s hands on his chest and his calm, hot breath on his flesh making him numb. He loved that human but his past sometimes ruined things so ugly. He thought about Diana: no, she didn’t cause all that; she just warned him. It was just a coincidence this crisis emerged after her appearance: if she was evil she wouldn’t have saved Bruce, her rival; she’d have let him die in his attackers hands.

He kissed feathery Bruce’s silken locks.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

This chapter wasn’t supposed to be so lengthy but as I was giving it a final reading I had some inspiration. I hope you like it.

Also, thank you for reading, commenting and leaving kudos.

The first impression was salty, male scent – irresistible male scent - and…donuts. Then he felt the soft thing he was glued on and how warm and nice it was. Fast but not as fast as he’d have wanted he realized that his face was nestled in Clark’s bare chest and Superman’s arm was loosely wrapped around his back keeping him really close. The warmth flooding his body rushed to his cheeks and that was ridiculous: after all these years of being fucked twice a day (at least), every day, blushing because someone holds you in his arms was stupid. Well, knowing that this someone must be staring at you sleeping probably for hours didn’t help matters…

A sweet mouth kissed softly the tip of his nose and then his lips.

“Good morning…” Clark’s voice revealed his smile and Bruce opened his eyes.

His eyes were met with Clark’s stony chest and his cute curly hair there yet he didn’t let his hands brush because along with waking the feelings from last night returned.

Clark didn’t need Bruce’s touch to feel pleasure: certainly, it would be a nice addition yet all this time Bruce’s mouth was touched to his flesh and the feeling of his lips and the air leaving gently his lungs had rendered him spineless.

He kissed the younger man’s forehead where some messy hair had fallen.

“Morning…” Bruce replied and his voice’s throatiness wasn’t only from the sleep.

The leaner man made to move away from Clark’s arms but he didn’t let him. Clark tightened slightly his hold and uplifted Bruce’s chin with his finger. Bruce’s eyes sparkled as they met challengingly the bigger man’s happy eyes.

“Why?” Clark asked almost whining. “Because of last night’s stupid slip of my tongue?”

Bruce arched an eyebrow.

“It wasn’t a ‘slip of the tongue’…Let me go.”

Clark closed his eyes but didn’t relent; he nuzzled Bruce’s cheek.

“It’s Sunday morning, Bruce; I was looking forward to this the entire week to be able to be with you when you wake up – to do the morning routine together. Let’s not ruin this because of my stupidity… I was tired…” well, that seemed odd from him. “Please…”

His arm passed over Bruce and returned bringing a donut to Bruce’s lips: a fresh baked donut, still warm and with a scent that made Bruce’s stomach growl and his mouth salivate.
Clark smiled on hearing his stomach reacting, like this.

“I know, I know… I’m committing bribery here but when a boy is desperate… Almond filling and white chocolate top…” he purred seductively. “The Prince’s donut… Now, crack a smile and I’ll give it to you” he took the delicacy away.

“I’m not hungry” Bruce detached his eyes keeping his grim expression.

“Your stomach says otherwise… C’mon, babe; don’t do this…”

Bruce heard little paws running there and Hero meowed before climbing the bed his eyes predatory on the donut.

“No, Hero” Bruce turned to the kitten though Clark still kept his body captive. “You should not eat sweets…”

But Clark had foreseen that; he left the donut in the paper bag on the nightstand and took from a second smaller bag a cat biscuit.

“Catch, Hero!” he threw the biscuit in Hero’s basket and the kitten hurried there. “Now, your turn, Prince” he brought back the donut and frowned in deep thinking. “Mmm… maybe we should follow the Fortress feeding tactic?”

Bruce pressed his lips frowning.

“Open for the airplane to land…” Clark moved the donut like an airplane to Bruce’s mouth and the younger man opened his mouth taking a big chunk.

Clark sighed.

“It felt as nice as when you started eating after the coma…” he captured Bruce’s mouth to share the mixed taste and smell of two candies: Bruce and donut.

“I don’t stink today?” Bruce asked coldly and Clark froze because last night he thought that had managed to not show it.

Clark shook his head.

“You never stink, okay? It’s my fault; can we forget all about this and continue with having a great day?”

He brought the delicacy to Bruce’s mouth for him to bite again. This time Bruce didn’t protest and Clark rubbed soothing circles to his back.

“How long it’ll continue, Clark?” he asked eating from his hand as he was doing in the Fortress the first days after his awakening: remembering that time in the Fortress and how much Clark did for him made his heart warm and let aside the latest events.

“What?”

“Saying or doing something and then trying to correct it by being super affectionate and caring… You know, this only makes things worse: it’s like you try to drive me insane.”

Clark would have ruffled his messy hair if both his hands weren’t occupied with holding the donut and Bruce.
“I’d never try to make that to you…Alright?” he whispered. “This is my true self; these are my true feelings about you. My…strange behavior is exactly that: strange because it isn’t me. I don’t know what comes to me and I act in that manner but then I get over it. Scratch all these, Bruce; I don’t mean them.”

Bruce shook his head, pursing his lips. Clark read his disbelief and it hurt. He jolted off the mattress holding Bruce and shoved the paper bag with the rest of the donuts in the top drawer.

“We don’t want our prowling four legged friend reach them…” he said showing Hero who was approaching slyly the nightstand.

Bruce smiled at the kitten and then looked at Clark.

“What are you doing?”

“Shower” Clark answered nonchalant and in a second they were already in the vast bathroom, the door closed.

Clark was completely naked but Bruce stubbornly fought the temptation to enjoy the spectacle and the Man of Steel realized and sighed. He leaned Bruce on the wall holding him from the waist and touched their foreheads together.

“Don’t tell me you stopped liking what you see?” he asked in his most sexy, raspy voice nibbling Bruce’s bottom lip.

Bruce felt Clark’s hands fondling his dressed ribs and though his throat filled with moans, he stubbornly choked them. Clark sighed defeated.

“Okay, buddy; but it’s shower time and I still love to see you naked” his hands blessed with super speed were sensationally slow as they removed Bruce’s rob and then unbuttoned his pajama shirt, one button after the other.

He slithered extremely slowly the pieces of the shirt to Bruce’s shoulders accompanying his moves with small kisses and then pushed the fabric till the wrists and then on the granite tiled floor devouring how the human body shivered in his ministrations. Then supporting Bruce’s body with his fell on his knees slowly, taking along Bruce’s pants. And then when only the black boxer stayed hiding the human body body he took it off dragging that clothe down.

“Damn!” he sighed raising his eyes appreciating the human body. “How can I survive without seeing that body every single day?”

Clark hooked his one arm around Bruce’s waist and brought both of them inside the hydromassage cabin that had more than enough space for two people. He set off the seven different body jets and supporting Bruce he began sucking his chest mingled with the artificial rain. His free hand fondled the younger man’s abs shivering with Bruce’s shivers.

“Tell me that you like it as much as I…” he sucked Bruce’s lips closing his eyes.

Bruce liked it; actually, he loved it but the knot in his stomach was there throbbing reminding him constantly that things had changed and might change even more. He closed his eyes and controlled the feeling of discomfort.

Clark cupped his face with the hand that didn’t hook Bruce on him. He brushed his eyelashes that
dripped water.

“There’s no hope then?” he asked locking his eyes with Bruce’s blank eyes. “I made your heart close again?”

Bruce focused on Clark’s eyes, on the clear, unique blue and their sadness. He remembered how this was the first thing he saw after he woke up from the coma; how these blue irises made the ice in his insides melt that night in the greenhouse; made him trust. He clenched his jaw: he didn’t know what was to come but he wanted to live this moment.

He wrapped both his arms around Clark’s neck and nestled his head in the crook of his neck kissing feathery the flesh there.

Clark shuddered from the abrupt movement and the way Bruce’s torso glued on his agitating his already aroused nipples; and then the little kiss there, the feeling of Bruce’s face there; the water running caressing and massaging his body.

“I want things to stay like this…” Bruce mumbled and his shy lips nibbled lower to Clark’s bulging pectorals.

“And they will, babe!” he cupped his face with both hands because he could support Bruce without having to hold his waist; he yanked Bruce’s face and stormed his lips kissing almost violently, needy, hungrily. “I won’t lose you…”

His lips felt like being drawn by a powerful magnet and continued battling with Bruce’s delightful defiant lips till his thirst and the mixed smell of human flesh and water led him to ravish cheeks and jawline causing melodic moans from the younger man who was choked from the power of lips that sucked his flesh and hands that squeezed sensually his torso.

And then suddenly Clark’s hands were tousling his drenched locks without stopping burning him with his mouth. His body although under the waterfalls of seven different faucets felt feverish making his torso writhing in his heart pace; he wished his hips were writhing like this but everything stopped in his waist.

Clark’s groin throbbed unbearably; his penis that anyways was half erect due to his morning glory now was already dripping despite the water or maybe more due to the water…Taking advantage of the fact that Bruce’s hands were clutching his neck to withstand the force of Superman’s passion, he grabbed Bruce’s thighs and heaved them to hug his hips; his penis shuddered as if electric current ran through it.

Bruce locked his eyes with Clark’s, his eyes batting from the water’s force giving him his silent consent.

Clark grasped his wrists, took them from his neck and since Bruce’s legs left his hips lacking any strength, turned the younger man face first to the cabin’s wall. He heard the human’s heart jolting from excitement and…hesitance when Clark put Bruce’s arms on the wall above his head.

“Don’t be fret, Bruce…It’s Clark…”

“I’m not afraid” he answered.

Clark massaged gently Bruce’s shoulders accompanying every stroke with a fervent kiss; he wanted to be fast but forced himself to be extra slow because he felt that slowness aroused more his mate.

“Do you remember that day at Thasos…in the shower? What you did to me?” the sensations from
that intercourse often returned with the help of his eidetic memory to torture him...the things Bruce’s mouth did to his body...The work of a professional...Clark froze.

Bruce sensed that slight change though the healthy portion of his body was on fire.

“Do you want me to do that again?” he asked in his most arousing rasp.

A professional...

“...beautiful beings like Wayne are made only for being used for pleasure and nothing more. The only teachings he had – even unconsciously – were of whores seducing their potential clients; and he knew deep inside that his ass was the only asset he had to survive. So even without his will; even without knowing it he used what he was learning from his environment. Cheap whores were all the family he had but even the cheapest whore knows how to emanate some charm to a client.”

Clark wished Diana’s voice and sayings didn’t sound so truthful...

“No, babe...” his penis was rock hard and ready to storm inside that body he missed so much; but he knew he couldn’t, he shouldn’t...His mouth found Bruce’s ear and panted as he rubbed his aching member on those delightful buttocks. “I won’t get inside you...” the words came out pressed, mixed with moans and grunts as his penis’ sensations peaked “though I want it so much...but I’ll wait...because...it must...be...perfect...for you too...”

His hands left Bruce’s wrists and hugged the youth’s waist sticking their bodies together as his rubbing moves became frantic, the friction from Bruce’s buttocks offering a satisfying substitute. Their hearts beat in the same pace till Superman’s beats surpassed any human rhythm and his penis exploded.

Clark was breathing hard on Bruce’s shoulders and the human felt burning in a sweet fire and then began shaking uncontrollably in his own arousal that would stay without any relief. The Man of Steel stroked his locks tenderly.

“Relax, babe...” he planted small kisses all over the back of his neck and then his back that under his super vision showed every sign of the fatal injuries Bruce undertook and Jor El’s treatment. “Now, we’ll bath...”

Bruce controlling at last his breath and heartbeat closed his eyes choking the moans that still climbed his throat. Experiencing his lover’s orgasm felt as if he also had ejaculated – Clark’s content made him satisfied too.

“No flowery bath foam!” he growled and Clark chuckled.

“No...I love your perfume, Bruce...” he took the bath foam and poured some on Bruce’s shoulders, spreading the soft cream with gently movements along with the water. “And then we’ll eat the donuts...I’m starving...” he roared and bit lightly Bruce’s rib causing a small laugh.

Bruce was happy and forbid the knot form again so soon after this happiness.

Joker watched behind his spoonful of cereals the orderlies watching something really interesting in their smartphones. His eyes sparkled wicked. The orderlies of duty were stiff as always in their positions around the cafeteria but some others behind the door, in the corridor were playing with their gadgets. The thing is that the door had round shaped windows and the morons were visible from inside to the keen eye and Joker’s eyes were very keen in locating interesting things.
He shrugged; he’d investigate it after that delicious breakfast. Brucie’s donations to the Asylum and Dr. Harlequin’s love for her patients granted them a different breakfast every day. In hopes of not boring Joker and leave their premises…

He leaned on the back of his chair and yawned; on the built-in TV screen Tom was chasing Jerry ending up with a lot of lumps and bruises.

“He! He!” he screamed and swallowed his juice.

But then the stupid mouse blew up the entire house and the cat found himself under a pile of debris. Joker’s wide smile curled downwards. In real life, this would have disabled anyone…Even Batman. He saw again the young man descending from the jet confined in a chair and his eyes darted to this buffoon Lu… His hand clenched so tight around the spoon that some blood spurt.

Well, the establishment was fine and the stuff very friendly yet the entertainment became boring, annoying and he’d have to soon leave…He sighed…He always got melancholic when he had to leave behind a place or a person…He scratched his head frowning; no, that was a lie. He never felt melancholic; on the contrary, he always felt crazy happy when he left behind a place – in ruins – or a person – in a bloody mess.

He was like a bird, he’ll only fly away; he didn’t know where his soul was, he didn’t know where his home was… Wait, that was a song…Hm…He rubbed his chin: he would sing that song to Brucie as soon as he met him.

He jolted from his chair and walked to the door.

“You're beautiful, that's for sure/You'll never eeeever faaaaade/You're loooovely but it's noooooot for sure/That I won't ever chaaaaange/And though my love is raaaaaa--re Though my love is trueeeeee…” he hummed shaking his head in the rhythm.

He halted in front of his personal orderly – his bodyguard.

“Mmm… Scotty, can I go out? Ppppppleaaaaaase!” he batted his eyelashes cutely and showed him his bleeding hand. “Hoooome accidents…” he lolled his head.

Scotty grimaced but moved his mass pushing the door for them to pass.

“Uuuuuuuuu! Thank youuuuuuu! What a gentle--man…”

As they walked to the toilets Joker’s eyes narrowed predatorily scanned the corridors and when he found what he looked for locked eyes with him sending the message.

Inside the first toilet cabin of the vast raw he found Malcolm, one of the non-criminal residents, waiting for him. Scotty waited him outside the room so they wouldn’t have any disturbance.

Joker knew that Malcolm had more privileges than anyone because he was obedient and very cooperative – and a really old customer; the poor fella must have spent almost all his life in the Asylum. The only drawback was that these traits that made him so loveable to the staff also made him extremely easy to manipulate. And for Joker was even easier…So the guy offered him a nice connection to the outside world since using a smartphone was one of the privileges the old guy enjoyed: poor guy couldn’t do anything with it than goggling at the wallpapers changing. Well, Joker definitely could do more…

“Thank you, Goofy…” he said snatching the phone; Goofy was the grandpa’s favorite cartoon.
He roamed Gotham’s news and perused the fresher.

“Hm…” he read about Luthor’s imminent release. “The baldy looooover boy has reaaaaaally strong friends, huh?”

And then he scrolled down until he found an article about the temporary DA’s announcement of the release. Well, the article had a video and honestly Joker loathed reading news articles so he pressed the little arrow and watched the video gritting his teeth on the authorities’ inability to keep inside jail that creep who touched Bruce.

“C’moooooong, guys! You need meehee to show you the way?” he murmured and already began to plan his chaotic ‘justice’ on Luthor – the lover boy really shouldn’t appeal for his release. “There’s a jungle out there, Mowgli and I’m Shere Khan!”

But then he focused his ears on that dork DA who strangely seemed satisfied; Joker frowned.

“But in our great country’s…”

Joker began whistling the National Anthem pretending to throw away a tear.

 “…1788 Ratification of the Constitution, 1791’s Seventh Amendment there’s a paragraph that gives to Gotham’s highest judge the right to not accept as orders the decrees which lack solid reasoning in their claims and intervene to decisions already taken by the courts of law; therefore this decree has the power of an appeal” the temporary DA heaved a really old looking parchment with the infamous seal and signs.

Joker scratched his head fascinated waiting the punch line of the joke.

“Thus Gotham’s judicial system will re-assess Mr. Luthor’s case; but until the Gotham’s court new verdict, Mr. Luthor will remain in Blackgate Prison” he clenched the papers he was holding. “The said paragraph and our official announcement will be distributed to all of you. Thank you.”

Joker jumped on the cubicle giggling.

“Huhuhuhuhuhuhu-hahahahaha! That must have huuuuuurrrt, baldy…Ouuuuuuuccch!”

He imagined Luthor’s pan upon hearing the news and then his screams of outrage.

“Poor thing… I want to peeeeeeet your bulb…aaand then give you a smack and open it in twooooo…Ooooh! I sniff good ol’ Harv behind it…Ugh! I miss him and Rach…We would have a veeeeery funny time together.”

He scratched his head and took in Malcolm’s bewildered expression.

“Hm…Maybe they’ll come back to play, huh, Goofy?”

And then suddenly he began giggling again hoping on the cubicle making Malcolm cower on the corner.

“Ohooooh! My paadal Luthor! HeHeHeHe! Ow, pooor guy! You were ready to fuck again the world but the world fucced you instead…Muhahahahahahah! It must huuuuuuurt…” he rubbed his nostrils together and sobered.

He handed the phone back to the old guy and jumped off the cubicle flushing.

“Thanks, pal! It’s been months since I had such a fun time and till I’m out…”
He opened slightly the door of the toilet compartment.

“You know the process: I’m leaving now and you’ll wait ten minutes before you go back to the yard, okay?”

The old man nodded and Joker slapped friendly his cheeks.

“Gooooood boy!”

He crossed the toilets hoping like a school girl and whistling: now he was ready to get out and spread some Joker regularity to that chaotic world. Releasing Luthor?! Outrageous injustice – for that he paid taxes to the state? Scott stared at him frowning; the big guy leaned on the wall with his arms crossed.

Joker winked.

“It must be something I ate…” he leaned his head towards the toilets. “Good thing that flush is strong…Do you think that they took Brucie’s money and pocket them instead of buying us good food? Villains!”

Scott didn’t answer and nudged slightly Joker to walk.

“The reasoning behind that party is to show the public that S.H.I.E.L.D. is no longer the ghost organization with the vague agenda and even vaguer goals and connections” Tony explained to the people sitting at the kitchen island of the Wayne Manor.

Clark was pushing gently Bruce’s wheelchair inside, Hero at their heels and Bruce lifted an eyebrow. Apart from Tony, Alfred had served breakfast to Pepper and Leslie.

“Good morning” Bruce and Clark greeted them receiving the same greeting as response.

Clark settled Bruce’s wheelchair at the island and took the stool right next to him causing Tony’s roll of eyes. Alfred cast a lopsided glance at the billionaire from Malibu and served breakfast to the newcomers and Hero who were already waiting at his bowl.

“He has eaten already some biscuits, Alfred” Bruce warned his butler and Alfred shook his head.

“He’ll need a diet soon…”

Tony chuckled.

“He is already like a ball with legs!”

Pepper lolled her head on the side.

“You, mister, are no better; you have already a bump. You’re lucky your armor adjusts to your body.”

Tony dropped his head and looked at Bruce.

“Much job, no action and no fun, little guy, and the one who forces me to work” he cast a sideways look at Pepper “exposes me like this…” he shook his head disappointed.

Pepper cocked an eyebrow.
“It’s better me here between your friends than you unknowingly – we know that you don’t have the most objective view for your looks – exposing yourself in front of your female fans. Imagine their reactions and the endless chats on twitter…” she shook her head. “I can already picture the memes…”

Tony’s eyes bulged in terror and his lip trembled, causing Bruce’s chuckle.

“Buddy, I’ll start workout with you…Those memes are cruel!”

“I’ll need a diet soon, as well, if I keep eating twice breakfast” Bruce replied shrugging.

Clark blushed under everyone’s stare; their late arrival already had raised suspicions about what kept them in the bedroom. And now everyone figured out that he fed Bruce as well…Actually, after the happenings in the hydromassage cabin they needed food and specifically sweets so the donuts were massacred.

“Not at all, Bruce; you need to put on some meat…” Clark replied nonchalant deciding that it was stupid to feel embarrassed for things he loved.

Leslie sipped from her juice.

“Agreed, as your doctor I believe that some more weight would be beneficial” she said in her scientific way but then her voice became sly. “Of course, Clark knows better your body…”

Clark choked with his juice and Bruce hurried to slap him in the back. Leslie’s smile was wicked.

“I meant after you’ve been treating him for an entire month…”

Pepper laughed too and Alfred looked amused so Clark decided to loosen up. Yet Tony’s cheerfulness was lost; he still didn’t like thinking of someone like Kent touching Bruce.

“Anyway” the billionaire decided to change the subject “we were talking about the party.”

“I heard what you said about showing the people how changed the new S.I.E.L.D. is” Tony nodded. “So you open the Tower for the public?” Bruce’s frown was very talkative.

Tony waved his hand determined to not get pissed by his friend’s paranoia.

“For a couple of hours” Bruce opened his mouth to say something but Tony caught him “only a portion of the building” Bruce made to say something again but his friend stopped him again “with all the safety measures taken. They will be prominent members of society.”

Bruce crooked his lips and Leslie said what her patient was thinking.

“Falcone and Luthor were prominent too…”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“I’m not a moron, alright! We were very careful with our choices.”

Pepper shrugged innocently.

“I’m his personal assistant and I have to do my job…”

“Don’t tell me Fury was okay with that?” Bruce asked.
Tony crossed his arms and stared at Bruce with arched eyebrows.

“Actually, he didn’t oppose the idea.”

“And the Avengers?” Clark asked and Bruce turned to him nodding.

Tony pouted.

“No problem. We are actually cheerful guys” he scratched his ear “maybe except Black Window and Hulk…but we all want to have people trust us, so we’ll attend” he pouted thoughtful “well, except Hulk who anyways wouldn’t fit the building. After all, Superman attends various parties” he pointed out. “Aaaaand he’ll attend that too…”

Clark jumped on his stool and Bruce frowned.

“Mmm…I hear about a party?” the kitchen’s door that led to the grounds opened and Selina slithered inside. “Sorry, I’m late…” she kissed Bruce’s cheek and petted Hero before settling in the stool. “I hope you don’t mind I entered without knocking” she asked Alfred while he was serving her.

“Not at all, Miss” he replied in his placid style “it is the reason I left the door unlocked; what’s the point of locking when a certain Catwoman is to drop by?’

“You’re the best!” she exclaimed and planted a kiss to the man’s cheek.

Alfred cocked his eyebrows.

“Well, I certainly am grateful, Miss.”

“So who’s throwing a party?” she asked chewing a pancake.

“Tony” Pepper answered.

Selina rolled her eyes.

“Who else?”

“At the Avengers’ Tower” Bruce said sharing knowing glances with Selina who gulped hastily her mouthful of food.

“That’s great news!” she exclaimed and Tony frowned at her enthusiasm. “It was about time! Am I in the list of guests?” she asked eagerly and Bruce choked his laugh.

But Clark who had stayed aloof thinking finally asked.

“You said that Superman will attend?” he frowned. “I’m not an Avenger.”

“Bruce will be there too” Tony stared at Bruce who wasn’t as thrilled as Selina in the prospect.

Leslie intervened.

“I don’t know if Bruce is capable of doing again a flight and New York has the same cold weather as Gotham. He just got over the cold from the Thanksgiving party – I don’t want him ill again: he managed to overcome it easily this time but I don’t want to put his organism in trial.”

Pepper looked pointedly at Tony who huffed.
“Leslie, you know that he fell ill because he slept in the cave and not because of the party so from that aspect he is more at danger getting ill here than in New York. As for the trip, he travelled here from the other side of the planet and nothing happened – the trip to New York with my jet is nothing. And I’ll take care of him and you are invited to the party as well.”

Leslie shook her head.

“I can’t abandon my clinic for so long and especially for a party.”

Tony pouted.

“Les, you realize that Falcone is gone for good?” he cocked his eyebrows.

But the firm doctor answered him with a sharp glance.

“That’s irrelevant!”

Tony closed his eyes defeated.

“Don’t tell me Batman will be at your party?” Selina chuckled because she saw Bruce’s discomfort and wanted to ease up the vibe.

Alfred who after Bruce’s gesture had sat too cocked an eyebrow.

“Do you wish that I prepare your best Bat suit, sir?”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Well, Batman might be an animal but a party animal, right?” Tony explained. “So Bruce Wayne will be at the party.”

“Bruce Wayne isn’t a party animal, as well…” Bruce commented and Tony began losing his good mood afraid that his friend changed his mind.

Clark locked eyes with the billionaire.

“Okay, I understand Bruce attending: he is your best friend…”

“And I owe my life to the Avengers” Bruce added “so it is the least I can do to saw my gratitude and support them in this new beginning” he fixed his eyes on Tony. “Right?”

Tony shook his head.

“I want you there because you are my friend – only that. Actually, we owe you our lives” he said soberly. “Weren’t for you Bagdana would have killed us all.”

But Bruce shook it off.

“What I said wasn’t sarcasm: I really feel gratitude to you and your friends for fighting the League of Shadows and saving me and the world.”

Tony chuckled.

“Well, thank you on their behalf. That means you didn’t change your mind…” he narrowed his eyes suspiciously.
“You know I don’t like parties, Tony… But I’ll come.”

“After all, I always need help with Tony in a party” Pepper snorted.

Clark huffed impatiently.

“Excuse me: what did you mean by Superman attending?”

“That Superman is a guest too” Tony said casually and drank his espresso. “Avengers worked with you in that battle and Ironman fought alongside you in Metropolis’ subway station; so it’d be rude to not ask you to join us.”

Well, Clark wouldn’t have given a damn if he wasn’t a guest but Bruce would attend too so even if Superman wasn’t a guest he’d have gone as Kent to watch for… ‘tresspassers’. He felt Bruce’s eyes on him and blushed because probably the younger man figured him out.

“I want to show” Tony continued “our true intention to cooperate with every force of good in this planet. So I thought that this guy Flash would be a very welcome addition to the list – Superman knows where to find him.”

Clark shook his head pressing his lips.

“He has a demanding day job and Central City is his domain – I’ll contact him but I can’t guarantee…” then he heard something strange: Bruce was chuckling.

Soon everyone’s eyes were on him.

“Master Bruce?” Alfred inquired softly and Bruce bit his bottom lip.

“It’ll look like the biggest costume party in the world…” he laughed. “You should have thrown it at Halloween…”

Tony ruffled his hair troubled.

“Says the man who dresses like a huge bat…” he spat and showed his tongue to Bruce. “And we won’t be wearing our suits…”

Bruce seemed shocked by that.

“What about secrecy?”

“Not everyone shares your obsession with secrecy.”

Clark lolled his head on the side.

“It’s not his only obsession…” he said snidely.

Bruce snorted.

“You keep your true identity secret as well” he snapped at Clark.

Tony nodded.

“That’s true, little guy. So the dress code in my party is quite free to choice. Mmm, I wanted to invite Wonder Woman too – she saved many people, in many different occasions most recently at Metropolis” he stared at Bruce almost apologizing “I mean if the UN honored her it’ll strike badly if
we didn’t invite her. But I doubt she’ll condescend to our humble party…”

Clark seemed lost all of a sudden, the remembrance of Diana returning back to him like a flood.

“I’m sure she’ll be eager to come when she hears that Superman will attend” Bruce commented having seen Clark’s expression.

Clark turned to him as if someone punched him with a Kryptonite glove but Bruce was chewing a pancake.

Tony who had an immense experience with relationships in trouble pouted narrowing his eyes.

“Ow! Ow! Did I miss an episode or something?” he asked a bit pissed because if Kent was making his little guy unhappy, he had some Kryptonite stock from Luthor’s labs.

“Many episodes, handsome!” Selina said dryly.

But Bruce pressed his lips.

“I mean that she is Superman’s ally and I dare say friend so if she knows that someone she cherishes so much will be there, maybe she’d bear the presence of mortals for his sake.”

Clark nodded relieved that Bruce meant that because from the moment Stark spoke about heroes who helped people he was feeling it’d be a big injustice if Diana wasn’t there; and the truth was he wanted her there.

Yet Tony wasn’t so convinced and Selina even more.

“I’ll inform her the next time I’ll see her” Clark said with a grin. “It will be great for the world to see so many heroes united with only one purpose: save humanity and serve justice.”

Selina snorted and Leslie, Alfred and Bruce chuckled because it was like hearing her saying ‘bollocks!’.

“Well, let’s come to the point” Selina said petting Hero who had climbed to her lap. “Am I invited or I have to break and enter?”

Alfred lifted an eyebrow and chuckled.

“That would be a spectacular event, Master Anthony: Catwoman breaking into the safest building in New York amongst the Earth’s superheroes.”

Tony rubbed his chin.

“Mmm...A hot staff dressed in skin tight black leather highlighting delicious curves, carrying a whip...mmm...it’ll be the best event in any of my parties...better than that all naked stripper dancing on stage while Luthor bragged about his corp in that boring entrepreneurial congress. Of course nobody was hearing his bullshit not even the women in the crowd because I had arranged for an all naked male stripper too...Hehe!” he sighed. “Good times…” he exclaimed melancholic.

“She is my bodyguard, nurse and friend, so she’ll accompany me. Forget the leather and whip attraction” Bruce said and Selina sent him kisses.

Jonathan Crane stood before a rusty, old industrial working bench that already had transformed into
his working bench – a handmade, sloppy, shitty laboratory but Scarecrow didn’t care about luxury only for effectiveness. And with the material he had brought with him from Jeremiah’s secret lab he could proceed with his creative genius.

In Jeremiah’s hideout chamber Jonathan Crane had established his own stock of chemicals and other material for his work; that started from the good years when he ran the nuthouse. Yet he was a leery man and always prepared for the worse: well, his childhood and teen experiences had forged him this way and he was really glad for that.

That was that made him stash in the old industrial area before Falcone’s fall a quite large amount of food with distant expiry date and of course water, drugs and…some guns, just in case. Also, a small TV set: the old industrial area was rich with generators so Jonathan had no problem watching the latest developments in Gotham.

Even now that he carefully mixed different liquids in tubes his one ear was focused on the news: everyone had forgotten him and discussed the news about Luthor – that dork billionaire. Well, that was good but still Scarecrow was angry that he overshadowed him. He’d make Gotham regret for underestimating him.

“I’m here for that, dude!” Jonathan frowned because although he was accustomed to hear Scarecrow’s voice this voice wasn’t in his mind and wasn’t familiar.

It was a sly, amused voice that echoed to the large storage room of the factory only a few buildings away from the ruins of Chickey’s factory where that nutcase Joker was captured by Batman. Jonathan was startled but his hand jerked instantly to his loaded gun and turned to the intruder.

Who with a lazy wave of his hand made the gun flew away. He had an annoying smirk in his face as he rolled his eyes.

“That’s not very polite from a scientist, huh?” he cackled.

Jonathan gritted his teeth and his lips trembled in rage. His uninvited guest wore strange attire that reminded of ancient times: black leather leggings, a green long tunic and a golden vest. His shoulder length greasy raven hair fell forward framing his narrow face where two eyes sparkled slyly as regarded him.

“And another loony escaped the Asylum?” Crane cocked an eyebrow and lolled his head. “The security was better in my days…”

The stranger walked towards him stretching smugly his body.

“I like escaping but Arkham wasn’t one of my residences though a very charming establishment and with very intriguing company…”

Crane narrowed his eyes.

“Who are you?”

The man lolled his head on the side curling his lips.

“I’m sure if you saw Thor you’d have recognized him at once…” he said snidely.

Crane’s eyebrows arched in sarcasm and he snorted.

“So…you claim that you are a…god?” he asked his voice cracked with amusement and his guest
pursed his lips annoyed.

Suddenly, Crane’s tubes began exploding and the mad doctor noticed how focused the stranger was on the working bench.

“Stop it, you idiot! You’ll get us killed and you’ll bring cops here!” he twirled to his bench but he was too clever to try to intervene.

Then as suddenly as they began, the explosions stopped and the tubes returned to their previous condition. Crane turned his head looking lopsided at the smirking man.

“Who are you?”

The other snorted and rolled his eyes frustrated.

“Not much general knowledge in your CV, huh? Loki Laufeyjarson of Asgard.”

Crane shook his head unimpressed.

“A god with surname?” he snorted. “No wonder you’re not a celebrity…”

Loki began laughing entertained causing Crane’s puzzled look: this self-proclaimed god reminded him of a certain clown and he didn’t like it at all.

“You, humans, are very entertaining! I’ll give you that!” he shook his index finger and pierced Crane with his wicked stare. “Yeah, I’m not a celebrity…yet but I’m new to the field…and I’m up to an aggressive breakthrough.”

Crane turned his back uninterested and began meddling with his tubes. He shrugged.

“And to be here, you want something…”

Loki approached him.

“I like people like you, Dr. Crane…”

Crane turned to him with a smug shine of self-satisfaction in his eyes.

“You know me?”

Loki smirked.

“You consider yourself a celebrity, right? SCARECROW?!”

Jonathan saw in his mind himself with Scarecrow’s mask injecting his patients with multicolored liquids or spraying them with his fear toxin; and then he saw Ironman raking the floor around him with bullets terrorizing him. He knew that this Loki guy was in his brain.

“Well, it happens that I can penetrate anyone’s mind” except little Bruce’s “and you’re not” Loki arched his eyebrows and nodded. “I mean you’re not a celebrity but you’re interesting as your pal, the clown.”

Crane’s eyes widened as he remembered Joker’s mumblings about a god visiting him in his cell.

“You’re the god Joker said that he saw in his cell.”
“Who else could it be? Aphrodite?”

Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“Nice…” he snidely remarked. “That dork forced his presence on me so much that now I share his hallucinations…”

“Bitch please…” Loki crossed his arms and a throne appeared behind him.

He sat and looked at Crane.

“Do I look like a hallucination?”

“Absolutely!”

Loki laughed and the second floor of the warehouse cracked and began descending rapidly. Crane’s eyes bulged and made to run for cover but he realized that his ankles were bound together by something like a cloud; he stared at his visitor whose grin had reached his ears.

“Do I look like a hallucination, Jonathan?” he asked calmly as if an entire floor wasn’t falling on them – on the other hand, he was a god so he couldn’t die contrary to Jonathan.

“Okay, you’re not!” he screamed. “You’re real! Damn it!”

The ceiling stopped in midair and returned in its place as if nothing happened. Jonathan’s breaths began normalizing.

“Can you release my legs?” he asked.

Loki leaned his head towards him and laughed. Jonathan ankles were free and he walked closer to the throne that was made of gold and wood that resembled nothing Jonathan had ever seen.

“I know it’s a bit showing off” Loki said looking sideways to his throne “but when you start your career you need some moves of bedazzlement.”

“What do you want, Loki of Asgard?” Scarecrow took control and raised an eyebrow with confidence.

Loki pouted innocently.

“The same with you: to become a celebrity” he pointed his index finger towards Jonathan and the doctor felt it without the finger making any contact with his chest. “And you, my friend, have talents I need… So are you in?”

Jonathan lolled his head on the side and stared sarcastic.

“Do I have a choice?”

Loki yanked his head and eyed the human.

“Always…but not today” he laughed. “C’mon, Scarecrow, it’ll be lovely; and you’ll have your revenge on…” he pouted thoughtful “whatever…” he settled. “Besides, what better you have to do? Wait for the cops or the Bat to bust you? Or playing with poor nutcases? I offer a freelance contract” a modern looking paper with a big signature saying Loki emerged “you offer me your services but you’re not bound to me – frankly” he squinted “you’re not my type. All in all, free to do whatever you want! By the way, I like your mask!” suddenly his head was in the Scarecrow mask. “Spooky!”
Jonathan rolled his eyes but the prospect of being in the same team as a free partner of a god was very interesting.

“Deal” he said flatly and his mask left Loki’s face.

The god stood and his throne vanished; he turned to leave but lolled his head to Crane.

“Your hideout is nice…but staying in here is too risky – someone could figure out…and I don’t want a precious partner being captured. So I’ll offer you a safer safe house. At least, till we end our cooperation…then you can choose where you want to go.”

Bruce was reading the logs Arkham Asylum kept about its staff. Ted Bradley and Martin Sanders were the names that interested him: the first had been attacked by Crane and the second was responsible for the former doctor but one day before his escape, he fell ill.

Bruce could hear Clark and Tony snorting at him that he was paranoid for searching the victims. Yet this job needed some paranoia – especially, when you’re dealing with paranoid criminals.

Martin Sanders was a veteran orderly, much experienced and hired by Dr. Cooper before Crane was positioned in the head of the Asylum. On the other hand, Ted Bradley was hired during Crane’s management. Of course, that didn’t mean that the man was fond of Crane since working for someone can make you either his supporter or his hater. Ted wasn’t married and lived with his brother Casey.

Bruce put Casey Bradley’s name on his own search software and it gave results that included police records. Investigating the relatives of someone who was involved in a case was necessary because sometimes it shed light to the most unexplainable aspects of the case. And Casey was a difficult case himself: several arrests for drug use even during Falcone’s reign – obviously the youth, only 16 then, didn’t have connections with Gotham’s Emperor and didn’t enjoy preferential treatment from the police. Yet he was released sooner due to being underage; he was committed in various rehabilitation clinics in Gotham – cheap ones – but soon after his releases he lapsed again.

Till his brother, Ted, was hired at Arkham Asylum. After that there was no results concerning Casey neither from police nor from clinics for addicts, which meant two things: either he miraculously came over his addiction or he found other ways – under the radar – to get his dose. And a psychiatric institution offered an amazing stock of psychotropic drugs and in big quantities. However, if Ted had stolen drugs from the Asylum, he’d be caught eventually and fired. And in his file there was no mention of any disciplinary slip: the orderly was exemplar.

Bruce rubbed his chin and for an instance turned his eyes to the flames dancing inside the marble fireplace. He chose the study instead of the cave because he didn’t want to make his people worry since only yesterday he ran a fever. But he definitely missed his cave and his monstrous computer though the Cosmos tablet was convenient enough since it was connected with the giant processor downstairs.

It was after the splendid lunch Alfred offered them that Bruce found the chance to slip in his study and do some work.

He opened the file about Martin Sanders and scrolled down to the report about his health that was attached to his petition for sick leave. There was no specific diagnose but the doctor of Mercy General Hospital was firm about the man’s need to stay in the hospital for treatment; in his description of symptoms were extreme nausea and vomit fits, vertigo, migraine and stomach cramps. That last one made Bruce frown: Ted Bradley had said that Crane had complained about cramps and
he thought that maybe the former doctor had been infected by the same disease with Martin – that’s what he said to the police.

So Crane knew which symptom would make his temporary orderly think he probably had the same illness like his colleague. Only the said colleague fell ill while out of duty, outside the Asylum’s premises…one could say that between colleagues such things are learnt fast. But that doesn’t change the fact that Crane knew what symptom to fake to make his orderly transfer him to the infirmary.

Which made Bruce wonder if it was another Crane’s substance that caused Sanders’ illness. If Crane managed to possess his fear toxin inside the Asylum then why not some other substance too?

Bruce drummed his fingers on the oak desk that was an exact replica of the one his father had. There was no doubt that Crane had planned this: he slipped the substance to his orderly to make him ill knowing that he’d be replaced by someone who probably was lenient to him. And since Crane had no access to Sanders’ food another orderly could have done it…Damn! Of course Sanders’ illness and Crane’s escape could be connected by chance but when you’re dealing with these people nothing happens at random.

Ted Bradley was the key because he might have been attacked by Crane but that might have happened to shake off any suspicion – Crane wasn’t a fool. Moreover who else could have given Crane access to his toxins than an orderly?

Bruce pressed his lips: if only Batman could interrogate Bradley! But that was impossible and Clark might wear the armor but this wasn’t his thing. Of course he would share his insights with Jim yet even if the Police took the man in for interrogation, Bruce doubted that they could keep him jailed based on some assumptions and a hunch.

And there remained another question: how Crane got out of the Asylum. Fine, he knew the ancient Mansion better than anyone and could conceal himself in some crypt through a trapdoor since the old manors had many of these: Wayne Manor was a fine example. But even if he crawled in a crypt Clark would have found him with his vision since all the lead had been removed from the building some months ago as part of the renovation…

Wait! That’s it… If Crane used trapdoors and secret passages then he might ended up in a crypt so ancient and so unknown that was still rich in lead. Of course…Bruce didn’t have the chance to do much reading all these years but from his childhood he remembered the spooky stories about the secret chambers deep down on earth where Jeremiah Arkham tortured his patients. What if Crane had discovered those chambers? And where these chambers might lead?

Bruce looked around: he needed a diagram of the Asylum and an ancient map of Gotham. The first was easy but Bruce didn’t want the diagram of the modern building and he didn’t trust much the ancient maps that libraries had which were made in the twentieth century: Gotham’s deception was everywhere.

His eyes fell on the whole wall library behind him, one of the few things of the Wayne house that Falcone left in its place because it was really precious and impressed his guests. Bruce remembered like a dream his father perusing through the pages of really ancient books.

He began reading the titles: thank goodness, his father had signs carved in wood that named each category of books. Medicine wasn’t what he was looking for; neither gardening; nor painting, sculpture; ancient classics, no; philosophy, no.

It was a blessing that Clark made that chair to satisfy his every need so only with the thought of needing to reach the top levels, the chair hovered and brought him where he wanted. Thankfully, he
didn’t fear heights…

History…Maybe that but maybe something more specified. There: Gotham’s old maps. There were four books and Bruce took them and willed the chair to bring him down.

He browsed through the books and finally he found a map that depicted the city of Gotham the era of Jeremiah Arkham. He focused on the portion of the map where Arkham’s Mansion was; then he brought a map showing the city’s urban design of the time. He licked his lips and took the hand scanner that wasn’t bigger than a common flashlight and sent the two maps to his processor in the cave, giving the order to cross them.

He eagerly waited, watching his tablet’s screen for the results.

“Sonova…” he exclaimed.

The city’s old sewers – that was long abandoned – where running under the Asylum. It was very possible that Jeremiah in his madness prepared an escape route connecting his secret chambers with the sewers: an ancient blueprint of the old Mansion showed that the foundations reached too deep – and Crane having explored the place knew it and followed the path. Much like Bruce had explored the underground cave system to wage his war.

He took a piece of paper and scrawled down where the sewers ended and realized it was a tricky business: the old sewers’ system was rambling ending up in many locations. The good thing was that the sewer system of Narrows those days was separate from the rest city’s so Crane could walk out only somewhere in the island. Of course from there he could head to the rest of the city but police was watching every street and bridge.

So the old sewers in the Narrows ended at the surrounding shores – that is to say, the docks and the abandoned warehouses. But there were also various manholes – thankfully, the design had their locations – and someone using them could emerge even at the Haven. That thought froze his spine; but he immediately crossed it out: the Haven had much security and too many people swarmed the place.

The most possible places for a wanted man was the docks/warehouses but there frequented small time crooks, addicts and creeps and Bruce doubted that Crane would want to meet them – more so since the police already had the docks under discreet but close surveillance. And then as he studied the map created from the crossing of the designs, it dawned to him: the old industrial area!

Images of dense smoke, giant tongues of fire and beams collapsing invaded his mind and his lungs felt squeezed by lack of air and his heart convulsed from agony for the life of the child he protected under his cape…

He closed his eyes and breathed calmly. The industrial area was one of the points with manholes and it was near the Asylum; also, it explained why Clark couldn’t locate Crane since the old factories and warehouses were full with lead and every kind of minerals and chemicals. Joker had chosen the exact area, so why not Crane too?

He called Jim in Batman’s voice and told him about the industrial area. Of course, Bruce would prefer busting Crane himself…

Now he had to wait…and if this had no result he’d focus on Bradley. In the meantime, he could work other things: he maximized the window with Wonder Woman’s interview to Lois Lane.

*LL: First of all your English are quite impressive for an inhabitant of a different world.*
WW: Thank you. I have the blessing of Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom so for me it is as you say a piece of cake to comprehend and use the language the people around me speak.

LL: What made you abandon your island and decide to inhabit our world?

WW: I found a human almost dead in a deserted island; I brought him to my island and treated him to health. I had many discussions with him till he was alright and we returned to his city. But all this intelligence I took from Mr. Queen made me realize that I couldn’t stay indifferent to the suffering and injustice in a world so near mine. Amazons are great warriors to thwart any menace coming from the outside world to ours yet my divine, noble ancestry didn’t let my conscience at peace knowing that innocent, weak human beings howl to the deities for help.

Bruce pressed his lips and shook his head in disapproval.

LL: So…is this a charity case for you?

WW: It is exactly what it is for Superman: responsibility. We owe to fix this world and show the humans the right way.

Bruce snorted and he was sure that Lois had done the same.

LL: It is your care for humans what guides your actions then?

WW: What else?

LL: What are your intentions about your action? I mean Superman cooperates with UN; Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. made new agreements with the government and the global organizations.

WW: I’m here to help humankind; if Superman believes that cooperating with UN is an effective way to that purpose, then why not?

LL: From your sayings I get the impression that you opt for an alliance with Superman.

WW: Who else? I mean his fame has reached even Themyscira: he is a noble, worthy warrior for an Amazon Princess to fight alongside.

Bruce could imagine Lois’ eyebrows arch in sarcasm thinking ‘only fight?’ but she was a respectable reporter and kept an objective stance at her interviews.

LL: You mean that you don’t want to fight with other heroes like Ironman or Captain America?

WW: Who are these?

Her smug face flashed before Bruce’s eyes.

LL: Human superheroes who saved the planet from dangerous criminals.

WW: Nice…But I consider humans a liability during battle; I love humans but they are weak so it is best to stay behind and let the true warriors do the job.

LL: Humans are not weak. Besides, Amazons are human beings too and you, as their Princess, fight side by side with them.

WW: You can’t seriously compare the Amazons with common human beings. Human heroes can do their things but when real threats appear Superman and me will be there to secure that nobody would endanger innocent lives.
Those soft knocks on the door was definitely Alfred’s.

“Come in.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, sir” he arched his eyebrows “though it is Sunday…”

“Sunday is a day of rest for those who work all week and I had the entire Saturday for rest – besides, I’m not doing hard work.”

Alfred remained expressionless.

“You have a visitor, sir.”

Bruce frowned.

“I didn’t have any meeting arranged…”

“Indeed, Master Bruce; but I believe that you’ll definitely want to see this visitor.”

Superman was heading north to his Fortress for his daily tests and finally could understand Bruce’s loath every time someone pressed him to do this. Of course, his own tests weren’t as inflictive as Bruce’s: Clark knew that when Leslie examined Bruce for the first time after Falcone’s fall, certainly must have him undergo a full examination in his private areas – he was a rape victim after all…

Clark shuddered, imagining Bruce’s feelings as a stranger was searching the parts of his body that caused him the greatest pain and humiliation. He really admired that human…

Suddenly he heard cries from Metropolis and then the noise of a fight: one was fighting with many and those many fired but the battle continued. He pressed his lips and dived towards the earth. A hundred feet away his smell told him what his vision was to tell few seconds later: a being with superb perfume was fighting with stinking thugs.

Diana had no trouble fighting those thugs even if they were a pack yet Superman was so angry that stormed at the few standing and sent them in a second to slump unconscious.

They had attacked a couple of tourists that cowered in a corner – Gotham wasn’t the only city with criminality and after Intergang’s ghostly appearance small timers became more aggressive hoping to be picked for members.

“Are you alright?” he asked Diana seeing her porcelain upper arm bleeding from a scratch above her gold bracelet.

Superman cast a fast glance at the alley and immediately understood; the thugs in their panic for having Wonder Woman pounding them opened fire and the Amazon to protect the humans used her body to shield them. Diana must have used her lasso to shatter the bullets but some shrapnel hit her – the golden rope was still clenched in her fist unfolded and smoking.

Police sirens were approaching.

Diana smiled in her enchanting smile.

“I’m fine; they can scratch me but nothing more…” she said bravely. “I thought that you would be with your chosen one…Humans cherish Sundays.”
Superman nodded.

“People’s needs never stop.”

Police cars entered the alley and Diana wasn’t too happy to see them.

“I don’t like being crowded” she answered to Clark’s questioning look. “Would you join me?” she was already flying out of the alley. “If you don’t have something else to do of course” she winked.

Clark thought about his destination: he would go later. Diana should look that wound. He followed as the cops handcuffed the thugs and took care of the frightened couple.

He was side by side with Diana in the blue sky and she stopped. The scratch in her upper arm had healed and the velvet skin was perfect again. Suddenly Clark noticed another scratch in her right breast: the bullet had torn the fabric a bit and a part of her nipple was visible and bleeding. Think, brown nipple with drops of blood that seemed like calling him to clean the porcelain breast that was so round and juicy…

He shook his head and Diana laughed eyeing her breast that instantly returned to its unmarred condition as the fabric.

“I guess you don’t see much of this, huh?” she remarked snidely and Clark blushed. “Oh, c’mon… it’s not a crime to look, is it? Don’t tell me Bruce is so ungrateful that is jealous of such things?”

“He is not…actually, he is perfect. And I wasn’t staring at your…breast – I was worried about the wound.”

Diana nodded amused.

“If you say so…Care to accompany me to a fly or Bruce would make your life difficult?”

Clark laughed.

“No, on the contrary” they began flying as the sun started setting. “Tony Stark is throwing a party at the Avengers’ Tower in New York and he’d like to invite you…I’ll be there too” he hastened to add “and almost every Avenger.”

She cocked an impressed eyebrow on the last while her eyes shone when Superman told that he’d be there.

“Bruce will be there too?”

Clark nodded.

“Then I’ll come. I’ll offer my help to your human since he is afraid of people knowing your relationship.”

“He isn’t afraid; it’s just…How you’re going to help?”

She yanked her long hair and some blue shine hit his eyes.

“I have heard what people say about you and me…It might not be the truth but definitely serves Bruce. If I am there people won’t think that you came for him…So your enemies will target me not your frail Prince – unlike him I’m not afraid of your enemies and it would have been my honor if the whole galaxy knew you loved me.”
“You’re unfair to him, Diana” she smiled patronizingly. “He isn’t afraid and he is proud of our relationship but we don’t need the whole world to know.”

She clenched her jaw and nodded, disbelief sparkling in her eyes.

“She doesn’t have a problem with my invitation?” she cocked an eyebrow.

“Of course not. I think that if you two speak you’d become friends.”

Diana shook her head laughing and with a sharp descend dived to the dark, cold waters of the ocean. Superman descended too and floated above the water surface.

She emerged after a while, her long shining hair sticking to her face dripping water to her half opened mouth enhancing her beauty.

“I love icy water!” she panted as if aroused. “In Themyscira, the sea is warm but the island has three waterfalls, the one of them coming from Hera’s mountain which is the highest. The water there it is frozen, the best for strengthening the body.”

She raised her blue eyes to him smiling.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of cold water?”

Superman’s eyes were fixed on hers but he could hear every drop of water travelling her gorgeous body. He dived too and the icy water didn’t feel cold at all.

“I used to stand under the rushing waterfall completely naked” Diana purred closing her eyes in remembrance. “Nothing compares with the brushing of the icy water in your bare flesh…” she chuckled. “But I wouldn’t strip here because Bruce would be so jealous…”

Clark was really happy for that as the corner of his eye fixed on her breasts that bulged from the cold and her thick nipples rock hard pushed the fabric of her bosom. Her laughter was like melody as she dived and then emerged from the water.

“Do you have a problem with Diana being at the party?”

Clark wrapped his arms around Bruce’s waist that dressed in his pajamas insisted on working on his damn tablet even at bed.

“Why would I have a problem?” Bruce replied still focused on the data that filled his divided screen: he was working both on Intergang and Crane.

“You know Intergang is my jurisdiction” he said playfully kissing Bruce’s ear but the truth was that he was a bit irritated because sometimes it felt like Bruce showed off.

“Not if they are behind the raids at LexLabs – LexLabs belong to Wayne Enterprises so that makes Intergang my problem too.”

Clark huffed.

“It can wait till tomorrow…”

Bruce stopped typing and inhaled.
"They didn’t find Crane…"

Bruce had told Clark about his suspicions that the escapee must be in the old industrial area.

"You’ll find him…” he breathed in Bruce’s ear and took the tablet from him using his speed to place it in the vanity to the other end of the room.

In a second he was back stripping Bruce completely and laying him flat on his back. He straddled him and leaned over his face.

“I was thinking that you might don’t want her there because you’re…you know jealous of her…”

Bruce felt as if he was hit by a lash. He narrowed his eyes.

“If you’re true to what you constantly say to me, then why being jealous? On the other hand, if you lie to me and you fell for her then what’s the difference if she isn’t in the party?”

“I’m always true, Bruce…” he whispered and let his naked weight touch Bruce’s flesh. He was glad Selina took Hero in her apartment for the night…

His mouth plunged in Bruce’s neck and began sucking rubbing his body sensually; after the hours in the water with Diana he really needed Bruce’s body.

Bruce wrapped his hands around Clark’s livid body and moaned but Clark grasped his wrists and pinioned his hands on the mattress above his head; Bruce grunted from the goosebumps this move caused and Clark laughed massaging with circling motions his breasts.

His hands were held there by Clark’s one hand grip and the Man of Steel with burning intensity lapped his pectorals like a thirsty animal. Bruce moaned more and closed his eyes enjoying his lover’s gentle sucking of his nipples. When the sucking became stronger almost painful and his heart began pounding remembering before his brain.

Bruce tried to free his hand to touch Clark in order to make him go slower but the grip was unrelenting if not stronger. He had to remind to his panicking mind that this was Clark…

“Clark…” he tried to catch his attention.

Bruce’s nipples were pink and small but using his mouth he could make them bigger, more satisfying – besides Bruce loved those ministrations.

The sucking became harder and stronger and Bruce had to clench his teeth to not scream.

“Stop that!” he growled.

Clark lifted his head and looked puzzled.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

Clark could see Bruce’s face drenched in sweat and his eyes glistening angry; but he wasn’t doing anything wrong, damn it!

“Make love to the one I love…”

Bruce shook his head defiantly.

“Free my hands!” he spat and Clark did it immediately noticing that he had reddened the flesh.
Clark took the fragile hands and kissed the wrists.

“Bruce, people do these things while having sex” he said softly as if teaching a virgin. “And I know you love nipple playing…”

Bruce had calmed his heart but not his rage.

“Not like this! I know what this is!” he abruptly shut his mouth unwilling to say more but Clark understood.

He cupped Bruce’s head caressing with his thumbs; he wanted to plant soft, reassuring kisses but his condition wasn’t fit.

“They tortured you through your nipples?” he whispered with his voice heavy from sharing the same pain that boy must have experienced.

Bruce lolled his head on the side and didn’t answer, his eyes blank, lost in his past. Clark pressed his lips.

“I’m sorry, baby…I should have…”

Known? How could he possibly know the range of cruelty those men inflicted to a child? He wasn’t a pervert…And Bruce wouldn’t speak to anyone. It was Bruce’s fault actually…If he had told him, Clark would never have done this…

He sighed; he felt so tired fighting every moment with Bruce’s ghosts. He wanted them to be happy but times like this it felt like a lost battle…and Bruce was dragging him along…

“I hope that at least he satisfies your needs…and he does not torment you all the time with guilt that’s not yours…He made your gallant heart fall for him and now leaves you thirsty…unsatisfied, famished…But it is your choice, Kal El…” Diana repeated in her sad but firm voice.

He eyed Bruce wearing his clothes in a hurry and he helped him. Clark cuddled his cold body and settled him on the mattress spooning him and rubbing soothing circles to his back.

“What Jor El said?” Bruce asked calmly.

Clark’s heart dropped; being with Diana made him completely forgot about the tests. Nothing bad happened – he’d go tomorrow.

“Everything fine, like yesterday.”

Bruce turned his head to him and Clark nibbled his bottom lip.

“It’s always your Clark…”

But Bruce’s eyes were turned inside; his soul floated to Gotham’s sky.
Chapter 28

The bright sun warmed his skin even under the thick shadow of the intertwined trees; he was calm, his soul free from every trouble and sadness as if he was in Heaven, except he knew he was in Earth and well... he was very much alive. Some distant clangs reached his ears as if people were training with swords but what towered every other sound was the echo of the waterfall reached his ears alluring him there…

A small lake lay seductively in the heart of the mountain amongst the ancient trees; the water fell from a steep hill forming a crystal curtain. The refreshing smell of icy cold water enchanted his nostrils as his steps took him there and then every other smell vanished as the intoxicating perfume of every flower in Earth sprang boldly.

His eyes which were mesmerized by the natural scenery popped out as the flowery perfume became stronger and clenched his melting heart: the waters split in half in the middle of their descent and from a huge cave in a niche of the rock a figure walked elegantly to the edge of the narrow ledge: she was completely naked but the sun was blinding him forbidding his eyes taking in every detail.

Suddenly she jumped some feet above the rock and bent her body in a gracious dive descending rapidly to the lake. She stayed under the surface for some time and he worried that she might have hurt but then she emerged inside the waterfall gasping with pleasure.

Her long black hair was plastered to her back and head, blue shines emanated in the sun’s rays. She was tall and lean but perfectly shaped muscles built her body: shapely, endless legs ended up to juicy, sturdy thighs and then with a breathtaking curve to her hips. She was standing profile and he could admire both the protruding, firm buttocks and her groin...Her flat, covered with layers of iron abdominals belly supported strong ribs and a broad back; he could see only one of her breasts that had bulged from the water’s coldness; its brown, thick nipple erect dripping water that had done a pleasant trip over the hill of her breast.

She leaned her neck backwards to lead the water to fall abundantly to her chest; her face was beautiful with heart, shaped rich lips promising pleasure beyond heaven…

Suddenly, she turned towards him having sensed his presence. A bright smile dazzled him as she moved her body to face him, confident in her complete nakedness.

“Kal...what a pleasant surprise! Join me!”

It was like an order and Hell, he couldn’t disobey. Encouraged by her easiness in nudity, discarded his own uniform that anyways was too suffocating from the moment he cast eyes on that Amazon goddess...

He walked effortlessly in the shining waters overcoming easily the resistance and she moved from the waterfall towards him. He could float but he needed to feel the cold water cooling his body.

He stood before her and neither of them had any problem for being exposed to the other’s eyes... as if it was meant to be.

“Diana...” he breathed and she gave a toothy smile that made her face even more beautiful.

“I knew you’d come...I knew you eventually would see the truth...” her voice was firm as always but somehow lower, sexier.
She wrapped around his neck her strong built arms that were still adorned with golden bracelets in the upper arms and locked eyes with him sending flames to rapidly burn his entire body. With her usual braveness attacked his lips with her wet ones and began gently caressing, exploring his intentions.

His breath had halted in his lungs, his heart raced; he knew it was what he wanted, what he always wanted. At first, he hesitated: a small, shy corner of his mind still nudged him and filled him with regret. But he was certain that this was the real thing for him; the one that when he’d emerge in happiness will erase every bitterness, every misery, every gray sky... He saw Gotham’s gray sky and for an instance his good mood almost evaporated yet Diana’s eyes were there to bring back the jubilant sun and her soft, delicious lips the optimism, life’s energy...

He enveloped her powerful body in his arms and her breasts brushed his chest as her smooth hips his waking groin. He chased hungrily her lips and locked them in a fascinating dance till their tongues got entangled exploring each other’s mouth. Their bodies rubbed together harshly and for just a fleeting moment he was afraid of hurting or causing injuries to a healing fragile human body... but this body was as strong and invincible as his and his heart jolted happily, free at least to enjoy what he should.

Now their hands were fondling each other’s body with violent almost brutal movements; their lips still locked twisting in desperate pleasure, without any fear for the lack of air in their lungs — their healthy strong lungs and their healthy, strong hearts that could dive into excessiveness fearless...

His length was half hard and Diana’s nails that scratched his deltoid in her passion to get the body she longed for made him go rock hard. Her other hand was tousling violently his wet locks as his hands grabbed her rock firm buttocks. She moaned in synchrony with his grunts and ground her slightly hairy pubis to his groin.

It was too much for him and she felt his need laughing.

“What you wait for, Kal? I’m not a scary little boy...”

He grabbed her thighs and heaved them slightly because Diana didn’t need more. She wrapped her endless legs around his hips and God! it was the best feeling in his life! His dripping penis storming at her waiting entrance with a hard, swift motion that made him worry that he hurt her.

But Diana was cupping his face glowing, her moan the only indication that she was just entered. She was towering him the way he held her thighs high and her happy face felt like the sun behind her. He thrust in her and Diana clenched more his face moaning delighted...

“Stronger, Kal...” she whispered in his ear and began lapping his neck. “I’m not going to break... You’re free at last...”

Her melodic and stern voice was the fuel for his passion: he began thrusting, in and out, in and out, stronger, deeper as she pulled his locks brutal to lead him, strengthening at the same time her legs’ grasp around his buttocks almost painfully... How he enjoyed that sense! But she pushed him to go faster and stronger moving her hips and sucking his length in the deepest of her body clenching her vagina... Her hot, warm, velvet insides felt like heaven... and her inner thighs rubbed on his pelvis like the finest silk in the world.

But she wanted more... she had been waiting this for too long and her insides burnt like a thirsty sun, an exploding sun and his body obliged free to act without any fear, to satisfy its needs... cause Diana’s frantic grunts and groans and her legs more tightening surely would have shattered any human bones; as her nails that dag his back would have stabbed a lesser being...
Yet there was no fear…just jubilation, just explosive passion and wet breaths and his tongue licking her breasts that were dripping wet but from sweat; his hands fondling brutally her body’s curves and secrets; his pants faster than ever, her heart leaping from exhilaration upon his; his penis more alive than ever; his body was floating above the waters without knowing.

He moved them under the waterfall and Diana gave out an excited yell, bending her neck backwards. He took advantage to trail the curve of her neck and then the dimple leading to her chest; the running water made her taste and smell even more captivating…His mouth ended up in her swelling breasts so soft and delicious that he was gnawing to Diana’s immense pleasure that showed off by her violent clutch at his buttocks.

She was moving up and down to increase her pleasure, panting and groaning loudly pushing his buttocks forwards to give more impetus to his thrusts.

He was drinking the water that fell from her nipple and it was the most delicious liquid in the world that intoxicated him and made his length throb frantically ready to explode mimicking the sound of the waterfall…

Clark jolted upright from the bed and stormed to the bathroom; he hardly made it to the bathtub before he ejaculated. He stayed before the porcelain tub numb because he felt the greatest satisfaction of his life; he was panting as his mind remade the sensations of the soft, strong body of his dream.

He closed his eyes and ruffled his hair; it was wrong…he was acting like a horny teen that was carried away by his hormones. He opened the faucet and his semen was washed off; he raised his eyebrows – it was too much even for his standards and he was grateful that had managed to get in the bathroom on time…He’d have soaked the whole bed, the mattress and poor Bruce. And then apart from the embarrassment he’d have to explain; imagine Alfred trying to clean his mess. A nightmare.

Thankfully, he had slept naked so his clothes were safely hanged from the back of an armchair. He stepped into the tub and opened the shower though the falling water was a constant reminder of his dream; however he had to clean himself and lower his temperature.

He wore a bathrobe and returned to the bedroom to dress. It was still five in the morning but he’d go to work earlier – after all, Bruce wasn’t supposed to wake before eight.

Bruce…His heart ached for him contrasting the avalanche of carnal pleasure before. That dream alone offered him more pleasure than Bruce ever did…He bit hard his bottom lip chastising and cursing himself because that was unfair. Bruce was so much more than just a body to satisfy his needs – Bruce was everything: his salvation, his soul mate…

“No! No, please, no; no more, sir; please, master…” his voice was really young and pitiful begging like this but it hurt so much…

His arms were tied above his head, outstretched and even his good arm pained while his cripple right hand was crucifying him. But the pain that towered everything else was of his chest. And then became even worse as the sucking was stronger, as Chill obeyed his boss. His small legs shook violently tied spread in the two corners of the table bent in the knees.

He cried like a baby with sobs and whines but the worse was feeling that he was ready to piss himself…
“No...” he begged but it sounded like a meow.

He had his eyes closed but he felt immediately his master’s gunpoint pressing his left arm.

“I know ya like it, ya littl’ bitch...ask for more or I’m gonna fill yar arm with bullets an’ then ya’ll be moping the floor with yar tongue! Say it!” he roared and the gunpoint stabbed his flesh as Chill pumped more stretching his nipples to their limits.

“M...more...” he mumbled because his right arm hurt too much and he didn’t want his left hurting the same – and then how he was supposed to do his chores? His heart pounded and that increased the pain in his breasts.

“Louder!” Falcone screamed in a mix of threat and delighted laughter.

And he obeyed asking for more and then begging for more till his master was satisfied from his swollen nipples and black and blue breasts. Falcone took off the glass-like things that were stuck to his breasts and his body convulsed violently because it hurt more...his face was drenched from tears and saliva had dripped from his mouth to wet his neck – he was sobbing.

Sobbing and whining and groaning louder and faster between his gasps as Falcon rubbed the swollen nipples between his fingers, thrilled from his feat.

And then Chill brought a strange tool that looked like a gun and gave it to Falcon who grinned.

His eyes bulged and his breath became even faster because he knew that there was more pain coming.

“No...” he whined between his sobs shaking weakly his head; he saw his master bringing the strange gun to his right nipple.

Falcone smiled and pulled the trigger. His pitiful howl echoed in the room as a nail pierced the base of his nipple splashing blood in the air.

“Please...” a second nail to the tip of his swollen nipple was his answer and his stretched body jerked from pain and violent sobs.

Both of them were sniggering when Falcon did the same with his left nipple; their amusement became greater as his body was trembling uncontrollably and his pants became louder. He had his eyes closed and his left fist clenched but that wasn’t enough to fight the pain as the nails in his right nipple began burning him.

He widened his eyes and saw flames behind the liquid curtain over his eyes: Falcon had ignited his lighter and burnt the nails sending the burning through his tortured nipple. Falcon glanced at Chill and the giant lit his lighter doing the same with his left nipple.

“Please! I beg you, master, stop!” he yelled as the metal inside his tender flesh burnt him; his stretched legs convulsed in a futile effort to escape. “No! No! No!”

A slap made his head spin on the metallic table and the mobster clenched his jaw forcing him to look at his face.

“Whine an’ moan an’ sob like a good slut or else I’ll pump yar tiny willie an’ make a hedgehog after!”

He gulped and nodded, clenching his jaw as they continued their entertainment lashing his breasts
with a crop…it was minutes later or hours – he didn’t know for sure because his mind was slipping in and out of consciousness.

The so familiar and so horrific sound of Falcone’s fly lowering made his tired heart sank…the grip of the enormous hands in his tied hips were like a tombstone and his master casually but brutally impaled him with his rock hard member leaning his weight upon him to bite hard his battered, bleeding nipple. He whined and sobbed causing a cruel snigger and an even crueler thrust…He cried and his body writhed desperately…

Clark who was buttoning the last of his ugly shirt turned like a robot when heard the thrashing; it wasn’t a very violent movement but his senses could catch every detail as well as the brain waves in Bruce’s brain. He knew these brain waves and was terrified from them every time because this meant that Bruce had a flashback.

“Damn!”

He hurried to the bed and sat. He petted the younger man’s locks hoping that he’d offer some comfort even in the depths of Bruce’s flashback.

Clark pressed his lips and cursed himself sensing his lover’s distress. He was wet dreaming, ejaculating in wild satisfaction while Bruce lived the eternal Hell of his past…because of Clark’s actions of last night.

He caressed Bruce’s neck that was drenched in sweat and trembled from his frantic heartbeat and breath.

*Chill had bent him over a barrel and lowered his pants hastily.*

“My turn, Prince…” his foul breath moisturized his ear.

*His breasts and nipples pained like Hell still pierced with nails since Falcone wanted him to bear them all night. Still the violent spreading of his thighs was worse after Falcone’s endless hammering. He could feel fluids still dripping on his inner thighs and his blood was among those liquids; yet the giant didn’t care and stormed inside his shaking body…*

*A tender hand brushed his hair and it was as if the sun entered Dolcetto’s dark and humid basement; as if the sun chased away that painful night, same as every other night…His Sun…A kiss in his sweaty forehead dripping affection…*

“Clark…” as soon as he opened his eyes he was met with Clark’s kind, beautiful face.

Clark admired Bruce: he just woke from a tormenting flashback and his stare was strong, unflinching, solemn. Only his messy hair and his slightly elevated heartbeat revealed what he’s been through and soon his iron willpower controlled that too. He even tried to hide from Clark the signals to his brain about pain.

“I know you’re in pain” he whispered tenderly. “Don’t tire yourself trying to conceal it from me…” he caressed his cheeks.

Bruce gave a faint curl of his lips.

“It’s not real pain; just my mind playing tricks with my body” he huffed. “Ra’s would have scoffed at me for not being able to keep my dreams from affecting my body…”

“Ra’s Al Ghul was a fool” Clark said disgusted on the memory of the man. “You surpassed him in
Bruce smiled and kept his hand the last second before it twitched to caress his screaming breasts. It’s not real, he kept repeating to himself without showing anything to Clark.

“I provoked that” the Man of Steel said remorseful understanding. “With my carelessness last night!”

Bruce didn’t want him blaming himself. He used his elbows as support to lift his torso.

“Flashbacks aren’t new to me.”

But Clark shook his head.

“But after you woke from coma they vanished until I…” he sighed.

“Maybe the Fortress kept them at bay but as its effect wears off they come back.”

Clark didn’t like the prospect of Bruce being again tormented by those violent flashbacks. He helped him settle in a sitting position, placing a pillow on his back.

“Do you want to speak to me about your flashback? You’ll feel better…”

Bruce smiled and Clark noticed how pale he was. The younger man pushed some stray locks from his forehead and shook his head.

“No” he pierced Clark with his stare. “I don’t want to share such filth” his voice was firm “besides if I tell you, I’ll stink to you worse...” he chuckled.

Clark blushed and felt deeply ashamed.

“You never stink, Bruce!” his hand jerked to pet the side of his face.

“C’mon, Clark…” he answered nonchalant “I might not have your super senses but I know how you breathe and the little changes when you like a smell or you’re disgusted. And lately your breath when you nuzzle me is abruptly cut as if you can’t bear my smell.”

Bruce’s eyes sparkled into his, not angry but demanding from him to be honest.

“Sometimes I catch their stink on your body…” he admitted locking eyes with him.

Bruce nodded; he didn’t seem hurt but Clark knew that it was a blow and he was ashamed of himself for giving so much value to these things and letting them ruin what he had with Bruce...while Bruce was struggling to heal.

“Falcone’s, Ra’s’, Chill’s, Bane’s, Talia’s…” Bruce counted pressing his lips. “I understand your aversion: it’s too much.”

Clark knew what he was going to say next: I told you, Clark...And Clark didn’t want Bruce to believe that he was right then for trying to hold him away; for denying himself a chance in love.

The Man of Steel locked their lips together and massaged softly.

“I don’t want you even to give a second thought about that, okay?” his eyes were almost in agony and Bruce felt for him. “Something is wrong with me lately and I’m acting like a creep; and I cause you distress and discomfort. But I love you and that’s the only truth. I won’t let anything stupid ruin what we have” he found his breath. “I almost lost you up there” his voice was a hoarse whisper “I
held you dead in my arms for 189 seconds…” he felt shivers and sensed that Bruce felt the same.

Bruce cupped his jaw and kissed his lips feathery.

“I got the impression that something affects you, Clark. Like then with the substance in my body or the special Kryptonite.”

Clark’s eyes widened.

“Do you think that my immunization worn off?”

“I’m not sure. Lucius said that the results would be permanent but given your alien physiology we can’t be sure. Or maybe what happened at the factory and my treatment afterwards might have changed something in my body and the substance my cells produce. I already had Lucius take some samples to test but I think you should do the same along with your tests with Jor El.”

That would explain his sudden aversion to Bruce and then his sex maniac attitude towards him but it couldn’t explain his attraction to Diana. Maybe that change eased him to see the truth and long for her? No! The only truth was his love for Bruce; that damaged, wounded but so beautifully strong man…Who now was staring at him reading him to the core.

“Sometimes I feel like a schizophrenic…” Clark chuckled. “Like always battling with some voices… Do you think I’m crazy?”

Bruce wrapped his arms around Clark’s neck and rubbed his hot cheeks to his neck.

“You’re not crazy but you have to promise me that you’ll listen to me till we find out what’s going on. Okay?” his eyes shining with honest love locked with Clark’s.

Clark felt his entire body being flooded with the warmth that only Bruce was capable of giving him. With Bruce he was safe…from himself. He remembered the dream and how wonderful he felt…he had brought Diana into this too. And she was gorgeous, desirable but Bruce was his love.

“I promise: I gladly surrender my life to your hands” he nodded chuckling. “I’m yours to lead…” he touched his forehead to Bruce’s. “Promise me that you won’t give up on me however stupid my behavior – promise that you’ll always bear in mind that this jerk isn’t the real Clark?”

“I’ll stand by your side throughout this unless you decide otherwise…”

Clark shook his head.

“I won’t! There’s no chance I’ll ever decide to leave you” he cupped Bruce’s face and licked his own lips determined. “Tonight I’ll take you to meet my Ma” he wouldn’t let that crazy phase of his life thwart his relationship with Bruce.

Bruce’s eyes widened. Clark could see his surprise, hesitation and…fear.

“Clark, are you sure?” he asked and Clark could read Bruce’s doubt about his feelings for Diana – Bruce was more than insightful.

Clark tousled Bruce’s locks.

“Of course I am! Ma wants so much to meet you and I think this is the best timing!”

Bruce shook his head.
“The best timing?”

“Definitely.”

“Don’t you want to wait?”

Clark shook his head.

“Noope! You’re my only truth, Bruce…” he saw Bruce thoughtful and frowned. “You sound like you’re afraid, Batman!” he said challengingly. “Besides it’s fair: I already met Alfred so it’s your turn to meet my mother; I met Tony and Selina but I don’t have any siblings for you to meet. So your work will be easier: contrary to the 2/3 of your family, my Ma is an easy case. And you’re already her sweetie.”

Bruce felt happy but still that annoying knot prickled his insides. Clark as if sensing it leaned and caressed his cheekbone.

“Be ready: after the work I’ll drop by to take you there…”

Bruce could feel that his enthusiasm was true and Clark was beaming like a little boy as he walked to the window. He turned to wave him goodbye but then he changed his mind and rushed to the bed engaging Bruce in a kiss that took his breath away.

“Don’t stretch yourself much in the office” he said warning “and dress warm: outside is icy cold and that goes for our flight too. And sleep a couple of hours more – it’s still too early.”

True. The sky was still a dark blue black as Superman took off for Metropolis. But Bruce couldn’t sleep anymore: his breasts ache and his mind was racing searching explanations for Clark’s attitude: it was some effect or just he was in love with someone else and his kind heart was struggling to not hold back on what he promised to Bruce; to not hurt him.

Bruce sighed and almost wished that Clark was just ill or affected by something or someone so they could fight it together. But immediately felt ashamed because this was selfish; because there was a simpler and safer possibility for Clark and Bruce should wish for that instead: Clark could be just in love with someone else…the Princess, and Bruce didn’t want to admit it trying to find excuses to avoid letting go of Clark…

He closed his eyes: for the time being what mattered was that Clark wanted to be with him and the Man of Steel was adamant about his love.

His first job when he arrived at the Wayne Tower was to ask Ms. Philips to arrange a Press Conference for tomorrow: as much as this felt like a real burden, he had promised Gotham’s Press to answer their questions if they left the children enjoy their party – well, reporters kept their end of the deal and now it was his turn.

Then he visited the legal department where Mr. Collins, the Head of the Department, almost berated him for not calling him to come to his office instead. Obviously, the man thought that Bruce shouldn’t tire himself with unnecessary runs.

Bruce thanked him for his concern and asked him to prepare the papers for the really urgent matter they had already spoken about yesterday.

He ended up to Lucius’ laboratory: the man though nowadays his position in the company was
strong still spent many of his working hours in the lab. So when Bruce went to his office first, Lucius’ secretary told him that he was at the Research and Development.

“Good morning, Mr. Wayne” Lucius greeted him as soon as he left the lift and Bruce greeted back.

The scientist was engrossed in the flood of data in his flat screen and although cheerful as ever the way he looked at his boss seemed a bit scolding.

“You could have asked me to come to your office.”

Bruce smiled.

“It is the second time I hear that today…I run the company, Mr. Fox so why not doing that also literally since I have this very handful chair doing it for me?”

Lucius grinned.

“So how can I help this time?”

“I’m aware that I loaded you with too many things…”

The scientist frowned.

“I gave you ever the impression that I was overloaded?” he chuckled.

Bruce shook his head a bit embarrassed.

“No, of course not!”

“Glad to hear because I feared that age caught up with me and I disappoint you!”

Bruce laughed.

“No way! So…about the samples you took from me?”

Lucius sobered and took off his glasses.

“I see it is rather serious…Good thing I began the tests immediately” Bruce’s eyes shone eager and Lucius pressed his lips. “I don’t want to be intrusive but is everything alright with Mr. Kent?”

Bruce touched his hand to Lucius’ working bench and glanced at his screen.

“From the moment I told you to take the samples I saw you understood…I’m grateful you were so discreet.”

“Till now…” Lucius chuckled. “But I might be able to help more effectively if I know what’s going on…and I do care for your wellbeing.”

The younger man nodded.

“I know, Lucius; and you’re not intrusive – as a matter of fact you have every right to ask besides it is pretty obvious when I come here asking you that. So…There are some changes in Clark’s behavior lately.”

Lucius fixed his solemn eyes to Bruce’s.

“Violence against you?” he asked.
“No…” he licked his lips uncomfortable wondering if indeed there wasn’t any violence in Clark almost penetrating him without his content – but he realized that Lucius was very focused watching him. “Just some aspects of his behavior are a bit changed and he has realized it himself so we want to see if there’s an organic reason.”

Lucius put his glasses on the bench.

“Organic reason in you?”

Bruce gulped.

“Actually, I thought that maybe this substance my cells create has mutated again due to my… accident and the following treatment so Clark’s immunization isn’t entirely effective anymore.”

Lucius was nodding thoughtful.

“If we want to have this possibility tested accurately we need samples from Mr. Kent too.”

“I know and Clark will come to give you samples – actually, he is already doing some tests in the Fortress. But I thought that we could start with me.”

Lucius pressed his lips.

“I had warned you the day you came that exacting tissue sample wasn’t the best procedure for you to undertake at this stage – if Dr. Thompkins knew I’d be in serious trouble.”

Bruce was shaking his head huffing.

“I know, Lucius; but a small discomfort is really nothing. Did you find anything?” his agony was evident.

“I need to observe your samples more, Mr. Wayne but from what I’ve seen already there’s no change in the substance or the way your cells work in general” Bruce was watching avidly, no relief in his features. “But I need time and fresh samples from your friend to test them and watch their interaction with yours.”

Bruce nodded determined.

“He’ll come soon” he said confident. “Lucius, I saw the updated list of the items found in LexLabs” Lucius’ eyes sparkled with understanding “and your separate report about some ‘special’ objects.”

“I see you were quite active even being under the weather; as we register more items from those labs some of them present a pattern.”

Bruce looked Lucius pointedly.

“For everyone or just you?” he asked teasingly and Lucius grinned.

“I hope you won’t consider it bragging if I say just me…”

“Not at all…Tell me more.”

Lucius put his glasses on and tapped some keys bringing several photos on the screen.

“They were found in various labs all over the states stashed as items of no importance.”
“But you beg to differ…”

A flashing smile revealed Lucius’ white teeth; the scientist shook his head.

“You know me so well, Mr. Wayne! And things of “no importance” in Luthor’s labs persuade me for the opposite…” he nodded. “Indeed, I see a pattern in these objects and probably there are more of them; I think that they form something bigger…”

“Like what?” Bruce asked intrigued.

Lucius pressed his lips.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that for the time being: they don’t fit anything I know; and even Mr. Stark who is engaged in every kind of breakthrough technology doesn’t have any answers…”

“I bet Tony isn’t happy about this…”

Lucius shook his head.

“No, he isn’t…So we decided to gather these items in a totally safe vault in the Wayne Tower till we find all the items and discover what they build together…”

Bruce’s mind was racing.

“It might be what all these raids targeted.”

“It’s very possible.”

“And this could explain the interest of the unknown big player who dictated Luthor’s illegal release” he rubbed his chin.

Lucius raised his eyebrows.

“They couldn’t imagine that Gotham had a hidden ace and would stop them.”

“For the time being: we won’t be able to keep him in prison for much longer.”

“This doesn’t change the fact that our friend is furious” Lucius chuckled and pressed some keys bringing on screen a video from GCN’s morning news.

On the bottom of the screen a caption flashed: *Lex Luthor sues Gotham’s judicial system*. Bruce snorted.

“This outrageous violation of Constitution and federal justice won’t stay unpunished” Luthor was speaking through a phone to the newscaster and his voice although icy, cold and composed as ever, still had a small almost imperceptible tremor that hinted an indescribable wrath or despair. “The denial of my release with the ridiculous citing of an obsolete and illegal parchment is violating my human rights and every sense of democracy this country fought to maintain. Therefore I’m suing the state of New Jersey and Gotham in particular and I won’t stop before I’m justified and receive restitution for the time I’m illegally held in prison.”

Lucius stopped the video and looked at Bruce.

“That long forgotten paragraph really ruined Luthor’s mood” Lucius chuckled.

“And his partner’s” but there was another thought in Bruce’s mind. “Lucius, you found something
that is unknown to everyone in Luthor’s labs and that reminds me that the beings that attacked me were also made of unknown material.”

Lucius frowned and nodded.

“You think that they are connected? We didn’t find anything in his labs that imply the creation of those beings.”

“Yes, I know; yet maybe the beings were already delivered to his partner or belonged to him from the start. We know Luthor’s loath about both me and Superman so he could have asked from his partner to attack me in exchange for his services and the promise to deliver him his ‘thing’.”

Lucius lolled his head to the side intrigued.

“Still…how they knew where you were?”

“Someone who has the power to take a decree that arbitrary orders the release of a convicted criminal can have the means to locate someone.”

“Even with Mr. Stark’s concealing systems?”

Bruce shrugged.

“We don’t know who we dealing with.”

Lucius huffed.

“You shouldn’t be stretching yourself, Mr. Wayne; I’m sure that Batman discovered that Crane had found refuge in the old industrial area: you should rest a bit.”

Bruce smiled.

“Unfortunately they didn’t find Crane…”

“The police found his DNA, tubes with chemicals and an open TV: Crane must have escaped just before the police reached him” Bruce shook his head. “Yet that doesn’t change that you must focus on your recovery.”

“I am. But reality doesn’t wait for me to overcome my disability and I don’t have the luxury to stay in front of the fireplace and read novels or watch movies while villains plot” he inhaled. “This is the reason I asked for that special armor” his eyes flashed hopeful “is there any development?”

Lucius blinked.

“I was expecting you to ask about the development of your spine parts…” he pressed one key and the large screen filled with a projection of his body – the flashing light blue parts throughout his spine, pelvis and legs were the alien energy casts that connected his fractured bones. Around the body floated the pieces that would be adjusted to his spine to enable him to walk again.

Bruce clenched his jaw. He knew how badly shattered his body was but still every time he saw it, a punch was delivered in his guts and he had to gather again his courage into chasing away the dread that that grave damage couldn’t be restored.

“This can be delayed, Lucius” he said determined though he craved to walk again “this has to do with Bruce Wayne – Batman on the other hand can’t wait.”
Lucius cocked his eyebrows.

“I think that Mr. Stark would have a different opinion…”

Bruce fixed his eyes on him.

“Is he putting the armor behind?”

The scientist closed his eyes and sighed.

“We both set as our priority your healing, Mr. Wayne” he took in his employee’s frown. “If you walk again then the new armor would have a better use than if you wear it while being still a paraplegic.”

Bruce yanked his head frustrated.

“I can’t believe it, Lucius! After everything we discussed Tony has talked you out of this!”

The scientist held the younger man’s upper arms.

“Calm down, Mr. Wayne…We didn’t cancel the project; we work on it too” he blinked “I work on it and Mr. Stark has an advisory part. We just set as first priority the bionic parts of your spine so that your healing coincides with the delivery of your new armor.”

Lucius’ eyes were reassuring but Bruce’s heart fell.

“I don’t have time, Lucius” he said dead serious, his eyes piercing the scientist’s. “Either you two make the armor or I build it myself.”

The vibe of betrayal was so intense in Bruce’s voice that Lucius’ hands fell and the younger man turned to leave. But in front of the lift Bruce looked again at his loyal scientist.

“I know you want the best for me and I won’t force you to act against what you believe…I don’t forget what you did and what you’re doing for me.”

Lucius inhaled deeply and pressed his lips.

“I’ll build your armor, Mr. Wayne; you’re right – building the armor won’t take much time and Mr. Stark and the other team can continue focusing on your spinal parts.”

Bruce nodded.

“Thank you, Lucius.”

The scientist smiled.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Wayne and…be careful with Mr. Kent.”

The youth smiled.

“He’d never hurt me, Lucius…” he got into the lift and the doors closed.

Lucius eyes were blank.

“I hope you’re right, Bruce.”
Lois eyed suspiciously under a deep frown Clark approaching her desk with his casual fake clumsiness. He was holding a rose that gave to her.

“What have you done?” she cocked her eyebrows “Again?”

“Nothing!” he smiled and hoped on her desk throwing to the floor her pencil case and phone. “Oh! Mmm! S…Sorry!” he slumped to the floor to gather her things and bring them back causing the laughter of their colleagues.

Lois rolled her eyes.

“Enough with the show… Is really necessary doing your act with…MY THINGS?” she brushed affectionately her things. “That phone is the first cell phone I bought!” she inhaled. “Anyway, speak! What have you done this time?” she asked in business matter.

Clark crossed his arms, shook his head and beamed.

“I’m taking Bruce to Ma.”

Lois widened her eyes.

“So, indeed, you did something awful and want to appease your guilt…” she shook her head.

Clark’s stare was hurt; he lolled his head on the side.

“You’re mean! I wanted to do that for ages! Ma wanted so much to meet Bruce but I waited till he is better.”

Lois crooked her mouth in disbelief and Clark huffed, standing from her desk which to Lois’ relief didn’t have a dimple from Clark’s butt made of steel.

“Ugh! I’m stupid for wanting to share my joy with you!” he spat mock angry.

She patted his upper arm pressing her lips.

“Good luck, farmboy. But be careful…”

Clark gave a huge grin and nodded before returning to his desk, Lois shaking her head.

“Ouch!” she exclaimed suddenly realizing the pain in the hand she was patting Clark with.

“That’s enough for today, Bruce” Matt said looking with narrowed eyes to the control panel; his patient had done only one walking movement with the machine’s help.

Bruce had been doing his routine working out for an hour and now was the best part: walking again even if his legs were helped by exoskeletons and the orders were given by machine. His new Batman armor would use exactly the same technology albeit more advanced.

He frowned at his physiotherapist who put a large towel on his drenched in sweat back.

“Why?”

Matt seemed troubled but tried to keep a nonchalant expression.
“We’ll do our massage section – I think it’s better after two days of non-action.”

The blond man assisted Bruce to sit to the working out chair and removed carefully the exoskeleton parts. Bruce was already thinking what he said about only doing the massage; while taking shower in the morning he noticed that the bruises on his thighs from Clark’s violent ministrations were still blue-black and…striking. He couldn’t strip or wear shorts else Matt would notice and ask questions.

“No massage, Matt.”

It was the other man’s turn to frown.

“May I ask the reason, Bruce?” he asked softly. “You feel any discomfort?”

Bruce looked him straight in the eyes.

“Why you stopped the walking and didn’t mention swimming? If it was the two day lack of working out, you wouldn’t have let me do the other exercises.”

Matt pouted and crouched before him.

“Because Bicep Femoris and Adductor Magnus – the muscles in both your thighs – are badly contracted: the control panel connecting with the exoskeleton showed it” Bruce’s eyes widened. “Your energy casts thwarted any further damage but if we continued walking we could have worsened things” Matt smiled to reassure his patient. “A couple of massage sections and the cramps will be eased.”

Bruce shook his head.

“I can’t have a massage…”

Matt locked eyes with him.

“Bruce, what’s wrong? You don’t trust me anymore?”

“I do.”

“So can I have a look?” he asked softly, carefully and Bruce dreaded that his physiotherapist was seeing the rape victim he had read about.

Bruce nodded and Matt unbuttoned the sides of his gym pants and revealed his thighs. Matt’s gasp wasn’t really a gasp but Bruce heard it immediately since he anticipated it. He watched the young physiotherapist lick his lips uncomfortable and trying to hide his anger taking in the ugly blue-black finger shaped bruises; controlling his breath, Matt examined the other thigh. He looked Bruce in the eyes.

“It’s not what you think” Bruce said firm.

Matt shook his head and blinked.

“Bruce, that’s…” his outrage was now evident.

“Matt, you don’t understand…Sometimes I feel so frustrated from the lack of any sensation in my legs that I dig my fingers to feel some pain from the areas that still have neurons. And sometimes I overdo it and bruises.”

He could see in the blond man’s face that he didn’t buy that: he would have met such marks before if
that was true.
“Those fingers are bigger than yours, Bruce…”

“No, no…Listen, Matt: it’s not fingers; it’s connected bruises that look like fingers…” this sounded lame even to him.

Matt held his upper arms.

“Okay, calm down, Bruce…you don’t need to explain anything to me” Bruce lolled his head huffing exasperated. “Let’s examine those muscles, huh?”

Bruce couldn’t feel anything but by watching Matt’s ministrations he could tell that his fingers were feeling his bruised muscles very softly and carefully. Softness that left Matt’s features the more he continued: Bruce could tell that the youth was enraged.

“The muscles are badly contracted…and this is three days’ old” he mumbled more to himself. “Listen, Bruce; take a shower and then we’ll massage those muscles properly” he was afraid that his reactions had panicked his patient and his hands remained on the bruised areas. “Nobody has the right to treat you like this, Bruce” he said calmly.

Bruce was happy that Selina wasn’t there – at first he was a bit worried and disappointed she hadn’t brought Hero back yet. But right now her absence as well as Tony’s and Alfred’s were welcomed.

“Matt, I told you…”

Matt’s hands were massaging his cramped muscles and the blond man was looking him in the eyes.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Bruce; but you could speak to Tony or Selina or Alfred or Leslie…There are so many people who love you…”

Bruce’s stare was so intense in Matt’s eyes that the physiotherapist stopped speaking abruptly.

“Matt, you won’t tell anything to Tony or anyone else” his voice was steely.

“But Bruce, there is nothing to be ashamed of in that – you didn’t do anything wrong.”

But Bruce’s eyes were determined.

“But Bruce, you won’t tell anything” he repeated.

Matt huffed and shook his head defeated.

“Okay, I don’t want you upset; I won’t do something you don’t want. But you should tell them if these things are happening” his voice was soft like talking to a child. “I understand that there might be someone in your life…”

“That’s right!” a stentorian voice vibrated the gym and Bruce who had heard the whoosh looked at Superman’s imposing form in disbelief.

Superman’s face was contorted in anger; he had entered from the master bedroom’s window and hearing what they were saying and that sly man’s touches rushed in the gym where the spectacle disgusted him: Bruce’s pants undone and that guy fondling him.

Bruce stared at Superman flabbergasted and angry; his lover’s eyes were lined by red and his arms were crossed evidently clenched.
Matt was accustomed to be in the presence of super powered beings but still seeing Superman there – despite the fact he had heard the rumors – startled him. And the hero’s posture emanated wrath. Yet the young man wasn’t a coward and if Superman had bruised Bruce and now was dangerously jealous he wouldn’t let his patient helpless.

He stood up.

“Superman?”

Superman’s smirk was poison.

“Exactly! Bruce is mine and nobody touches him!”

Matt shook his head.

“But I didn’t…I mean…I did but this is my job: treating muscles. You can’t honestly think…”

Superman uncrossed his arms and made a step forwards, a wave of hot anger hitting the physiotherapist only from his movement.

“You think you can fool me?!!”

An outraged, jealous Superman was the most terrifying thing to face but Matt wouldn’t flinch; he strengthened his body in front of Bruce.

“Superman, stop!”

Matt’s eyes bulged; he couldn’t believe it. His patient sitting on his wheelchair stood between him and Superman, not a flinch of fear in his voice facing the most powerful being on the planet angry as Hell. He always admired Bruce for his strength and courage but that bravery really caused him goose bumps. Especially, when Superman stopped in his heels: not appeased, still angry but somehow mesmerized by those eyes that pierced his.

“Matt, you can go” Bruce said to him calmly without breaking eye contact with Superman whose face was still contorted.

“I’ll call…”

“You won’t call anyone” Bruce ordered and Matt knew that he couldn’t disobey even if his conscience urged him to. “Everything is alright – I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“As you wish” he answered and gathered his things ashamed for leaving Bruce alone; Superman engaged in that eye contest with the impaired human didn’t even glanced at him leaving the room.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Bruce asked after Matt closed the door and the sound of his steps vanished.

Superman squinted and his face muscles’ spasms made him almost ugly.

“That’s my question!”

In a flash he grabbed Bruce’s upper arms and lifted him from the wheelchair covering the distance to the master bedroom in less than thirty seconds and settled the human in a sitting position on the bed. Bruce’s stare didn’t flinch even though this time he could feel the bruising grasp on his upper arms that Superman didn’t let go.
“Can you calm down and release my arms?” Bruce asked completely unfazed by Superman’s panting breath that burnt his face as his enraged eyes locked with his calm ones.

But Superman didn’t seem to have listened at all.

“Is that why you made all these fuss about me and Diana? Is this why you made me feel ill? To run around doing tests letting you free to fuck with your physiotherapist?!”

Bruce’s eyes widened.

“You still smell Falcone on me; if what you say was true you’d have smelt that as well” he controlled the feel of insult that boiled inside him.

Superman laughed really snidely.

“You’re cunning! You definitely found a way to cover the smell of fucking with him!”

“Clark, it’s happening again – you’re out of your mind.”

He shook his head and tightened his hold.

“You’re out of arguments already, babe? Matt, you won’t tell anything to Tony or anyone else” he mimicked Bruce’s voice. “Bruce, there is nothing to be ashamed of in that – you didn’t do anything wrong” he did the same with the physiotherapist’s voice. “I think it’s pretty obvious – I’m not that dumb, you know…He is fucking you months now and he wanted to tell Tony and the others but you didn’t want because Stark would brag and mock me and you didn’t want me to know!”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Why would I want to do the nonsense you say?” he asked tranquil in sharp contrast to Clark’s frantic rant.

“Because you want the blond hunk who is a human like you but you don’t want to lose Superman either” Bruce was staring at him with eyes unreadable like shining walls.

“You consider me a slut, then…” he said so calm that Clark even in his enraged condition was baffled.

Superman shook him.

“I heard you, Bruce! Damn it! I saw you!”

“What you saw?”

“Your pants unbuttoned and he fondling your thighs! Fire him right now!”

Bruce yanked his head in defiance.

“He only does his job.”

“Oh, yeah?” Superman snorted. “And what’s his job? Giving you blow jobs, as right before I came in? You might not feel anything but I’m sure he definitely had a helluva party!” he hissed.

It stung because it was unprecedented; the pain wasn’t much but the shock was greater; he didn’t see it coming but Bruce had just slapped him in the face. He looked at the human who ground his teeth, his hand left on the mattress carelessly.
“Master Bruce, is everything alright?” Alfred’s voice behind the door was composed but there was a hue of wariness; he must have heard the ruckus.

“Fine, Alfred” Bruce mastered calmness back in his voice. “Please, go now and I’ll call you.” He waited with his ears on Alfred’s retreating footsteps and then stabbed Clark’s eyes with his.

“Scan my groin, you fool! Is there any signs of saliva?”

“Then what he was talking about? Why he was fondling you?” his voice was still raspy.

“He wasn’t fondling me: he was massaging the cramps in my thighs’ muscles. The muscles three days now are contracted…badly.”

The shock of Bruce’s slap was nothing in comparison with that: Clark quickly scanned Bruce’s almost naked thighs and ruffled his sweaty hair. Indeed, the muscles in Bruce’s thighs were like stones from cramps that remained unrelieved for three days …

“I didn’t notice…” he mumbled what he was thinking looking up at Bruce’s stern eyes.

Bruce nodded.

“You’re preoccupied with other things…” he said coldly.

“What you forbade him to tell to Tony?”

Bruce blinked.

“He saw the bruises over my thighs and wanted to tell my friends because he though” he inhaled “that someone abuses me…”

Clark bit his bottom lip: it was obvious that his violent grasp that night in his thirst to spread Bruce’s thighs provoked the cramps and since Bruce couldn’t feel the pain his cramps remained unsolved. He jerked his head backwards and huffed.

“I fucked up again, right?” he muttered but Bruce wasn’t looking at him anymore: his eyes were expressionless gazing at his hand that had slapped Superman.

Clark took gently Bruce’s hand and scanned: hitting Superman’s face was more painful to you than Superman leading to broken bones and this time Clark actually felt pain which meant that the human had used considerable strength. Thankfully, there was no cracked or broken bone but it’d certainly bruise.

“How?” he asked puzzled about the lack of injury.

Bruce still didn’t look at him.

“Ra’s. The last years of my training had me punching bricks and pillars made of steel: he was preparing me to kill you…in bed. Whenever my bones cracked or broke he was giving me his brews.”

Superman brought Bruce’s palm to his mouth but Bruce twitched it away.

“I’m sorry, Bruce…”

Bruce didn’t look him.
“Every time you repeat that it sounds less honest.”

Clark closed his eyes and brought his palms to his face.

“I mean it, Bruce…You know I don’t believe anything from what I told you.”

“Really?” he snapped.

“I was afraid that you wanted him – I don’t want to lose you to anyone.”

Bruce crossed his arms; his hand throbbed from the slap.

“The only one you can lose me to: is yourself!” he spat and Clark agreed.

Bruce looked around: he wanted to take a shower because the sweat from his working out stack on him and because he wanted to distance himself from Clark. But his wheelchair had stayed in the gym and was too far to come to his mind’s calling.

Clark took in Bruce’s glances around and understood. He flew back in the gym and brought the wheelchair in front of the bed for Bruce to slip in.

He stood there watching the younger man entering the bathroom and then heard the water running, sliding over Bruce’s body. His deeds haunted his mind but one thing shadowed everything else: he grabbed Bruce’s thighs to penetrate him and not only caused him cramps but also didn’t scan it for three days! That could have made serious damage to Bruce’s recovery. Thank Rao! The energy casts must have protected him!

Bruce sat on the special seat the bathtub had and let the water fall on his lowered head keeping his eyes shut: such moments he wished there was a way to press a button and shut his mind as well…

“Promise me that you won’t give up on me however stupid my behavior – promise that you’ll always bear in mind that this isn’t the real Clark?”

“I’ll stand by you throughout this, unless you decide otherwise…”

Clark jerked when the bathroom’s door opened; Bruce was muffled in his bathrobe so meticulously that no part of his bare skin was uncovered except his neck, hands and feet. Like that night in the greenhouse before this brave being defeated his demons to gift Clark the greatest present: a present that Clark just threw on the floor and trod on it.

Bruce kept his eyes away from Clark.

“I thought to leave; spare you from my presence” Clark decided to speak “but I didn’t want you to take that for indifference. You…you said that you’ll stand by me throughout this unless I decided otherwise…If still matters” he gulped “I want you by my side.”

Bruce didn’t answer and Superman rushed to him falling on his knees and taking carefully his bruised hand in his.

“If you say it, I leave” he kissed his throbbing palm. “I’ll call my Ma and cancel the dinner…”

It was the first time Bruce looked at him though not in the eyes. Clark’s mother did nothing wrong and Bruce didn’t want to sadden her. On the other hand, if he pushed Clark away now whatever caused the change would gain the total control to unpredictable results. At least, Clark still listened to him to realize what he was doing.
“Don’t…” Clark’s eyes flashed with disbelief and then joy and gratitude. “Your mother expects us. I’ll dress and notify Alfred to not worry.”

Clark nodded and hastened to fly outside to give Bruce some privacy.

When dressed Bruce went to the grand salon where Alfred was speaking with Selina, Hero rubbing to her legs but as soon as he saw his young master ran to him and climbed to his lap. Bruce smiled and petted him.

“I missed you, buddy. Hi, Sel: why so late? I’m going to take your visiting rights back!”

“Ha! Ha!” she exclaimed. “Why you don’t admit the truth? That you missed me?” she kissed his cheek but frowned noticing how he had his hand on his lap. “What’s wrong with your hand?”

Alfred was watching their chat with a grim look; his eyes tense and knowing.

“Work out” Bruce answered nonchalant. “I overdid it with those pushups.”

“Matt didn’t restrain you?”

Alfred walked closer.

“Mr. Leench seemed rather nervous when he left.”

Bruce shook his head.

“You both know me… I can be completely uncontrolled” Selina shook her head rolling her eyes but Alfred remained stone faced to Bruce’s rue; however he chose to not address his butler’s evident knowledge. “Sel, I’m sorry I won’t be here for dinner but I must leave.”

“May I ask where?”

Alfred already knew.

“Master Bruce is going to meet Master Kent’s mother.”

Selina’s eyes widened and she laughed.

“Your mother-in-law? Wow! You’re gonna ask his hand?”

Alfred just shook his head, definitely completely out of good spirits.

Throughout the entire flight, Bruce never let his head rest on Superman’s shoulder; he didn’t let him take him in bridal style but remained erect holding his waist rather lukewarmly.

It was dark and very cold without any stars and moon since heavy clouds covered the entire sky. However as they entered the Kansas state the cold became milder and the sky clear with an abundance of stars and a moon of three quarters.

“Do you like it?” Clark asked carefully.

“When I planned to escape with Alfred, we intended on stopping to Smallville before heading to California…” his voice was still flat but his eyes were taking in greedily the rural landscape even in night as Clark began descending.

“This is the farm I grew up” he said putting his feet firmly on the soil and heaving Bruce to hold him
in bridal style: now they didn’t have another choice. “I wanted to show you my home under better
conditions…even today, I was constantly planning it… but… my stupidity ruined everything” he
sighed because Bruce’s tenseness hadn’t ebbed throughout the trip.

“When would you go to the Fortress?”

“As soon as I place you in your bed back in Gotham.”

Clark hadn’t ascended the entire front stair to the porch when Martha hurried outside, her face
beaming.

“Welcome!” she greeted them cordially. “Come in! It’s cold outside.”

She was so happy and Clark was afraid that Bruce’s gloominess would spoil her mood and made her
suspicious – which was his own fault. But Bruce as soon as they entered the warm, small house
filled with delicious smells, changed his expression and smiled to the kind lady.

Clark placed him carefully in the most comfy armchair of their humble living room and helped him
took off his coat, Martha rushing to muffle his legs with a soft blanket.

“This is for you, Ms. Kent” Bruce gave her a beautiful wrapped packet that took out from the inside
pocket of his coat.

Ms. Kent gaped.

“Oh, Bruce, you shouldn’t…”

“So, you two don’t need me to introduce you…” Clark said grinning relieved and hanged the coat to
the carved coat rack.

“It’s nothing…” Bruce blushed.

Martha ripped the paper and her eyes sparkled: it was a very old and rare edition of Emily
Dickinson’s poems.

“She is my favorite poet; how did you know that, dear?”

Bruce smiled.

“In the Fortress, Clark used to read me poems from a book and I noticed that the book had some
notes in handwriting that wasn’t Clark’s and seemed feminine. Then one day I noticed in the first
page the initials M.K. and I presumed that it belonged to you.”

Clark chuckled.

“You could have just asked!”

But Martha gaped and looked at her son.

“This young man is very clever…”

Clark nodded.

“This edition is very rare, dear; from the first 19th century publications!”

“There’s a bookstore in Gotham – it was my mother’s favorite, Alfred had recommended it. She used
to take me there with her…” his voice cracked the slightest and Martha let the book on the couch and cupped his face.

“My sweetheart…Can I kiss you?” Bruce nodded and she pecked his cheek. “Your parents are very proud of you, dear” she looked him in the eyes and her sparkling eyes were wet “don’t you ever forget that!”

She served them her homemade pink lemonade till the meal was ready.

After the dinner Clark brought Bruce back in the living room and Bruce took his handful of pills as he had promised to Alfred. Martha’s eyes were sad watching the youth; she was outraged by the lengths of human cruelty that rendered him paraplegic: she had heard in various discussions many gruesome theories about what tortures could have caused such grave damage.

Her host had tea ready and cinnamon biscuits – without knowing that cinnamon flavored biscuits were Bruce’s favorite. Bruce had to admit that they were as delicious as Alfred’s.

“But don’t tell him!” he warned Clark who smiled though the coldness that still larked in the depths of Bruce’s eyes was like punch.

When they finished, Martha stood to take the tea set to the kitchen but Clark stopped her.

“I’ll wash the dishes; stay with Bruce” he didn’t want to force his presence to Bruce when alone; besides, he really did dishwashing while at home.

“What is it, dear?” Martha asked Bruce softly when the water in the kitchen would muffle her voice.

Bruce was startled because he believed that had covered it perfectly.

“Mmm…Nothing, Ms. Kent.”

“Call me Martha – and yes, you know how to hide your emotions but I’m a mother…” she smiled.

“But is anything wrong with Clark?”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

“No; I’m just a bit tired and your house is so beautiful and warm that I’m a little drowsy like I am home.”

“I’m happy to hear that, honey. Clark told me that you saved his life…more than once” Bruce knew that Clark didn’t reveal to her that he was Batman. “I know that with you my son will be always safe and happy.”

Bruce wished he could share her certainty.

Ms. Kent…Martha…” he hesitated.

She took gently his hands in hers.

“It’s alright, dear…Clark is very lucky to have you and if he ever does something to hurt you, call me to put him in his place” her voice was stern.

Bruce grinned.

“You found an alien baby and raised him as your child whereas someone else would have given him to the police…” Martha pressed her lips because Jonathan and she knew what would happen to the
baby if they handed him to the government. “His good fortune is you and only you…Me, I am ephemeral and can be gone from his life” Martha frowned. “But you will be always there to look after him – I can be reassured knowing that he will always have you…”

She hugged Bruce; her hands caressed his locks.

“You’ll walk again, sweetheart; and nothing would shadow again your life…You’re not ephemeral, Bruce: you won’t be gone from his life because he loves you and you’re too important for him” Bruce sighed, his eyes blank gazing at the farm’s yard through the small window. “I always feared for Clark…He was always bullied by the other kids and then as an adult he was mocked all the time and although he never seemed to care and helped humans…I always had the dread that someday he’d lose his path: all this power can corrupt and the way some people sniff at him may take the better of him; or someone could find a way to control him into horrible deeds” Bruce jerked at that.

“But then he met you” Martha continued “and since then I’m peaceful because he speaks about you in a way that shows his admiration, his respect: how much he cherishes you…I’m not good in this…You’re his moral compass, Bruce; his anchor…The warmth in his heart: a star that shows him the way. As long you’re by his side he is safe.”

Bruce patted Martha and looked her.

“Your son is kind and generous and a beacon of hope and morality of his own; he always has been like this” he smiled. “He doesn’t need me…You’re the pillar of his life…You raised a remarkable man and a formidable protector of people” the woman although proud for his praise seemed a bit shaken because she regarded Bruce as her ally “But I promise you that whatever happens I’ll always care and be there for him” even if he throws me out of his life.

The old lady cupped his face with both hands.

“Thank you…” she whispered relieved from his promise.

Clark upon emerging from the kitchen frowned at the scene.

“What’s going on? Bruce, are you alright?”

Bruce nodded.

They couldn’t stay much longer. Martha touched went with them till the fence.

“You’ll come again?” she asked and Bruce felt his heart clench not only because he felt the deep loneliness of the kind lady but also because he couldn’t promise her that.

“We’ll do, Ma! Christmas is for certain and we’ll stay the entire day!”’ Clark replied confident and beamed to Bruce who just averted his gaze to look at Ms. Kent.

“Thank you for everything, Martha”.

“Don’t mention that, dear: thank you for the book – the ladies in the literature club will be ecstatic. Clark, be careful with Bruce – hold him tight!” she yelled as they took off.

In no more than ten minutes Bruce succumbed to sleep; he was exhausted, Clark could sense that as the contracted muscles in his thighs that he would massage as soon as they reached their bed. Even in sleep, Bruce kept his head lolled in his own shoulder and not nestled in Clark’s neck – and Clark missed the senses…
Chapter Notes

I always feel nervous when I get to write a chapter that I had in my mind from the start of the story.

“I thought you wouldn’t come back.”

“I never abandon my patients” he chuckled “unless they boot me out – am I fired?”

Bruce mirrored Matt’s smile albeit more restrained.

“I don’t think that any of your patients gave you the ax…”

Matt raised his eyebrows.

“I have a good CV…but there’s a first time for everything” he crouched next to Bruce’s wheelchair.

“If you want me to leave” he said serious looking Bruce in the eyes “I’ll find a good excuse for Tony to not find out that it was your decision and ask questions” the blond pressed his lips. “I don’t want to cause you problems with Superman.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Thank you, Matt; you don’t cause me any problems and I’m sorry about what happened” he inhaled. “It wasn’t your fault. But I’d have understood if what happened yesterday made you decide to not come back.”

Matt laughed.

“You mean to save my ass from being kicked by Superman?” he ruffled his hair. “I admit that an angry, jealous super guy is a…terrifying spectacle especially when he glares at you with red eyes but your bravery is” he shook his head “mind blowing.”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“ Inspiring… I mean if you’re so brave to stand your ground in front of him then I won’t resign either… I’ve never been more inspired in my whole life, Bruce… and I’m the Avengers’ physiotherapist.”

Bruce rubbed his temple.

“I’m not so brave…I know that Superman won’t hurt anyone including me.”

Matt shook his head in disbelief.

“I don’t know, Bruce… He was emanating animosity ready to explode” he clenched his jaw. “And if I see a mark on you ever again I’ll go straight to Tony” any sign of fear vanished. “He might have treated and saved your life but he has no right to lay a finger on you!”

Bruce frowned.
"You knew?"

"I’m not a fool, Bruce; I know that Tony’s work is phenomenal and pioneering but your energy casts…” he shook his head “are definitely alien. And as a physiotherapist I know that people with traumas like yours in the majority of the cases…” he stopped abruptly not wanting to utter it but Bruce who had already understood urged him with his eyes “die immediately or within some days” Bruce pressed his lips. “In that video on the clinic’s roof, you seemed fine but I know that sometimes the lapse can be sudden and sharp: so Superman saved you twice – once from that League and then from death and we’re all grateful to him but that doesn’t give him authority on your life.”

“He doesn’t think like that – it was a bad moment” Matt huffed. “I appreciate that you didn’t speak to anyone about this.”

The blond man chuckled.

“If I was the gossipy type now the talk shows would have been babbling about anecdotes from the Avengers’ lives and I would have been at hospital with broken bones…” he rolled his eyes. “At least…”

Bruce laughed.

“Can we proceed to our massage session? Also, you’ll take some muscle relaxants for a couple of days and we’ll be okay!”

But Bruce didn’t reflect Matt’s radiant smile.

“You told Leslie?”

“Of course not. I used some scientific mumbo jumbo to explain the need of muscle relaxants.”

Bruce felt a bit guilty for not sharing everything with his friends but it was necessary and there was no reason to complicate things more. He steered the wheel through the streets of New York; his sleek black car first seen there was causing the awed stares of people. The GPS system was guiding him to the Avengers’ Tower for Tony’s party.

Tony wanted to take him there himself but Bruce refused pointing out that he was the host to this party so since his goal was to make a good impression for the new S.H.I.E.L.D. he ought to be there for his guests. His friend had grunted rolling his eyes on the ‘ought’ but Bruce told him smiling that he had missed his masterpiece car and he didn’t want to miss any chance to drive – especially, on unknown streets.

Tony was appeased and Bruce read in his eyes that his friend felt for his need to act independently despite his disability. Alfred had stayed at Tony’s mammoth penthouse at SoHo: inside the Tower Tony had established rooms for every member of the team and his own was – of course – the biggest and most luxurious (“they call me a cocky, spoiled rich brat” Tony had explained with a lips’ purse and a shrug, “so why not leaving up to my reputation?”). Yet the billionaire didn’t want to be restricted to a place and besides he had owned this penthouse before Ironman was even a sperm in the genius’ mind.

Bruce’s heart felt heavier thinking his loyal butler. Alfred didn’t come to the party to babysit Hero. Bruce had told him that there was no need for him to leave Gotham and accompany him to New York but the Englishman was adamant. After the incident with Matt and Clark, Alfred became more worried about him: although the esteemed butler knew how to keep his composed demeanor, at times Bruce caught him staring at him almost scared – his worry matching the first days after Clark brought
him from the Fortress to Tony’s villa in Thasos.

Some other times Bruce felt that Alfred was on the verge of asking him to open his heart but the wise man didn’t do it granting him the right to decide himself – and Bruce wished he could speak to him or Selina or Tony about what he was experiencing but that would only worsen things and Bruce after those perfect days hoped that their life with Clark would be again like before.

“Gotham Radio News24” he ordered the car’s AI.

He hoped to hear any update on Crane; after the unsuccessful raid at his hideout the former doctor remained untraced. Giving that he flew from the old industrial area just before the police arrived, someone would expect him to be less careful with his movements in his effort to find a new refuge. Yet that wasn’t the case: despite police’s increased efforts and raids in shady places, the doctor seemed to have just vanished.

Bruce wished he had his new armor…that Tony had delayed behind his back. He huffed. He didn’t confront his friend but he was sure that Tony got the message when Lucius began fully working on the armor. Bruce wasn’t angry with Tony – he knew that his buddy wanted the best for him – yet he felt…Not betrayed, definitely not betrayed.

“I don’t think that people care to know the details of what the League did to me – Police’s reports are more than enough.”

His own voice on the radio startled him. It was from his Press Conference three days ago; his answer to a really crude question about what League did to him to cause such injuries to him. He rolled his eyes exasperated even now though then he didn’t: really? He was supposed to answer that? Even some of the guy’s colleagues cast him hostile and disgusted glares.

“Gaining LexLabs’ control and the 20% of the entire LexCorp was a brilliant move – especially, since you were kidnapped when this was done. Did you have any insight about Luthor’s collaboration with the terrorists and his imminent arrest so you planned it beforehand?” Alex Knox asked really intrigued.

It was one of the hardest questions yet Bruce couldn’t say that he didn’t expect that.

“If I had any insight, I wouldn’t have even approached that suite” he smiled and some of the reporters chuckled. “Mr. Fox has my complete trust to do what he thinks best for the company when I’m gone: so he saw the opportunity and exploited it.”

“That goes for Daggett, too?” Knox’s eyebrows were raised; obviously he didn’t completely buy the Fox-did-everything thing.

Bruce had shrugged.

“You have to ask the Police about that: I was shocked when I was informed that Mr. Daggett was plotting with Luthor.”

“What are your plans about LexLabs?” Lois Lane’s distinct voice uttered the next question.

“Make them a scientific groundbreaking firm completely abiding by the law.”

“So you did know about Luthor’s more than shady activities” Vicky Vale had remarked snidely.

Bruce completely calm lolled his head on the side.
But her next question was what everyone wanted to ask and of course after the Press Conference it was constantly replayed in every TV station, in news and talk shows; the various videos at Youtube marking record views.

“Do you have a love affair with Superman?”

Bruce remembered that despite the fact he was prepared for that, he had blushed and didn’t try to hide it because it fit. And although his answer was agreed with Clark, he still felt odd uttering it: however this was for the best.

“I saw your video, Miss Vale and I don’t understand how you could create such a love story out of this. Superman has saved millions of people: I have seen him carrying people exactly like he carried me but no love story was made up for any of them.”

“He seems to be pretty involved in anything around you” she pointed slyly.

“I don’t think that Superman’s activities have anything to do with me: League of Shadows was a terrorist group that threatened the entire planet; Falcone was a federal criminal. I just happened to be in the crossfire…”

The recorded abstract stopped and some song began playing offering soundtrack to the broadcaster.

“Well, history will prove if our Prince is honest or he is trying to hide the elephant – well, the Superman – in the room. We know it’s not our business and all that jazz but tonight at the year’s greatest event, the party in the Avengers’ Tower people will be watching the two lovebirds – sorry, savior and saved – to see the truth.”

Bruce grunted. Really? He thought that this station was serious! He closed the radio. Clark and he had agreed to keep appearances and with all the superheroes and heroines there surely people wouldn’t solely watch them. And the Amazon would be there too…

Those four days after the incident with Matt, Clark was perfect like the time before the Amazon invaded their lives. He even went to Lucius for those samples; Bruce anxiously awaited the results. But now that Clark would meet her again Bruce felt the knot forming again in his guts because he knew that Clark’s attitude around her wasn’t just a pretense and although he asked him to keep a distance he dreaded that Clark wouldn’t do it.

As the Tower became nearer, Bruce was tempted to drive directly to the secret entrance and the garage on the back side of the building. But it’d be pointless: avoiding the press in the entrance while in the reception hall would be plenty of reporters mixed with the guests. Besides, people seeing him confined in a wheelchair, was good because nobody would connect him with the Batman who roamed Gotham unhindered by any injury.

On the other side, although he never accepted what the others said about him of being a role model of courage, he didn’t want any paraplegic in the world to think that he was ashamed of his disability.

As he took the path leading to Manhattan’s center, he regarded the Tower. He had seen the building again in the blueprints and during daytime but night made it glitter like a gem with its thousands sparkling lights fueled – as the entire premises - solely with renewable energy that was provided by an arc reactor.

At 105 floors the Tower was the highest building in New York. It was narrow and rectangular for the 90 floors but the last of the building was shaped like an ellipse; the ellipse hosted in the base floor
the reception area which was half surrounded by a sharp balcony; in the middle nine floors were the headquarters and the Avengers’ apartments – well, Tony kept for himself the whole – floor apartment on top of the others – and the last five floors of the building was actually a landing area for jets and helicopters.

Of course nothing indicated that the giant golden ‘A’ that covered the front of the ellipse area opened the dome to accept aircrafts or permit others to take off. In the center of the ellipse’s dome a thick and tall telecommunication antenna bleeped constantly sending and receiving information from and to every corner of the world through satellites.

Bruce felt amazed and proud for Tony; his friend was great. Yet Bruce’s first desire seeing that building was perching on the giant ‘A’ wearing his armor and dive into the night…

As soon as the dashing, masterpiece car parked in front of the breathtaking building, flashes were on fire and cameras turned there. They had framed a spacious corridor for the guests to pass but some security staff was guarding the noisy herd of reporters.

Bruce regarded the scene with a raised eyebrow: it reminded him of a Hollywood party and he didn’t like that; yet he recognized his friend’s reasoning behind that party and he was there to support Tony in this.

Pepper like a formidable queen crossed the corridor that was carpeted in red and approached the car when the valet opened for Bruce. He took his folded wheelchair from the passenger’s seat and with the pressing of the button the chair opened before him – of course, it was the wheelchair Tony had built for him not Clark’s.

Bruce slipped with ease in his chair ignoring the blinding flashes that rattled with every movement he made. Pepper shook hands with him and Bruce thanked the valet who watched astonished as everyone else the car slithering alone to the parking.

“Tony waits upstairs” Pepper said as they moved.

“No, Tony’s here!” the billionaire from Malibu covered the distance in playful strides and hugged Bruce. “I couldn’t let you alone.”

“But this is the safest building in the world” Bruce said mocked puzzled. “Or you’re uncertain?” he winked.

“I wouldn’t have brought you here if I wasn’t sure…” he mumbled to him. “What do you say?” Tony asked when they reached the great front entrance; like a schoolboy eager to get his teacher’s praise.

“Tony, I had seen the Tower before and the blueprints.”

“Yeah, but it was daytime; everything looks better in a black scenery” he winked.

“It’s your masterpiece, Tony…at least, until your next creation! But one hundred and five floors? You couldn’t resist, huh?” he cocked his eyebrows.

Tony shrugged innocently.

“No, I couldn’t…” he shook his head. ‘But it was only a floor…and you know how I can’t stand being seconded: I always want to have the biggest things.”

Bruce snorted.
“Freud has a good explanation for your case…” Tony frowned. “Nothing worrisome: men who want to possess the biggest things need to compensate for length problems in…” he shook his head with his face deep in sympathy “in their groin.”

Pepper began laughing and Tony growled.

“I’m glad to see you’re in a spree, little guy…”

Superman was already in the reception floor chatting with some senators he knew very well and respected for their integrity.

The entire floor was a huge reception hall with elegantly decorated benches covered with every kind of expensive food and dessert, booze and flowers. In the other edge there was a huge dance floor and a famous band played music.

The noise of chatter and giggles was already established mixed with music that was rather neutral for Tony Stark’s infamous tastes.

Suddenly, Superman turned where everyone was looking. He already knew from the familiar heartbeat and the aroma but still his sight was dazzled. Well, he knew Bruce’s beauty better than anyone but seeing him formally dressed always made something to him. Oh, he hated that tailor! And loved him for creating such clothes that manifested Bruce’s beauty so irresistibly. But mainly he hated him because now everyone was drooling on Bruce and he still didn’t know how the tailor handled Bruce’s body in the process.

He loved every color on Bruce’s body but this classic combination of black suit, white silk shirt and black silver stripped tie made Superman’s groin twitch – and that wasn’t ideal, since he was in his Superman suit that, well, was very revealing of his body’s reactions.

Stark had left his guests to welcome his friend in the entrance and now as he and Pepper escorted Bruce in the hall, Tony Stark was beaming proud and happy: Clark cocked an eyebrow – why not? Stark wasn’t forced to watch Bruce from afar…

Superman’s eyes widened and he gulped his booze in a large gulp – not that alcohol was of any help… He had sensed a powerful being and… body heading towards Bruce and upon turning his eyes there supposedly indifferent he saw Thor in his divine attire and his hammer stashed in his golden belt. The god glowed with his blond locks giving the impression of sun rays yet what gave the impression of the sun more was the sweet smile in his bearded face as his eyes met Bruce.

The Asgardian stood in attention and brought his fist on his heart and Clark could hear Bruce’s discomfort in case someone could suspect but others were rather preoccupied with Bruce’s body than Thor’s salute; only Superman noticed feeling a hot wave of lava ascending his body to his head. Tony cleared his throat and the Norwegian realized and proceed to shake hands with Bruce who nodded solemnly.

“I am honored to be in your company again, Mr. Wayne; I hope your healing is moving smoothly.”

“It is, thanks to you and all the heroes who saved my life.”

Pepper patted Bruce’s shoulder.
“I’ll get you something to drink.”

But she didn’t finish her phrase and a gorgeous woman in a black velvet skin tight dress that reached her ankles approached them with gracious strides that highlighted her perfect curves. She held between her lean but lethal – Clark knew that – fingers a crystal flute and her grey, smart eyes scrutinized Bruce’s face with fascination.

“That won’t be necessary, Miss Potts” she said in her heavily accented voice. “I took the liberty to bring a drink to our guest of honor.”

“Who?” Tony shook his head mock frustrated. “It’d be better if you killed me, dear…” he said dramatically to her. “You know: by wrapping your thighs around my neck…” he winked. “Little guy, I wouldn’t drink anything she offers…”

“No alcohol…” she said her eyes fixed on Bruce’s, her juicy lips moving slowly. “I’m sure you’re still on medication.”

“Indeed” Bruce answered and took the offered glass. “Thank you, Ms. Romanova.”

Her eyes glimmered and a satisfied, impressed smile curled her lips.

“Finally, a person from West says it right.”

Bruce lolled his head.

“Tony had me do my homework…”

Tony coughed again and waved his hand in front of her face to get her attention.

“Yeah, I’m here too, doll…”

“I didn’t notice you, Stark’’ she retorted to Thor’s chuckle and Tony huffed opening his arms in the air.

“It must be the suit…” he turned to Peppers cocking his eyebrows “Remind me to not wear grey again.”

Clark felt a torturous fire inside him; he should have been proud that people admired and respected Bruce even without knowing about Batman but still…

“Avoiding greeting him would be more suspicious…” Lois whispered slyly ending up to his side after a ‘patrol’ for news-fishing.

He didn’t need more: he left his glass in the tray of a passing waiter and marched there stretching his impressive posture – he was as sturdy as that Norwegian and more… But suddenly a company of teens ran to him ecstatic yelling his name awestruck: Stark had the Tower open for the public for the day and invited the schools that have come to stay for the party.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have any autographs, guys…” Superman said smiling and his eyes locked momentarily with Bruce’s eyes that pretended indifference.

Yet the fleeting second of their eyes’ locking it was enough for Clark to understand how proud Bruce was of him and how much he loved him – Clark didn’t need Bruce’s lips twitch to know that he was smiling.

Superman smiled cordially feeling his heart floating and spoke to the teens, which soon were
reinforced by younger kids – keeping constantly the corner of his eye on Bruce’s company which moved inner. To worsen Clark’s torment. Because he could see eyes goggling at Bruce and the rest of the company of course; but still the youth who returned from the dead intrigued people – especially, since he was so stunning.

“Bruce!”

Superman didn’t need to turn there to know who was: Matt Leench. His heart began beating faster; he knew that Bruce didn’t have anything with his physiotherapist and that the blond didn’t grope Bruce but still…And the worse was that Leench didn’t emanate any sign of hesitation or fear knowing that Superman was also there, watching.

Clark mumbled an answer to a kid’s question and bit his lip: he didn’t want anyone to fear him and he actually felt grateful to the man for not running to Stark or anyone and saying everything about the cramps he caused. Also, with Leench’s ministrations Bruce’s muscles were fine again and he began again walking exercises and swimming.

“Matt, finally, I get the chance to meet Lilly, your lovely fiancé” Bruce said beaming. “He speaks all the time about you – he showed me your picture once.”

Clark’s heart from beating heavily began flying and he wanted to sigh in relief when he heard the young woman chirping.

“He likes to brag about me all the time – sometimes I feel embarrassed.”

Tony cocked an eyebrow and looked at the young woman.

“No need for that, dear” he said in his sexiest voice and Bruce bit his bottom lip to not laugh. “He has every reason to brag though he didn’t brag to me about his stunning fiancé…” he took gently her hand and feathery touched his lips on the back.

Matt nodded.

“Because I know you, Stark!” Matt said mock angry and Pepper nudged Tony in the ribs.

Tony pouted.

“Excuse moi; I must tend to my guests. Bruce, I’ll be back in a moment: till then, you’re in good hands.”

Superman snorted inside: yeah, a gorgeous ballerina-spy-assassin, a god hunk, a nice looking physiotherapist. Thankfully, Rogers wasn’t there because he was sure that he would be glued to Bruce too…

“That Bruce Wayne is really gorgeous, huh? Even in a wheelchair…”

He caught a giggling feminine voice from a corner of the space.

“And those clothes on him…I mean Armani is a master but I think he should pay the man for wearing his suits not vice versa…”

Another woman.

“No wonder Thor and Romanov is with him – this body certainly needs to be guarded…”

A harsh man’s laugh.
“Next time Stark didn’t guard his puppy it ended up to the wrong hands.”

“Not just hands…Imagine what this pelvis suffered for the poor thing to end with paraplegia.”

“I don’t think he is a ‘poor thing’ – actually, partnership with Wayne Enterprises seems now more promising than ever” a woman intervened. “It’s time I introduce myself.”

“You won’t wait for Stark to return?”

Superman could hear the rolling of her eyes.

“We’re talking about the man who kneed Luthor’s balls and sent him to prison snatching his Labs… Wayne doesn’t need a guardian.”

Clark with dread heard the others agreeing and walking with the woman to Bruce. He felt the urge to take Bruce and take him somewhere to spend the night alone…

“Sorry, kids; Superman is needed elsewhere” Lois’ voice cheerful but firm addressed Superman’s little tormentors. “There’s ice cream in the fridge - fountain.”

“Thank you!” he sighed when they were left alone.

Lois rolled her eyes and shook her head in despair.

“You’re helpless…Now, go to Bruce…” she whispered.

Superman was ready to cross the space to speak with Bruce even playing an act but then a frame of the wall opened. The wall was entirely made with bullet proof glass reinforced with a special alloy Tony invented and whenever a flying guest arrived, a frame rose to permit entry.

Clark’s eyes bulged on the figure that landed softly and graciously – and well he wasn’t the only one as a stampede of camera clicks roared. Almost every person in the enormous hall goggled on the newcomer.

Diana stretched her breathtaking body and raised her head eyeing not without a hue of arrogance the place and the people. She wore a dress – yes, a dress! Clark insisted on that because he couldn’t believe it…but he certainly appreciated it. A flaming red silken dress that reached her hips and ended wispy in her knees; her dress was strapless with a deep cleavage that let half her porcelain breasts bulge free; the fabric was airy but still stuck on her body’s muscles revealing every detail of how perfectly ripped she was. Her arms were naked with a golden bracelet like lace covering her right wrist to the elbow; she wore golden high heeled sandals that their strings hugged her entire shapely calves. Her waist length locks were free and her tiara embroidered her forehead – the ruby star sparkling.

Clark hadn’t seen her from that night he was returning to Gotham from the tests Jor El had run on him; he had spoken a bit rude to her and since then she didn’t appear again except in the dream at the waterfall in Themyscyra… 132 hours and 46 minutes…Wait! He was counting the time unconsciously? He felt immense guilt and…dread but his joy for what he was seeing silenced everything else. And her perfume hit his deprived nostrils more intoxicating than ever.

Her eyes were ablaze, indifferent for the crowd and the stares she was receiving. She nodded when Stark rushed there with his confident stride and brought his palm to his chest bowing slightly his head in respect.

Diana curled slightly her upper lip with satisfaction and brought her palm over her heart to show her
respect.

“Princess Diana, it is an honor for us and me personally that you grace us with your presence.”

“The honor is mine, Mr. Stark, to be among such noble heroes and heroines.”

A genuine smile lighted her beautiful face when Superman came to her side without everyone catching his fast motion. Superman grinned too and Tony frowned – for the first time suspicion gnawing inside him.

Even though people tried to approach Diana to see her from up close, the two Avengers didn’t move from their place around Bruce: Steve Rogers now added to their company accompanied by Peppers. So Tony led the way for her and Superman to his teammates.

“Let me introduce you” Tony said obliged as a host but definitely his voice was completely out of the mood. “Natasha Romanov, the infamous Black Widow, Steve Rogers, Captain America our leader and Thor, well, the God of Thunder” he frowned “maybe you’ve met before in a congress or something?”

Thor laughed lighthearted but Diana remained cold.

“No, unfortunately, I didn’t have the pleasure.”

“Your glory has reached Asgard” the blond god commented but Diana replied only with a tight smile.

Tony coughed uncomfortable for the Princess’ lukewarm handshake with Natasha who just cocked an eyebrow sarcastic and Steve mumbled a ‘nice to meet you’ reflecting her lack of interest for meeting him.

“And my best friend, Bruce Wayne” Tony avoided referencing to their previous meeting due to the attack.

But Diana smirked locking her eyes with Bruce who didn’t blink.

“We meet again, Mr. Wayne” she said uncaring for Tony’s intention to keep secret that they already had met; she cocked an eyebrow and her eyes shone gleeful. “I see you managed at last to accumulate strong people around you: that’s perfect – that way you won’t need to cower behind trees to save your life…”

Tony clenched his jaw and Pepper’s eyes flashed angrily; the rest were shifting nervously, their irritation clear.

But Bruce was completely calm focused on her eyes but scrutinizing her.

“I don’t select people according to what you consider strength and weakness, Princess, because people have many more qualities than just physical strength. Except for some people that evidently have nothing more to show off than their supposed strength for which they brag like kids in a playground” he uttered keeping his unflinching stare locked with hers.

Tony mouthed ‘Ouch!’ knowing that nobody was seeing him, his cheerful mood back again while Lois raised her fist in the air in a gesture of vast satisfaction.

Superman’s eyes widened feeling Diana’s body tremble in anger while Bruce was composed as ice. The Princess was snarling at Bruce minus the growling but the human was indifferent already
detaching his eyes to continue his discussion with Matt’s fiancé.

“Diana, let me suggest you some really great beverage” Superman said to her to lighten the mood – what was Bruce thinking talking like this?

But she was still glaring at the human.

“We don’t have any nectar but I believe that you’ll find something satisfying in our esteemed bartender’s selection” Tony chirped remembering his host role.

Diana nodded to him but turned to Superman.

“Yes; I’ll trust your taste, Kal El.”

Superman smiled to her and both strode the space to the buffet standing out among the crowd that swarmed around them.

“Your pet is quite insolent” the Amazon leaned to Clark’s ear.

“He isn’t a pet” he answered through his teeth beaming at people.

“You approve his behavior then?” she arched an eyebrow shaking hands indifferently with the Mayor.

“Of course not…”

“You spoiled him…” she snorted and bypassed the crowd to get to the bar, Superman hurrying to follow her.

“Bitch!” Natasha spat and Steve looked at her reprimanding but not disagreeing.

Tony whistled.

“I’d like to have a ladies’ fighting in my party…” he looked at the ceiling thinking. “Mmm…some mud would be awesome! Now I need some hard rock…’xcuse me, boys and girls, have to speak to the band…”

Bruce splashed some water to his face: Tony had provided that the Avengers’ Tower offered a perfect friendly environment for people with impairments so some sinks where set lower and some cubicles where made with the latest developments for the needs of people with special needs – Bruce felt actually joy that his disability became the reason for his friend to be more sensitive to these issues.

He had crossed the reception floor to the corridor leading to the rest rooms unnoticed, his training in stealth useful even in civilian settings. He needed privacy to take his medication – he had promised Alfred to not neglect this and even if he had planned to, Tony had managed to slip his guests and bring him a dish with freshly cooked food.

“Alfred sends his regards…” Tony had winked.

“You’re kidding me!” he had gasped and Tony pursed his lips shrugging.

“New York has some awesome delivery services…Bon appétit, mon ami!”
He had searched the room for Selina though he’d have sensed her presence without seeing her: she should have been there by now…

Suddenly the door opened and Bruce saw in the mirror Superman approaching him with a frown. Bruce’s heart sank – from the moment he spoke with the Amazon, Clark hadn’t given him even a glimpse - but he turned immediately to face him.

“Hi, Superman: do you have a good time?”

But Clark had no time for this.

“Nobody is in hearing range” he snapped. “What do you think you’re doing?” he asked standing in front of him, imposing like a tower.

“Surviving through the party?” he arched his eyebrows.

Clark lolled his head and licked his lips.

“I think you have a better time than just surviving…” he remarked snidely, the sting from all the people swarming around Bruce still hot. “You know what I mean? Why you spoke to Diana like this? You said you had no problem with her being here!”

Bruce narrowed his eyes, a crease settling at his forehead.

“I don’t” he protested.

Superman crouched in front of him and held his shoulders.

“Really, Bruce?! Why? To get the opportunity to insult her?”

Bruce shook his head.

“I didn’t insult her: I just answered to her – you certainly heard what she said.”

“Do you have to reply like this? Showing off your wit and giving the chance to malevolent chat about her? Get a grip, Bruce! She saved hundreds of people in just few months! Hell! He saved your life and you didn’t even thank her once! And now you offend her like this!”

Bruce’s eyes were blank but shone as Superman’s rant unfolded.

“For the strong person she declares to be, she definitely gets easily hurt – especially when she so lightheartedly insults others” he lolled his head on the side. “At least, she has you to comfort her…”

Clark pressed his lips and caressed Bruce’s bangs that were wet from the water.

“There is nothing to be jealous of, Bruce; she doesn’t know anyone here apart from me and the Avengers are too preoccupied drooling at you.”

“People are drooling at your Princess, too; she could socialize if she wanted but she just needs to have you fixed on her” Clark closed his eyes huffing frustrated. “Have you revealed to her that you’re Clark Kent?”

Clark widened his eyes.

“Of course not!”
Bruce nodded relieved.

“Nice” he was aware that lack of trust couldn’t be the reason he didn’t tell the Princess yet the result was that counted.

Clark pecked his lips and rose.

“Please, speak better to her next time…” he turned to leave the restroom but stopped hearing Bruce’s intake of air signalizing that he was ready to say something.

“You know, Kal El” he chose on purpose that name “I was expecting you to speak then – to say something about the… ‘weak’ human beings. Not specifically about me but all the human beings who love you and believe that you help them not just in a showboat of your superiority.”

Clark didn’t turn.

“How can you believe that she helps people for that?”

Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Because she admitted it – c’mon, Kal El; haven’t you read her interview?”

“We’ll talk after the party, Bruce” his entire posture vibrated from his haste to return to the party.

“Superman, keep your distance from the Princess” Bruce had noticed some things about her that made him worried. “Until we clear things about what’s happening to you” Clark yanked his head huffing in frustration. “Please.”

Superman shook his head in disbelief.

“I can’t believe this, Bruce! Stop being jealous…”

Bruce didn’t return to the hall; the corridor had an exit to the elliptic balcony that hugged half of the floor dangling over New York. He relished the freezing breeze brushing his face – below the city sparkled with all her night glory: Tony’s railing was almost invisible so even someone sat in a wheelchair wasn’t thwarted to enjoy the view.

He was relieved to be alone – he cared about people yet being among them made him uncomfortable because he still felt that he didn’t belong. There were people that really liked him – it wasn’t their fault he felt like this. It was only his… He wasn’t normal by any means…

Inside, the intermission of rock music had given its place to calmer melodies as the youngsters left the party. Excitement reached easy his secluded spot at the balcony since he stood on the very edge of the tongue like balcony and from there he had a prefect view of the dance floor. He turned because the melody of “Fly me to the Moon” was very familiar to him: Frank Sinatra was Tony’s favorite singer. So it was no surprise to him that Tony was dancing with Pepper in the center of the stage – Bruce smiled fondly for his friend when Tony rested his head on Pepper’s naked shoulder licking his lips.

Soon more couples joined them and Bruce distinguished Captain America and Natasha, Matt and Lilly, Fury and Maria Hill…he paled…Clark and the Princess. He closed his eyes and turned his eyes to the sky: they were supposed to pretend that they didn’t have an affair but he warned Clark to keep a distance from her. And he didn’t listen…
Bruce had noticed that her hair emanated an artificial glow that was common in dyed hair: why a goddess – especially, an Amazon – dyes her hair? And her eyes seemed a bit odd…

“I can’t believe this, Bruce. Stop being jealous…”

But Clark asked him to don’t give up on him during this: he ought to protect Clark. This was the reason or he just satisfied his own need to keep Clark? He inhaled: he wished to stand on the railing and dive to the void opening his wings and flying – it seemed ages since the last time he did it…

Someone was there and Bruce knew that he could reveal his awareness to him; he turned and Thor’s impressive figure approached him.

“I’m sorry I interrupt your thoughts” the blond said with a smile.

“No problem” he answered and looked again at the sky.

The god stood beside him following his gaze.

“I don’t agree with anything the Amazon Princess said – I can’t understand why she spoke like this.”

Bruce rested his forearms on the transparent railing.

“Not all gods are so generous and kind to humans as the God of Thunder.”

Thor turned his eyes to him slightly frowning.

“I don’t consider it generosity and kindness being respectful to humans – especially, to a unique human being as you, Mr. Wayne” Bruce locked eyes with him. “She insulted you personally and I wanted to shove into her face who are you really …but I respect your will to keep it secret.”

Bruce nodded.

“I appreciate it. But her words were really nothing…I have heard much worse.”

Thor pursed his lips.

“I was shocked Superman didn’t say anything: after all, he has witnessed your braveness in more situations than me.”

“He respects my decision for secrecy too” he replied and wished this was the truth. “Besides I prefer people consider me weak and coward.”

Thor’s eyebrow twitched and he shook his head; his baby blue eyes twinkling with fondness.

“But you are not: Bruce Wayne is the bravest, strongest person I’ve ever known. Even though severely injured you fought and defeated the most powerful demon to save your friends and…me; and then though you should have stayed in the hospital you used the power of your mind to make your body fight an insane criminal saving innocent lives…You almost died there” he shook his head clutching the railing. “Even gods wouldn’t do that…”

Bruce didn’t like praising him so he decided to change the subject.

“Don’t tell me that gods are afraid of dying?” he smiled.

The blond turned to him, his locks framing his bearded face.
“Gods can die too but…it is more difficult.”

“So gods are just beings with special skills and powers and not the supernatural entities most people think.”

Thor gave him a toothy smile.

“So…you’re denying my divine nature?”

Bruce arched an eyebrow.

“Mmm…more I’m putting it into perspective” Thor blinked captivated. “Are you going to burn me with your thunders?”

Thor chuckled.

“I’m not the God of Wisdom but I’m not so stupid to burn my general in battle” he crouched before Bruce and placed his hands on his shoulders. “I don’t long for battles but I wish when the next comes I’ll be honored to fight beside you.”

“Hm…It’s so nice seeing a God kneeling before a mere mortal…” Lois said wickedly to Superman who was staring dumbfounded at the balcony.

Most of the reception hall didn’t have a view to the balcony because of the stage floor’s interval yet from some spots you could get a glimpse.

“That’s preposterous!” he whispered to her but Lois pouted innocently and shrugged.

“Why? You’re glued to the Princess’ skirt so someone has to entertain our Prince” she winked. “And the Avengers team has a breathtaking selection of hot bodies…”

“But we agreed to keep appearances this is why I stick to Diana.”

“Cut the crap, Supes! Keep appearances doesn’t equal making out with someone who openly fancies you.”

Clark licked his lips.

“I’m not! Diana knows that I’m with Bruce and has accepted it.”

“Really? That’s why she insulted him in front of everybody?” she sniggered and cocked an eyebrow in glee. “At least, she tried…”

“Did you have to post it at Planet’s site?”

Lois sipped her mojito.

“I’m covering the party, right? Besides, it was the highlight.”

He shook his head.

“I don’t believe how many haters of her commented already…” he had found a moment to peruse on one of the built in tablets Stark had throughout the Tower.
“Haters? Nah…Just clever people who see through her…” her demeanor became dead serious. “Go to Bruce even for a typical handshake or watch others appreciating what you are too damn to appreciate!”

Lois left to speak to a senator and thankfully Thor was moving away from Bruce probably to give him some privacy to answer his phone. Superman began walking towards the window frame that opened to the balcony when Diana intercepted him.

Moon river, wider than a mile  
I'm crossin' you in style some day  
Old dream maker, you heartbreaker  
Wherever you're goin', I'm goin' your way

“You know you should have been sleeping…”

Clark’s voice was stern but in his beautiful eyes it was obvious that he was happy he hadn’t slept.

“You spoiled me; I need you to cuddle me to fall asleep – so basically is your fault.”

Superman crouched and lifted him from the chair easily as a baby.

“I’m so happy I finally spoiled you!” he exclaimed heaving him in bridal style and flying again through the open balcony door of his bedroom in Tony’s villa at Thasos.

“Where are you taking me?” Bruce chuckled and Clark leaned his head over his, locking their eyes.

“To spoil you more…”

They floated over the black sea; the full moon was sending silver to sleep over the black slithering silk. And then in the peaceful thrashing of the small, lazy waves, Bruce heard some very familiar words that made his heart beat faster.

“Moon river, wider than a mile…”

He stared at Clark who blushed and stopped.

“I know this song” Bruce said.

“No kidding…”

“I must have heard it in Tony’s house: Sinatra is his favorite singer…but this song feels more important” Clark was looking up, pursing his lips. “What?” he asked grinning.

Clark gulped and looked him in the eyes completely solemn.

“I used to sing to you that song…every night…at Fortress…when you were…” he inhaled deeply “far away from me…when I wanted to persuade you to come back so to see the world together…to not let me see such a vast world alone…”

Bruce felt his eyes watering and Clark smiled.

“It seems they’re right about people hearing us even when…” he caressed Bruce’s cheek “they’re
far…Don’t cry, Star…we’ll cross that river together” he captured his lips.

“Sing it again…”

Clark began singing as before mimicking perfectly Sinatra’s voice but Bruce touched his fingers to his lips and he stopped.

“In the Fortress…don’t tell me you sang using Sinatra’s voice?”

Clark blushed.

“No…”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I want to hear it with your real voice…”

Clark coughed embarrassed and began singing with his own voice and it was the loveliest voice Bruce had ever heard; he murmured appreciatively without opening his eyes and felt Clark change his position hugging his waist and holding him erect upon his body. Moving slowly to the rhythm of the song…Bruce nestled his head to Clark’s heart keeping his eyes closed to suck the verses, Clark’s voice and his heartbeat.

Two drifters, off to see the world
There’s such a lot of world to see
We’re after the same rainbow’s end, waitin’ ’round the bend
My huckleberry friend, Moon River, and me

Bruce had stayed with his smartphone clutched in his hand and turned his head towards the hall hoping to lock eyes with Clark sharing that memory; the feelings of that night; of that song.

His heart beat desperately and it was as if he heard the cracking. Clark was dancing with Diana, his hand clenching her waist, her fingers digging her shoulder plates; their eyes locked.

Two drifters, off to see the world
There’s such a lot of world to see
We’re after the same rainbow’s end, waitin’ ’round the bend
My huckleberry friend, Moon River, and me

Bruce’s breath halted for some seconds.

“Mr. Wayne, there’s nothing wrong with Superman’s cells – and no strange reaction between his and yours cells…Of course, there could be other reasons for the behavioral changes you observed – external reasons we can’t identify through lab techniques. But your friend isn’t ill.”

Lucius had worked till late to ease his agony. Bruce thanked him for everything and wished him a great evening. Nothing wrong…

“Is this why you made me feel ill?” Clark accused him.

Bruce’s eyes were fixed on the couple dancing as he slipped the smartphone to his inside pocket; he turned his back shutting his ears to anything other than the ruckus of the city underneath. He had made Clark feel ill? To not lose him?

“Promise me that you won’t give up on me however stupid my behavior – promise that you’ll
Tony patted cheerfully New York’s Mayor and keeping his big grin on his face he strode to Pepper who has just distanced from a company of guests. She was the only one that noticed that his flashing smile didn’t reach his eyes. Actually, Pepper knew that he was fuming.

He stood before her.

“What is it, Tony?”

He scanned the entire hall without seeing or caring about anything.

“What is he thinking!” he spat and gulped his bourbon.

Pepper followed his stare to no avail.

“Who?”

“Superman!” he lowered his voice and grinned carefree to some guests who looked at him. “You saw him with that arrogant bitch!”

Pepper pressed her lips; she had seen them dancing.

“Maybe it’s some plan of Bruce’s.”

Tony shook his head.

“Plan my ass! No plan would have included Superman snuggling her…” he blinked huffing. “I knew that the UFO was interested in her but…how things got here? Bruce didn’t tell me anything!” he ruffled his locks with one hand. “Of course…I’m all the time away…”

Pepper held his shoulder and looked him in the eye.

“Maybe it’s not something serious, Tony…”

But he cocked his eyebrows.

“Yeah, sure…You forget to whom you talk? I warned the bastard to not hurt Bruce!” he clenched his fist.

“Maybe Bruce doesn’t see it as you do…”

Tony looked around.

“Where’s Bruce?”

“I don’t know” she shook her head.

“Alone!” he snapped and headed furious to find him in the enormous pack hall but some senators cut him in the middle and though he sighed he couldn’t shun them.

“Are you nuts?!” Lois was now seriously mad at him and thankfully she kept her voice whispering so that nobody noticed.
“What now?” he rolled his eyes.

The song had ended and Diana went to speak with Oliver Queen who just arrived.

“Bruce is alone and you dance with her such a song?”

“People are drooling at Bruce; he is fine – everything goes according to the plan.”

Lois shook her head exasperated.

“You know better than me that Bruce hates people goggling at him – that’s why he secluded himself there: to get some privacy and maybe some word with you. You’re the only one that counts for him!”

Superman frowned seeing her face ease with a satisfied grin watching Bruce.

“Can I have this dance with the party’s most beautiful man?”

Bruce smiled and looked at Selina slithering to him: a sparkling star in her deep blue silk thigh-long dress.

“This chair isn’t made for dancing and…anyways I was never a good dancer.”

Selina gave him her hand and he grasped it.

“Peps says otherwise…and I’d never let a chair stop me.”

She positioned Bruce’s hands in her waist and hers over his shoulders beginning moving slowly to the music; their eyes locked each of them reflecting the other’s smile.

Superman saw what Lois had seen: a stunning Selina had gone to her friend and they were dancing.

“They are so cute together!” Lois chirped delighted. “Same age, same beauty, she was there for him throughout his Hell” Clark had told her about Selina and Bruce. “They are a match made in Heaven!”

Clark understood her intention to make him jealous and rolled his eyes.

“They are like siblings…”

Lois pouted and arched her eyebrows shooting a picture of them with her smartphone.

“You’re not going to publish that?” Superman asked exasperated.

“Of course not! Bruce deserves some discretion: I just want to have him with his new love interest.”

Clark’s face contorted in irritation.

“I told you they’re like siblings!”

“Oh! That easily changes: I have seen it many times: childhood friends coming closer to each other when one of them gets a broken heart…”
“You’re late, Sel…”

Selina pressed her lips cutely and blinked.

“I know, sweetie…I’m sorry but I thought that you won’t be in danger with so many heroes around so… I put business before pleasure.”

Bruce frowned and narrowed his eyes.

“Do you have something to tell me?” he caressed her slightly curly hair that fell to her shoulders.

She licked her lips and chuckled.

“You know me so well…I had to free a precious gem from its kidnappers…”

“You didn’t tell me anything.”

Selina kissed his cheek.

“A girl has her secrets…”

“From me?” her friend asked almost hurt and she tapped her fingers on his shoulders.

“You’re right but the chance came all of a sudden and I couldn’t resist…”

“You returned it to the Police?”

Selina blinked seductively and curled her lips.

“After I pet it a bit…”

Bruce lolled his head to the side and smiled.

“Old habits die hard, huh?”

“I won’t keep it, sweetie…”

He grinned.

“I know.”

Bruce felt her hold tightening.

“I saw him dancing with her…”

He shrugged.

“So?”

“It’s Your song!” her eyes widened – Bruce had told her about the song.

“It’s okay, Sel.”

“It’s not! You can hide from everyone else but me, Bruce! I know your eyes!” a crease formed on her brow. “And there’s sadness…”
Bruce rubbed soothingly her back that stayed uncovered from fabric and smiled.

“Let’s dance, my beautiful lady…”

Superman pressed his lips and made to march there to Lois’ amusement when he saw something and stopped abruptly.

Steve Rogers had noticed that Bruce was alone in the balcony and he didn’t like it. Besides he wanted to speak to him.

Of course when you’re Captain America people unaware of your wishes stop you constantly to shake your hand and pat your shoulder. So when he finally got to the balcony he saw Bruce Wayne dancing with a lady who from the back side looked more than beautiful.

He blushed and made to leave to not disturb yet Bruce had already seen him.

“Captain…”

Bruce amused took in Selina’s eyes bulging and her lean body going stiff.

“I don’t want to disturb…” Captain mumbled ruffling his hair. “And it’s Steve, Mr. Wayne.”

“Bruce. You don’t interrupt anything…” Selina turned to Steve and the hero’s eyes sparkled fascinated, which Bruce was sure that Selina noticed as well. “This is my best friend, Selina Kyle – Selina, this is Steve Rogers.”

She gave him a dazzling smile and walked to him graciously offering her hand.

“Who doesn’t know Captain America?” she said seductively. “Thrilled to meet you.”

“Me too, Miss Kyle…” he was actually blushed and Selina’s smile became wider. “I didn’t know Mr. Wayn…Bruce had such a brilliant friend.”

Bruce smiled.

“Steve, Selina is a great dancer and I’m not the best to escort her” he chuckled. “So could you replace me?”

Selina lolled her head to him with a glance screaming ‘bitch please!’ But Bruce was happy for the first time in the party.

“With pleasure!” he offered his upper arm to Selina who wrapped hers enjoying the sense of bulging biceps.

But soon her big smile faded and she turned to Bruce.

“I don’t want to leave you alone…”

“In a minute I’ll get inside too…Do not worry and enjoy yourself!”

She pressed her lips again and Steve looked at Bruce also indecisive.
“Go…” Bruce gestured to the stage and they hesitantly left him alone.

Now that Bruce was alone again Clark could go to him and maybe when nobody was looking take him and have a dance up to the sky as they did wrapped in aurora borealis back at the Fortress or washed in the silver moon in Thasos.

After Selina left with Rogers, Bruce had watched them for a minute and then turned his back to the party doing stuff in his smartphone – Clark could hear it even though Bruce’s back hide it. The stubborn human was working even now! His strides were decisive as he headed to the exit but a hand caressed his forearm. He turned frowning and his eyes met Diana’s.

“Don’t tell me that you’re tired of dancing?” she smiled.

He cast a glance at Bruce and then at Diana – Bruce loved loneliness and it’d be better to speak at the safety and warmth of their bedroom. He nodded to Diana and she beamed gripping his upper arm and guiding him to the dance floor.

Every time their twirls brought the balcony to her eye range Selina was trying to get a glimpse of Bruce though it was difficult with dancing couples getting in the middle.

Steve met her eyes and smiled.

“I feel there’s a great bond between you two… You know Bruce since he was Falcone’s captive, right? You stayed at his side all these years… You’re as admirable and brave as he.”

She pressed her lips.

“I was just a witness…” she said hoarsely. “Pain, starvation, humiliation, despair… he endured alone.”

Steve blinked.

“I think that your presence there galvanized him… fuelled his courage; even the bravest and strongest of people need someone…”

Selina grinned.

“What about you? Do you have a special person in your life to galvanize you?”

“It’s difficult being with someone in this job…”

Selina cocked her eyebrows.

“That’s why I won’t ever become a super heroine!” she chuckled and she felt with a thrill Steve’s arms tightening around her.

“You’re already super, Miss Kyle…”

Selina couldn’t stop a snort.

“If you’re taking flirt lessons from Stark, you must change tutor, handsome…”
Steve chuckled.

“So… I wasted my money, then?” he said flushing.

Selina slithered on his body and touched her lips in his ear relishing the goose bumps throughout his body.

“A secret… With such eyes and body you don’t need any teacher” she whispered in his ear exciting his heartbeat. “Do you want me to show you?”

“Someone like you shouldn’t be alone.”

Bruce had heard the footsteps turning the curve to his spot but didn’t move hoping that the stranger would leave. But instead the steps came closer and the stranger leaned on the railing focusing his intense green stare to Bruce’s uninterested eyes that gazed at the sky.

He had been perusing data in his smartphone from several sources about Diana of Themyscira: he had already searched many times for her but now his focus was on plain descriptions of her from ancient authors – he had also taken many photos of her from the party for further scrutiny. Upon hearing the footsteps he slipped the phone in the jacket’s inside pocket.

He intended to go inside and bid good night to Tony and then return to the penthouse for a hot shower and some lifesaving sleep. So Bruce wanted nothing more than getting rid of the intruder as soon as possible.

“I’m not alone” he replied indifferently turning his eyes to the stranger only to be met with a figure that actually was very familiar.

During his research for the Amazon, he came upon many pictures and videos of Oliver Queen: he should have recognized his voice but the videos must have altered it a bit. The man was definitely more handsome from up close – standing at 6’3”, being muscle bound and sturdy with broad shoulders his presence radiated power as much as his face emanated charm.

His short hair and stubble was a dirty blond and his green eyes stared with an intensity that gave the feeling of being X-rayed; his lips were always curled in a smug faint smile that accompanied perfectly the smugness in his piercing eyes.

Queen looked around pouting.

“I don’t see anyone…” he shrugged innocently.

“I don’t want to monopolize my friends” Bruce replied nonchalant.

Queen cocked an eyebrow and his grin made his face even smugger.

“If I was so lucky to be your friend, I’d crave to be monopolized by you…” he offered his hand for a handshake “Oliver Queen.”

Bruce shook his hand without showing that he knew him already.

“Bruce Wayne.”

“I know…” Queen answered and his eyes sparkled mysterious. “It’s only three months I returned from the dead” he said keeping his eyes on Bruce’s “but your story reached my ears and fascinated
Bruce shook his head.

“There’s nothing fascinating in my story.”

Queen arched his eyebrows smiling.

“I beg to differ… You survived through deprivation and tortures that even an adult wouldn’t and you managed to get your family’s company back sending your tormentor to prison. I admire you, Mr. Wayne.”

“There’s nothing to admire…” he spat and turned his wheelchair towards the curve leading to the frame for inside. “Excuse me but I’m tired…”

The man grinned knowing.

“I ruined your solitude…” he nodded. “I’m sorry for my intrusion – I cherish loneliness too but my desire to meet you at last subdued my discretion.”

“There’s no need to apologize; after all, I was leaving… The balcony isn’t my property.”

But Queen’s tender hand on his shoulder stopped his movement and Bruce frowned at the man’s annoyingly confident but charming smile.

“What do you want, Mr. Queen?”

“To discuss potential business partnership; a friendship; sharing our feeling of not belonging… But mainly a promise to meet again.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Mr. Queen, Wayne Enterprises will gladly study the possibilities of a partnership with you” the man gave a toothy smile that was filled with amusement for the younger man’s evasion.

“I confess that my interest is greater for you than Wayne Enterprises” Bruce’s blushing wasn’t an act and he saw fondness in Queen’s enigmatic eyes. “I think that we can understand each other, Mr. Wayne: we might be surrounded by our friends, people who care and love us, but they can’t understand… Right, Bruce?” his eyes pierced Bruce’s and it was as if the older man tried to invade him.

Bruce detached his eyes searching the dance floor since the rest of the hall wasn’t easily visible especially for someone in a wheelchair.

“I must find Tony…”

“Let me come with you then.”

Queen moved along him to cross the curve when the sound of glass smashing and gunshots made the older man grab Bruce’s shoulders to stop him; he definitely felt how tense those shoulders have become. The ruckus of terrified shrieks made Bruce’s blood freeze and his body rebelling to get there; his eyes were wild focused on the inside but panicked bodies moving aimlessly covered even the small view he had.

Suddenly, Queen crouched before him and his eyes locked with Bruce’s.
“I’m going in to see what’s going on” he grinned. “I can’t think of anyone so insane to attempt anything here… With so many super heroes it’d be oven in a minute. However stay here and take cover in the shadows” he showed the sharp, too narrow end of the elliptic balcony that was drenched in the shadows from the neighboring building.

Bruce wanted to go inside but he shouldn’t raise suspicions so he nodded. But Queen waited and Bruce knew that he wouldn’t leave if he didn’t go where the man have showed him. Grudgingly he did and the older man smiled and moved inside winking…

Bruce watched him leaving and tried to get a glimpse of what was going on opposite the dance floor in front of the gathered crowd of guests. Well, he could think of someone so insane that could hit here but his insanity wasn’t enough to break the security and he was supposed to be in Arkham, right?
The guests in the reception floor of the Avengers’ Tower gaped at the improbable spectacle of windows smashing in thousands shards and guys with Disney characters’ masks landing among them with firearms aiming at them.

For the first seconds, surprise and shock didn’t let the reality sink in – this building was the safest in the US and probably the world AND almost every fucking superhero was there! But when the nightmarish bang of exploding glass registered and the waterfall of shards flooded the floor women screamed and men moved from there taking women along, leaving unwillingly empty a space which looked like a stage.

The Avengers, Superman and Wonder Woman dispersed in the hall watched dumbfounded, angry but unable to do anything as if someone had paralyzed them.

Pepper who stood with Tony in a corner, squeezed his hand, but Iron Man looked at her outraged.

“I can’t do anything!” he gritted his teeth.

“Call Jarvis” she whispered but Tony shook his head in denial, his burning narrowed eyes fixed on the intruders.

“Not even this…”

Pepper tried to contact Jarvis from her StarkStell, only to realize that her phone was dead. She met Tony’s knowing stare.

“We’re fucking!” he mumbled pissed.

The Disney cartoons took their places surrounding the crowd and then one last jumped through the nonexistent window landing on his knees slipping through the floor.

“I’m gooooonna make aaaaa brand newwwww start of it in ooooold New York! New York!” he sang in a dissonant nasal impression of Sinatra spreading his arms in the air.

People goggled at him: he wore a dark purple suit with green shirt and vest matched with the purple Sinatra-like fedora on his head. Clark and Tony like some of the reporters knew him.

Joker jumped on his feet: his face was perfectly painted in his clown face.

“Whoa! I aaaaalwayss wanna dooo that!” he frowned. “Wait! I have al--ready entered a building thaaaat way but not in Brooooodway style…” he lolled his head towards the reporters with the cameras. “Wha’? No pictures? No standing ovaaaaation?! Tough audience…”

His eyes flicked to each superhero in the room and waved his hand in frustration.

“Theyeeeee toughest audience, huh? Bi--ceps, del--toids, pecs and ster--oids, HeHe! Well, I dooooon’t like repeating myself but since you’re new to this: I’m tonight’s entertainment… aaaaaand by the way: I LOOOOOVE NEW YORK!” he showed around the ‘I ♥ New York’ badge on his lapel to be met with perplexed stares.
Joker pouted and looked at the badge which read not New York but Gotham.

“Ooooopsy, dairiisyy!” he cackled maniac only to stop abruptly sobering with an apologizing expression. “Small technical inconveniences – happens all the time in live shows…”

Tony had had enough and despite the fact he couldn’t make his armor activate or contact Jarvis he crossed the space, clenching his jaw. Joker’s goons pointed their guns at him and Tony’s teammates followed by Superman and the Amazon moved though like Tony they felt their powers gone or just unable to make anything with them.

“Oooon! Toonny, dear!” Joker stretched more his grotesque scars and turned to him.

They stood opposite each other in a breath’s distance. Tony’s eyes were cold piercing the clown who towered him. Joker licked his lips.

Thankfully, nobody was in proximity because the moans and wet breaths certainly passed the restroom’s locked door.

“I told you that you don’t need Stark’s lessons, handsome…” Selina mumbled between her pants and moans.

Her neck was stretched permitting full access to Steve’s mouth to suck as he was thrusting harder in her. She clenched his powerful shoulder blades and tightened her thighs grip around his buttocks urging him for more.

Captain America’s shirt was tossed away – Selina had gotten rid of it from the start: she wasn’t going to lose the golden chance to grope such meat – and the man really enjoyed the young lady’s hands fondling him stronger and more arousing than any other woman.

“Are you sure you don’t have any super powers?” he panted looking in her green glimmering eyes and she chuckled.

“Apart from my exceptional beauty and sharp wit, none…” she grabbed the nape of his neck and brought his lips to her own chewing them with all her lust.

“No need for more…” he whispered smiling and his mouth stormed at her naked breasts.

Selina didn’t care about the mangled state of her dress: Steve had rolled the sleeves down until her breasts were freed and the down half of the dress was upturned to her waist when Captain settled her against the tiled wall. She had immediately lifted her legs to wrap his thighs staring him in the eyes.

Well, he might be from another era but he wasn’t stupid! He grabbed her black silk pants and in the frenzy of kisses and touches he lowered it along with her black fishnets to the knees just to gain access to what he wanted. Yet Selina moved her body tossing away with impatience the clothes and her stiletto heels.

Steve’s arms were protectively wrapped around her naked back to keep her from being crashed to the wall because his thrusts were exactly what she had expected from him. And she showed her appreciation with moans, grunts and prompting for more.

“Did you hear something?” she frowned. “Like shattering glasses?”

Steve raised his blond head from her breasts; he was all flushed and horny for more; his eyes almost
“Tony…” he panted trying to find the words fast “some…crazy stuff…”

She smirked and her eyes shone gleefully; she shook her head scolding him.

“Mmm…I think I get the SMS, handsome…” a stronger thrust affirmed her thought. “Let’s continue OUR party…” she moaned lustful mouthing Steve’s lips and stabbing her nails to his deltoids to outer her immense pleasure.

Bruce covered in the shadows pulled out of his pocket his Cosmos smartphone and brushed the upper right corner transforming the gadget into a tablet. He had no intention to oblige to Queen’s suggestion but first he had to gain intelligence about what was going on: those yells definitely weren’t from excitement.

His fingers began flying on the screen and eventually he gained access to the building’s control system. Only to realize with a frown that the control system was out of order and the entire Tower was locked from the outside world and inside. Which was to be expected since the Tower had his own security staff and the reception hall should have already been swarmed by them.

So the one who organized this took good care to trap them somewhere in the building – there! He saw the figures of armed people locked inside their offices or elevators as they were heading to the reception floor. Even the headquarters were locked along with the control panels and the telecommunication antenna was also out of order.

Bruce bit his lip: that was a major blow for Tony…and definitely it wasn’t the work of a common criminal. He tried to get a view inside the hall from the surveillance system but of course this was disabled too… And the oddest of all: there was no indication of the system being hacked or attacked by a virus.

However, even if the Tower was completely breached its greatest defense was the Avengers and they were inside, Superman and Wonder Woman with them. Yet there was no sign of a battle and even if there were hundreds of civilians and hostilities would endanger them still all these heroes could stop the invaders in a minute or less…

He pursed his lips…unless they couldn’t fight… The electronic attack could have rendered Iron Man useless; Kryptonite would have the same effect to Superman – his guts clenched for Clark. But the rest? Thor and the Amazon were Gods, Natasha’s abilities were independent of any external factor and the same went for Captain America… How could someone incapacitate all of them?

He still couldn’t see inside… He clenched his jaw and dialed a code.

“Jarvis?”

“At your service, Master Bruce.”

“Can you contact Tony?”

“I’m afraid I can’t, sir; something blocks any communication path with Master Anthony.”

Bruce nodded huffing.

“Get me view inside the hall through any satellite you can.”
“Yes, sir.”

In two minutes, he had on his screen delayed image from a satellite from the moment when the invaders smashed the windows. Though the image was much snowed he certainly could make out the Disney masks.

So he didn’t need the next image to know who attacked: with his purple suit, a purple fedora and his face covered with the known makeup, Joker in all his glory entered last.

“Damn!” he exclaimed and his eyes darted towards the whole-wall windows of the hall.

How he managed to escape with the new knocking-out system Tony had in him? He wouldn’t be able to make a threatening step not to mention escape Arkham and come to New York. He shook his head snorting: of course if someone could render useless this Tower, the Avengers, Superman and Wonder Woman, disabling Joker’s security measures wouldn’t be a problem. But the news of his escape should have leaked…

“Jarvis, can you activate Iron Man’s armor from distance?”

“I’m afraid it is impossible, sir” the AI sounded really sorry. “There is too much interference.”

Bruce pressed his lips – of course, the guy behind all these took his precautions.

“But I know that Tony can sustain the armor with his mind’s power.”

“Indeed, sir, yet it seems that something messes with Master Tony’s mind because he can’t contact me.”

Bruce nodded: if Gotham’s crime world had interfered in that then things weren’t simple.

“Okay, Jarvis. I let my Cosmos open for you to get access: through it you’d have proximity to keep watching the entire Tower as much as possible and try to overcome what blocks the systems. I’ll go inside.”

“Sir, I strongly suggest that you do not go there: the danger is too high and Master Tony would be furious.”

Bruce smiled.

“Do not worry, Jarvis: I don’t intend on going back to the hall but getting inside the building might make it easier to find a way to help” a thought crossed his mind – how can someone strip heroes from the ability to use their skills without something evident? “Jarvis, I want you to scan the reception hall for anything odd – especially the air.”

“I’ll do my best, sir, though it might be difficult doing that through the satellites.”

“Thank you, Jarvis: I let our line open…”

Holding his Cosmos with one hand, brushed the control panel on the armrest of the chair and slid to the curve heading for the entry frame at the corridor bypassing the hall. He had already a theory: he knew of one brilliant but deranged genius in psycho-pharmachology, who with the proper help could achieve that – and that man had just escaped arrest in a miraculous way.

Someone powerful must have intervened and that reminded him of the decree about Luthor and the Metropolis’ released criminals and of course the attack against him. Intergang? He pursed his lips. He
didn’t believe that Edge, the mobster that was killed during the subway attack, was the leader; yet the real Intergang obviously wanted people to believe that so they wouldn’t make such a spotlight move destroying their own scheme…

And with Joker from all people? Joker would never work for a mobster…

“Well, well, well!” a sniggering voice and a body blocked his way. “Look who’s her’.”

Bruce made his eyes widen from fear as he faced a man of average height and weight aiming at him with a machine gun. He wore a Disney character mask.

“Please…” he muttered feigning fear.

“Boss, will be sooooo happy to get his Brucie!”

“What are you doing?” Tony spat at Joker through his ground teeth.

Joker lollled his head on the side and spread his arms towards the smashed windows.

“A spee--ctacular entrance! I thought you of all people would understand…” he pouted.

“Take your pathetic gang and beat it before we kick your lame ass!”

Joker craned his head backwards and stared at his ass intrigued.

“Well, I’ve got to admit it’s not the beeeeest butt out there – not with Brucie in the contest” he licked his lips. “But laaaa--me? You’re so cruuel – let’s ask Brucie…”

Tony clenched his jaw and tried to fist his hand to punch the clown in the face – armor or not – but slightly panicked realizing that his body wasn’t obeying. Thor made a step at his side.

“Leave Bruce Wayne out of this!” he’d have grabbed Mjölnir yet he had already found out that he couldn’t even yield the weapon – and that hurt as if he was left half.

But he wouldn’t let that discourage him nor the fact that his body didn’t obey him to fight: Bruce fought Bagdana while paralyzed and then defeated that clown being severely injured. Thor wouldn’t fail that brilliant human: he’d protect the innocent among them even somewhat disabled.

Natasha stood beside the two men, her eyes two flames sending daggers at Joker.

“Let the people go, mu`dak!”

But joker spat his glove and fixed the locks that fell in his face.

“Uuuuh, ho--ney! Russian sweet words turn me oooon but I’m married…” he pouted and stretched his hand to pet her cheek but she spat at his fingers. “Hahahahahahehe! I’m gonna have fun tonight! I LUUUUUUUUUVE …where are we? – ah, yeah – NEW YOOOOORK!”

Superman who exactly as the rest felt deprived of his powers without feeling extremely ill like when a Kryptonite was present stepped forwards. He hated that Thor spoke protectively of Bruce and besides his goal always was to protect people and in this hall were many innocent people. He just hoped that Bruce would remain in the balcony till they cleared this mess.

“What do you want to let these people leave unharmed?” he asked calmly and Diana strut proudly at
his side – the heroes forming a half circle – which oddly was like a smiley - with Joker in the middle.

People in the enormous space were already terrified about the fact that a small army and a nutcase had crushed the specific party; and the fact that all these superheroes didn’t do anything to beat them only increased their panic. Of course some guests with more cool reasoning attributed that to the heroes’ intention to not cause casualties.

And actually that was the reason Tony and Superman didn’t ask Joker how in hell he managed crippling them: they knew that admitting that would shatter any thread of composure the crowd had.

Yet Joker didn’t have such worries. He leaned towards Superman squinting and in a swift move took his cape and covered the hero’s head.

“Heya, Papa Smurf!” he giggled and then sobered. “I aaaaalways wanted to do this” he said turning to the puzzled people who held their breaths. “Don’t tell meee you didn’t want that too? Seeing these super baboons rendered useless?” he inhaled deeply and yanked his head closing his eyes. “This is a night of mir---acles! Your heroes are their true selves: useless!”

The guests exchanged fearful glances and a collective scream shook the hall when Joker pulled out of his jacket a gun aiming at Superman: people knew that their heroes were indeed powerless otherwise these bozos would have been already stopped.

“We have some unsettled business” Joker hissed humorless and met Superman’s glare with his own. “You just can’t keep your balloon hands away from other’s property, huh?”

Superman snarled: Joker calling Bruce his property was outrageous and he’d have smashed him weren’t for that damn thing that dampened his ability to order his body to act. Joker’s finger was tightening around the trigger and Clark knew that it’d hurt or kill him but he didn’t care.

The others looked appalled at the scene.

“He isn’t…” Superman began uttering through gritted teeth and Joker clenched his jaw twitching to press the trigger.

Tony frowned: of course something didn’t work with the precautions he set inside Joker’s system but witnessing that was worse.

Diana made a step and stretched her imposing body between Joker and Superman, glaring arrogantly at the jester.

“He has no connection with that pathetic human” she said stentorian and Tony wasn’t the only one who suddenly forgot Joker to hate her. “Bruce Wayne said publicly that he has no relationship with Superman!”

Joker lolled his head to the side and eyed her intrigued with a glimmer in his acid green eyes. He let the gun dangle from his finger.

“HeHe! Another token of spouse fidelity…” he frowned eyeing Diana from feet to the head. “Ow! Ow! Ow! The ooooldest heeen in the room!” he lolled his head to the crowd and winked “aaaaand the planet…” he added collusively.

He leaned his face close to her who sniffed as if smelling something really rotten.

“You’re holding up pretty good for a 5,000 old, huh?” he giggled “Tell me, granny, can I have your plastic surgeon’s name?” he winked. “Might need him in 1,000 years – this face” he gestured to his
She gritted her teeth and fumed as Tony couldn’t fight a chuckle as many of the bystanders. Diana wanted to raise her arms and hit him but as every other hero she found it impossible – Superman held her upper arms.

“Easy, sugar… I’m not gonna hurt you – I cherish UNESCO’s protected monuments – HAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA!” Joker hopped around.

“How you disabled our powers?” Tony asked really pissed but not for Joker’s spree on Diana – that he had enjoyed.

Joker scratched his nape with the point of his gun and hopped to his direction. He tilted his head on the side and pursed his lips.

“C’moooooo, Tony-boy… You’re a fuuucking genius ooooor a genius in fucking – find it yourself.”

He made a circle-like gesture to the small army of goons he brought along and they threatened with their firearms the crowd who cried.

“Enough!” Thor roared. “Leave before this ends badly!” his eyes casted fires at Joker.

The jester began shaking and then pouted.

“Uuuuuuu! I luuuuuuve tough…” he squinted. “You’re supposedly a god, huh? Brrrrrrrrrr! Now, let’s get serious… BUHAHAHAHA!” he cackled. “Oh! Boy! Meeeee? Seeerious? This is out of character… Sorry, ‘bout that!”

He stroked through the room, his goons pushing the guests to the perimeter. He scanned every corner licking his lips, scared people following his gaze.

“Daaaaaamn! I feel like that evil fairy in Sleeping Beauty: uninvited, misunderstood, scaaaaaring people…” but suddenly he raised his voice in a roar “WHERE’S MY SLEEPING BEAUTY!”

Tony approached him with confident strides, determined, ignoring the gunpoints turned at him.

“He’s safe away from here and you!” he clenched his jaw. “Bruce has already left the Tower. So take money and get the Hell out of here!”

Joker closed his eyes and shook his head disapprovingly.

“Hooooow rude! Is this a way to treat your broooooother-in-law?” Tony’s face contorted in puzzlement and repulsion. “Bruce is your brother, I married him sooooo we” he moved the hand with the gun between them causing a gasp from the crowd “are now brothers” his eyes stopped blinking playfully and turned into ice. “I know he didn’t leave and I’ll find him!” he gritted his teeth.

And then his eyes found the shining bar – the barista freezing in his spot.

“Oh, my!” he screamed like a thrilled school girl. “Do you haaaave a bar?”

Alfred sat in the white leather semi-circle couch at the salon in Tony’s penthouse. He was sipping a fine wine that he had taken from Tony’s oaken bar and Hero was purring folded like a fur ball next to him casting drowsy glances at the butler who smiled at him.
“Our master will be back in short; he said that he wouldn’t stay till late. He doesn’t want to admit it but lately he gets tired rather easily – you noticed too, don’t you?” he petted the kitten’s belly and Hero played with his hand. “This will stay between us, right, young master Hero? An esteemed, serious butler can’t play with a kitten even as adorable as you” he looked warily around. “Do you think Master Anthony has an AI here too, watching?”

He turned on the huge built-in TV.

“CNN has a splendid documentary on wines” he explained to Hero. “Indeed, he gets easily tired, Master Hero, and this is due to his emotional state – he covers it perfectly (that boy had to hide his emotions his entire life to survive) but I sense it: I see it in his eyes even when he smiles…” he sighed. “I wish his parents were alive so he could talk to them at least…”

The huge plasma screen filled with peaceful French scenery: green fields, vast vineyards and then small, traditional cottages hiding at their underground endless rows of beautiful barrels priceless wines that the documentary’s experts tasted narrating their stories.

“The best to relax yourself, Master Hero…” but the kitten looked to him rather bored and Alfred twitched his lips. “Next time we’ll watch something about fish; mice documentaries are pretty unwatchable…”

But suddenly the peacefulness of cava was abruptly cut for breaking news and Alfred although away from Gotham felt his guts clench reflectively. Avengers’ Tower was the safest building in the world: what could go wrong?

“The Avengers’ Tower is breached!”

The caption under the clear image of the flashing building was enough for Alfred to stop listening to anything the newscaster said in an awestruck face. He gripped the armrest of the couch.

Bruce stared feigning panic at the firearm’s point that aimed at his chest. The guy didn’t sound like the usual goons which in most of the cases were mental patients. However the man made a move towards him and it wasn’t the smartest thing to do – on the other hand, how was he supposed to suspect that weak, paraplegic Brucie was ready to knock him out.

“Please…Put that away…”

But the goon – Donald Duck – rushed to him and grabbed viciously his arm.

“Move your ass, ya cripple!” he spat.

“I wish I could…” Bruce murmured and was ready to knock the man out getting the proximity he wished for.

Yet his trained hearing caught the almost imperceptible sound of a twang and then a twish and whoose; he knew these sounds too well because Ra’s loved archery and many times after his training or sex sessions made a demonstration to him. But an archer in New York?

He pulled his arm causing the goon to lose his balance just a second before he thunk of the arrow declared that met flesh; Bruce’s eyes bulged supposedly surprised; he couldn’t see the goon’s eyes yet his yelp and jerk to the glass wall were eloquent enough. Instantly, a small pond of blood formed under the man from the spot in his shoulder where the arrow’s head protruded. The goon’s mask muffled his screams but his twitching said everything.
Bruce knew that he was watched and brought his palm to his mouth appalled and shocked; he didn’t want his stalker realize that he wasn’t the weak Bruce Wayne or that he knew about the arrow before it hit the man. And of course he was so petrified to look around to locate the archer who was perched on the railing.

But when the man’s light feet landed on the balcony he couldn’t ignore him. He casted his fearful, shocked eyes on him and cocked an eyebrow but only inside.

The stranger wore dark green pants and tunic with a hood of the same color casting his face in shadow; there was a black eye mask and from the slits two green eyes like fire daggers pierced Bruce who stared flabbergasted hiding his amusement: Robin Hood?! The bow was looped over the man’s right arm and the arrow case was distinct in his back.

The archer straightened his posture and keeping his eyes on Bruce’s face strode to him. Bruce flinched to the back of his chair and the archer put his hands on the armrests trapping him between them.

“You pushed him away from my arrow…” he said in a low but almost threatening voice.

Bruce shook his head in denial narrowing his eyes.

“I…what? I didn’t…”

The archer smiled in a tight line.

“I never have missed my target.”

Bruce’s eyes sparkled.

“It seems that now you did…” the stranger laughed and shook his head appreciatively. “What was your target?”

The man’s eyes bore into Bruce’s.

“His heart, of course.”

Bruce gasped.

“You wanted to kill him?”

“Of course, he’s a bad guy” he said indifferently. “I thought that you of all people would agree with that.”

“I don’t want people getting killed, even bad guys. He might have a family: by killing him you would have increased the possibilities his kids follow his path while if you help him reform he would keep his kids out of this.”

The man rolled his eyes and snorted.

“Wrong hour you chose to deliver sociology lectures…” he remarked snidely. “Anyways, you might have saved him but I’ll finish him before he informs his boss.”

In a swift motion, he extricated his bow and an arrow was already positioned ready to launch to the fallen, writhing man.

“No…” Bruce said and the archer licked his lips frustrated and glared at him sideways.
“You’re stupid, you know that?”

Bruce nodded and the archer put his gear back.

“You can go now” Bruce said.

But the man trapped him again between his arms so rushing that Bruce jerked backwards.

“WE go” the man stressed the pronoun and settled his one arm around Bruce’s back and the other under his knees ready to heave him.

But Bruce stared at him with widened eyes and his body stiffened.

“We need to be stealth so no chair” Robin Hood explained. “Putting your arms around my neck will help…”

Bruce shook his head: that man ruined his plans – he couldn’t work with him around. Robin Hood frowned puzzled.

“If you stay here the guy there will get you” he gestured to the hall. “He is a Gothamite like you and I’m sure he’s looking for you – his goon said it. And you’re cold…Paraplegics should be careful with hypothermia.”

Indeed, fat snowflakes were falling thickly and Bruce for the first time realized that he was indeed cold but he didn’t want this man attached to him.

“I’m not going with someone who kills people…”

“Give me a break, will you?” he retorted annoyed.

“I give you one – go!”

But the archer gritted his teeth and tightened his grips on him already lifting him off the chair. Bruce repelled him by pushing his shoulders with his palms.

The green eyes flashed.

“I don’t believe it!” but then he softened his voice. “I won’t hurt you, okay?”

“Leave me alone!”

The man despite his resist lifted him in bridal style Bruce still struggling.

“If you don’t stop struggling” the stranger warned him with a hiss “I’ll knock you out! Do you want to be unconscious in a stranger’s hands?”

Bruce knew that there was no use: he had to find another way to do his work with him around. So his face filled with fear on the hint and stopped writhing, clutching his Cosmos. However his eyes fell regretting to his chair as he was lifted – it was his greatest chance in mobility and independence. The archer taking this in pressed his lips.

“I’m here to help not hurt you. Relax” his hoarse voice became soothing and in a swift motion they were running into a blur to the building’s inside.
Joker staring at the bar gestured to his henchmen who armed their firearms ready to shoot the crowd; the heroes hurried to put their bodies between the guns and the people but it was clear that if those firearms shot the heroes wouldn’t be the only casualties.

The jester indifferent hoped on a stool before the bar and slumped on the shining surface.

“I’m not here to kiiiil anyone” he uttered in a sweet, melancholic way gazing at the plethora of bottles behind the petrified barista. “Of course, it could juuuuust happen – because of…mmm…how scientists put it? Chaaaaaos Theory…”

Tony rolled his eyes and snorted: this loony speaking about science? How shitty that night could get?

“Tony, ol’ pal” Joker giggled. “Stop roooooling your eyes! Well, back to the gist: I’m a poor artist with need of funding for his dream project…sooo, all in all: give wallets, jewelry, Rolex to my fine gentlemen before chaos erupts…” his voice sounded tired.

“What do you want, Joker?!?” Superman demanded infuriated by his irritating state to stand and just witness thugs robbing people as, in less than minute, small piles of valuable items formed.

Joker rolled his eyes to the barista shaking his head.

“He’s as dumb as his suit, huh?” he waved his gun gesturing to the young man to approach and put the hand holding the gun on his shoulder causing the barista’s trembling. “Listen, dude…I’m a cinnamon addict” he told him in trusting way and the barista widened his eyes: it was the first time he heard something like this. “Aaaaaaand I’m in withdrawal” he touched the gunpoint to the man’s temple. “Do something, wiiiill ya?” he pleaded.

The barista nodded panicked and rushed in his bottles to make a proper beverage with cinnamon, his trembling hands made the bottles rattle.

Tony yanked his head towards Joker.

“Let the man alone, clown!”

Joker yawned.

“With you in a moment, Iron-y…Mmm…Let’s see what you did there…” he took the glass that trembled in the barista’s hand and everyone in the space watched breathless. “Cheeeeeeers!” and made to drink but stopped abruptly, his eyes glaring at the man above the glass. “I hope it’s not poisoned…Nah! You’re a good kid!”

He gulped the liquid making loud sounds and the crowd followed every gulp.

“Mmm…” he licked his lips putting the glass on the bar. “Noooot bad…” he stashed his gun in his inner secret pocket and the barista along with the guests sighed in relief.

Suddenly, a flash of movement and people understood what happened only when the barista jerked violently backwards and crushed at the wall behind him. A bare blade slightly protruded from the center of his chest that fast drenched in blood.

“WHERE’S MY CINNAMON?!” Joker yelled to the barista’s crystallized, bulged, dead eyes.

The heroes in the room moved as one against the clown and every firearm turned on them, arming to shoot. The guests yelled, their shock from the barista’s death fuelling their new horror.
But Joker turned to them calm.

“Easy, children… I want myyyyy stars alive for the show.”

“Where’s Rogers?” Natasha mumbled to Thor’s ear.

Steve held Selina in his arms having just experienced his second climax; their hearts were beating one upon the other, relaxing slowly, their eyes locked in ecstasy.

“Oh, Captain, my Captain…” Selina exclaimed and Steve laughed.

But then the echo of frightened cries reached them and for the first time the lack of music hit them hard.

“That definitely wasn’t Tony’s tricks…” Steve said determined and carefully put Selina down on her feet.

“Bruce…” she gasped worried and fixed her dress gathering at the same time her dispersed clothes.

Steve who was dressing too looked her in the eye.

“Tony won’t let anything bad happen to him!”

Selina hastily gathered her messy hair in a ponytail and lolled her head.

“When he obviously wasn’t able to stop someone scare his guests?!”

Steve nodded.

“This is impossible…” he muttered. “In that hall, are so many heroes: why they don’t do anything?”

Selina putting her feet in her stilettoes marched determined to the door.

“I don’t know but I’m gonna find out!”

She unlocked the door and made to open but frowned finding it to be locked. Steve who stood by her grabbed the handle and shook it to no avail.

“Someone locked us…” Selina mumbled and made to extract a special pin she had in her hair for breaking locks but Steve touched her shoulder to get her away.

Which Selina accepted gladly because she didn’t want him to realize her special skills.

“I don’t need my armor for that…” he said and with one kick the door collapsed in its hinges.

“I just noticed…” Selina purred and winked.

Steve smiled getting out helping Selina pass the debris.

“The restrooms’ doors are not as durable as the other doors in the Tower; that explains why the security staff isn’t already storming the floor to stop whatever is happening; if they are locked as we were, they can’t get out.”

“I must find Bruce” she said already gazing at the frame leading to the balcony. The corridor wrapped the ball room but the frame leading to the balcony was in the opposite direction.
Steve looked her in the eyes and nodded.

“I’ll go inside to help” he already turned but Selina held him.

“The hall’s entrance not being guarded means it’s a trap. And whatever made your pals unable to confront the menace will hit you as well. Better come with me, find Bruce and think.”

Steve took one of the built-in tablets to call anyone in the building but it was of no use.

“It’s dead” he said to Selina.

She nodded.

“Expected: they must have caused an electronic blackout to the entire Tower. Let’s go find Bruce. I hope he stayed at the balcony.”

She was sure for her friend’s extraordinary skills but still he was in a wheelchair and definitely she didn’t want him using his mental power on his body AGAIN.

“We don’t have any contact with the Tower, Paul – it seems that everything is shut down including the phones of the guests and the building is locked in and out. We see Special Forces rushing here but what they can do when the Avengers, Superman and Wonder Woman can’t do anything?”

The Afro-American journalist from the entrance of the mammoth Tower was relating to the newscaster while the cameraman showed the vans with Special Forces and the local police flooding the road pulling away the reporters to a safe perimeter. Bystanders added to the frantic crowd of reporters gaping curious at the building.

Thomas Elliot sat on his elegant, corner couch, dressed in his silken, expensive robe; he took the glass of whiskey Kelly gave him and grabbed her waist to settle her in his lap.

“Is this…” she asked pointing at the TV set.

“Yes, babe: the Avengers’ Tower is breached” his eyes shone gleeful but he didn’t want to reveal his joy to her.

“We have some satellite pictures from the intruders…” the newscaster said a bit baffled by the depicted people. “And this must be their leader...According to the FBI…”

A picture of Joker under much snow was on the screen and Thomas laughed.

“This guy is sick, huh, babe?” and very interesting in his obsession with Brucie… Searching information about Bruce, he learnt everything known about Joker. “And I was pissed I wasn’t invited…” he snorted and sucked Kelly’s shoulder causing a giggle. “Lucky me, right, babe? I just hope that poor Bruce is alright.”

Kelly looked curious on a thick parcel which seemed to enclose a CD or DVD.

“What’s that, Tommy?”

He looked at the parcel and a real evil smile carved his beautiful face.

“Something I was waiting for a long time!”
The archer kicked the door and miraculously opened. It was a bedroom – one of the guestrooms, Bruce knew from the tour Tony has given him on the previous days. It seems that whoever locked up the building didn’t care about the guestrooms.

The man put Bruce on the bed but he immediately grabbed the armrests of the nearest chair and pushed his body to slip there. The stranger regarded him.

“You really hate beds, huh?”

Bruce didn’t answer and grabbed his Cosmos off the mattress.

“I had the impression that every phone in the building is dead?”

“Not this one – this is new…” he mumbled an answer and when a blip was heard he turned it in private calling and brought it to his ear.

“Master Bruce, you were right: there is a strange toxin in the air that probably prohibits Master Anthony and the rest of the heroes use their powers.”

“Of course…” that explained why someone saved Crane from the Police. “Can you dissolve it?”

Bruce caught the archer’s intrigued stare but he couldn’t stop now.

“I think I can, sir: the ventilation system has a backup, auxiliary control system that the saboteur didn’t know.”

“Do it, Jarvis.”

He met the man’s gaze.

“It’s business. You won’t go back to help?” that way he’d be alone and his hands would be free.

The archer shook his head.

“That room is fool with fucking superheroes – they’ll manage. And frankly I don’t care much.”

“But there are civilians, too…”

The man looked at him deeply in the eyes.

“I did what I wanted to do – that’s all!”

Bruce frowned.

“Me? But you don’t know me more than anyone in that room.”

“Some people don’t need to know each other…”

He turned his back ready to open the door.

“I’ll be outside guarding the door” he said gruffly realizing Bruce’s need to be alone.

“Thank you, Arrow…” he was glad that he decided to give him privacy.

The man turned to him, his mysterious eyes sparkling interested.
"How did you call me?"

"Robin Hood is copyrighted" Bruce grinned.

The stranger smiled and nodded.

"I like it – I’ll keep it."

As the door closed behind him Bruce dialed Alfred’s number; his poor butler must be distressed.

"Alfred, I’m alright. Safe. Don’t worry. Yes, the others seem to be fine, too. We’ll clear this mess up. I must hang up now."

Selina and Steve saw shocked Bruce’s wheelchair empty at the balcony. A pond of blood was in the curve and some red footsteps leading away from the balcony.

Selina kneeled before the chair and caressed the back and the armrests, her eyes ready to water. But Steve squeezed her shoulder soothingly.

“I’m sure he is alright…Bruce is a fighter; he came out of this. Look…”

He gestured to a second pair of footsteps almost covered from the fresh snow; it was different than the bloody one and headed to the inside of the building. From the snowflakes that almost hid the footprints, they had formed before the bleeding man left.

Selina frowned and followed with Steve the traces. The footprints stopped at the frame opening to the corridor and thankfully not the one to the main hall.

“Someone took him?”

Steve nodded.

“And I’m positive that he wasn’t a bad guy or else he’d have taken him inside the hall.”

Selina shook her head.

“Unfortunately, not only one bad guy wants to get Bruce…” Steve pressed his lips. “Let’s find him…”

Steve hesitated casting an eager stare to the main hall. But Selina gripped his upper arm.

“If you go inside now, you’ll be unable to help like your teammates – we must wait and find Bruce.”

“What do you mean?” Tony asked the clown, his patience running thin with each moment.

Joker jumped from his stool and walked towards the heroes, forming a square with his fingers and eyeing Tony through it like a director. People flinched at his approach.

"Ugh! I aaaaaalways wanted to direct my ooooown superhero movie…’’

The heroes frowned staring at the jester.

“You’re crazy!” Thor roared but his lost contact with Mjölnir was bothering him as Hell.
Joker lolled his head to him smiling and batting his eyelashes.

“We artists are crazy, blond hunk” he uttered dramatic and frowned. “Where’s Captain…how was it? I caaaaaan’t remember thaaat country…Oh, yeah! America” he shrugged disappointed and huffed. “Never mind, we’ll do this without him – we can’t recast him at this stage.”

He continued scanning the place through the square his fingers formed.

“Mmm…I wouldn’t mind a little black in the equation – no offend for your splendid black dress, dear” he said to Natasha. “But a rodent would be a gooood addition: I feel that Bats brings cash…” suddenly, he caught Fury’s eye that flashed from wrath “Right, Mr. Fury?”

He spread his arms to the crowd and closed his eyes.

“Aaaaand I have my audience ready for the movie of the decade!” he casted a sideways narrowed glance to the frozen members of the band. “Nooooo soundtrack? Naaaah!”

Superman felt his body charging and his powers returning swiftly; he could tell that the same was happening to the others as well because they were already casting daggers to Joker ready to tear him apart. Tony’s armor already covering his body.

The goons instead of shooting at the heroes turned their firearms at the band after their boss’ gesture.

“I waaaant a draaaaamaatic, overwhelming score” he hissed at the band and they nodded fearful. “Beeeenny Hill Show!”

The infamous music filled the space and Joker giggled crazily observing with his acid, frantic eyes the heroes. Then he raised his hand dead serious.

“Shut up, people! Aaaaaaand…ACTION!” his raised palm fell on his opened palm like a clapboard.

Superman frowned seeing Thor with his face distorted in wrath attacking Diana who was taking a defense-attack stance and the Kryptonian clenched his fists and jaw tackling the Asgardian. Thor was enraged that an ice giant dared to thwart his attack on Adva who was there smirking at him ready to launch her attack.

Meanwhile, Tony saw in the spot Joker stood, Peps. How couldn’t he notice her before? And Iron Mongul was storming at her ready to hit taking his revenge for Tony defeating him over the ocean. His body fully covered in Iron Man’s armor, he stormed at the giant who in fact was Natasha at first attacking a horribly misfigured Joker but then he became Snapdragon who was surging against her; Natasha gritted her teeth, tore her dress to get freedom of movement and changed her body’s stance to face him.

Diana was helping Superman confront Thor.

The guests watched flabbergasted the heroes blowing each other and then as the blows and beams began launching and the heroes’ features transformed into grotesque monsters terrified screams vibrated the vast hall and people ran around looking for cover, punching other people in their path because everyone was a monster from their worst nightmares.

Pepper though frightened from what she was seeing took cover behind a fallen bench.

Joker laughed delighted.

“My masterpiece! Noooo CGI, no special effects: MAYHEM PRODUCTIONS PRESENT:
DESPERATE SUPERHEROES – THE FACE OFF” he scratched his green, freshly dyed locks “or maybe FUUUUUUCK OFF – I wiiiiish my audience could help meee decide” he sighed watching the chaos. “Anyway, I was sure that my flick would make crowds delirious – AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAA! Aaaaand I loooove the soundtrack – sooooo fit!”

He turned to his goons who giggling watched the spectacle of superheroes battling each other and people punching, kicking and smashing bottles and glasses.

“Children! Grab the stuff aaaaand go: we have my cinnamon to find” he lollled his face to the side watching touched his creation – he took a tear that wasn’t there and threw it away. “The cameras will record everything for the next generations…OH! I’m so proud!”

He kicked one goon who was passing in front of him and then stopped in his heels seeing one of his men shuffling his feet towards him, stained with blood, an arrow piercing his shoulder. Joker cocked his eyebrows.

“B…boss, Wayne was…at the balcony…I…was bringin’ him when a dude shot me…He took Wayne…” he panted.

Joker cursed and slapped the goon to the floor.

“Why you didn’t come earlier?!”

“I was dizzy, boss…” he whined “and I went through the other door and lost my way” Joker rolled his eyes impatient “and I passed out at some point…”

“Moron! They’re still in the building – it was locked till now. I’ll find them. Chaaaaarge!” he yelled at his henchmen who turned their heads dumbfounded.

“Jarvis, any progress in dissolving the toxin?” Bruce asked the AI.

“I was ready, sir, but there’s no need for that now…”

Bruce frowned but he heard something behind the door.

“Jarvis, wait…” he couldn’t do much than wait and if it was some of Joker’s men, knocking him out when he’d come to grab him. But probably it was just the Arrow.

When the door opened hesitantly at first Bruce’s eyes widened from pleasant surprise. It took only seconds for Selina to envelop him in a tight embrace kissing his cheeks and tousling his hair.

“Thank Goodness! You scared me, sweetie!”

Bruce patted her upper arms.

“Are you okay, Sel? I thought you’re caught in there…” but then he regarded Steve and understood.

Selina lolled her head to the side and cleared her throat.

“We wanted to talk in private…and left the room…”

Bruce noticed Steve’s blushing but the hero immediately noticed the tablet in Bruce’s hands and sat at the bed frowning at the gadget.
“I thought that every gadget in the Tower was dead?”

“It’s new tech developed from Wayne Enterprises.”

“What are you doing?” Captain asked and Bruce knew that he didn’t have the luxury of lying.

“I’m in contact with Jarvis” he replied and Steve’s eyes sparkled hopefully. “Tell me, Jarvis” he put the AI on speaker.

“The toxin that was previously in the air is dissolved but it’s not my doing” Bruce frowned and gestured to Steve not interrupt with asking. “The Tower is finally unlocked, sir; but inside the hall most insane things happen: Iron Man fights with Black Widow, Superman and Wonder Woman with Thor. People are running around frantic, screaming and cringing from fear and hitting each other.”

Bruce closed his eyes concentrating his thoughts.

“How the Tower got unlocked?”

“I can’t answer that, sir; it seems that the same thing that locked the systems and the doors, simply unlocked them as well.”

And the heroes faced each other instead of chasing Joker and his thugs; and the guests indicated being in delirium. This pattern reminded Bruce something.

“Jarvis, I send you a chemical compound and I want you to check if this is in the hall’s air.”

He brushed the indication on the screen sending the synthesis for Crane’s fear toxin that Fox had analyzed when the doctor used it against Bruce.

“It’d be easier this time, sir; since I can get access to every system in the Tower.”

Steve was staring at Bruce intrigued but the later even though was aware of that, couldn’t address that now.

“The chemical synthesis you sent me, Master Bruce, is at large portions in the hall and includes one more element” Bruce nodded knowing already “Kryptonite.”

Bruce bit his lower lip.

“That’s why they dissolved the first toxin letting the heroes use their skills and powers and that explains why they unlocked the elevators and every door.”

Steve and Selina frowned.

“They want a bloodbath” Bruce told them but didn’t explain, hasty to address Jarvis. “Jarvis, I want you to disable IronMan’s weapons and strengthen his defense” he hoped to thwart his friend from hurting innocents.

“I can do that, sir; but Thor’s hammer can’t be controlled” the AI replied understanding his intention.

“I know; let’s hope Superman and the Princess can take the force…” his guts clenched from agony for Clark. “Jarvis, I have the synthesis for the antidote – and I know that Tony has it stashed in the Tower’s ventilation system along with his selection of antidotes” he stopped to gain his breath. “Find it and disperse it to the hall.”
“I’ll do that, sir. The Tower’s security staff is heading there from the elevators and the Special Forces just entered the building; also, I detect a police helicopter approaching. With heavy artillery.”

Bruce looked at Selina and Steve.

“The bloodbath: they unlocked the building and spread the fear toxin to drive the guests and the heroes mad into fighting each other. When the security and the Special Forces arrive, the heroes will see them as nightmarish monsters and will strike them hard – they will answer the fire and the guests will be in the middle.”

Steve was appalled from all these but also puzzled.

“How do you know all these, Bruce?”

Selina locked eyes with Bruce and he huffed.

“This toxin is the creation of an insane doctor called Crane; I know what his toxin does because he used it on me.”

Steve stood.

“I’ll go there and try to stop them from killing each other till the antidote gets administered.”

“Master Bruce, Joker and his gang left the reception hall and wander the building…”

“They’re looking for you” Selina spat.

“Jarvis, focus on the toxin.”

Steve looked indecisive.

“I can’t let you alone now that Joker is coming for you…”

“I’ll be with him” Selina stood so confident that Steve was impressed and perplexed.

“Go, Captain” Bruce urged him. “These people need you more.”

Steve held Bruce’s upper arms.

“I already knew that you’re a hero and tonight you confirmed it.”

Bruce grinned shyly.

“Jarvis is the hero…”

Steve laughed and nodded totally unconvinced and stormed out of the room in his super human speed.

Selina sat again at the mattress.

“Who brought you here, Bruce? Don’t tell me you used…” her disapproval was clear.

Bruce on his screen watched the footage from different parts of the building having hacked the central system.

“You didn’t see him? He was standing outside the door.”
Selina shook her head.

“Nobody was there.”

Bruce nodded: of course, the Arrow left as soon as he heard them coming.

“It was an archer dressed like Robin Hood” he shrugged at Selina’s puzzled eyes. “At least, vigilantism doesn’t lack variety and imagination.”

He brushed some spots in his Cosmos’ screen.

“What did you do?”

“I stopped the elevators caring the Special Forces and the security people – it won’t last much given that the central control is unlocked but it should give Steve some time to get there and Jarvis to free the antidote.”

“Can you locate Joker?”

Bruce pressed his lips and locked eyes with her.

“I don’t have the luxury to care about him right now – besides the building is huge; he won’t find us easily.”

Leslie’s voice was panting on the phone and Alfred couldn’t blame her.

CNN was broadcasting that blasts sounded from the building and sparkles were seen.

“He called me, Leslie, he is fine; calm down…And I’m sure Master Anthony knows how to protect himself. I’ll call you when they get back.”

He petted Hero who looked at him and meowed.

“You’re certain as well that they will be alright, huh?”

Superman felt for the first time in his life exhausting of fighting: dodging that Asgardian’s blasts sent from his hammer was a constant challenge and actually some of them burnt him. But he was happy that his heat vision had managed to hit the God while Diana exchanged punches and kicks with him. Her beautiful face was scratched and bleeding but Thor wasn’t better. Suddenly, Superman’s heart stopped as his lungs: Thor shoved his blazing hammer and the blow at Diana’s head was so hard that the Amazon flew through the hall and slumped at the wall.

Superman stood there paralyzed; dead, his eyes melting in hot tears. The entire world got dark and he was floating in the void: Diana was dead! He ground his teeth and launched against the Asgardian deciding to kill him or get killed.

Suddenly, his mind began clearing and in front of his eyes Thor’s grotesque face became the known mild, kind face. The baby blue eyes of the god looked puzzled at Superman who had gripped his torso lethally. His Mjölnir vibrated angry and vibrant in his grasp but he wouldn’t hit Superman.

“Superman?”
“You killed Diana…”

Tony saw suddenly Iron Mongul transforming into Natasha. Whose dress was ragged and some gushes and burns ran the visible parts of her body and face. Her eyes were two menacing slits as her legs stretched like catapults hit him square on the chest throwing him down.

She stormed at his fallen form with her fingers ready to snatch the arc reactor from his chest but Natasha stopped abruptly as Tony was ready to kick her away.

“What are we doing?” the Russian asked.

“Foreplay?” Tony chirped.

Fury ran there; he was dizzy and still confused but due to his training was able to get over the effect sooner than the other guests.

“Joker did something to us: are you alright?”

Superman felt a strong hand in his upper arm. He turned.

“I’m here, Kal El” her smile was radiant and Clark’s heart began beating again.

Her dress had gashes as her arms and cheeks but she was fine. His relief was so grand that he couldn’t stop himself from hugging her.

Bruce had just managed to get image from the main reception hall and his eyes were narrowed into slits on the mayhem – Jarvis had informed him that there was also a man dead.

Selina watched over his shoulder.

But then Bruce’s finger stayed numb over the screen as he got image from the Superheroes’ fights. He heard Superman accusing Thor of having killed Diana: so that was his greatest fear? And then she touched Superman and he hugged her desperate and relieved.

Selina bit her bottom lip and slipped her hands to hug her friend’s upper arms. Her eyes were sad when met with Bruce’s but he grinned shaking his head.

“Let’s see elsewhere…” he changed into another camera’s image and Selina knew that Bruce really suffered.

Fury turned at the big elevators right in front of the hall’s main entrance. He frowned at the indicators showing that the lift was there.

“The attackers came back to finish the job” he said to the heroes. “Protect the civilians.”

The heroes marched to the entrance, the guests just overcoming the toxin’s effect were trying to make head or tail from the wreckage around them and the bruises they had.

Lois dizzy and battered shuffled to a better spot readying her smartphone to shot the scene – Jimmy was already getting pictures.

“I have some missiles with their names on” Tony spat really pissed. “No” he frowned “I don’t have
any missiles…” he said as realized that his artillery was blocked.

“Stay behind, kid…” Natasha snorted at him.

The elevator doors began opening and Thor raised his hammer as Superman, Diana and Natasha stormed at them. The men from the elevators seeing attackers aimed at them but a tornado tackled them throwing their firearms away.

“Stop!” Steve yelled both to security men and teammates.

Everyone stopped and Superman helped the security men stand.

“There’s a helicopter coming and there are Special Forces in the Tower heading here – so we must be ready to neutralize them because they might be ready to fire…” Steve snapped.

The distinct sound of a helicopter filled the space and Tony ran there; he could stop the helicopter if he gained control over his hacking systems.

“Jarvis! What the Hell are you doing blocking my systems?!”

“Following Master Bruce’s orders” the AI replied nonchalant.

The helicopter were a breath away from the smashed windows and Ironman stood there ready to tackle them even without missiles but the helicopter turned around and left.

“Where’s Bruce, Jarvis?” Tony asked as Pepper hugged him. “Nice hair, dear” he teased her because her perfectly groomed locks were like having survived a hurricane.

But before receiving an answer from Jarvis he heard Superman informing the others that the coming Special Forces had their guns down – someone had contacted them about the situation being in control.

Joker stormed the floor with the guestrooms ahead of his goons; some of them were carrying sacks with their loot.

“The only place where someone could take Brucie were the guestrooms that were unlocked… Hoooooney, I’m hooooome!” he lolled his head and licked his lips.

“No, you’re not!”

A sweesh sound pierced the spacious corridor and Joker was carried away by a force and stabbed to the wall.

“Wow!” Joker exclaimed and along with his flabbergasted goons saw that the force was indeed a thick arrow. “Phiew!” Joker said relieved as the arrow pierced only his jacket on the shoulder.

Simultaneously, several arrows pinned his goons like dolls to the corridor walls.

A man marched towards them fixing his bow on his shoulder.

“Rooobin Hooooood?” Joker asked thrilled. “Huhu! I like it!”

“It’s ARROW” the man hissed at Joker’s face.
Joker giggled to the man and looked upwards.

“Um…Houston? We got a prooooo—ble--mo…” he said in a singsong voice and he along with his men vanished.

Loki moved his butt to make himself more comfortable on the cloud he sat cross-legged in the place where his golden throne usually stood. Opposite him the wreckage of the Tower’s ball room played live on thin air till the god bored switched off with a snap of his fingers.

He regarded almost indifferently Joker and his gang that just landed on his palace.

Joker noticed the several huge containers of popcorn thrown around empty.

“So what’s out Rotten Tomatoes’ score?”

“It was fine I guess” he pouted “I’ll give you 78%.”

Joker lolled his head.

“Everyone’s a critic…”

“The end was underwhelming…”

The clown raised an eyebrow.

“I know who ruined my show – he does that!” he sneered.

Loki raised an eyebrow.

“I’m content with what you achieved even if it’s the half from what we wanted…”

Joker clenched his fist.

“I didn’t get Brucie…”

“No, you didn’t!” he huffed. “And that would have led to a great chaotic sequel.”

Loki unfolded lazily his legs and stood from his cloud; he strut to the clown and patted his shoulder laughing.

“Next time, mate…”

Tony had deactivated his armor and ran to the balcony where Superman said that last saw Bruce, leaving Pepper and Fury handle the mess. He froze seeing Bruce’s chair empty covered by thick snow though he knew from Jarvis that his friend was safe.

“Damn!”

“He must be fine” Superman said having followed puzzled about where Bruce was.

After all these Clark couldn’t find the concentration to locate the man’s vitals and Diana’s hand on his shoulder, causing warmth and goose bumps to his body, wasn’t of any help.
Tony’s face was distorted from anger when turned to him.

“What do you know?!” his anger from what witnessed Superman doing with the Amazon returned. “You filthy…”

But Thor was there patting his shoulder.

“Calm down, Tony. Bruce is tough.”

Tony nodded; Jarvis had told him that Bruce gave him orders so the little guy was definitely alive and kicking but his empty chair gave him chills: maybe he was hurt and the AI didn’t know?

“Mr. Wayne knows how to preserve his hide” Diana said slyly her eyes shining gleefully and Tony casted her a lethal glare before focusing on Superman who was also annoyed by the billionaire’s stance.

“Put a gag on her filthy mouth!” Tony spat to Superman.

“I care for Bruce as much as you!” Clark yelled and thankfully the outsiders were in the hall answering police’s questions.

Tony marched to him gritting his teeth.

“Where is he then?”

“Here!”

They both turned to the curve of the balcony. Steve Rogers was carrying Bruce in his arms, Selina beside them. Superman felt a rush of jealousy seeing Bruce in someone else’s arms.

But Tony was beaming; he ran to his friend and took him from Steve’s arms managing in his joy to throw both of them on the floor, keeping Bruce safe on his body.

“Are you comfortable, little guy?” he asked cocking an eyebrow.

“No offence but I prefer Captain’s arms…”

Tony laughed happily and Selina brought the chair having cleaned it from the snow – thankfully the material was water proof.

Thor took Bruce carefully off of Tony and settled him in the chair muffling him in his cape because the snow was still falling pretty thick.

Diana casted a sideways glance to Clark’s almost red eyes – she cocked an eyebrow and slipped her hand in his trying to calm him.

“Mr. Wayne, I was looking for you.”

A man around fifties approached them Oliver Queen following him to answer his questions – Queen was ragged, disheveled and battered as every other guest.

“Mr. Wayne, I’m glad you were far from this mess…” Queen exclaimed to Bruce.

“NCPD, Lieutenant Johnson. I’d like to have your testimony, Mr. Wayne” the man that came with Queen showed them his badge.
But Tony intervened.

“Lieutenant, my friend is under heavy medication and all these events exhausted him. He really needs some rest so if you would agree to get the testimony tomorrow morning, I’d be obliged to you.”

Everyone at the balcony had the same shocked expression for his diplomatic tone and Tony scowled at them. The Lieutenant nodded looking at Bruce.

“I understand…Tomorrow, Mr. Wayne” he grinned.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

The New Yorker left and Tony grabbed the handles of Bruce’s chair.

“I’ll drive you to the penthouse.”

“No, Tony, you have a lot of things to do here – and you can’t let everything on Peps: she had a really rough night. And you’re the director.”

“I won’t leave you alone when Joker is free.”

“The car you gave me is a fortress…”

Tony shook his head.

“So this Tower…” his disappointment was evident and Bruce squeezed his hand.

“It wasn’t your fault” he smiled though a man had died and that was a heavy burden for everyone.

“I’ll go with Mr. Wayne” Superman said marching to the young man who met his eyes with a cold stare. “I’ll fly him there because his car is known and could be watched.”

“Thank you, Superman” Bruce replied emotionless. “But there’s no need for that.”

Superman stood still frowning.

“I’m coming with you, sweetie” Selina said and took him away. “And I’m driving…”

As soon as they arrived at the penthouse, Alfred hurried to open the door: relief beaming in his tired face.

“Thank Goodness! You’re both alright! Master Anthony? Miss Potts? Master Kent?”

Hero ran and climbed to Bruce’s lap rubbing to him and purring. Bruce petted him along with Selina.

“They are safe and sound, Alfred; Tony and Peps will come later.”

“What happened, sir?”

“I’ll tell you everything tomorrow because now I need a hot shower and some sleep” Bruce muttered patting Alfred’s forearm.

The Englishman could see the exhaustion in his eyes but he felt that it wasn’t only from the tension of the night. Selina nodded to him confirming.
As Bruce settled on the mattress, his back ached from the night’s fatigue. He had just drunk a glass of warm milk with a spoonful of honey – Alfred brought him – and his eyelids were really heavy.

Hero climbed swiftly on the bed and sprawled on his chest, purring smoothly. Bruce caressed him affectionately.

He thought about Crane and Joker working together under the high protection of someone powerful but as his conscious mind was rapidly falling to deep sleep one thought prevailed over everything: Clark didn’t care anymore to be the fastest to come for him…

Chapter End Notes

Well, watching Captain America: Civil War, during the battle in the airport I felt a bit like Joker laughing at the oddity of these heroes fighting each other. So I thought to give Joker the chance to direct such a scene.

I hope you liked the chapter.
“How am I always ending up in your arms?” Bruce chuckled staring at Clark’s eyes; Superman’s face was smoked, dirty and bruised but Bruce found it gorgeous.

“How am I always ending up in your arms?” Bruce chuckled staring at Clark’s eyes; Superman’s face was smoked, dirty and bruised but Bruce found it gorgeous.

“Because I’m the fastest” he frowned “are you complaining?”

Bruce drew a deep breath.

“Of course not – I missed you…”

Clark closed his eyes and sighed.

“You have no idea…” he whispered.

Superman couldn’t be the fastest this time even if he wanted to…

And I wouldn’t want him to abandon innocent people in danger just to come and cuddle me…I was safe, far from imminent danger… People must still be Superman’s priority not his lover…

“You killed Diana…” a crestfallen but angry at the same time Superman told through gritted teeth to Thor, holding the god in a bone crushing grip.

And then at the sight of the Amazon, his face gained again its color and beamed from utter relief and happiness.

His greatest fear IS Diana getting killed…that’s what he experienced under Crane’s toxin…

Exactly…It was the toxin…This – the worst fear thing - doesn’t necessary apply to normal conditions…

I know the toxin…I experienced it twice…

Diana’s locks shone oddly like they were dyed; and her eyes had something unnatural…

The four days Clark was away from her he was normal; and then as soon as she appeared again, Clark slipped…

Superman and Diana were dancing passionately under the melody of that song; their eyes locked, their bodies united – unaware of the rest of the world… they were floating over a black sea that reflected the silver shine of the moon…

And he watched fixed in his chair; at a balcony; and his throat felt like burning…

A young man dressed with black trousers, black vest, white shirt and black bow-tie lay sprawled on the shining floor under the glass shelves packed with all short of booze; his hazelnut eyes were bulged but didn’t move; he was looking up to nothing or better to death – a bare blade slightly protruded from his chest: the blood had dried absorbed in the white fabric… He must have been cheering when he got the job of the barista in the biggest event of the year – Tony Stark was generous after all…

“You lead lined the Tower, right?” Superman’s voice sounded really pissed not too far and to pass the sound proof walls of the penthouse meant that he was shouting – or maybe it was just his trained hearing.
“Of course!” Tony retorted equally pissed and heavy with sarcasm. “It ought to be protected even against Superman: that building is the safest in the world!”

Now this couldn’t be possibly heard but Bruce could picture Clark cocking his eyebrows snidely.

“I just experienced that tonight!”

A palm slapped hard the dark blue granite surface of the kitchen’s island and Bruce raised slowly himself in a sitting position. Hero a ball on his chest opened his eyes puzzled and regarded him even though the room was completely dark.

“Sleep, buddy…” he whispered and took the kitten off of him and laid it on the mattress.

He didn’t clap for the secret lighting to illuminate the corners of the vast bedroom, he just casted a glance at the hologram pyramid shaped clock on the nightstand: 2:16 in the morning.

The wheelchair Superman made him came to the king sized bed obeying his wish and he slipped in it; he wore his robe because Alfred was adamant about that: being warm from sleep could make the slightest difference in environmental temperature get him down with the flu.

“It wasn’t the lead that thwarted you from running to Bruce!” Tony spat at Clark’s tense face; he was still in his Superman attire. “Damn! You’re the fastest man in the planet! You could have swept the Tower and found Bruce but you preferred to stay glued to the Amazon’s skirt!”

Superman’s more than friendly interactions with the Princess were still in Tony’s eyes and that kept his anger red hot. Clark could see it.

“And you could have located him too with Ironman’s systems!”

“They were still restoring! But the point is that you cared only for that Amazon who insulted Bruce in every given occasion!”

Clark widened his eyes in irony.

“You make me a scene on Bruce’s behalf?!” he cackled. “Bruce during the night was constantly surrounded by drooling Avengers and I’m sure you happily would cover your friends if they wanted to make advances on Bruce.”

Tony gritted his teeth.

“They weren’t drooling! They respect Bruce for his power of character and his quality as a human being. You were the one drooling stupidly over her! You failed to realize that Bruce got isolated to that balcony because of your actions!”

“And that saved him from the Joker and then saved all of us!”

Tony sniggered and tilted his head on the side.

“You’re really insensitive, aren’t you?” he leaned forward so their intense stares collided. “You hurt him, you dolt!”

Superman raised his index finger and pointed at Tony’s chest, his face distorted in anger.

“You blame me of being indifferent to Bruce but I didn’t see you running for him when Joker made his appearance” he twitched his eyebrows challengingly. “You had better things to care about, huh?”
“You fuckin’ motherfuc…” Tony’s fist rose to punch even though Superman wouldn’t feel a thing – Clark actually watched amused with his arms crossed over his chest.

“You both did perfect to not come for me!” Bruce slithered the wheelchair into the kitchen.

They looked at him almost embarrassed; Tony ruffled his hair.

“We woke you up?” he asked regretful.

“I thought that your drugs were so strong that you couldn’t wake during the night…” Clark walked to him a bit hesitant and Bruce noticed.

“They are” he nodded “but the tension of the last hours didn’t let me muster deep sleep. You should stop speaking so loud or else Alfred will be up too – he needs his rest. And Selina as well.”

“You’re right, little guy” Tony nodded twitching his mouth. “Sorry ’bout that. I’ll make you some warm milk.”

Bruce smiled.

“Thanks, Tony, but Alfred already forced me to drink one glass – I can’t take another, really…” he stretched his eyebrows appalled and Tony chuckled forgetting his previous rage with Superman.

Superman crouched before Bruce and looked him in the eyes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come for you…”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“Is this really the only thing you feel the need to apologize for?!” he snorted.

Clark turned to him exasperated.

“I don’t take lessons from you, Stark!”

Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose feeling the beginning of a headache.

“Nobody needs to apologize for anything, okay? Both did the best staying with the guests – I was safe” his voice dropped a tone: “A man was killed a couple of hours ago…that’s what matters.”

Tony pressed his lips because he sensed his friend’s exhaustion, mostly emotional: Superman’s interactions with the Amazon definitely had an impact on him but he was stubbornly ignoring his own discomfort for what he considered more important things. And for Tony the death of that young man was also a heavy burden: he was supposed to guarantee that everyone was safe in the Tower.

The billionaire walked to his friend and squeezed his shoulder, pursing his lips.

“Weren’t for you, buddy, there’d be many more casualties and our hands would be drenched with blood of innocents” their eyes locked. “Jarvis recounted to us everything.”

“And I’m sure your Avenger buddies were raving about Bruce…” Clark snorted, towering the other two.

“Of course… they know to appreciate the people who worth it.”

“Tell your friends to keep their hands away from Bruce!” Clark snapped.
Tony widened his eyes and shrugged.

“Why? You didn’t seem to care much during the night” he pouted. “You had your company so Avengers chose their company too…”

Superman looked at Bruce.

“He put lead in the Tower so I couldn’t locate you.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and cocked an eyebrow.

“Actually is a new alloy based on lead which increases lead’s qualities.”

Clark inclined his head to Bruce raising his eyebrows.

“You see? I’d have found you sooner than Rogers.”

Bruce shook his head: that discussion was improbable.

“That doesn’t explain why you didn’t go to Bruce once during the night and why you didn’t retort when the Amazon insulted him.”

After the dramatic events of the assault, Bruce had almost forgotten the scene Clark made in the toilets reprimanding him for insulting Diana.

“Tony…” he tried to smoothen again the tension but Clark was angry.

“That’s irrelevant! I should have reached first Bruce and I should have carried him! Rogers has no job laying his hands on him.”

Bruce closed his eyes and huffed.

“Then why you didn’t run the building?”

“Please, stop this quarrel!” Bruce spat. “It’s…it’s inappropriate when a family mourns their loved one and when there are more serious things to contemplate like who was behind Joker and Crane.”

“Yes, but…” Clark insisted.

“Captain America already knew where I was so he just came and brought me to you” Bruce retorted to stop all of this.

Clark frowned and narrowed his eyes.

“So…he was with you all the time…that’s why he wasn’t in the hall during the entire thing…he had better things to do…with you!” his darker suspicion was evident in his tone and Tony snorted.

“No, actually the handsome was with me!”

Tony and Clark turned at the rectangular frame of the entrance where Selina traipsed graciously in the kitchen. She wore a white knee-length flannel nightdress with long sleeves; the neckline was just above the collarbone and from her chest to her belly Duchess, the beautiful white cat from the Aristocats smiled charmingly.

Tony looked at her widening his eyes impressed: seeing the always sexy Cat dressed so…casually just enhanced her beauty and highlighted her young age.
“I envy that old guy…What has he that is better than mine?”

Selina came very close to him and her flat slippers brought her to the same height as him.

“Do you really want me to tell you?” she breathed sensually to his face.

Bruce managed to chuckle despite his emotional turmoil and Clark smirked.

“Never mind…” Tony waved off.

Selina tilted her head to the side and cocked her eyebrows.

“I was gonna say the shield…” she chuckled. “Anyway, jealous boy” she casted an irritated glance at Superman “Steve was with me when Joker attacked and we decided to find Bruce before doing a hasty move which was the best choice because Bruce was completely in control of the situation. After everything settled down, Steve came back to us because – obviously – there was no means for Bruce to leave the guestroom we were in.”

Clark seemed relieved and caught Bruce looking at him interested; however something was lacking.

“Yes, but how Bruce got there in the first place? His wheelchair was at the balcony… You didn’t use your brain to force your body to move?” this time real wrath colored his voice.

“Buddy…” Tony tilted his head to the side, his disapproval and frustration for Bruce doing this was evident.

Bruce shook his head.

“I didn’t do that: I was heading inside the building when a goon blocked my way wanting to take me to Joker but then an arrow hit him.”

“An arrow?” three voices exclaimed at once.

“Yes, an archer dressed like Robin Hood took me from the balcony and took me to a guestroom; guestrooms were the only spaces that remained unlocked. Then he left telling me that he’d stay guarding outside the door.”

“He probably left when we reached the guestroom” Selina commented.

Tony frowned, rubbing his goatee.

“Security found arrows stuck in the walls of the corridor at the guestrooms’ floor; unfortunately, we don’t have surveillance cameras there due to privacy issues but there was no blood. And judging from the sacks with jewels there…Joker and his goons headed to the guestrooms to get you but your mysterious friend stopped them.”

Superman was annoyed that another admirer was added to last night’s army…

“He’s a seductress…” Diana had breathed in his ear as he watched Thor placing Bruce in his wheelchair, careful as if he was handling the most precious thing. She definitely had felt his jealousy for Rogers carrying Bruce – his jaw had clenched and now his eyes became almost red. “You can’t honestly blame the others when Superman himself was seduced…Wayne is a rare seductress…”

Even in his boiling state of mind Superman got the use of ‘seductress’ instead of ‘seducer’ and Diana’s sneering tone – she definitely referred to the fact that Bruce attracted mostly males. But honestly at this state he didn’t care: he was pissed with Bruce. And indeed, Diana was right on spot:
Bruce was a seductress: he carried in his body the DNA of a female demon who was an irresistible seductress, attracting men and destroying them.

“Who was that man?” Tony asked. “And how he got in the locked up building?”

“Maybe he was already in?” Selina raised an eyebrow and Bruce nodded.

“I think that this council would better take place in the morning” Alfred offered marching to Bruce’s place. “All of you need some rest – except if you want me to prepare something before you return to your beds.”

It was new seeing Alfred in his velvet mahogany robe which was embroidered with golden fine stripes.

“No, Alfred, thank you” Bruce replied.

Superman leaned on him and looked him in the eyes.

“May I carry you to your bed?” his eyes almost pleaded.

Bruce pressed his lips; his heart was still numb from what happened but he knew that Clark needed him. He nodded and wrapped his arms around his neck causing a pleased smile in Clark’s face and he heaved him with new energy.

Alfred grabbed the handles of the chair as Clark was already trotting to the bedroom.

“I’ll bring the chair” the butler said.

“Good night” Bruce bid his friends and they bid back.

Selina filled a glass with mineral water from a glass bottle over the shining sink bench and sipped. Tony tilted his head to her furrowing his brow.

“Can you tell me why this bastard is so lucky?” he asked pissed. “Not only Bruce gave him his love…”

“And not only that…” Selina commented slyly cocking her eyebrows, her comment adding more annoyance to Tony.

“But also the little guy is so forgiving with him! He was snuggling with the Amazon all night!” he shook his head. “I got yelled and slapped for less…”

“I’m sure…” Selina smirked and raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

But then she put the glass in the sink and huffed.

“I wasn’t there from the start but what I saw was enough…Superman dancing with that bitch” she had her back turned to Tony for a bit but now she twirled to look him. “However I trust, Bruce: I’m sure he knows what he’s doing – he always does: he proved it tonight.”

Tony shook his head pursing his lips; his hands crossed over his chest.

“I trust him too, Sel; but he is in love for the first time in his life” Selina lowered her eyes because she was thinking the same. “And maybe his better judgment falls under his love for that sneaky bastard” he crossed the distance between them and held her upper arms. “I feel that things will end very badly and I’m afraid for the impact this will have on Bruce…” he gnawed his bottom lip. “I wish I could
protect him…to open his eyes and make him realize that Superman doesn’t worth it.”

Selina inhaled deeply.

“Maybe is not as serious as we think …Maybe our overprotectiveness makes us see monsters surrounding Bruce.”

Tony brushed his lips with his finger skeptical; he lifted an eyebrow.

“But aren’t these monsters really there?”

Selina pressed her lips in a tight line and patted his shoulder before heading to her bedroom.

Superman opened the bedroom’s door holding Bruce only with one arm; Alfred clapped once and the room was casted under pleasant pale white light from the corners’ secret lighting.

Clark that didn’t need light to see placed Bruce gently on the mattress and Hero hurried to lick the alien’s face. Bruce petted the animal and Clark took his hand and kissed the palm.

Alfred settled the wheelchair beside the rectangular black bed from Bruce’s side and glanced at the scene feeling relieved as every time he witnessed Bruce and Clark interacting affectionately; yet he couldn’t ease the clenching in his chest.

“Would you like anything else?”

Bruce turned to his butler.

“No, Alfred; thank you.”

Clark shook his head in denial.

“I’ll take care of Bruce now…” he smiled warmly and Alfred bowed his head.

“I’m very glad to hear that, sir. Have a lovely night!”

“Good night, Alfred” Bruce told him and the British smiled to him before closing the door.

Clark put on his pajamas in less than a minute and slumped on the bed bringing his body to meet Bruce’s that was supported on his elbow. The younger man was petting Hero with his other hand and Clark took off his robe and threw it over the wheelchair’s back. He leaned and kissed Bruce’s bottom lip.

“Alone at last…” he breathed. “There were moments during the party that I felt the urge to take you to a place where we’d be just the two of us.”

Bruce pressed his lips in a tight smile: he wished he could believe that and maybe it was true till the Amazon came to the party and then Bruce was completely erased from Clark’s awareness if not for berating him for insulting ‘his Amazon friend’.

He didn’t give any reply and just nodded continuing playing with Hero who twitched his paws to catch his fingers.

Clark understood Bruce’s inhibition. Leaving the Avengers’ Tower to Stark’s penthouse he had realized that during Joker’s show, he hadn’t thought of Bruce once…And that cracked him…His only thought and care was Diana – it was as if Bruce had never existed. Even when Joker spoke about ‘his cinnamon’ clearly referring to Bruce, he wasn’t enraged – he was indifferent. Well, he
could attribute it to those toxins Joker released in the hall – Jarvis informed them that Bruce discovered that.

But he had to be honest with himself: even before Joker attacked, from the moment Diana made her appearance, he was absorbed in her presence, by her beauty – he didn’t mind her speaking like this to Bruce. He even scolded Bruce for defending himself.

But he loved Bruce: Clark knew that. He needed Bruce. So he grabbed the younger man’s upper arms and heaved him slightly to be face to face, to lock eyes and lips. Clark had no problem kiss him as passionately as ever and Bruce followed the pace though his heart beat somewhat strange, not joyfully like in the past.

“Thank you for not sharing Tony’s irrationality” Clark chirped wanting to dissolve every cloud his interaction could have created over their relationship – after all, he hadn’t done anything blamable: he just was with a friend and when the danger came and Bruce was safe, he focused on the one that was in the line of fire. “You know that there’s nothing between me and Diana: we’re just friends. And I’d have run to find you…eventually, but Rogers caught me on that and I hate it that he touched you…” he brushed Bruce’s upper arms and he grinned.

“He couldn’t carry me without touching me…” he remarked dryly.

Clark ruffled his hair laughing.

“Touché. But still I didn’t like it. First, all of the Avengers and then Thor alone and that unknown guy taking you to a guestroom and then Rogers…”

Bruce looked in Clark’s eyes: Clark definitely wasn’t aware of what he was doing – being jealous when he clearly flirted with the Princess. Either he was affected by something or he just wanted everything: keeping him and Diana. Bruce however didn’t want to believe the second option.

“You know, Bruce, although you took a shower, I can discern the smell of Rogers and Thor but no third smell.”

Bruce had noticed too during his interaction with the Arrow: his senses weren’t superhuman but Ra’s’ hard training didn’t leave smelling out.

“I noticed too; but it’s not awkward. His clothes must thwart his smell coming off, exactly like Batman’s” his voice remained impassionate but he couldn’t fight the bitterness when realization hit him hard: it was five months he didn’t done the cape and cowl.

Clark cupped his face with both hands and kissed the top of his head.

“You always are Batman – Tonight Batman saved us all even without wearing his armor.”

“You don’t give Jarvis his deserved credit” he chuckled and Hero climbed Clark’s body settling on his shoulder. “Clark, before Joker’s attack, Lucius called me.”

Clark, who was caressing Hero laughing, sobered and placed the kitten on the mattress. He understood what would make Lucius call Bruce so late.

“My tests’ results…”

Bruce nodded and seeing the beautiful crystal blue eyes in agony smiled.

“Lucius didn’t find anything wrong: there’s nothing organic.”
“That’s great!” he exclaimed and planted a deep kiss on Bruce’s lips but then he abruptly became grim. “Then my behavior is…” he pressed his lips – not that he felt bad about his behavior yet Bruce’s feelings got hurt sometimes “normal?”

Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“Lucius said that still there could be an external factor that affects your behavior.”

Clark frowned.

“Like that substance they applied to your body?”

Bruce lifted his eyebrows.

“Well, that is excluded” he inhaled deeply because he knew that what he was to say would cause some turmoil. “Clark” he looked him deep in the eyes “you must stop seeing the Princess – being around her.”

Those beloved eyes bulged in puzzlement and irritation. Clark bolted and sat on the mattress.

“And I thought that you didn’t share Stark’s bullshits!” he huffed frustrated. “Of course…” he cocked his eyebrows “you’re slier than Stark: Ra’s Al Ghul taught you how to manipulate people into doing what you want.”

Even if his words stung, Clark not looking at him was worse. He slithered on the mattress and raised his body in sitting position to be next to him.

“You didn’t start making a scene pretending the cool and understanding only to present your demand as logical and not jealousy evoked!”

Bruce touched his shoulder.

“I wouldn’t have asked you that if I didn’t have my reasons” he knew that there was no point in telling ‘you can’t believe this’ because Clark definitely believed it.

Clark shook his head nervously.

“Of course you have your reasons: you hate Diana and you’re green with jealous because I was with her at the party: you want everything don’t you, Bruce?” his eyes were ablaze when he casted them on Bruce’s.

Bruce frowned.

“You want me alone but also you want your superhero admirers drooling around you! Diana ruined your plans because she just kept my attention away from that torture you wanted to put me through!”

Hero began meowing distressed and Bruce caressed his back to calm him but his own heart was beating fast.

“I was only talking to them.”

But Clark wasn’t listening; he grabbed Bruce’s upper arms and shook him his eyes stabbing the younger man’s motionless eyes.

“I asked you once to fire your physiotherapist and you didn’t do it and now you have the nerve to demand from me to dump my friend?”
Bruce was glad his tone remained low because he didn’t want Alfred or Tony or Selina intervening to this.

“Matt is engaged, you saw his fiancé tonight…”

“This doesn’t mean anything…” he said harshly. “Many engaged or married men cheat their mates.”

Hero hissed angrily feeling the animosity and Bruce hushed him.

“I think we covered this already” Bruce told Clark calmly. “You know that I don’t have anything with him and I asked you to keep your distance from her because you asked me once to help you get over what is happening to you – to not give up on you. Remember?”

Clark loosened his grip.

“I do; but asking that means that you don’t trust me.”

Bruce met his stare.

“Do you trust yourself?” Clark seemed thoughtful and Bruce blinked. “I don’t ask you that because I want to keep you for myself” some of his sadness flowed in his voice and Clark looked at him touched. “Believe me if she was Lois or anyone else I’d have finished this already and let you enjoy it…”

Clark’s mouth stayed agape; his eyes widened in shock and sympathy. He shook his head and made to hug Bruce but he raised his hands and didn’t let him.

“Bruce, I don’t…”

But the younger man shook once his head in denial.

“I know you’re attracted to that woman but there are things that make me suspect that she is not who she says” he avoided speaking about their relationship or his feelings because that was the least: Clark’s wellbeing was the important.

Clark noticed that and realized that it must hurt Bruce. But Diana not being who she said was crazy.

“What things?” he brushed Hero’s belly.

“Her hair give out a shine that it’s not normal – looks artificial like in dyed hair.”

Clark snorted and couldn’t fight rolling his eyes. Really, Bruce?

“Because you know everything about female hair, huh?”

Bruce saw Clark’s exasperated reaction and felt embarrassed because certainly Clark believed that he was making up lamentable points to justify his jealousy ridden request. But he didn’t do it for that. He knew he had to keep Clark away.

“I grew up in a cabaret, Clark; women there dyed their hair all the time.”

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

“Why on earth a goddess would dye her hair?”

Bruce nodded, licking his lip.
“Exactly! That’s what raised my suspicions! Unless, she isn’t who she says and wants to impersonate the legendary Amazon Princess.”

But Clark wasn’t convinced.

“You have seen many gods and know how their hair looks like?”

“You, Thor, Loki… Bagdana didn’t have locks but he had body hair.”

Okay…Bruce had his experience with gods and demons.

“If her hair was dyed I’d have detected that, Bruce; and I didn’t.”

“Maybe you can’t…I mean when she is around you’re changed…you admitted that yourself. And those four days she wasn’t around you, you were perfect but as soon as she appeared at the Tower…” he huffed. “You changed.”

“Perfect means glued to you?” Clark spat and even he realized that this was a stab to Bruce’s heart.

The younger man lowered a bit his eyes and Hero purred to him.

“No…It was you that considered that kind of your behavior abnormal…” Clark seemed regretful of what he told but Bruce felt that it was more urgent to elaborate on his suspicions. “Also, her eyes are odd…”

Clark shook his head in disbelief: he felt sorry for implying that Bruce said all these from selfishness but what was he supposed to think when Bruce uttered such nonsense?

“I repeat that if her eyes were not real I’d have found out first: I’m the one with the 100 different kinds of vision.”

Bruce knew that repeating the argument about him not being himself around her wouldn’t do anything to change Clark’s mind.

“The ruby star in her diadem isn’t the ancient Greek star…”

“Because you’re a scholar of Greek mythology, huh?” he smiled.

“Of course not – I searched the ancient texts about the Amazon Princess: the star in her diadem should be the ancient Greek one with the 8 peaks.”

Clark cupped Bruce’s face with both hands and placed him gently on his back; he nuzzled his cheek.

“You need some sleep to clear your head from this night’s shit and Stark’s poison because I’m sure that your brilliant logic mind can’t believe such nonsense” Bruce narrowed his eyes angry. “You were a hero tonight, Bruce; don’t tarnish it now.”

The younger man turned his face to avoid Clark’s lips and raised himself supporting his torso on his elbows. Hero sat on his butt and watched baffled sniffing the tension between the people he loved.

“If someone needs to clear his head, this is you, Clark!” Clark had retreated a bit but still kept his arms on both sides of Bruce’s torso as if trying to trap him – a deep frown formed in his brow from the human’s reaction. “This is why I asked you to stay away from her! You too believe that you’re not yourself lately” he huffed slowing down. “Everything started when she appeared.”

Clark closed his eyes and shook his head exasperated.
“But I’m alright – Lucius confirmed it. It was just a difficult period, nothing more” Bruce was staring him in the eyes. “If you calm down and don’t let others influence you, things will be normal again.”

“You’re the one who gets influenced – that woman has a bad effect on you and you need to stay away from her till we figure out what’s going on. Jor El told you that he needed time and daily tests to be sure. But until then I think it is safer if you stop interacting with her.”

“Safer for whom? Your beaten up sense of security? The fact you’re fixed in that chair has made you insecure” he saw Bruce’s eyes widen more shocked than angry. “If your self-esteem wasn’t so battered you wouldn’t see Diana as a threat.”

The shine of Bruce’s eyes sent shivers to Clark’s back.

“Safer for you…” Bruce didn’t want to retort to what Clark said about him because he felt so dried from his words that it seemed totally unworthy of even replying. “I don’t feel threatened by her” for the first time his eyes moved softened. “I feel that you’re the threatened here…”

Clark pressed his lips: Bruce tried to justify his jealousy claiming that he was in danger… He brought his face to Bruce’s face.

“If you want to persuade me to stay away from my friend you must give me a solid reason and not mumbo-jumbo bullshit: you’re just embarrassing yourself, Bruce – you’re a detective and yet you make horrible points out of your grudge for Diana because we danced a couple of songs.”

Bruce’s heart sank: a couple of songs? Clark’s suave, baritone voice echoed again inside his head accompanied by the sound of quiet sea waves; his heart warmed like that night when his eyes had watered hearing about the too wide world that waited them to see it – that night he felt the urgency to travel with Clark to see all the things he dreamt locked up in Dolcetto.

Now there was only a stab wound… The song Clark was singing to him every night during his life or death battle was just a song? Clark didn’t remember or just it wasn’t as important for him as was for Bruce?

“What?” Clark asked narrowing his eyes puzzled from Bruce’s blank eyes.

“Nothing…” Bruce pressed his lips – if Clark didn’t realize the importance of the song, reminding him would only make the man sneer more at him.

Clark nodded taking Bruce’s silence as a sign of embarrassment for his attitude.

“You realize that you’re pushing me away?” Bruce said to him with a steady voice.

Clark frowned; he didn’t like that. Why pushing him away? There wasn’t a reason to lose Bruce because of his insecurity. He grasped Bruce’s torso and settled him flat on his back bringing his broader body upon him.

Bruce wasn’t afraid of him but Hero became restless moving around and meowing nervous without Clark registering anything except Bruce’s defiance.

“I don’t want to hear that again, Bruce: I won’t lose you but I won’t kick out my friends because of your insecurities. You promised me that you’ll stay with me unless I decide otherwise – and I didn’t!”

“There are other ways to show your decision than just words…”
Superman was now pissed.

“Damn it, Bruce!” he hissed. “She is my friend – FRIEND! – I didn’t do anything wrong! Why are you doing that to me?” he lowered his tone to a complaining purr. “I need you…” Bruce’s pale, porcelain skin was so beautifully stressed by the light silver colored silken sheet that his mind forgot his irritation.

He began nibbling Bruce’s lips and then his neck, settling his body heavily on the human’s; his heart was beating fast and strong, demanding: seeing other people touching Bruce made him angry and… this anger brought arousal that urged him to reassert his dominance on that beautiful human body.

Clark unbuttoned hurriedly Bruce’s pajama shirt and fondled his breasts, his mouth sucking hard his neck and when that wasn’t enough biting softly. His pelvis rubbed longingly on the non-responding hips as Clark’s mouth savored his lover’s taut breasts moaning through the warm flesh. But Bruce was too tired to keep his eyes open for longer so he succumbed to exhaustion since he didn’t have the mood to stay alert.

Yet his sleep wasn’t so deep to not sense Clark’s weight moving away from his body and laying on his side of the bed sighing because he had the mood for more but he couldn’t operate when his lover was asleep.

Clark made to brush Hero but the kitten slipped his hand and curled on Bruce’s side. Clark snorted: Bruce had spoiled the kitten so the animal preferred him. He clapped once and the room was casted in darkness; he closed his eyes and slack off as his mind replayed the dream with Diana.

Bruce felt Hero’s tongue licking his hand soothing and heard Ms. Kent:

“You’re his moral compass, Bruce; his anchor…The warmth in his heart: a star that shows him the way. As long you’re by his side he is safe."

He had to stay with Clark till the end to keep him safe: the more he stayed close to Clark the more time he had to present him proofs about the Amazon. And maybe after Clark saw the proofs, things would return back to the greenhouse or the island – he just hoped that it wouldn’t be too late until then…

Darkseid sat on his gigantic, granite throne that was carved with real small thunders and tornadoes; his fingers were knitted together in front of his face. There was nobody else in the vast circular underground hall except than Bagdana who waved his hand and dissolved the image of the Avengers’ Tower gaping from the smashed windows on its 90th floor.

The New God looked grimly at his minion.

“You were wrong” he growled clenching the armrests. “Earth’s heroes are simply pathetic” he arched his eyebrows “even a pitiful clown managed to wreck them. I can erase them with just a breath.”

Bagdana dressed in his black leather pants and his matched vest turned to his partner. His square face glimmered with confidence.

“The clown evidently had a powerful backup that rendered these guys and the Tower’s security useless.”

Darkseid’s bald head jerked upwards.
“Which I can also do. I think you delay my action on purpose to succeed your own goals” his voice became a deep roar filled with menace.

Yet Bagdana unfazed marched towards his throne and stretched his enormous posture though the steps leading to the throne still kept a considerable distance.

“If you didn’t need my advice you wouldn’t have freed me from my prison” he clenched his jaw and the silver spikes on his head sparkled. 

Darkseid arched an eyebrow as his red eyes flashed.

“I might have overestimated your value…”

Bagdana snorted.

“The one who is behind the attack has no ultimate plan – you do. He/she just wanted to inflict chaos sharing the same desire with Joker – they wanted just to have fun and mock those heroes. You, on the other hand, want more than just pulling up a show; you need your machine to fulfill your plans and your machine is far from ready.”

Darkseid tapped his fingers on the granite of his armrest and the tornadoes twirled faster.

“I can exterminate all these heroes and then have Luthor create my machine to fulfill my plan.”

Bagdana shrugged.

“Then do it” he said nonchalant. “If you believe that you’ll manage exterminate them now, do it – but deep inside you know that it’s not so easy” Darkseid’s eyes were fixed on him. “That attack may be impressive but it wouldn’t have led to your enemies’ defeat: maybe to many civilian casualties but the heroes would be unscathed” Bagdana enjoyed Darkseid’s interest. “And you don’t seem to consider something else – the factor that should make you wait the right moment to hit.”

The New God yanked his head.

“Which is?”

Bagdana smirked, his yellow eyes flashing.

“Someone ruined their plan; someone saved the day” Darkseid’s thick blue brows formed a line. “Would you like having that unknown factor meddling with your plans when the time comes?”

“Who was it?” he demanded.

Bagdana smiled coyly.

“Allow me to keep that information for myself…something to keep our deal active” he pressed his lips seeing that Darkseid didn’t like that.

“Batman wasn’t there…” Darkeid sniggered because he knew his minion’s high opinion for the vigilante and was sure that the demon believed that he saved the Avengers.

Bagdana’s smile was genial.

“You can’t be sure about that… but you may rest assure that waiting for the appropriate moment as I suggest you do, will guarantee your success and your satisfaction because I will neutralize that factor. And you’ll get the Kryptonian.”
Darkseid slapped his palms together and the granite round shaped pillars that supported the roof shook.

“And you, your human…”

Bagdana twisted his lips.

“That’s fair…”

Darkseid snorted and real smoke burst from his big nostrils.

“Unless, that pitiful clown makes it to him first” he savored the anger in Bagdana’s eyes. “He almost succeeded back there” he moved his palm and the Tower emerged again in the air of the hall. “But that sneaky, coward pest knows how to hide…”

Bagdana’s eyes were narrowed to slits and the demon didn’t care for Darkseid’s presence: his hatred for Joker prevailed. Bruce almost died because of him; Bagdana still felt the ripping of his guts when he sensed Bruce’s body dead…He wouldn’t ever permit that again.

**Attack on the Avengers’ Tower: one dead, several injured – How Stark’s love-child became his nightmare.**

The caption at the bottom of the TV screen read.

“Did anyone give a satisfying explanation about how the most secure building on Earth – according to its constructors’ claims – was breached by a madman and his gang?” the gray haired newscaster asked his younger colleague.

“He calls himself ‘The Joker’ and he brought mayhem and many casualties in Gotham some months ago before he was apprehended by the police with the alleged contribution of the local vigilante, Batman. Joker had kidnapped Bruce Wayne, the young billionaire, who after eighteen years of captivity was recently liberated from Carmine Falcone and restored his fortune. Guests testified that Joker was demanding Bruce Wayne. So speculation is that the young Wayne heir was indeed what brought the madman in New York.”

A picture of Joker from his first arrest in Gotham appeared on the screen and Ms. Rose, a short, round shaped old lady, cringed. The clown was still on his makeup and winking to the camera.

Clark had left New York before the dawn and flew to Metropolis. He wore his Clark Kent ugly suit and spectacles and took refuge to Ms. Rose’s bakery. The old lady had some tables in her small store and the bench which displayed her baked delicacies served as a bar; usually, some clients were there eating her infamous donuts or cookies but it was still early so Clark was the only client. He sat on a stool at the bench beside the old coffee machine.

She looked at Clark appalled from Joker’s picture.

“What’s that?”

“A dangerous man…” he muttered recounting Chickey’s factory where Bruce almost died to save the children from the maniac.

And that brought him back to his thoughts…about last night. He felt kind of bad…yet he knew he hadn’t done anything wrong: he had few real friends – Lois, Jimmy and Diana. Okay, someone
could say that every human was Superman’s friend but it wasn’t the same. So Bruce, as much as Clark loved him, had no right to demand from him to shoo one of his friends just because his disability made him antsy, cranky, nagging and scared that he could lose him.

Alright, that night he was absorbed with Diana but he was the only one she knew. Bruce was surrounded by friends and admirers so it was mean of him being jealous because Clark didn’t let Diana alone in a hostile environment. And big deal! He danced a few songs…Bruce hadn’t mentioned that – it was Clark addition. He scratched his head…Damn! It felt so great dancing again with someone: actually, dancing and not just dragging someone’s dead legs along…

He blushed and got sweaty: that was a bad thought…but a real one: he couldn’t hide from himself. Yet that thing apart he loved Bruce and he couldn’t afford to lose him even if he needed Diana too…as a friend. Because although the immerse sexual pleasure from that only dream with her was still lingering in his body and her four days’ absence made her return mind blowing, that didn’t mean that his desire for Bruce was vanished and that he would tolerate to lose him. Damn! So many sharks waited eagerly to savor Bruce’s gorgeous body and Clark wouldn’t let that happen.

Especially, when he saw Rogers carrying him in his arms or Thor settling him in his chair muffling him in his cape. That cape was stabbing his eyes all night since his stare had stayed fixed on the carefully folded red fabric on the black dresser.

His love for Bruce was there but recently he often got pissed and frustrated with the man – falling asleep when he needed some satisfaction, even the minimum of carnal pleasure Bruce could offer – didn’t help the aggregated tension. And Bruce trying to make him kick out Diana who was an oasis to his life right now was preposterous. Especially, when he used such lame arguments as her not being who she said she was because Bruce thought that her hair was dyed! Bitch please!

Clark rubbed the bridge of his nose skewing his glasses. And Bruce forced him to be examined: okay, he went to give samples to Lucius because Bruce would know if he didn’t yet after the first two times he didn’t go again to the Fortress. He was just fine and Lucius confirmed it: Bruce was just trying to make him feel that his friendship with Diana was illness. He huffed.

He loved Bruce, he was lenient and understanding with him but making him feel ill was…unacceptable, monstrous. The one who needed to be checked out was Bruce but he would never admit it. Not physically: physically Bruce was many times examined. However his behavior lately roared that he needed some sessions with a psychotherapist.

Understandably. He was kidnapped when he was just eight years old; he watched his parents being murdered, he was shot, almost drown to death and then for eighteen years Falcone and many others used him as a piece of meat to inflict every sick and twisted idea they had. And then a couple of months ago, Bruce almost died – no, he was dead for some minutes and when the brain stays without oxygen for minutes some damage takes place. Either way, another great shock was added to the pack.

Maybe the responsible for the crisis in their relationship was Bruce and his paranoia that now peaked seeing a person getting some of the attention he till then enjoyed exclusively. So Bruce made him feel ill and now tried to make him coy towards Diana on the ridiculous assumption that she wasn’t Diana because her hair seemed dyed! Bruce was definitely a manipulative person: he manipulated Falcone, Chill even Ra’s Al Ghul but he wouldn’t let Bruce do the same with him.

“There’s no official announcement, Eric. But I think that this isn’t the only burning question from the previous night.”

The co-presenter nodded and arched his eyebrows.
“Certainly.”

“The most intriguing part was why the Avengers along with Superman and Wonder Woman didn’t stop the intruders – it shouldn’t have taken them more than a minute. And some witnesses say that they were literally powerless just watching that Joker guy wrecking chaos.”

“Also, Bill, some other witnesses mentioned that at some point heroes turned against each other and the guests too – of course, there’s no official confirmation about that or footage but the world is going to wake up this morning ranting around the rumors.”

“First, the attack at Metropolis’ subway station and now an even bigger hit at the Avengers’ Tower – a blow in the heart of our sense of security. I tell you, Eric: people feel a lot less secure and confident about their protectors – superpowers and all; especially, when these protectors, according to the witnesses, were ready not only to kill each other but also kill civilians.”

The second newscaster shook his head pursing his lips.

Ms. Rose with one hand clutching her waist upon her laced apron and the other pouring coffee into Clark’s cup watched the discussion intrigued.

“Is that true, Mr. Kent? You’re a journalist after all; you know more.”

Clark shrugged.

“I don’t know anything more than you, Ms. Rose. Lois was there covering the event – she and Jimmy sent some coverage but I haven’t spoken with them.”

She nodded.

“I’m glad they’re okay but shame that young man was killed…”

Clark pouted and pressed his lips: he was there watching and didn’t do anything – all these superpowers and in the end he was unable to prevent Joker from killing a man… His guts were clenched.

Ms. Rose put her hand on his shoulder.

“You’re alright, son?”

He gave her a big goofy Kent-ish smile that she and Bruce adored.

“Yes, Ms. Rose; I just didn’t sleep well.”

The old woman smiled relieved.

“Now, let’s get your order…” she opened the window display and the delicious smell of the store became heavier, really mouth salivating. “Mmm…let’s see: ‘Prince’s donuts’ as usual?”

Clark’s chest became a stone: almost every day along with his own favorite flavor he bought Bruce’s favorites too. Ms. Rose had named that flavor ‘the Prince’s donuts’ out of a whim and she was so right! But today there was no need for Prince’s donuts…

“No, Ms. Rose…Just my usual…” he registered the kind woman’s surprised look – Clark had seen then many times smiling pointedly as she picked the best donuts for his order and he blushed every time…she had guessed that he was taking the Prince’s donuts to someone…

She put them to a paper bag and Clark paid.
“Have a great day, Mr. Kent!”

“You too, Ms. Rose” he smiled and she reflected his smile.

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The Asylum’s lounge space that included the cafeteria was filled with inmates watching TV or playing games. It was evening and almost the time to have their dinner.

The orderlies stood on the perimeter of the rectangular room and some of them were scattered inside the room between the tables of the cafeteria and the armchairs and sofas of the lounge room. Crane’s escape had increased the security measures and now they kept their Tasers clenched ready for use. Asylum – and Gotham – couldn’t afford a second incident.

Joker was sprawled on the black leather couch opposite the big screen built-in TV and giggled loudly watching cartoons.

At that moment, the double doors to the cafeteria-lounge space opened and Dr. Quinzel entered strolling around the patients and talking with some of them. She stopped in front of Joker and he patted the couch next to him inviting her to joy him shouting something about a great episode.

She sat completely calm.

Bruce frowned. He had hacked last evening’s footage from the Asylum’s security cameras – Joker must have escaped around that time; it was the same footage that Gotham’s police was searching for any clues. If he had escaped earlier he’d have known because he got updated on Gotham’s developments regularly throughout the day.

The holographic pyramid-watch at the nightstand read 6:16 in the morning: when Bruce woke up Clark had already left which Bruce couldn’t attribute only to his need to fly to Metropolis to get to his job on time…Last night’s dispute played its role as every dispute lately…and they had a lot of them.

He had sighed but realizing that he couldn’t persuade his mind to stop thinking and sleep again, he sat on the mattress putting a pillow between his back and the headboard, and opened his Cosmos to do some meaningful work.

Hero had slept curled at his side and looked at him sleepily.

“Sleep, buddy; it’s still early…What am I saying? Cats woke up early…”

He looked again at the paused frame of the footage. Dr. Quinzel shouldn’t have sat next to Joker but he couldn’t blame her: she knew that Tony had planted security triggers in the criminal that whenever he dared to do a threatening move knocked him out. And she was his therapist so she wanted to construct a patient-therapist relationship based on trust.

Bruce already figured what happened without seeing the next; yet he pushed ‘play’ in hopes of finding an explanation on how Joker did escape.

Joker’s movement was so quick that the orderlies couldn’t catch it. His forearm pressed Quinzel’s throat and he stood abruptly dragging her along. Her face was definitely surprised but still calm even though Joker had a metal pipe with sharpened edge grazing her cheek.
“Kids, take those niiiiice looking toys from these buffoons aaaaand playyyyy!”

The orderlies moved their Tasers threateningly towards the menacing inmates.

“Nooo…noooo…Doon’t be bad boys noooow ooooor I’ll slice the goooolllloooood doctor – it’d be a shaaaame, huh? Give your toooys – kids should share their toys…”

Bruce was sure that Joker from his previous attempt to kill his former goon had figured out how Tony’s security worked so this time he was completely tranquil. Yet Tony had changed that after Bruce’s suggestion making the knock out effect hit when fear was monitored around Joker. And Quinzel should have been scared – at least, uncomfortable and distressed. Bruce licked his lips and paid more attention to her beautiful face that seemed…satisfied? Could the doctor be enjoying Joker’s rough treatment?

Well, Joker noticed too.

The inmates took the orderlies’ Tasers and guns and aimed at them.

Joker cackled.

“Uuuuuuu! I loooooove dramatic escalation!” he leaned his face to his therapist and licked his lips.

“Daaaarling, you liiiike it oooor is my idea?”

He shook his head.

“Then you’re gonnaaaaaa loooove this!!!!” he released her throat only to twirl her to face him and bitch slapped her with such force that the lean woman slumped on the wall and collapsed.

Bruce inhaled deeply: Joker had slapped him too in the past but he had the training to handle it – poor Dr. Quinzel stayed curled on the floor Joker laughing and hopping around.

“But his violent slap to the doctor made the orderlies move forward and the inmates used the Tasers causing the orderlies’ pained yells and convulsing.

Bruce saw what should have happened earlier.

Joker with a stupid expression upon realizing what was happening collapsed unconscious to the floor and the inmates gaped at the spectacle.

Bruce tilted his head on the side and grinned in spite of himself: it was the first time that Joker was truly funny.

The double door burst open and backup from the orderlies that were in the Asylum’s other facilities surged the space.

Bruce’s eyes narrowed: it should have ended there but suddenly the lights went off and the image stopped abruptly replaced by thick snows. Bruce nodded thoughtful – Joker’s ally intervened to save the day. He doubted that Crane bothered to help: he disappeared miraculously from his hideout literally moments before police stormed the place so he wouldn’t risk something like that even if he wanted to – and he definitely didn’t want to.

From all the footage of his interactions with Joker Bruce had watched, the former doctor seemed
rather displeased from the jester’s proximity. So it was just a coincidence that the attack at the
Avengers’ Tower used both of them: a third, powerful agent recruited both of them. And Bruce was
afraid that the person who unleashed Joker to have his fun in the Tower wouldn’t limit the clown;
Joker wanted him so probably Gotham would be again his performance stage from now on. So
Bruce knew that he had to return as soon as possible…

To do what, fixed in a chair? He could always use the Tumbler to patrol until Lucius had the armor
ready.

He brushed the ‘fast forward’ choice and the footage moved on; the snow persisted. Suddenly, image
returned: a looted, destroyed cafeteria with every glass display case shattered, food splayed
everywhere – mainly on the unconscious orderlies -, tables uprooted, chairs broken, shards from
crockery over the floor and the ripped couches and armchairs. TV was still playing but on the screen
a huge red smile was sprayed.

It was the moment Gotham’s SWAT surged the space: 22:15:30;09. Bruce pressed his lips – the
Asylum had stayed in lockdown for two hours without the police having any notice about the
breakout – everything went south like in the Avengers’ Tower. That explained why the news of
Joker’s escape didn’t reach them earlier to take their precautions.

Thankfully, the fugitives didn’t take any hostages; he saw some police officers taking care of Dr.
Quinzel who was evidently in a daze. Batman definitely wished to have a talk with her but patrolling
in the Tumbler was easy while speaking to someone keeping the image of the unscathed vigilante
was an entire different thing.

He huffed and minimized the window. He grabbed the armrests and slipped in his chair; he took
Hero in his lap.

He missed having breakfast with Clark…that thought brought back the cold feeling from their
quarrel last night. One of these days Clark might not come back…He pressed his lips to the point that
they became white. But he wasn’t going to send him away even though he felt like being poisoned
with little dosages every day…

However, Clark still hadn’t done anything extreme: his Sun was still fighting that unknown thing and
Bruce was sure that Clark loved him and listened to him even reluctantly. Clark hadn’t decided to
leave him – with words or acts - yet so as Bruce had promised he wouldn’t give up on him.

He looked down at Hero who was staring at him puzzled and a bit melancholic as if sensing. Bruce
smiled to him and kissed the top of his head.

“Time for breakfast, buddy.”
Chapter 32

The palace’s grand hall was empty; the last servant removed the popcorn containers and left hurriedly. The long corridor leading to the throne shone pristine, its golden tiles reflecting the green ceiling. The hall was round and the crystal walls granted view from one side to the great iceberg and from the other to a peaceful beach with palm trees and exotic birds that reminded of the Caribbean: Loki loved variety so even if his location didn’t provide that, he created it himself.

A long satisfied huff cracked the silence as Loki yanked his head to touch the green velvet of his throne’s back; he had returned his throne to its normal golden-green grandiose after watching the show – the cloud was great for enjoying movies and shows but afterwards he craved for showing off; even to his servants.

He had his eyes opened, upturned to the ceiling, a sly smirk on his face. His arms flexed on the golden armrests and his fingers clenched the curved edges as he replayed in his mind how Thor was fighting with Superman and that Amazon unable to realize that there was no real danger but just a stupid hallucination. And then when the effect was gone…oh! Their stupid faces with that dumb expression…

His giggle vibrated through the vast, high ceiling hall. But then his eyes fixed on the great orgy that was depicted on the dome with dozens of naked male and female bodies mingled into each other between green branches, leaves and flowers as snakes slithered on the bodies increasing pleasure; he abruptly jerked and ruined his relaxed position into bending to support his chin on his palm. His cunning eyes deep in thought.

“They shouldn’t have come out of the hallucination before real damage was done…It was too soon; it’d be funnier if Thor, the God of Thunder, had used his stupid hammer to real business. Someone ruined my fun…someone saved them…”

That clown certainly knew who did but he wouldn’t say – the scum had his secrets and wasn’t willing to share. If of course Joker himself was aware of these secrets because Loki had entered his mind…And that was THE experience! Like riding a roller coaster: complete chaos where concepts, images and ideas twirled each other without any meaning and then… BOOM! The man’s mind was a real minefield.

Only two things were distinguished: Bruce Wayne and Batsy but they were mingled – Joker seriously had an issue about choosing his real love…

Loki sniggered even now with the thought of Joker having a real love other than disaster, chaos and fun. Surely, he had some ‘philosophical ideas’ surfacing to the stormy sea of his mind. A stormy sea that became tranquil when the jester was to execute his attack.

Bruce Wayne was on his mind aiming to find him; Batsy was on his mind when he realized that their show was ruined. Yet Batman wasn’t in the Tower that night so probably the clown was thinking of other times the flying rodent destroyed his fun. Maybe the Bat had become the symbol for every obstacle Joker found in his way…

He shrugged and protruded his bottom lip tapping it with his finger. Never mind…That Joker guy was his jester and offered him entertainment.

As when he watched him being knocked out during his attempt to escape that loony bin. Loki kept an eye over Gotham’s Asylum waiting for the jester’s movement – he knew that this dude wouldn’t
stay for long there: he wanted Bruce Wayne and was thirsty of wrecking chaos in the world for his fun. Much like Loki. Not that Loki believed that Joker looked like him…His face distorted in disgust: for one thing, the God of deceit was beautiful… But they had common taste for mischief.

So Loki felt excitement when his potential ally grabbed the silly blondie and sent the other loonies to get the weapons from the orderlies. And he had the greatest laughing fit when the inmates aimed the Tazers against the orderlies and they screamed from shock; Loki’s hysterics weren’t for the orderlies but for Joker whose face took a stupid, astonished expression – eyes narrowed, eyebrows frowned, mouth agape – before he collapsed to the floor unconscious.

Someone played a brilliant prank to the clown and Loki appreciated the irony. Yet he had to control his laughter to intervene because the crazies stayed as cold as their momentary leader and more orderlies burst in the lounge space. The show would have a premature – and no funny at all – end if he hadn’t stopped everything in the Asylum and taken the clown to his palace and the loonies to a warehouse-like place he formed in his territory.

Loki didn’t care if the loonies testified upon being arrested that a god freed them because…Hell…every insane would have said the same thing. However, he was selective in his companies so Joker was enough for guest.

Joker began slowly twitching – Loki’s stare still on him having just woken him with a snapping of his fingers. The clown lay on the marble floor under a pillar with the shape of a curvy, naked lady several feet opposite Loki’s throne and his expression was as funny as when he realized that he was going to faint. Joker’s eyes ascended the marble lady’s body and he whistled.

“Heeeeello, babe! Either you’re a woman shaped column ooooor” he tilted his head “I must get laid ASAP! HeHe!”

He sat on his butt, gathered his legs and scratched his hair looking around the rest five pillars that formed the enormous hexagonal with Loki’s throne in the center – they were shaped as male and female nude bodies. And then he also stared at the ceiling.

“Oooooh, boooy! Stark sponsored trips become mooore and mooore entertaining…My roomy-room now looks like the ugly, kitsch palace of a seeex deprived guy…”

Loki stood and his footsteps echoed through the hall, he kept his hands behind his back, his lips pouted.

“Ugly? Kitsch?” he mumbled. “The same in Louvre and Capella Sistina is called art…”

“Aaand in your place is called per--vert!” he nodded goggling at the ceiling. “I know: world is un--fair buuuuuut I know a pervert when I see him…”

Loki smirked.

“You had a lot of practice in your mirror!” he slurred.

Joker’s eyes turned on him and he started giggling, pointing at Loki.

“Niiiiiiice outfit! And they say my taaaaste is baaaad! Hehehehehehe!”

Loki rolled his eyes standing beside Joker and towering him. Suddenly, the God of mischief began trembling, his eyes bulging and his face distorted in fear. Joker understanding what he was doing raised his palms.
“Wait!”

But Loki screamed and let his heart beat fast in terror and Joker slumped on the floor unconscious. It was Loki’s turn to giggle pointing at Joker’s stupid expression.

This time Joker jumped at his feet as soon as Loki revived him; the God looked at him amused with raised eyebrows. And before Joker could say anything Loki widened his eyes terrorized and screamed sending Joker again unconscious to the floor. The raven haired man pouted looking at Joker.

“It’s not my fault your face is horrifying…”

However Loki was in a hurry so he brought round Joker immediately; the jester’s jump and his irritation were so funny that he couldn’t fight it and imitated again the scared.

“Not again…” Joker exclaimed rolling his eyes before falling down and Loki doubled up in laughter.

“I could repeat that for ages…” Loki said and sidestepped Joker’s body to cross the corridor and settle to his throne; he waved his hand “but we have business…so…” he snapped his fingers and Joker began stirring.

This time the clown didn’t jolt to his feet but stared from narrowed eyes at the guy who looked him from the throne.

“I’m glaaaaad someone’s having fuuuun – I’m a jester after all…”

“You can’t imagine how ridiculous you are when you recognize the first signs of being knocked out…” Loki cackled. “I never saw again such a stupid fainting since Lorelei saw that she didn’t fuck her beloved fisherman but dear ol’ me…” he sighed “What a fuck was her!”

Joker lifted an eyebrow and bent his knee to support his elbow.

“Weeeell, you flatter me! Can you sign me a letter of recommendation?”

Loki shook his index finger chuckling.

“Oh, dude, you’re good!”

“Aaaaand you’re that guy who caaaaame to my cell – I told you: I don’t work for others.”

Loki shrugged and widened his arms to show his palace.

“I’m not running a business – and I don’t offer wages, insurance etc.” he pouted.

Joker frowned and made to stand but hesitated remembering what happened the previous times; his cautious stare met Loki’s eyes and the god nodded giving his approval. Joker stood dusting off his butt but taking in it was the orange suit from Arkham twitched his lips in aversion and stopped.

“I hate orange…” he groused nasally.

Loki nodded pouting.

“I see your point” he nodded and Joker was dressed in his trademark purple suit.

Joker regarded himself and batted his eyelids.
“I dooooon’t like strangers dressing meeeee…” he said in a mock girlish tone.

He marched towards Loki’s throne regaining his slightly hunched posture and his questioning stare.

“I don’t believe you took me from the loony bin to have the pleasure of dressing me up?”

Loki arched his eyebrows and sprawled in his throne crossing his legs.

“It was a good laugh – and the one that pulled up that prank on you would have been laughing right now” he squinted and leaned towards him. “Who schemed that? I bet Stark…”

But Joker seemed thinking hard and Loki getting a glimpse of his mind understood that the clown was actually capable of rational thinking. And Joker had Stark crossed out.

“The exe--cution was definitely Stark’s…” the jester mumbled in heavy English accent grabbing a pipe that wasn’t there. “Yeeeet Stark had made that think work when I felt the arousal of harming others…and now I get knocked out when others feel dread…Sooooo the one who thought it knows that I dooooon’t experience agitation when I harm – that’s for boooooring people.”

Loki shook his head.

“But you want a demonstration?” he cackled.

Joker tilted his head to the side.

“Naaahhh…Someone gave him the idea – someone cunning as me who is able to turn the tables and bring the joke on me…Someone who compleeeetes me…”

Loki penetrated his mind to see who that might be but that mind was filled with explosions, blood and screams and Loki felt bored.

Joker’s acid green eyes were sparkling.

“Sooooo, what’s the catch?” he asked in business matter.

“I’m Loki.”

Joker rolled his eyes and snorted.

“I knooooow – you tooold me then” he made a gesture of dismissal “As if he is Mick Jagger…Tough!”

Loki smirked.

“I like your style…”

“You’re not the only one: I like myyyyy style too…”

Loki leaned his head towards him, his eyes piercing Joker’s.

“Tonight, at Avengers’ Tower is held the party of the year. Tony Stark and his pals among them my dear brother, Thor…”

Joker goggled.

“Ooooh…sooo you’re a goooood! Can I have an autograph?” he giggled.
“Yeah…I’m a god: a beautiful one” Joker made a throw up motion and Loki chuckled. “There will be also Superman, that Amazon, plenty of people…”

Joker scratched his nape.

“Caviar, champagne? Because that fine establishment I was in didn’t satisfy my gourmet appetite…”

“And Bruce Wayne…”

Joker yanked his head.

“Now you haaave my mouth sa--livating…”

Loki’s face was carved by a huge grin behind his united fingertips that formed a triangle.

“So…Stark is bragging that his newly built barn is the safest building in the world…”

“HEHEHEHE…”

Loki arched his eyebrows.

“I get we understand each other?” the God asked slyly. “I want a spectacular show and I believe that you’re the best to direct it…” his smile was almost warm and his sneaky eyes bore in Joker’s.

The jester licked his lips and gave a grin of his own.

“Soookooo you’ve read my artistic am—bitions, huh?” he tilted his head on the side. “Though…” he shook his index finger calculating “the cast youuu provide me has tooooo many staaaars and you knooow how difficult those stars are nowadays…” he winked.

Loki waved his worries off.

“Let your talent fly, my friend…I have a gas that will render them powerless.”

Joker’s wicked eyes sparkled hungry.

“Soookooo Johnny – boy is part of our creative team, huh?”

Loki looked him lopsided.

“Jonathan Crane” Joker spat.

“How you figured?” Loki stood.

It was Joker’s turn to wave him off.

“Ppppplease, Loki; haven’t you heard of the crazies’ intelligence? Not that I’m crazy…buuuuut I’m definitely ahead of the curve. The guy escaped before me aaaaand he’d have been already back in the dumpster if a big guy – like you – didn’t hire him. Aaaaaaand he’s the guy for such psycho-mambo-jumbo.”

Loki yanked his head and cackled.

“I like you, clown…” Joker shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Little by little you’re gonna staaaart groping mee…”
The god tilted his head and sniffed at Joker pouting.

“You’re not my type…”

Joker shrugged.

“Youuuur looooss, buster! Back to business, if you have hired Johnny…”

“I don’t hire anyone: he’s a freelance partner like you.”

Joker shook his head nodding several times impatiently.

“I want another one of his gasses…” his eyes had become slits, glimmering and Loki could hear crazy wheels rotating swiftly in his head.

“What gas?”

Joker squinted more and shook his index finger reprimanding.

“Naaaah, naaaah, naaaah…I need to sur—prise my audience!”

Loki spread his arms and stood.

“Okay, then sur—PRISE me!”

Joker crooked his mouth.

“Aaaaaaand I want my ballet to surround the prima ballerina” he gestured to his chest “that’s me!”

Loki cocked an eyebrow.

“I don’t eyeball you as Rudolf Nureyev…” he sneered and Joker blinked snorting.

“You haven’t seen me in tights…”

Loki clutched his waist and roared in laughter yanking his head backwards.

“In the name of Me! I just ate!”

“Everyone’s got an opinion nowadays…” Joker muttered nasally.

Loki stopped laughing and gazed at his partner.

“I parked your goons in a warehouse nearby – you’ll have everything you want. But we don’t have much time: the party begins in an hour.”

“Dooooon’t fret, Joker’s here – you did provide some kryptonite, right?”

Loki smirked.

“Please. I know my thing.”

“Glad to hear; soooo let’s partyyyyyy, babe!” Joker roared and made a twirl marching to the other side of the hall.

“Where are you going?”
Joker stood abruptly and tilted his head backwards rolling his eyes to Loki as if he had asked the most obvious thing.

“To dye myyyyyyyy loki-locks, of course…My Brucie doesn’t want me just for my looks but I want to be daaaaaaashing…Do you have any hair color in this dump?”

Loki blinked.

“You’re heading to the pond with the piranhas” he said indifferently and Joker spread his arms yanking his head.

“Whaaaat kind of weirdoooo keeps piranhas in a…palace?”

Loki pouted and upturned his hands.

“Well, me…”

“HeHeHe!” Joker shook his index finger. “Finally, a god who’s not boring” he turned and narrowed his eyes curious. “Dooooo you have a forked tongue? It’d suit you perfect. No flattering but you remind me of that snake in Paradise…”

Loki lollled his head and huffed reminiscently his eyes travelling.

“The fashion of that era was great..!”

Loki cackled remembering the clown prancing in his hall. After the party, he sent him and his goons back at Gotham as Joker wanted. Loki was sure that there would be more fun and he was ready to stir things a bit.

“Master Bruce, what are you doing?”

Well, the image Alfred saw upon entering the kitchen left him bemused. Of course, it wasn’t the fact that his young master was working on that tablet at the kitchen’s island – Alfred sometimes felt on the edge of smashing that thing!

First, it was hardly half past six in the morning, that is to say very early for Master Bruce to be awake and that made Alfred very worried. Second, which caused a hardly contained grin, the shining surface of the kitchen island was already covered with crockery: toasted bread emanated tantalizing smell piled neatly in a dish, boiled eggs were positioned in porcelain eggcups; the butter was in its special dish and honey and jam in small, transparent jars. Also, the bizarre thing that it was Master Anthony’s newest coffee machine waited on the bench with its jug filled with delicious smelling coffee.

Also, Hero was eating his own breakfast from his bowl and casted a lazy gaze at Alfred licking some food of his little pink nose.

Bruce raised his head and acknowledged his butler who was dressed impeccably as usual. He grinned.

“Good morning, Alfred” he greeted him nonchalant. “Come, join us!”

“Good morning, Master Bruce” Alfred replied and approached him. “Master Bruce, you realize that you should be still sleeping?”
Bruce sipped from his orange juice.

“I didn’t prepare juice for the rest because I didn’t know when you’ll come and didn’t want the vitamins to be spoiled.”

Alfred arched his eyebrows.

“I think you’re stealing my lines, sir…” he commented dryly. “You don’t avoid answering, right?”

Bruce shook his head.

“I woke up and I couldn’t sleep more so I decided to make good use of my time.”

Alfred’s disapproval was clear.

“Preparing breakfast? That’s my job, sir” he smiled “unless you consider of doing job cuts?”

The youth smiled.

“Of course not – I couldn’t survive without you, Alfred” he took his butler’s hand in his and squeezed.

Though Alfred was a typical trained to be cold butler this gesture from his young master filled him with happiness; however, he knew that his boy indeed survived too many years without him.

“What am I going to do with you, Master Bruce?” he squatted to be at the same height as him.

Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“Eat breakfast?” the youth replied shrugging and Alfred huffing sat at the stool beside Bruce.

The Englishman took one of the toasted slices of bread and spread some butter.

“This is absolutely the first and last time you prepare the breakfast, sir.”

Bruce widened his eyes mock shocked.

“Why? You don’t believe you’ll survive my cooking?”

Alfred couldn’t stop a big smile cracking his face; he wanted to caress the youth’s disheveled hair – Bruce was still on his dark blue pajamas and matched robe. But he didn’t do it although his master’s effort to hide his emotional turmoil of the last days for his sake touched him.

“We do need to change your medication, Master Bruce” he said looking into Bruce’s frustrated eyes. “These drugs are supposed to ensure you at least eight hours of solid, restful sleep and lately you don’t sleep enough.”

The younger man pressed his lips.

“Maybe I don’t need so much sleep anymore” his voice was a bit uninterested.

“We’ll speak to Leslie, Master Bruce.”

Bruce gulped and nodded re-focusing on his work at the tablet.

“I don’t see your milk, sir” Alfred changed the subject but Bruce just nodded and the butler smirked for his avoidance. “Let me bring you some” Bruce sighed defeated when Alfred stood and opened
the silver double door closet refrigerator. “How on earth you know how to boil an egg? My egg is near perfect. And toasting bread?”

He handed Bruce a big glass of milk which he began sipping rather disgusted his eyes fixed on the misty city’s view from the frameless window at the wall opposite the island – the way the city’s millions dim lights still sparkled had something mesmerizing. Alfred smiled remembering the toddler Bruce closing his nose with his tiny fingers to drink his milk before leaving for school.

“I…” Bruce hesitated for an instance but then continued “when I mopped the kitchen’s floor in Dolcetto food was smelling so tantalizing that I couldn’t help but stare – when nobody was looking of course” his gaze fell on the tablet’s screen but was seeing elsewhere. “I knew that I wouldn’t get anything from that to eat but still…” he smiled. “I guess I was fooling my hanger imprinting the process of cooking…”

Alfred pressed his lips and continued eating his egg.

“Wow! Delicious coffee straight ahead!” Tony exclaimed striding in the kitchen in his pajamas with Garfield’s huge head smirking wickedly from his shirt.

He stopped abruptly seeing Bruce.

“What are you doing off your bed so early?” Bruce casted a lopsided glance at him.

“Everyone is going to ask me the same?”

Alfred and Tony exchanged a hopeless stare.

“And how you managed to operate my coffee machine?” he asked rubbing his goatee and squinted at his friend. “Because Alfred couldn’t.”

Alfred blushed and cleared his throat dignified.

“Master Bruce prepared the entire breakfast.”

Tony lifted his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

“Thankfully, Peps stayed at the Tower so she’ll take care of everything while I’ll be in hospital with poisoning…”

Bruce yanked his head backwards and snorted.

“Very funny…”

Tony opened the transparent cupboard, took a huge square porcelain mug with Ironman’s head on it and poured coffee.

“Mmm…You hit the target, little guy. Mmm…the finest espresso I have ever drunk!”

“You made a damn good machine there, Tony” Bruce replied engrossed in his tablet and Tony leaned to see.

On screen, Bruce compared photos of the Amazon from last night with various ancient depictions from mural paintings and vases. The Californian tycoon shook his head exasperated and huffed.

“What are you looking for?” he asked slumping into the next stool laying down his coffee and grabbing a slice of bread.
“Isn’t it obvious? I want to compare the Princess we have with the real one.”

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and bit his bread.

“You realize that these are not pictures and the painters did them hearing the legends and not seeing the real thing?”

Bruce lifted his eyes to him.

“Of course but it is clear that the one we have, tried to imitate these characteristics.”

Tony spread some honey on his bread and bit.

“You think that she isn’t the Princess of Themyscira but an impostor…”

Bruce nodded, his eyes fixed on the diadem’s star in the ancient depictions that was with eight and not five peaks. And in the ancient depictions the face had a different bone structure making it sterner and wiser.

“Her hair seem dyed and her eyes fake.”

Tony jerked in his seat.

“What?”

“You didn’t notice how her hair emanated artificial glow?”

Tony had to take a large gulp from his espresso looking to Alfred for help.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Don’t expect from a billionaire playboy to notice woman’s locks…” Selina’s sly voice entered the space. “His focus is on other things…downwards!”

She purred some coffee to a mug and sat on a stool. Hero rushing to her and climbing in her lap.

“Why so early, Bruce?” she asked.

“I couldn’t sleep more and I have to go to the police for my testimony.”

Tony frowned.

“I thought they’ll come here?”

Bruce shook his head.

“I prefer to go myself. I already called Lieutenant Johnson and he’ll be waiting me at 9.”

“You want me to come with you?”

“No, Tony, thanks; you have a lot to do” he took in Alfred’s expression and caught him before asking the same “I appreciate it, Alfred but I’ll go alone. We need to get ready to return at Gotham by afternoon.”

Selina narrowed her eyes.

“Why such haste?”
Bruce shrugged a shoulder.

“Joker and Crane are free and probably plotting new ordeals for Gotham.”

“Let police handle it” Tony said coldly, his eyes saying that he didn’t want his friend getting in these things.

Bruce looked him in the eyes, reading his displeasure.

“Jim lit the Batsignal last night – yet Batman didn’t go…” his voice was heavy with regret.

Tony was ready to ask him what he thought he could do in his state but honestly he was afraid to ask.

Selina took a spoonful of her egg.

“Mmm…A perfect boiled egg! Well done, Alfred: as always” she wanted to lighten the mood.

“I didn’t do anything, Miss Kyle: Master Bruce prepared the breakfast.”

She cocked an impressed eyebrow and whistled.

“Another talent?! I gladly marry you, handsome…”

Bruce chuckled and sighed dramatically.

“I came second after Captain America” but then he became serious. “Speaking of which, Tony, we agreed with Steve to not tell anything about my involvement last night: it was Jarvis who used my tablet to get access to the building and analyzed the toxins neutralizing them.”

Tony nodded but his eyes were solemn.

“I want people to know the hero you are.”

But Bruce pressed his lips.

“I’m not a hero. Besides it was indeed Jarvis who made the work: I think you should give him a raise or something.”

Selina chuckled.

“Maybe a female AI?”

Tony scratched his nape.

“Hm…I don’t know but I have a hunch that Jarvis is actually gay…” Bruce and Selina laughed but Tony unlike himself was serious thinking what Selina had said. “Actually, it’d be great if you two ended up together…”

Bruce and Selina exchanged puzzled stares.

“How you came up with this?” Selina asked.

Tony gulped the rest of his coffee and Alfred stared at him understanding that what was coming wasn’t nice.

“I hate seeing Superman treat you like this and you tolerating it.”
An uncomfortable silence fell and Bruce looked at his friend.

“Tony, I know what I’m doing…”

Tony pursed his lips and shook his head.

“I doubt it, little guy…If you knew you’d have kicked this asshole’s ass! How can you stand this, Bruce? He is openly flirting with that bitch who insults you with every chance – and he doesn’t give a damn! And then he makes scenes and treats you like dirt!”

Bruce inhaled deeply and yanked his head.

“If I was ill and behaved awkward to you, would you turn your back on me?”

Tony lolled his head and blinked.

“Of course not” but he narrowed his eyes. “Is he ill? Because he looks quite fine to me.”

Bruce pressed his lips feeling all eyes on him.

“We still try to figure out” and seeing Tony running his fingers through his hair “Clark loves me” Bruce said calmly and Tony slapped his face. “You don’t understand, Tony…He is affected by something and I…”

But Tony interrupted him.

“Exactly! By his dick! Sorry, Alfred…” he locked eyes with his friend. “Stop making excuses for him! He is a prick…he feels you’re his possession and now looks for more. So, Bruce: admit the reality, finish this thing and move on.”

“I won’t abandon Clark now that he needs me. Besides he hasn’t done anything with her: he is with me.”

“That’s what every victim of abuse says!”

“I’m not a victim!”

“Then stop acting like one! You…you make feeble theories about impostors and bad witches wanting to harm him only to deny the truth that he is an asshole and just follows his dick’s whims.”

“I won’t turn my back on him – not while he is still with me. He needs help.”

“You know what I see, Bruce? That man has alienated you – you’re not yourself anymore! Joker took away your mobility and Superman your personality!”

Bruce’s eyes were blank, emotionless but for a sparkle.

“Master Anthony…” Alfred stood up and Tony followed towering Bruce.

“I can’t bear seeing him being treated like this after everything he’s been through” Tony gestured to Bruce.

“Clark isn’t cheating on me and hasn’t done anything… He tries to fight this and listens to me so I won’t deny him my help.”

Tony closed his eyes and shook his head disappointed.
“He’s playing you like a fool, little guy…and you create conspiracy theories about the Amazon not being the Amazon to justify his behavior allowing him to laugh behind your back. You can’t believe these things, buddy, because if you do then the one that needs help it’s you…”

Bruce grabbed his tablet and steered his chair to the exit. He stopped at the threshold.

“Thanks, Tony! I’ll consider your advice…” he said without turning his head. “Excuse me, I have a meeting with Lieutenant Johnson” he continued.

Tony bit his bottom lip.

“She isn’t worth it, little guy!” he yelled to his friend’s retreating form.

Alfred stood and began gathering the things off the island, completely expressionless and silent. Tony’s head slumped in his chest and sighed regretful. Selina approached and patted his shoulder.

“You aren’t helping this way…” she remarked with sympathy.

Battery Park.

At half past seven, only a few bystanders were scattered around – most of them jogging before getting to their works. It was a bit humid so even they wouldn’t see him clearly.

He steered his chair through the paved path, under the tree branches that by now were completely bare of leaves. He stopped before the railing. The public lantern above him still casted its dull light since the fog was dense and the cloudy day didn’t help dissolving it fast.

The view of the Harbor was eye-catching though the mist made the Statue of Liberty looking like a dark mystic creature from a horror child story. Although he wore a black long coat and woolen black cap and gloves, he could still feel the humidity gnawing his slowly healing bones but he liked the feeling of the morning cold in his hot face.

Bruce missed Gotham’s docks though most people would consider that crazy… His guts were clenched in a tight knot: Clark’s attitude and words from one side and Tony’s scolding from the other. Bitterness was really acid in his throat and erosive in his mind. Maybe both of them were right: maybe he was the one with the problem. The one who didn’t want to accept the facts and made up stories to avoid facing the truth.

But which was the truth? Clark didn’t want him anymore and fell for the Princess, as Tony said? Or Clark still loved him as always and Bruce was exaggerating what he was seeing feeling insecure?

“That man has alienated you. Joker took away your mobility and Superman your personality!”

So he wasn’t exaggerating the signs – other people saw them too. Yet Clark was honest when he said that he loved him and that his behavior was stupid and this wasn’t himself…

Bruce sighed and a small round cloud of breath was formed.

Or maybe Clark just didn’t want to hurt him by dumbing him and tried to cover the truth wanting to keep both…But this hurt him more. And he knew that something was wrong with Clark from the moment she appeared – even Clark in the start had admitted it.

He yanked his head and his gaze fixed on a lonely seagull. How was he supposed to handle this? He
didn’t have any previous experience of relationships – with people who loved him romantically. His reasoning sometimes urged him to kick Clark out – much like Tony said – but then he was realizing that this wasn’t his reasoning; rather his boiling emotions of jealousy, of feeling marginalized, out of the center of Clark’s attention, not his entire world anymore: it was his bleeding selfishness…

His real reasoning calculated the facts coldly and prompted him to use his current proximity to Clark to protect him from what was affecting him; and try to keep him from tumbling down this steep road. If Diana just wanted Superman for her lover Bruce would have let them be together; but if she used other means to charm Superman – especially, if his suspicion of her being an impostor was real – then he couldn’t let Clark fall into this. He didn’t know what more could she have in mind for Superman.

“Clark is affected by something.”

“Exactly. His dick!”

Bruce licked his dry lips. What if this was the thing? He was disappointing his friends permitting this to continue but did he disappoint himself?

He inhaled deeply letting the cold air cool his lungs. No, he knew he was doing the right thing; he knew that something was going on and that Clark deserved to be trusted and supported through this…Like Clark did for him…

The mist dissolved to be replaced by the relaxing light blue fluorescent color of the Fortress; the two huge rectangular crystal columns vibrated at the edges of the medical chamber and Bruce knew that their vibration was dictated by his vitals.

He was lying on his rectangular, crystal white bed that felt soft like a cloud; on the triangular nightstand was placed the Black Butterfly – the gem’s glow surpassing the crystal’s. Bruce looked fondly at the black diamond which was laid on his heart till he woke up from the coma.

He still felt exhausted to the point of lapsing again to an uninterrupted sleep; and sometimes he felt on the verge of slipping but his joy for being again with Clark erased the darkness that wanted to engulf him.

The door rolled upwards and Superman dressed in his ceremonial attire- the same Bruce wore - entered the chamber shining like the sun. His face beamed with a huge smile and his eyes sparkled like a child’s when fell on Bruce.

Bruce noticed that he held one of the odd, sphere crystal bowls and that meant that it was time to eat; his eyes lost some of their shine and Clark took it in.

“What’s wrong?” his frown was deep as he sat at a chair that the Fortress conjured for him.

“I can’t eat” Bruce sighed eyeing the bowl.

“Jor El says that you can eat this.”

Bruce licked his lips and yanked his head on the fluffy white pillow.

“I know that the Fortress can sustain my needs in nutrients.”

Clark leaned above him and caressed his forehead, planting soft kisses.

“I know it’s difficult, Bruce; after all this time, food disgusts you and your stomach feels like a stone;
yet you should start eating - a small bite at a time…For me?” he smiled and Bruce was dazzled by his beauty.

He nodded gulping but when the spoon approached his mouth, his gag reflex shut his throat stubbornly. Clark pressed his lips and Bruce was sure that there was some wetness in his eyes so he opened his mouth and took in the food wanting to see again Clark’s blinding smile.

“I’m not a baby, you know…” he commented pleased by Clark’s happiness.

“I beg to differ: you’re my baby!”

Bruce snorted but couldn’t stop a smile that became a pout when Clark brought another spoonful at his mouth.

“You said a small bite at a time…” he muttered displeased.

“Ooops…” Clark blushed and left the spoon back in the bowl on the nightstand.

He placed his hand over Bruce’s hand that still had some strange things attached on; most of the bones of his arms were fractured and he couldn’t move them. But at least he could feel them, unlike with his body below the waist that simply wasn’t there.

Clark’s eyes that were more clear and shiny than the crystals in the Fortress captured Bruce’s tired eyes; he was serious and his hand squeezed gently Bruce’s.

“You need to start eating as normal as possible in order to regain your strength and leave this bed” he tilted his head with a guilty expression as he regarded Bruce’s body “though I don’t mind you on a bed…But not this one!” he nodded. “Too many bad memories…”

He took again the spoon and shook it like a flying plane.

“Vzooom…vzoooooom! I’m asking permission to land!” he yelled in a tough voice and Bruce chuckled. “Open the hangar or we’ll crash!”

Bruce opened his mouth and gulped the food that was in jelly form and as a matter of fact delicious. But his organism still didn’t want it as if still doubting that he was alive.

“If you’re a good kid and eat all your food, when you’re ready, good ol’ Clark will bring you something special…” he said mischievous and Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“What?”

“Almond praline filled donuts with white chocolate topping – The Prince’s donut!”

Bruce closed his eyes and huffed reminiscently.

“Now we’re talking!”

Bruce was still smiling as the fluorescent blue was replaced by the gray sky and sea of the Harbor. Though he knew that these moments of affection were over, never to come again; and that realization clawed at his guts.

“Bruce?”
Tony stopped his Audi in front of the Avengers’ Tower; he decided to come early to avoid the reporters but even at this time – hardly half past seven – the street was crammed with them. He could have gone from the back entrance yet he didn’t want them to believe that he was afraid to confront them. He put on his designer sun glasses and got out giving the keys to the valet.

The press flock stormed at him launching questions and the security stuff struggled to hold them off. But Tony stood and looked unfazed at his masterpiece that stood wounded; the gap at the 90th floor visible even from the ground. Of course, Tony’s mood was dark not only from the disaster but also from what he had said to Bruce.

“How they managed to breach the Tower?”

“Safest building in the world and getting hijacked by a clown?”

“With world’s mighty superheroes in it?”

Tony overlooked them and proceeded stretching his posture in his brown long coat.

“You can’t protect the world!”

“Superheroes are nothing!”

Tony stopped and turned completely expressionless to the yelling mob.

“You’ll get your opportunity to bark appropriately at the Press Conference we’ll schedule in due time. Till then” he thought to say ‘fuck off’ but now he was S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new director and should keep appearances so he stretched his lips in a fake smile that exposed his gritted teeth “have a nice day!”

He twitched his mouth in disgust as the double door opened to his approach and walked in the shining foyer. People there were also gloom but greeted him so he did the same.

The silver spacious elevator stopped and the artificial female voice announced the 90th floor – reception hall.

He pouted and marched his way inside the hall unbuttoning his long coat. He stood in the middle, took off his glasses that threw in his pocket and looked all over.

At the far end of the vast hall, opposite him, five frames of the whole wall windows were smashed – the shards still all over the floor. Throughout the hall, the buffets lay upturned bearing marks of blasts – thankfully, their shots found the tables and not people; on the floor, broken crockery, bottles and knives, spoons and forks, flowers and tablecloths’ torn pieces. The stage were the band was playing was filled with pieces of instruments – Tony would have to compensate these.

His eyes stopped at the corner of the bar where every bottle was shattered since the selves had collapsed – probably from some blast. The bench was cracked in many places from bottles that terrorized guests had smashed believing that they were hitting monsters. But what made Tony close his eyes and rub the orbs was the sketching of a body the police had made…A young man had died last night.

A compassionate hand squeezed his shoulder and he looked – although he already knew – at Pepper dressed in her usual business attire, energetic as always despite the fact she had to handle the mess afterwards.

“Stark Industries are covering the hospital expenses of the injured and the funeral of Nathan Keaton”
she said calm. “I contacted everyone for the meeting at 9 o’ clock.”

Tony cupped her hand and nodded pressing his lips.

“I fucked things up, Pepsi…” he mumbled and she rolled her eyes.

“That’s not original, Tony” she shrugged a shoulder.

“With Bruce” he stressed the name arching his eyebrows and Pepper sighed.

Bruce stared at the spot where the voice came and through the mist saw a tall, very broad man approaching; he was blond and Bruce could make out that he had a long ponytail. He couldn’t discern his features but he wasn’t sure it was due to the fog...

Something inside him clenched his heart with terror: little Bruce could combine a ponytail only with one man…The Vulture…And though Bruce knew that he was dead through the mist Chill’s jeering smile returned.

“Bruce, are you alright?”

Bruce blinked to clean his eyes from Chill’s form. In front of him stood…Thor dressed in jeans and a brown leather jacket, his long blond locks tied in a loose ponytail.

“Fine…Nice outfit!”

Thor looked at himself and ruffled his hair.

“Mmm…I finally admitted defeat with suits and decided to go for more casual clothes. I got it this time?”

Bruce nodded smiling.

“I prefer jeans too – but Alfred wants me dressed as a noble…and I hate ruining his mood…You’re perfect!”

Thor seemed proud of himself.

“You shouldn’t be here at this time, alone” the god remarked.

Bruce shrugged.

“It’s not Gotham…”

Thor leaned his waist at the railing looking at Bruce.

“Yes, but New York is still dangerous” he shook his head. “And Gotham seems to hunt you everywhere.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“It seems so…but I wanted to clear my thoughts – hoping that my cap would conceal my identity.”

Thor crossed his arms over his broad chest.

“Not only your cap” he raised an eyebrow.
Bruce placed his forearms on the railing and gazed at the gloomy gray sea.

“I wouldn’t expect a god strolling at a park…”

Thor followed Bruce’s gaze.

“We have a meeting at the Tower and till then I thought to walk a bit…I love the view from here…” Bruce nodded. “You should come to the meeting.”

Bruce turned his gaze on him.

“I’m not an Avenger neither a hero.”

Thor chuckled.

“Poor Fury! He wanted so much to make you one of us…And it’d be a huge honor, Bruce…but I respect your wishes. However in that meeting you should be: I’m sure that it was you who figured out their plan and saved all of us. Again.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Jarvis did that.”

Thor nodded smiling completely unconvinced but respecting the man’s wishes.

“I should have with me your cape to return it…”

Thor licked his bottom lip.

“Please, keep it…I know you prefer the red cape of another hero but keep mine too as a token of my gratitude, friendship and alliance.”

Bruce nodded.

“Thank you, Thor” he narrowed his eyes thoughtful and Thor stared at him interested. “Can I ask you something?”

“Certainly.’’

“Can you check on Bagdana?” he met Thor’s gaze.

“Has anything happened?” he asked worried frowning but Bruce shook his head in denial.

“I guess I’m a bit insecure lately…” he crooked his lips and shrugged; Clark’s words still stinging him. But the dream he had seen some days ago where Bagdana saved him from the factory instead of Clark still occupied the back of his busy mind.

Thor nodded.

“It doesn’t hurt to be sure, right?”

Bruce arched an eyebrow.

“My thought exactly” he grinned.

Thor reflected the smile and Bruce looked at his wristwatch: he felt nice with Thor’s respect and genial friendship yet there was some uneasiness.
“You are emotionally tired…” the Asgardian said sad “and sorrowful…”

Bruce smiled.

“Reading minds is part of your special abilities?” he asked playfully to change the subject.

“No, actually, this is Loki’s area of expertise” Thor replied understanding Bruce’s intention. “He can’t invade my mind though.”

Bruce frowned and Thor looked interested.

“What?”

“A thought…Last night Joker had definitely help.”

“Jarvis told us something about toxins created by some Dr. Crane.”

Bruce gave an affirmative nod.

“Other than that he needed someone powerful to breach the Tower’s security and stop every activity locking the building inside-out” Thor watched fascinated. “I’m thinking…Joker isn’t the kind of gun someone would hire and definitely Joker wouldn’t have worked for any usual mobster – the show he created manifests just that and also shows that his partner has a knack for chaos and ‘fun’ as well. I watched the surveillance video from Joker’s escape and it looks like someone intervened without showing himself shutting off the building for two hours. Crane was just as ‘miraculously’ saved from arrest some days ago. A Deus ex machina…” Bruce locked eyes with Thor whose eyes sparkled.

“Loki!”

“He has a rivalry with you so he could want to ridicule you and your teammates that way.”

Thor shook his head.

“And he showed an interest for you, which could lead him to Crane and Joker.”

Bruce grinned.

“Loki can invade and control minds – he could do that with the Avengers, Superman and Wonder Woman – into rendering them unable to use their powers and skills. Yet he can’t do that with your mind so he used Crane’s genius in toxins…”

Thor clenched his waist with both hands and yanked his head grunting causing some clouds to move swiftly.

“I can’t believe it! The rascal! I always tried to treat him better than the other Asgardians do and even made excuses for him but now…”

Bruce raised his palm in an appeasing gesture.

“That’s a theory – we can’t be sure and if you surge and confront him we’ll never know.”

“What do you propose?”

“Watch him discreetly and that way he’d lead us to his partners before they do more damage.”

Thor furrowed his brow.
“Lead? Joker and Crane must be with him.”

Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“I’m sure that both Crane and Joker wouldn’t act as a god’s lapdogs…they probably are back in Gotham under Loki’s protection.”

“Do you want me to say all these to the Avengers?”

“Of course but…” Thor smiled.

“You want me to not reveal that you thought it…”

Bruce nodded and Thor shook his head crossing his arms over the chest; his eyes filled with warm admiration.

“I must head for the one police plazza: I have an appointment” Bruce muttered feeling overwhelmed from the god’s admiring eyes.

“Do you want me to accompany you?”

Bruce shook his head and chuckled.

“I wouldn’t want you to be late in that meeting: Tony is a very strict director” a shadow ran his eyes on the remembrance of what happened at the kitchen.

Thor thought of replying that as a god he could disappear and reappear in the other corner of the planet in a second yet he sensed that the youth wanted to be alone. So he just nodded and stretched his hand for Bruce to shake it.

“I’m glad I met you, Bruce; whenever you need something…anything…” he lowered his eyes shyly.

“Think of my name or call me and I’ll be there.”

“I appreciate that, Thor.”

The Asgardian turned to leave as Bruce did but stopped and looked at the human’s back. Bruce sensed that and turned too.

“Last night when I was unable to make use of my skills and Mjolnir felt suddenly strange…I felt…disabled” he pressed his lips “and realized how you feel” Bruce’s eyes flashed as they collided with the god’s baby blue eyes. “It was overwhelming getting a glimpse of what you experience every moment and even more shuddering, realizing your willpower, the strength being a hero even in that chair, fighting the difficulties…” the god smiled. “I feel weak in front of you…”

Bruce blinked uncomfortable and clutched the armrests.

“Superman is the luckiest being in existence to have you…” he placed his palm on his heart and continued his road.

“Bruce, I didn’t believe that I’d say it, but I’m glad you didn’t attend the party: if you were affected by the fear toxin, the green Thing would have demolished the Tower and casualties would have been way more – even some of us among them…” that was the only attempt on humor from Tony throughout the meeting and even he knew that it was lame – he didn’t need Dr. Banner’s gloomy stare to confirm it.
Tony stretched in the back of his chair; the conference hall had emptied as Thor, Steve, Dr. Banner, Natasha and Fury left. Steve had kept his agreement with Bruce and didn’t reveal his friend’s true involvement; of course, Thor knew already that Bruce was Batman so he certainly figured who was guiding Jarvis through all. Natasha had kept an eyebrow arched throughout the meeting and Fury… Good ol’ Fury had always believed that Bruce was the Batman but his face stayed cool and expressionless.

And then Thor began analyzing his theory of Loki being behind the attack and Tony detected Bruce’s deductive thinking. As well as in Thor’s suggestion to not confront Loki immediately because a theory was a theory and they didn’t have proofs…

Tony tapped his fingers at the enormous, round shaped glass meeting table; a deep frown had settled in his brow throughout the meeting even if he chose not to think about his attitude in the kitchen. Now the frown became deeper and his eyes though focused on New York’s skyline from the whole wall windows, saw only Bruce’s back.

A stupid god was messing with them and implicated Bruce in this using Gotham’s scum in his plans. Bruce had told them about that strange creature that came across in that forest in Thasos moments before Bruce was attacked. Loki had helped him then till his friends came to stop the green things; but maybe this was just a camouflage. Maybe he had organized the attack to act the good guy and… Bring the Amazon in the whole picture.

Tony rubbed his goatee deep in thought feeling Pepper’s intense gaze on him. Maybe Bruce was right and the Princess wasn’t the Princess after all? Loki could control minds so he could be either controlling the real Princess or using someone else as a puppet – and he could also be affecting Superman’s mind.

He had his arms crossed over the chest, stretching his legs under the table. He was pouting. No, even if Superman was affected by something that couldn’t exonerate him for his behavior to Bruce…

He slapped his face with both palms and Pepper narrowed her eyes and stood from her seat at the side of the table. Thinking Superman’s ass behavior to Bruce brought his own behavior to stab him in the back. What was his excuse for speaking to Bruce like this? He meant no harm…He only wanted to make Bruce get a grip…Feeble excuses…

He roared and jerked from his leather-metallic chair, his motion bringing him face to face with Pepper.

“I’m an asshole!” he exclaimed.

She shrugged.

“That’s not news…”

Tony smirked and held her upper arms planting a soft kiss on her lips. But then something flashed in his mind. Thor had met Bruce before their meeting: that was the only way he could have listened to his friend’s deduction.

“I must see, Thor, doll!”

Pepper squinted.

“Don’t be an asshole, again…” she spat to his retreating back and he nodded without stopping.

Fury intercepted him as the double doors opened simultaneously for him to enter and Tony leave.
His consultant made to tell him something but Tony raised his index finger graciously.

“With you in a moment…” he mumbled hastily and ran to catch the elevator; the young lady inside holding it for him.

He stepped out at the floor with the Avengers’ apartments – the other Avengers because he had an entire floor as his apartment (he wasn’t so cocky but he needed the space for his personal lab…and snooker area…and Jacuzzi).

Thor was leaving his apartment in his god attire – he had come to the meeting dressed in civilian with his hair tied in a ponytail which was a huge improvement from his suit choices. His hammer safely stashed in his belt. The blond eyed him curious and Tony strode to him.

“Did you see Bruce this morning?” he demanded stretching his neck to decrease the height difference.

“Yes, I did” he answered simply. “Why?”

Because we had a quarrel and Bruce took his car and disappeared…

“What do you want from him?” Tony demanded and the Asgardian seemed utterly insulted.

“Why would I want anything from your friend?” he frowned. “I cherish and I’m honored from his company but I don’t try to inflict my presence on him!” his calm demeanor prevailed and looked his comrade in the eyes. “Our meeting was by chance – you have my word!” he squeezed Tony’s shoulder – and that hurt. “What’s wrong?”

Tony crossed his arms and arched his eyebrows.

“I just don’t want another god circling him – he has enough already…”

Thor’s kind eyes filled with honest concern.

“Does Superman treat him badly?” he asked and the thunders he had under his orders surfaced in his voice.

Tony regarded him suspicious and uncrossed his arms.

“Just watch over that nutcase, Loki…”

He turned on his heels and marched to the elevator, Thor watching him lopsided.

Bruce slid his wheelchair on the foyer of the One Police Plaza, the New York City Police Headquarters. He had given his testimony and now he was heading to the front door and his car; he was determined to leave for Gotham at once.

“Mr. Wayne!” he heard a known voice behind his back and took in several interested eyes on him from bystanders who knew the name.

He turned his chair and as he already knew Oliver Queen came to him having just left the elevator. A big radiant smile was on his face and he stretched his hand for a handshake immediately.

“Mr. Queen…” Bruce greeted him with a courteous nod and shook his hand.
“I couldn’t fancy finding you here – I was sure that Lieutenant would have come to your residence to spare you the inconvenience.”

“I like being treated like every other citizen” Bruce grinned.

“Mmm…better move on…” the tycoon said catching with the corners of his eyes people staring at them. “I came for some additional information – you see, last night most of us were transmitted to the hospitals for check up. But fortunately, the antidote that was dispersed in the hall was great and there were no side effects.”

He held the door open for Bruce to get out and inhaled deeply the cool air; the mist had vanished but still the sky was cloudy and the day very cold.

“Well, Mr. Queen, it was nice to see you again but I must go.”

Oliver’s face fell though his eyes had still their familiar smugness.

“I’m sure your schedule here in New York isn’t so crammed to forbid a nice cup of hot coffee.”

Bruce felt the urge to refuse: he wasn’t in the mood after all. However, his mind recounted the videos and the interviews of Queen where he spoke about his rescue and the Amazon. Maybe he could answer his questions.

“Why not?” Bruce smiled.

“I know a place with the best coffee in town – it’s not far from here. We can stroll there” he put on his cashmere light brown gloves and made an inviting gesture to Bruce who wore his woolen cap and his black woolen gloves.

The place wasn’t too big but it was cozy, its walls painted in peach color while the corners were highlighted in maroon making the feeling of warmth greater. The center was occupied by a round shaped bar which shining wood was chocolate brown; rectangular marble small tables were scattered around, comfy round shaped small armchairs luring the customers with their maroon velvet.

Though it was day the secret lighting behind the maroon lines of the walls was on and the sphere shaped metallic table lambs were lit due to the semi darkness the heavy cloudy sky casted.

Oliver helped Bruce took off his coat and eyed intrigued his jeans and black woolen turtleneck blouse for an instance before he led Bruce to a corner table where the rectangular window that ran the middle of the entire world gave a spectacular view of the Brooklyn Bridge. Yet Bruce’s gaze was captured by the newspapers in the stands right next to the bar as Queen placed their order to the waitress.

“Ironman rusts” one read above Tony’s beaming face from last night; beside him a picture of the Tower gaping from its 90th floor.

“Superheroes for laughs! Clowns in Joker’s show!” and in smaller letters underneath: “Who saved the day?”

“One dead, 35 injured in Avengers’ attack: the world isn’t safe even with Superheroes – After S.H.I.E.L.D.’s recent revelations, the protectors’ inability stresses the need for reevaluation.”

Bruce remembered Tony’s outburst and felt for his friend: Tony was in his greatest moment believing that he established something valuable and Joker smashed everything, turning the triumph into failure…And then having to endure Bruce’s problems as well…It was understandable that Tony
would snap.

Queen followed his gaze and shook his head.

“They’re too harsh” he arched his eyebrows. “But that’s what those journalists do. Stark must be distraught.”

Bruce yanked his head.

“No, Tony is very strong to let this get to him.”

Queen smiled and watched the waitress serving their order and then Bruce taking a sip from his hot coffee.

“Well? How’s your coffee?” Oliver asked intrigued “Was I right?”

Bruce licked his lips.

“It’s quite delicious but honestly I can’t judge because I don’t have much experience with coffee – Alfred insists on milk and juice because they are more nutrient.”

The older man nodded.

“Right…You need the best quality food there is after all these years…” he said thoughtful but taking in Bruce’s discomfort sipped his own coffee. “I hope Alfred isn’t waiting you in the car.”

“No, he is at the penthouse. I came by myself.”

Oliver cocked an eyebrow.

“What a brave young man!” he exclaimed.

Bruce took a bit of his cake.

“Mr. Queen, I was watching some coverage over last night’s events and the reporters recounted your story…”

Queen crooked his mouth and sighed dramatically waving his hand dismissively.

“They do it all the time” he leaned towards Bruce locking eyes with him. “I’m sure you know the feeling” he stretched back in his chair. “But call me Oliver – I know I’m older than you, but you’ll make an old man a favor.”

Bruce grinned.

“You’re quite young, Mr. Queen…Oliver.”

Queen changed his crossing leg and turned to the waitress.

“Another cake to my friend, please! My gratitude, Bruce.”

But Bruce was eager to ask.

“I wanted to ask you about the Princess of the Amazons.”

Now the full of Queen’s smugness returned to his sculpted face and an enigmatic grin shaped his lips.
“I think I just caught our fair Prince lying…” he said mock accusing.

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“Lying?”

The older man chuckled.

“A couple of days ago you declared in public that you’re not having an affair with Superman but now you asking about the Princess because she clearly fancies him.”

Bruce shook his face.

“It has nothing to do with Superman” Queen nodded snidely. “I was just curious: she said that she took you to Themyscira to heal your wounds.”

“Exactly” he replied nonchalant sipping more from his coffee.

“You saw the island?”

Oliver’s smile was huge.

“Of course, Bruce – I stayed months there: she found me almost dead. Weren’t for her I’d be dead now. I strolled this island a lot and I was mesmerized by its mountains – Hera’s mountain, Aphrodite’s lake, Are’s canyon, Hephaestus’ caves. It’s like heaven: crystal waters running in streaks and waterfalls from the guts of the mountains; thick forests where birds song obliterate anything else. But what shadows every other thing are the Amazons” his eyes closed in nostalgia. “The most beautiful women sparring with their perfect bodies half naked – and among them a real gem, their Princess.”

Bruce’s heart fell: he hoped that Queen hadn’t seen the island or the Amazons. That he was kept blindfolded in a building. But he had witnessed everything. He pressed his lips: unless he was fooled as well?

Oliver tilted his head on the side perusing the face of the younger man, a sly grin forming. He leaned forward intertwining his fingers on the table.

“I know she isn’t the easiest person; she is arrogant and her politeness is only for those she considers equals. And definitely she doesn’t persuade for a philanthropist. But she saved me and since she brought me back, Diana helps people every day. She is good but she doesn’t like to show it to everyone. She is strict because that’s her role: she trained her sisters in Themyscira to defend themselves. Amazons aren’t many and they must be perfectly trained: Diana can’t manifest softness because then her warriors won’t be tougher than men: her people wouldn’t have survived thousands of years.”

Queen’s eyes stayed fixed on Bruce’s and to avoid his peruse he began eating his cake indifferent.

“Talk to me more about their temples, their buildings, their outfits” he said to the older man hoping to detect things unmatched with the legends.

Oliver squinted.

“Hm…That demands of a second meeting for dinner” he said slyly. “Perhaps in Gotham?”

Bruce was ready to reply when his Cosmos smartphone rang from his pocket and Queen huffed but
then reflected Bruce’s frown.

“Mr. Collins, I’ll call you as soon as I land to meet me there.”

Bruce ended the dial and opened his wallet hastily – his eyes were dark and his face pale. Oliver cupped Bruce’s hand when he put the money on the table.

“Please, it’s on me….” his eyes lost their smugness to honest concern. “Is everything alright?” he asked warmly.

Bruce looked at him but not in the eyes.

“I must return to Gotham immediately.”
Clark rushed to the office’s entrance along with most of his colleagues acting eagerness to welcome the newcomers; even Perry White came out of his office and his journalists opened up to give him a path.

Lois Lane marched to them unscathed but for some superficial scratches accompanied by Jimmie Olsen who unlike her seemed a bit shaken: Jimmie was too young and less experienced in tough situations. Yet the youth didn’t have an obvious injury apart from some bruises, disheveled hair and dazed eyes: Clark could tell that Jimmie was still shocked from the things he experienced under the fear toxin despite the fact that the antidote forbade the toxin from causing any long lasting side effect.

Clark patted the shoulder of the youth who was totally neglected by the others their attention on Lois. He smiled affectionate to him and the boy reflected the smile encouraged.

“Everything will be fine, Jimmie; you’re the best, buddy…”

The youth nodded, gratitude filling his eyes.

“They took the guests immediately to several hospitals in New York to make sure that there wasn’t any residual damage from the toxin and the…” Lois rolled her eyes recalling “ruckus. But the antidote was perfect and I was perfectly fine and I told them so but they grabbed me and put me in an ambulance though I kicked them hard” she was ranting, still pissed.

Perry laughed in his dry way.

“Probably that convinced them that you were still under the toxin’s influence.”

Lois clutched her waist with both hands, lolled her head on the side and snorted.

“I lost precious time of reportage!” she huffed and her colleagues chuckled – leave it to Lois to put the reportage over her wellbeing.

Perry patted her back patronizingly.

“Both of you are safe and sound and that’s what counts; after all, your reports, the video from Rogers tackling the ready to attack security staff stopping the bloodshed, and Jimmie’s photos were great – not to mention your exclusive video from Wayne dumbfounding Wonder Woman: you can’t imagine how many hits we get” he nodded.

“Yes, I do” she replied.

“And I’m sure that while in hospital you did some field work” he winked. “Which I expect to see very soon in an article, since yourself said that you’re alright.”

He turned his back to a huffing Lois who had crossed her arms over the chest.

“Jerk…” she spat in a low tone and Perry who had crossed the half distance to his office turned grinning.

“I know you love me, honey…”

As their colleagues dispersed after welcoming Lois back, the young woman strode to her desk ignoring pointedly Clark who followed her twisting his lips.
“I’m glad you’re alright” he said after she settled in her chair and Lois glared at him.

“You knew that already from last night” she whispered and then tilted her head arching her eyebrows. “Oh!” she exclaimed dramatically. “I forgot you were too engrossed in the Amazon to care about your friends…” she lowered more her voice “or your boyfriend.”

Clark sat carefully on her desk and rolled his eyes.

“Not a scene from you as well…!”

Lois chewed the tip of her pen and her eyes flashed.

“Don’t tell me that Bruce finally gave you hell for your behavior?” the glee dripped from her voice that came distorted from the pen in her mouth.

Clark crooked his mouth irritated.

“I should have made a scene – and actually I did” Lois batted her eyelids interested. “Captain America was carrying Bruce in his arms – bridal style! – and Thor muffled him in his cape!” he had to put an effort to not raise his voice – his sense of being treated unfair boiling.

But Lois’ eyes bulged thrilled and slapped her desk making her nearest colleagues look surprised at her.

“I’m gonna sue New York police! I should be there taking pictures! It’d be the exclusive of the year!” she narrowed her eyes which had the sparkle that told Clark that she had something on her mind. “Is there a way to use your eidetic memory to print images?”

Clark closed his eyes shaking his head exasperated.

“I come without provision for connectivity with printers…” he remarked snidely.

But Lois crossed her arms over the chest and casted a lopsided glance at her friend.

“I know a place where I could put that plug…” she said slyly with a gleeful shine in her eyes and Clark blushed. “You seriously made a scene to Bruce?” her voice became dead serious and scolding. “He is a paraplegic, Clark: without his chair he must rely to someone to carry him – also, despite the fact the snowfall stopped rather quickly at New York, it was freezing cold last night so Thor – gallantly – protected him with his cape. You see, you were too preoccupied to do any of that…”

Clark ran a hand through his hair thinking hard. Lois smirked.

“It seems that our Prince has a talent in attracting superheroes…Though some of them” her voice pointed at him “don’t appreciate what they have.”

“C’mon, Lois…” he huffed. “That night was a mess with all these toxins…I was affected” Lois smirked in disbelief.

“Thor was affected by the same toxins…” she snorted and Clark huffed.

“And Bruce the entire night was exchanging compliments with the Avengers and had people goggling at him so he didn’t have any right to ask me to shove away Diana.”

Lois frowned – that info was new.

“Wow!” she exclaimed though in a low tone to not cause stares. “Finally, the kid learnt some
things…” Clark yanked his head backwards. “And you, buster, know very well that Bruce was just polite with Stark’s teammates: what did you expect? To insult them as your…” she arched her eyebrows sarcastic “Diana did with him? And Bruce doesn’t give a damn about other people goggling at him; that’s why he got isolated at the balcony – for which I’m very glad because I wouldn’t want the poor thing being attacked by that nutcase, especially when you don’t give a damn about him.”

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose and frowned.

“I do care for Bruce and though Diana is a friend and I care for her too, Bruce is the one I love. I don’t want to lose him.”

Lois nodded.

“Then prove it. Because you may see the Amazon as a friend but it’s clear that she wants more…”

Clark shook his head and licked his lips.

“No, she doesn’t – she told me.”

Lois lolled her head at him with her gaze shouting ‘bitch please!’

“You’re sooooo idiot?” she shook her head exasperated “what am I asking now?” she told to herself twitching her fingers in the air. “Of course, she’d tell you that to not be the bitch who separates a couple but she continues working just that.”

She locked eyes with him.

“If you don’t want to lose Bruce you have to do this. You have to choose between the Amazon and him – you can’t honestly expect to continue playing Bruce like a fool – we both know that the boy is very clever” she blinked “despite the fact he fell for you…”

Clark cackled mocking.

“Very funny…”

Lois tapped her fingers at the desk and looked him solemnly in the eyes.

“If you lose Bruce because of your attitude it won’t be any funny… Think carefully, Smallville…”

Clark pressed his lips recalling the way he had spoken to Bruce last night…He was so harsh on him and Bruce didn’t deserve that…even if his arguments were laughable: it’d have been more decent if Bruce had admitted that he was jealous than making up all these. Yet Clark had taken his decision.

“You realize that you’re pushing me away?”

Bruce’s calm voice told him again and he saw Rogers, Thor and a shadow figure that was the unknown stranger of last night circling Bruce – if he let Bruce leave they would have their chance… and Clark couldn’t tolerate even the thought of their hands touching Bruce’s naked body – this beautiful body was only his and would remain that way.

The soft, almost imperceptible humming of the engines lulled Bruce in and out of dozing off with his eyes fixed on the gray, crying clouds outside the strip window that covered the wall’s center throughout its length. The cup at the white oval table in front of him was half with coffee; he asked
for a second coffee though he wasn’t a fan hoping that this would help him fight back his fatigue that weighted down his bones.

He could have lain down at the comfy bed of bedroom on the backside but he doubted if his agitation would let him sleep even for a few minutes, much more throughout the journey to Gotham. But he settled for stretching his body in the big, white colored armchair, the blue pillows increasing his comfort.

Oliver Queen had offered to fly him to Gotham with his private jet but Bruce refused politely to the man’s half grin and arching eyebrows.

“I understand…After the unfortunate incident in Luthor’s suit, you don’t want to be isolated with a stranger…” he pressed his lips nodding. “I don’t blame you… But maybe, in due time, I’ll manage to earn your trust.”

Bruce could have rent or bought a jet but doing so he would increase the gap between him and Tony after the morning exchange and he didn’t want to solidify coldness in their friendship. Tony was one of his life’s pillars and didn’t want anything to ruin their relationship. Misunderstandings must be quickly dissolved.

He could discern Tony’s initial surprise and then joy receiving his call.

“I hope I don’t interrupt anything, Tony.”

He could imagine his friend running his hand in his messy by now hair but Tony’s relief was clear in his voice.

“Are you kidding? Nothing is more important that you, little guy…Everything alright? You left…” because of me – Bruce could hear his guilt “and it’s freezing cold today.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Not inside your car…” Tony laughed but Bruce was in a hurry. “Umm…Tony, I need to get to Gotham ASAP.”

“What’s the matter? You make me worry – you want me to come with you?”

“No, Tony; you have already too much to cope and there’s no need to worry, I’ll tell you later; but I need to leave right now.”

“Okay” Tony sensing the urgency didn’t insist. “Happy will be at the private airport in ten minutes – he’ll arrange everything to leave at once. Is Alfred with you?”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“No: he packs our things and I don’t have the luxury of waiting. I called him to not worry.”

Tony made an affirmative sound.

“Leave the car to the airport’s parking and I’ll arrange its transport home.”

“Thank you, Tony!”

Tony sighed.

“No, I thank you, Bruce for speaking to me again after what I say in the morning.”
Bruce chuckled though his mood was really bad.

“I don’t have another friend with a private jet…”

Tony laughed: as if Bruce couldn’t rent or buy a jet…

“Thank Goodness then I’m a filthy rich bastard, huh? Have a great trip, buddy and try to get some rest – you didn’t sleep much last night…”

“I’ll try, Tony; hold on, buddy…”

The double door opened and Tony strode inside the conference room ending the call with Happy Hogan. He threw casually his StarkStell in his jacket pocket and looked at Pepper who had taken his seat at the head of the table working on her tablet. Fury – predictably – wasn’t there waiting.

Tony trotted to Pepper, leaned and kissed her cheek.

“You’re attempting a take-over against me?” he asked seriously locking eyes with her.

“I’m glad your mood is better…” she muttered indifferently continuing her work. “I prepare your press conference.”

Tony dived on the next chair and tied his hands behind his neck. He sighed.

“I told Bruce off because he is so indulgent with Superman and…in the end Bruce is doing the same with me. And I’m very happy for it!” he frowned “that makes me a hypocrite, huh?”

Pepper lifted her eyes looking disapproving at him.

“And a scum…”

Tony pursed his lips and nodded.

“Thanks!”

Pepper shrugged.

“Don’t mention it…” she kept looking at him expecting. “Well?”

Tony yanked his head backwards and sighed.

“He called me saying that he needed to return to Gotham” he cocked his eyebrows. “He could easily find another way to do it but he just wanted to show me that he wasn’t angry at me…”

“While he should” Pepper spat.

Tony ran his hands through his hair.

“Yeah, I’m so lucky…”

“I’m looking now at Gotham’s news outlets for anything that could cause Bruce’s haste but other than Arkham’s last night escape there’s nothing.”

Tony nodded.
“I searched too and we knew about the escape from last night so this wasn’t the reason for Bruce’s departure.”

“Something personal then.”

Tony sat upright.

“He’d have told me.”

Pepper shrugged.

“Maybe he couldn’t right now…”

The door opened revealing Fury’s imposing form.

“Tony, have a moment?”

“Sure. Anything for my favorite baldy.”

Tony gathered himself and stood following Fury outside leaving Pepper to resume her work.

Mr. Collins was a man at his sixties with white hair and wise brown eyes; average at height and weight he didn’t give the impression of one of the best lawyers in US and the head of Wayne Enterprises’ legal department.

He leaned back at his dark blue car’s hood and with arms crossed watched Stark’s private jet landing at the airstrip of Wayne Enterprises’ small private airport. The premises belonged to Thomas Wayne and then fell into Falcone’s hands along with everything else but now the platinum ‘W’ welcomed passengers in the front and jets in the five hangars. At the moment, the small airport hosted jets of other owners because Bruce Wayne didn’t want to spend yet a large amount of money to buy his own plane after he sold Falcone’s: the youth believed that the company’s priorities lay elsewhere.

Mr. Collins had parked his car in the hangar that was permanently given to Tony Stark. He stretched his posture watching the wonder that was Stark’s unique jet entering; his machines were almost soundless in comparison with other crafts but what caught the eye was the curvy cabin part that ended up with a sharp decline to the cockpit that reminded of a shark’s snout – however the cockpit’s dark to the exterior big windows reminded the proud glare of an eagle.

In a few minutes, the door opened and the crew helped Bruce descent the ramp with his chair. The young billionaire thanked the crew by handshake, wished them a nice trip back and headed to Mr. Collins that he had noticed as soon as the door opened.

“Good morning, Mr. Wayne” the man hastened to meet him and shook hands with his employer.

Bruce smiled.

“Good morning, Mr. Collins; I see it’s a very cold day in Gotham too… Thankfully, Tony’s jet isn’t thwarted by elements! You didn’t have to come; I could take a cub.”

Mr. Collins chuckled.

“That would be a disgrace, Mr. Wayne, leaving our president take a cub when Wayne Enterprises have so many cars.”
They moved to the car and Mr. Collins kept the passenger’s door open for Bruce to slip there from his wheelchair; Bruce pressed the option in the control screen at the armrest and the chair folded for Mr. Collins to place it to the trunk.

“Thank you, Mr. Collins” Bruce said to him when he sat at the driver seat.

Collins smiled warmly.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Wayne.”

It was indeed a very grim day even for Gotham’s standards and the gray streets seemed grayer under the cloudy sky and the constant soaking of the rain – it wasn’t a heavy rain; raindrops fell scarcely with a steady rhythm but they were frozen drenching to the bone those pedestrians who didn’t carry umbrellas. Hurried footsteps crushed the small puddles on the cement and the water splashed around.

Bruce loved the rain and the way it hued Gotham’s imposing buildings and gloomy streets – the way the water dampened the sharp lights of the city. He had the impression that the water from the sky cleaned the grim city from filth and sins…exactly as he wished the rain could do to his soul and mind. His mind was calculating his options and his plans as the wipers danced up and down to push away the drops.

Mr. Collins parked the car in front of a modest height building with stern rectangular lines; it was a public building and people were coming in and out constantly from the main entrance.

“Everything is under control, Mr. Wayne” Collins reassured his employer seeing his agitation.

Bruce nodded.

They entered the building; Bruce from the side ramp and Mr. Collins holding his brown leather briefcase from the small cement staircase. The veteran lawyer didn’t need to ask at the information desk; he gestured to the small elevator that barely contained Bruce’s chair – which was a really slim chair in comparison with the common wheelchairs. Obviously, the building was very old without any renovation to cover the modern needs – even the external ramp was constructed really recently.

The department they wanted was at the second floor; a small square gray label read ‘Social Service’ with black capital letters. Bruce’s heart skipped some beats and Mr. Collins patted his back and led the way.

There were many offices with shut doors forbidding indiscreet stares since the services referred to sensitive cases. Yet Mr. Collins knew where to go and knocked confidently the door.

A young woman around her thirties sat behind an old, small, simple wooden desk with a PC screen on her right. She was speaking to a shaken boy who was clenching the armrests of the metallic chair in front of the desk. At the second chair, another woman a bit older was watching the exchange.

The boy shook his head stubbornly denying; his sweet cheeks were flushed.

“It can’t be…She took me to school a couple of hours ago…she can’t…”

The social worker inhaled deeply.

“Police found your grandmother’s car abandoned but no trace of her, Richard” her voice was cracked with real concern. “You understand that you can’t stay by yourself so you’ll be housed temporarily at the ‘Thomas and Martha Wayne Haven’ – which is a very warm and wonderful place - till either your grandmother is found and returns or…” she hesitated to continue.
The boy’s eyes widened and he gasped.

“She is not dead!” he ground his teeth and the social worker nodded pressing her lips in a reassuring smile.

The social worker finally acknowledged Collins and Bruce but before she addressed them the door opened without a warning knock. Bruce was looking at Richard who in his distress hadn’t noticed him but then he eyed frowned the newcomer.

“He isn’t going to any orphanage, I’m his uncle – he’ll come with me” Tony Zucco said and Dick’s eyes sparkled hopefully meeting his uncle’s form.

But this relieved sparkling became angry when he finally saw Bruce. The boy jerked upright, puzzled by Wayne’s presence but hiding it under his ire.

“What are you doing here?! It’s not enough you saw me burying my family? You’re an evil demon! Get out of here!”

“Dick…” the second woman who was his school’s social worker held the boy’s upper arms. “Calm down, dear.”

Bruce felt a stab in his chest and the curious stares on him after the boy’s reaction increased his uneasiness – but he was determined to not retreat.

Zucco approached Dick and ruffled his hair.

“Do not worry, Dick. You won’t have to see him again” he casted a snide sideways glance at Bruce.

He turned to the social worker who was still baffled from the boy’s angry reaction to Bruce.

“As I said, I’m the boy’s uncle – his only relative. I’ll take Dick with me” he gave his ID to the social worker who perused it.

She fixed her glasses.

“You have to fill some papers and bring some documents; you can take Dick with you and then the court will decide about his guardianship.”

Bruce stiffened but Collins squeezed his shoulder.

“Mr. Grayson won’t go with Mr. Zucco” the lawyer said calmly.

Zucco jerked his head at him unpleasantly surprised with his eyes narrowed in a threatening expression.

“Why?” he demanded.

Bruce straightened his head.

“Because I’m his guardian.”

Mr. Collins after forty years practicing law he had countless connections in every public service and people respected and trusted him that he wouldn’t make ill use of inside information. So when Mr. Wayne called him a Sunday afternoon asking him information about the procedure for becoming a kid’s guardian and the following morning came to his office to give him more details, Collins informed his contacts to let him know if anything important happened concerning Ms. Turner or
Richard Grayson.

Upon being informed that Ms. Turner’s car was found abandoned at the outskirts of Gotham, he immediately called his employer and the social service’s director.

“No way!” Dick snarled at Bruce.

But Mr. Collins walked to the social worker’s desk, laid his briefcase on the desk, opened it and gave some documents to the woman under Zucco’s frown that Bruce knew that covered barely restrained wrath.

Bruce watched the social worker reading the documents and realized that everyone in the room did the same. Dick was clutching his cheeks and Bruce felt really bad he caused such turmoil to the boy.

“Well, Ms. Jhonas?” Collins asked her using the name of the golden plate on her desk.

She took off her glasses.

“The documents are completely legitimate” she nodded. “Indeed, Mr. Bruce Wayne was given the guardianship of Richard Grayson by Ms. Melanie F. Turner, his grandmother. So, Richard should go with Mr. Wayne.”

Dick’s eyes flashed angrily and he clenched his fists.

“I prefer the orphanage!” he growled, glaring at Bruce.

Bruce moved closer.

“Richard, please” he said calmly “I assure you that everything is going to be fine.”

But the kid gritted his teeth and clenched his uncle’s waist; Zucco caressed his hair.

“Don’t talk to me! Because of you I lost my family and now my granny! I won’t go with him!”

Mr. Collins met Bruce’s tired eyes and the younger man raised his hand in a waiting gesture.

“It is what your grandmother wanted, Dick” the social worker from Dick’s school said softly. “We must respect her wishes. She wanted the best for you.”

“I’ll stay with Tony! Granny was wrong! I won’t go anywhere with Wayne!”

But Zucco cupped the boy’s face with both hands and looked him in the eyes.

“It’s alright, champ – go with him for the time being: it won’t be for long. I won’t let him keep you” he smiled to the boy and Dick pursed his lips determined nodding reassured.

“I’m listening” Tony said to Fury as soon as the door to his office closed behind him automatically.

The panoramic view of New York’s skyline from the whole wall windows behind Tony’s back indicated that weather’s sullenness wasn’t going to subside soon.

Fury raised his eyebrows, his face as serious as ever.

“I think it’s high time we recruited Batman.”
Tony pouted and widened his eyes flabbergasted.

“You’ve schmoozed with him?” he mumbled.

Fury smirked, his eyes regarding Tony estimating.

“Says the man who had the Bat at his party.”

Tony understood where Fury was taking it but lifted a shoulder and lolled his head looking lopsided at the veteran.

“I had many party animals at my party but not a real animal…or a dressed up one.”

Fury chuckled showing off his pearly white teeth.

“C’mon, Tony, I think we understand each other… The Bat saved the day last night” Tony rolled his eyes. “You’re a good director after all: you took care to secure a contingency plan in case our safety measures failed.”

Tony nodded.

“Of course! I created a fucking genius AI: Jarvis.”

Fury shook his head.

“Jarvis just executed: a strategic genius was guiding him. And we know that this strategist is your friend, Bruce Wayne” he decided to stop Stark’s avoidance game.

Tony huffed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“That again…I thought you were cured from your obsession…I know a super therapist who specializes in compulsive preoccupation. Of course, there’s always Arkham Asylum as a contingency…”

He sank in his ergonomic chair behind the desk and tied his hands behind his neck, crossing loosely his legs.

“And you wanted to see me just for this?”

Fury crooked his mouth and sat at the comfy armchair in front of Tony’s desk.

“Till now Wayne had every reason for not wanting to join Avengers – his hunch proved right and I clap him for his insight to see through S.H.I.E.L.D. But now the League of Shadows is exterminated and S.H.I.E.L.D. sanitized.”

Tony stared at him keeping his fingers intertwined in front of his face. His eyes intense but unreadable and his lips pursed. Fury leaned forwards.

“His best friend is the director” he widened his eyes stressing his words. “He trusts you so he shouldn’t have any objection to join the organization you lead” he shook his head “He does trust you, right? He doesn’t have any reason to believe that your motives are shady or anything different than fighting injustice. So why not accepting to join us?”

Tony uncrossed his legs and leaned forwards as well.

“Maybe because Batman isn’t my friend and as a matter of fact he doesn’t trust me or any other
person?”

Fury leaned back in his chair huffing.

“We both know that Bruce Wayne is Batman; he proved it last night!”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“You do realize that you’re speaking about a man confined in a chair? The same time that Batman soars Gotham’s sky every night; even last night, some reported that saw him...in Gotham.”

Fury cocked an eyebrow.

“I know you could have found a way to make Batman patrol Gotham while he is disabled. Bruce is a master of deception and you as well as Mr. Fox master inventions” he blinked and shook his head. “I don’t care about revealing Batman’s identity; I’m just thrilled from the prospects of him joining us. Imagine it yourself: the man who defeated the League of Shadows twice, the first time while being their slave, channeling his genius in our cause.”

Tony who till then was watching almost avidly cocked an eyebrow and tapped his fingers on the glistening silver surface.

“Was Batman League’s slave?” he squinted. “How you came up with this? AND my genius is more than enough for S.H.I.E.L.D. We don’t need such darkness in our team.”

Fury lolled his head on the side and watched him squinting.

“You consider me inadequate for my position?” Tony asked him lifting his chin.

“Not at all; I just believe that you’d like your friend being safe in a legitimate organization instead of being a wanted vigilante facing not only villains’ bullets but also those of the cops. And we both know that Batman can really offer to the Avengers...Not to mention that Batman joining the Avengers will elevate S.H.I.E.L.D.’s and Avengers’ prestige – you know that although a vigilante he is a legend.”

“As every Avenger... For one last time: I don’t know who Batman is and I don’t give a damn. My priority is helping Bruce walk again. Now I have an important Press Conference to prepare and I suggest you look thoroughly the re-arrangements of our sectors’ security.”

Fury stood up and saluted Tony military style with a slightly ironic smile.

“Aye, aye, sir...” he narrowed his eye. “Think what I told you.”

Tony under furrowed eyebrows watched him leaving. He wouldn’t ever push Bruce join his team even if S.H.I.E.L.D.’s own survival depended on that.

It was late afternoon and Bruce was in his father’s study for a couple of hours when Alfred knocked.

“You have a visitor, sir.”

Bruce frowned.

“I didn’t have any meeting arranged...” it was a Sunday afternoon after all.
“Indeed, Master Bruce; but I believe that you’ll definitely want to see this visitor.”

As his wheelchair slid from the elevator to the grand salon he could see the back of his visitor’s head slightly above the back of the black couch. Alfred was following in his butler posture.

Bruce learnt from his childhood to be observant so that back of head was enough for him to identify his visitor. He frowned.

“Ms. Turner, how nice to see you!” he said as soon as they faced each other.

The old lady shook Bruce’s offered hand. He could detect her agitation and distress.

“Mr. Wayne…” she inhaled deeply “Bruce” she remembered his old request and Bruce nodded.

“I’m sorry I came without an appointment…” she upturned her hand in hopelessness “or a call…”

Bruce waved her worries off.


Ms. Turner touched her cheek but seemed unwilling to start talking so Alfred having already served tea to the old lady made his excuses to let them speak alone and Bruce met his butler’s eyes communicating his thanks.

“Well?” he asked softly.

Ms. Turner pressed her lips.

“Bruce, you’re a great young man and I know how much you love Dick…”

Bruce nodded without saying anything to let her to continue. Ms. Turner seemed hesitant but then as if something nudged her she licked her lips and gathered her courage.

“I’d like to ask you” Bruce was watching her face’s twitches that cried her agony. “If of course you want…to be Dick’s guardian” she exhaled.

Bruce was shocked: he never expected to hear that. The woman took in his astonishment.

“I know, sweetie…You’re too young…more like Dick’s big brother…and you have too responsibilities already and problems of your own…”

Despite being surprised he could tell that the old lady was too upset and disheartened so he approached her and smiled at her.

“Please, calm down, Ms. Turner: drink some tea.”

She reflected his smile and cupped his hand on his chair’s black leather armrest.

“You have a golden heart, dear” she lowered her eyes. “And I’m taking advantage of that…”

Bruce shook his head in denial.

“No, you’re not: it is an honor that you trust me with that yet Dick hates me…” his sadness was clear.

Ms. Turner took the blue royal porcelain cup and sipped from her tea.
“He is still young and grief stricken…he’ll understand that our family’s murder wasn’t your fault and he’ll realize the great man you are.”

Bruce brushed his chair’s armrests.

“Ms. Turner, what’s going on? I assure you that your trust is flattering” he smiled “though I have to admit that the thought of being a child’s guardian it is overwhelming too. Yet I know that something distresses you: at the Thanksgiving party, you almost fainted…” he leaned forwards and met her eyes. “Ms. Turner, I know it is indiscretion, but is something threatening your health? Because my company develops some really miraculous drugs.”

“You’re not indiscreet, sweetheart. And no, Bruce, I’m not ill.”

He inhaled with relief yet his puzzlement was now bigger.

“Then?”

She ran a hand through her short curly gray hair and sighed.

“There’s a man…Tony Zucco.” Bruce knew the man but didn’t make a move to show his knowledge “He is Dick’s uncle – John’s cousin. He never saw Dick from his birth and now he came back at Gotham and approached the boy befriending him.”

She stopped to catch her breath and took another sip from her tea, Bruce refilling the cup.

“Thank you, dear. Well, this man is anything but good and I don’t want him near Dick but the poor boy is quite fond of him since Zucco was – he pretended to be – his father’s best friend. But actually he hurt John; Zucco was also his trainer and at some point John was found drugged with illegal substances… and John didn’t do it. Someone slipped the drugs in his drink and the only one who could do this was Zucco… It was when John’s career had declined and he had some major failures; he was unhappy and Zucco tampered with his drinks so that John wins some championships and signs new contracts. You see, John had listened to Zucco and made some very bad investments losing almost all his money.”

Bruce shook his head: at the same time Zucco’s investments gave him loads of money.

“Zucco was a good friend only when John was working for major advertising companies and had money to spend and trust to his cousin for investment… After the doping scandal, John hired again his old trainer and he was ready to fire Zucco – his only fault was that he kept him to his training team… John died in an accident during his training when Mary was pregnant.”

“You believe that Zucco caused the accident?”

Ms. Turner rubbed her palms together and locked eyes with Bruce.

“Nothing was ever proved: neither for the doping nor for John’s death” she gulped “but I know he is an evil man and…” he upturned her eyes inhaling. “I don’t want – if something happens to me – I don’t want Dick in his hands” her eyes met Bruce’s and his guts clenched from the despair and agony he saw there. “He never cared for the boy and I’m sure that he came back now because he sniffs money… he admitted to me.”

Bruce took her hands in his.

“You’ll live many years more, Ms. Turner and you’ll be very proud for all the medals and the championships Dick is going to win” the old lady beamed, tears slithering her wrinkled cheeks.
“But if you insist, I’ll gladly accept Dick’s guardianship –” he grinned shyly. “Though I don’t feel competent for… the job.”

Ms. Turner smiled and hugged Bruce.

“Believe me, honey: no parent feels competent for this… job. And if someone feels overconfident, then he/she probably won’t be a good parent... And you’ll be a great guardian and father, Bruce… With you I’m sure that Dick will be safe and happy… I can be calm that Zucco won’t harm him as he did with his father…”

Bruce clenched his teeth.

“I won’t let Zucco hurt Dick, Ms. Turner – I promise…”

Bruce ran his hands through his hair watching behind the wipers’ up – down movement a bunch of boys of various ages that were chatting and smoking in a shadowy alley at the Narrows. School had ended for the day and those little swaggers were enjoying their freedom – of course Bruce didn’t know if all of them attended school though the Haven’s project ‘Back to School’ had managed to bring back on class a spectacular percentage of the Narrow’s kids.

He had parked his car at the road side opposite the alley’s opening and waited; he had located the bike he wanted and stayed a few feet behind.

Bruce had called Leslie to the social service to drive him and Dick at the Manor because Mr. Collins had to stay there to settle the formalities. The doctor stayed with the boy at the Manor since Alfred hadn’t arrived yet and Bruce took the red Renault Clio which was adjusted to his impairment. After the League attacked the Lancia to grab Alfred they bought this car to replace the Lancia for their needs in being undetected.

A kid no more than 11 walked out of the alley throwing his half cigarette to the wet cement and ran to his bike.

Bruce turned on the engine and slowly approached the boy who frowned at the car that stopped some inches from him. That part of the Narrows was still underdeveloped with hardly any traffic and the shining, clearly brand new car was an odd spectacle. Not to mention that, even though Wayne had made Narrows safer perverts still lurked to make their move. But, hey, he wasn’t a victim.

The boy saw the dark window from the driver’s side lowering and then his eyes widened. It was that Wayne guy – he remembered him from TV and the party.

Bruce smiled.

“Hey, Jason.”

The boy crossed his arms over the chest and took a badass posture that made Bruce’s demolished mood lighten.

“My mother told me not to talk with strangers…” he cocked his eyebrows.

Bruce nodded.

“Ms. Todd was right. I’m Bruce Wayne” he offered his hand for a handshake and Jason took it. “We’ve met at the Thanksgiving party in the Haven – I don’t know if you remember me” the kid didn’t answer.
“And?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I’m here for Richard” Jason seemed not understanding and Bruce hurried to add “your friend, Dick. His grandmother has disappeared” Jason gaped obviously shaken by the news. “And he’ll stay with me till Ms. Turner is found” Jason’s eyebrows reached the roots of his wet, raven hair. “Ms. Turner made me his guardian.”

The boy snorted.

“Oh, boy!” he knew Dick’s hatred for Wayne. “I’m sure he isn’t too excited…”

Bruce shook his head.

“You betcha… The think is that Dick is distressed and I can’t help him so I thought that he’d want his best friend with him – you.”

Jason lollled his head on the side and eyed him.

“So if you want to come to the Manor to do him some company, I’d be grateful.”

The boy arched his eyebrows and pointed his index finger to his chest.

“To me?”

Bruce nodded.

“Sure…but my mom…”

“I spoke with Ms. Todd and if you want you can stay as much as you want – tomorrow it is Saturday so you can stay for the night” he offered him his smartphone. “You can call her to confirm that” Bruce remembered that day in front of the schoolyard when Chill and Earl tricked him to enter the car; how desperately he tried to reach someone he trusted to confirm that it was safe and how his failure to do that led to disaster.

But Jason didn’t take it.

“I trust ya, dude” he said pompous.

Bruce pressed a button and the passenger’s door opened yet the boy shook his head.

“I’ll come with my bike – lead the road!” he ordered and Bruce chuckled and obeyed.

Bruce parked the car in the enormous underground parking of the Manor and Jason goggled at the Ducati Monster motorcycle completely ignoring the cars; he rushed there and brushed the beautiful bike while Bruce sat in his wheelchair and approached him smiling.

“My friend has a Harley Davidson – she loves bikes like you…Come.”

Leslie opened since Alfred wasn’t there and stared curious at the boy who accompanied Bruce. However she held the door wide open for them to come inside.

“This is Jason Todd, Leslie” Bruce introduced “Dick’s friend. Jason, this is Dr. Leslie Thompkins.”

“Nice to meet you, young man” she said and offered her hand.
“The same” Jason replied shaking her hand uncomfortable gaping impressed at the elegantly luxurious manor.

Bruce smiled.

“I’ll take you to Dick’s room” he said and made an inviting gesture.

Jason walked with Bruce to the elevator stumbling a bit from his unstoppable goggling at the stunning house. After his tenth stumble the boy stretched proudly his posture, coughed and pretended indifference.

Bruce opened the elevator door, let him enter first and then slithered his chair.

“It’s okay” he smiled to the boy “I mean, to be impressed…I was too when I first came here.”

Jason frowned.

“Impressed when you first came here?”

Bruce shrugged.

“For eighteen years I lived in a cave-like underground cage…”

The boy’s eyes filled with understanding and he nodded.

“Here we are” Bruce said as the elevator stopped and he touched the door that opened.

He led Jason in front of a thick, dark brown oaken door with carved squares and knocked.

“Go away!” Dick growled from inside and Jason chuckled meeting Bruce’s eyes.

“He is in a helluva mood, huh?” he gestured with his thumb inside smirking. “I feel for him: granny was really good…”

Bruce took in the use of ‘granny’ and understood that Jason loved the old lady. He nodded.

“Ms. Turner IS great” he arched his eyebrows. “She is missing not dead – I’d like you to remember that and remind it to Dick. I don’t want him to lose his hope.”

Jason shook his head.

“But…in Gotham?” in Gotham when someone disappeared then probably was as good as dead.

Bruce nodded.

“Even in Gotham” Jason pressed his lips. “Richard, Jason is here to see you” he gestured with his head to Jason to enter and smiled to the boy before leaving. “Thank you, Jason.”

The boy shrugged a shoulder.

“’S nothing” he replied and opened as Bruce steered his chair to the elevator.

Bruce stared at the cowl in his hands and his eyes became blank focusing on the empty eyes of the cowl that somehow gripped his soul that cried for salvation. So many things squeezed in his mind; in his soul…
He gazed at the cave and it seemed deserted, depressive…or maybe it was his own emotions. The freezing cold and the humidity were attacking him – the low humming of the processor accompanying his thoughts. Bats had fled away for hunting; he sighed wishing he could follow them as he was doing all these years even under Falcone’s slavery.

He eyed the individual pieces that constituted Batman’s armor; sitting on the wheelchair made them look so distant, unfamiliar…

“This man has alienated you! Joker took away your mobility and Superman your personality…”

No, they didn’t! He lowered the cowl to hug his head in familiar safety.

Alfred was watching a recorded coverage of Master Anthony’s press conference in the huge flat TV sat in an armchair at the Manor’s living room; Hero was rubbing at his legs and purred demanding his attention.

They had arrived a couple of hours ago and the first thing the butler did was to cook something. Now apart from his young master, in the Manor were housed two children – one of them was to stay since he was Master Bruce’s legal ward. He served them dinner at Master Richard’s room after the boy completely ignored his invitation to come down to the kitchen. The butler justified the boy’s rudeness, exactly as Master Bruce did – the poor boy suddenly learnt that his grandmother disappeared few months since he lost his family – he was left alone. Being at the house of his ‘enemy’ wasn’t the best addition to that…At least, Master Jason, Alfred chuckled, - if you could call that little rascal a master – was with him.

Alfred learnt about the guardianship as soon as he entered the Manor. Master Bruce informed him and Alfred answered with ‘very well, sir.” Actually, he was afraid that this was too much to be added to his young master’s already difficult situation yet he knew that he’d never let an orphan boy unprotected, especially since he promised to Master Grayson’s grandmother. But Alfred like everyone knew that the boy detested his master so the thing was even more complicated and his young master’s absence at ten in the night was indicative.

He sighed and tickled Hero’s belly since the kitten had rolled in his back and moved his paws in invitation. The solemn butler forgot his worry for a moment as the kitten stretched his paw to play with his finger.

Alfred jerked at the ring of the sat phone Master Anthony and Master Bruce had set to communicate without the fear of being watched.

“Good evening, Master Anthony.”

“Alfred, where is Bruce?” Tony’s voice was angry.

Alfred fixed his stare on the fireplace opposite him.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that, sir.”

Tony huffed.

“Batman is out with the Tumbler, right? I set a transmitter in that tank and now is off – Bruce obviously realized and deactivated it. Iron Man is coming there right now to kick his ass back home! What was he thinking, Alfred??”
“Master Anthony, I’d suggest you don’t do that…He really needs that, sir and I’m certain that he won’t put himself in danger” he heard Tony’s sigh and rolling of eyes. “Let him have his outlet, Master Anthony. I assure you that he will be back in a couple of hours safe and sound so there’s no reason for you to neglect the important things that demand your attention.”

Batman had already stopped three robberies, one rape and two beatings. He didn’t come out of the Tumbler – he couldn’t: Lucius didn’t have his new armor ready. He used sedative darts to knock them out and the net launcher to incarcerate the assailants. Afterwards he notified the police to gather them.

He patrolled the Narrows and the docks in his car watching constantly the chats in hopes of learning anything about Crane or Joker but nothing. Of course if Loki was covering their tracks…

It felt nice being at the streets even though he couldn’t walk them or soar to the sky or fight.

Suddenly, his scan caught something descending right in front of him. He steered the Tumbler backwards because he didn’t want to encounter the newcomer.

“Stealth lead mode” he ordered and his stalker soon lost him.

Superman landed in the middle of the wet street and crossed his arms in the chest shaking his head in disbelief.

“You shouldn’t be in the streets, Bruce…” he mumbled inside his mouth so that only he could hear.

When the Tumbler stopped at the rock surface inside the cave, it felt like all the weight of the world fell again on Bruce’s chest. He summoned his wheelchair to wait next to the monstrous car and stripped to his gym pants and T-shirt that wore under the armor. Batman wouldn’t sit in that wheelchair.

But as soon as he slipped in his chair a wave of air rushed to him and he was elevated with the chair in the air.

“Put me down!” he demanded and pierced his ‘assailant’s’ eyes. “I can manage on my own.”

Clark’s blue topaz eyes stared at his face sad and he obeyed.

“I’m sorry…” he bit his lips “for everything” he twitched his eyebrows. “I said horrible things to you…I’m a scum. But believe me, Bruce, I love you and I don’t want to lose you.”

Bruce’s eyes sparkled but he was hesitant.

“And?” he could read that Clark wanted to say something else.

Clark licked his lips and squatted to be at Bruce’s level and locked eyes with him, sad for the coldness he saw in Bruce’s eyes.

“I won’t see Diana ever again’ I’ll stay away from her. Nothing would stand between us.”

“So…you believe me?” Bruce was uncertain if Clark meant what he said; after all the times things went so awry…
Clark lolled his head on the side.

“You want that and that’s what matters to me...I won’t let anything cast a shadow to what we have and upset you in your recovery” he leaned his face forward with his lips slightly parted waiting for an invitation.

Bruce seemed a bit hesitant at first but then decided to reward Clark for his determination and truth be said, he needed Clark’s kiss after everything. He closed his eyes and brought his lips to entangled Clark’s soon leading to a passionate kiss. The Man of Steel made to lift Bruce in his arms, hasty to take him to their bedroom but Bruce held his forearms.

“Clark, Richard Grayson and his friend are in the Manor so we must be careful.”

“I know; the Planet got some info but we didn’t publish it yet.”

So Clark left the cave to reach the bedroom flying and Bruce used the lift, scanning the corridor for any presence before exiting. He found Clark sitting at the armchair next to the window, already dressed in his pajamas.

The Man of Steel felt the urge to take Bruce in his hands but after every shit he had done to the younger man he felt he ought to not be pushing so he let Bruce get inside the bathroom to strip and shower calming his heartbeat as he imagined the water caressing Bruce’s bare body. Bruce’s defiance to get out and patrol Gotham as Batman worried but also aroused Clark – he knew that it was too dangerous for Bruce yet that feeling of danger made his body writhe and crave for the human.

Yet when Bruce came out of the bathroom dressed in his dark blue pajamas Clark’s arousal fell back because his worry covered everything else. As the younger man lay flat on his back at the silken sheets Clark looked at him reading clearer the signs of his exhaustion all over his body; his back must being aching.

“How can I take you?” he asked scratching his nape hesitant to speak about Bruce’s condition. “I swear I don’t have dirty things in mind” Bruce gave a smile. “I’ll only massage you – I can see that your back aches...” he said carefully because he knew that Bruce didn’t like to address pain issues.

Yet the younger man nodded.

“A bit...”

Clark helped Bruce turn on his stomach, rolled his pajama shirt off him and began rubbing the flesh softly almost like caressing extricating small moans from the man under him; moans that intensified when Clark planted small kisses all over his shoulder line. He was straddling Bruce’s pelvis but his knees were sunk in the mattress so that his body didn’t touch Bruce’s; Clark didn’t want to burden the exhausted body with even a grammar of his body.

He sucked Bruce’s earlobe.

“It was great being out there again, huh?” he whispered in his most husky voice; Clark felt for Bruce despite his agony for the man’s safety: it was months since he last patrolled his city – he last breathed the air of that city which for everyone else might be an evil witch but for Bruce was his love. He shared for a moment his mate’s agony at being away from her and from Batman and he smiled at the relief that this short escapee offered the man.

Bruce let his eyelids cover his stinging eyes and his cheek sink in the silk. He recalled the feeling of Batman’s armor against his skin – above the waist – the feeling of the cowl, the smell of the
Tumbler’s interior. It was hope…

“Uhu…” it was the only affirmation he had the strength to give.

Clark leaned over Bruce’s face to see what he already knew: Bruce was asleep.
Chapter 34

Dick was pacing up and down on the same strip of velvet, dark blue with white designs carpet; his arms were crossed over the chest and his entire face tightened in a frown. He wore his pajamas: Dr. Thompkins had driven him and Wayne at his granny’s flat to grab some clothes; his granny had given Wayne a set of keys along with his guardianship…

Jason was sprawled at his side on the bed, supporting his head on his palm. It wasn’t a king size bed but even so it was much bigger than the children beds Jason and Dick had; light blue, matching the room’s painting with a mattress so soft and strong that Jason at first spent ten minutes trampolining. He, as well, wore one pair of Dick’s pajamas – they didn’t differ so much in height or weight. Jason yawned lulled by his friend endless pacing.

The hands of the round, black and white clock on the right wall showed 1:35. The old man who introduced himself as Alfred and insisted on calling them…’masters’ – Jason still chuckled every time he remembered that – came around ten o’clock. He had told ‘master Jason’ that he had prepared for him the guest room right next to ‘master Richard’s’ but the boy retorted that would sleep with his friend.

Alfred nodded courteously saying ‘as wish, sir’ and prepared the bed laying blankets so fluffy and thick that Jason cocked an eyebrow; then grandpa took the tray he had brought them dinner – since Dick was adamant about not going to the kitchen – and left wishing them ‘goodnight’, clearly relieved that at least both boys ate their food.

“Man, cut the pacing!” he exclaimed “I get giddy!”

Dick stopped at his heels and glared at him.

“Then stop watching me and open that TV on the wall!”

Jason rolled his eyes.

“I’m here for ya, man – not the damn TV…though that screen is the GOAT” he pouted at the flat, shining 40” screen over the rectangular built-in fireplace opposite the bed. “C’mon, pal, calm down…I’m sure yar granny is okay an’ they’ll find her an’ ya’ll return with her at yar home.”

“Do you honestly believe that?” he snapped at his friend, upset but with a tiny hope in his voice.

Jason scratched his head remembering Wayne’s words.

“Ms. Turner is missing not dead…I don’t want him to lose his hope.”

“If a scum had killed her cops would have found her now.”

“Then she abandoned me?”

Jason closed his eyes and jerked his head upwards huffing.

“Wouldna blame her…” he snorted and Dick ground his teeth because his friend was poking at him. “Ya know that she wouldna do that – something else happened, man. An’ she took care of ya even in her absence…”

Dick lolled his head at the side and snarled at him.
“Seriously now!”

“Ya’re safe her’, man” he stretched his arm at him. “She didna let them take ya to an orphanage –
though I hear that the Haven is pretty cool…”

Dick finally slumped on the mattress.

“She put Wayne as my guardian!” he shook his head exasperated. “She hates me, Jay!”

Jason quirked a bit his lips on the use of present tense that indicated that his friend believed that his
granny was alive. He gathered his limbs and kneeled on the mattress patting his friend’s back.

“She doesn’t hate ya, Dick, an’ ya know it. She trusts Wayne that he’d take care of ya if she was
forced to leave…”

Dick shook his head.

“Tony can take care of me better than Wayne: he is my uncle, he loves me and I’m happy with him.
But she is biased against him and chose that spoiled brat over Tony.”

Jason raised his eyebrows.

“That Zucco guy is bad news, Dick; yar granny didna trust him an’ I agree…”

The older boy crossed stubbornly his arms and set his jaw.

“Speaks wisdom of life incarnated…” he jeered showing with his hand Jason’s small body although
he was taller than most boys in his age.

Jason snorted.

“Ya call Wayne ‘a spoiled brat’ but actually, ya’re acting like one, man…Refusin’ to go down to eat
an’ forcin’ the old man bringin’ ya food here…” he shook his head and gestured to the door at the
left, next to the built-in white closet. “Thankfully, the bathroom is inside the room otherwise ya’d
pull out yar willy and pee from the window…”

Dick gazed at the arch shaped balcony door which offered a spectacular view of the grounds from
the window panes its white frames formed; the frozen raindrops that fell all day long had turned into
thick, fluffy snowflakes that fell graciously on the perfectly groomed lawn, the bushes and the big,
round light bulbs which emanated strong white light along the perimeter of the brown slated paths.

Alfred had closed the heavy light blue curtains for the boys to sleep but Jason had watched where the
mechanism was and as soon as the butler was gone he climbed the wooden rectangular table and
opened them again. He planned to get out from the balcony door to the Narrows…but the door was
unbreakable.

“Definitely! If Wayne was underneath!” Dick snarled but hearing Jason chuckle, he couldn’t help
but chuckle himself. “She didn’t tell me she made Wayne my guardian…” he said sober.

“Because she knew how woulda reacted – an’ ya’d have run to Zucco an’ tell everythin’ – which I
bet they didna want.”

Jason hugged him.

“Everythin’ is gonna be fine, mate. Yar granny is okay an’ she’ll come back.”
Dick smiled at him and Jason yawned again.

“Let’s sleep now, pal – I cannot break outa this fortress to go to the Narrows so I’m sleepy…That fireplace an’ ya goin’ up an’ down lulled me.”

The older boy nodded.

“I’m sleepy too” he admitted. “Dr. Thompkins told me that she’d give me some mild sedative with my milk to help me sleep – it seems it took effect…”

Dick fell back on the soft mattress and Jayson made a spectacular dive causing his friend’s grin.

“It’s a good bed!” Jason exclaimed patting the cotton sheet.

“Not if you continue jumping like this…” he muffled both of them with the blankets Alfred had laid.

“I’m baffled ya drank the milk with the sedative.”

Dick stretched his arm and pressed the button over the soft headboard to turn off the lights leaving only the fireplace’s dancing flames illuminate the vast room.

“Granny wants me to sleep well…” he muttered staring at the balcony door; from its rectangular frames he could see snowflakes falling graciously. “How Wayne found you?”

Jason rolled his eyes and knocked Dick’s temple.

“Are ya connected with yar brain? He saw me with ya at the party an’ he knew that mom works for him; so he asked an’ found me – big deal!’’

Dick blinked and sighed.

“I feel I’m trapped with my worst enemy…”

Jason whistled and snorted.

“Cut the crap, Dicky! If someone’s trapped that’s Wayne – with ya!” he shook his head “an’ me, I guess…”

Dick chuckled and ruffled his friend’s messy hair.

Clark didn’t need sleep so he preferred watching awed and affectionate Bruce sleeping. A big smile was stretching his lips: it was the most beautiful image in the world – Bruce sleeping peacefully. An angel as the tranquility of sleep caressed the beautiful lines of his face: eyelids softly covering the orbs, silken, long eyelashes caressing sharp cheekbones, bangs falling carelessly over the forehead and the cheeks – rosy, velvet lips slightly parted as he inhaled and exhaled.

Superman felt the urge to trap these lips in his mouth and suck mercilessly…but he didn’t want to disturb his much needed rest.

Clark spooned Bruce having the younger man’s face in front of his, in a breath’s distance; his arm hugged Bruce’s broad shoulder, travelled his back to end on his waist – the other arm finishing his loop touching tenderly the younger man’s pelvis.

He held Bruce’s body tight because the day’s fatigue led to abnormal muscle tone and Clark
massaged gently to relax the tension: last night’s events at the Tower, then only a few hours of restless sleep – thanks to Clark’s behavior -, then a flight to Gotham, running all day to take care of Dick Grayson and then patrolling… These could exhaust a healthy person; for a paraplegic still in recuperation could be devastating.

Clark sighed silently to not disturb Bruce and rubbed soothingly the back muscles that were trembling slightly from fatigue. Bruce was an extraordinary individual and wouldn’t let his body’s needs stop him from doing what he believed was his duty.

Sometimes, like now, Clark had the feeling that he was dealing with a child: innocence and power in one fascinating body. He leaned carefully and placed a tender kiss on Bruce’s temple.

A boy around eight years old, with brunette hair and dark blue eyes lay on the floor over a cheap carpet, at the right wall of a small, ordinary living room; the TV was still on, broadcasting a stupid show.

The boy’s eyes were left open but not watching the dull TV program: they were looking up, at nothing…two blue orbs crystallized in the terror of the imminent death and the unbearable pain. His small arm flexed on the floor in an odd angle was pierced by two bullets and his face was carved with two scars beginning from the corners of his lips to the middle of the cheeks, giving for an instance the ridiculous impression of a smile – lines of blood had dried as the two wounds had bled unstoppably. But it was a huge hole in the place where his heart was once beating that killed the boy.

Bruce could see where the boy’s eyes pointed – a message written in red, huge, capital letters – the paint leaking from the edge of each letter: “Kids must permaneeently smileeeee – Brucey, I’ll mak’ you smileeeeee!”

The paint wasn’t paint – Bruce could smell the peculiar, iron, horrific smell of blood. The message was written in Brian’s blood…

A tiny white casket was descending slowly to a freshly dug pit under Gotham’s gloomy gray sky that cried unstoppably; another boy similar in looks with Brian cried and shouted to his brother, storming at the casket to stop the descent…

Clark saw in the dark something glittering trapped between Bruce’s eyelashes: a tear that sparkled like diamond. And then the eyelashes began thrashing brushing the cheekbones – first, slowly but then fast till Bruce opened his eyes abruptly. Without a gasp as Clark expected after a nightmare: Bruce was calm though his heartbeat was elevated. Clark knew that his mate wasn’t afraid of the darkness but immediately turned on the night lamp on Bruce’s nightstand without letting go of his embrace.

Bruce stared at Clark’s face and brought his hand to rub his eye without moving from his enveloping arms.

“The boys…” he muttered worried and Clark caressed his messy hair.

“They are sleeping like angels. I hear their breaths – calm, restful, children’s sleep…” he whispered reassuringly, tenderly, understanding that Bruce has seen something about the boys.

Bruce gulped and nodded but made to disentangle from Clark’s safe nest.

“I must check on them” he said determined to Clark’s frown.

But Clark tightened a bit his one arm hug and with the other hand brushed Bruce’s cheek.
“Alfred did that ten minutes ago…”

Bruce closed his eyes and huffed.

“My good Alfred…”

Clark rubbed his back.

“Does he know that you skipped your midday medication?” he asked smoothly but mildly scolding at the same time.

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I guess Leslie told him… I didn’t do it on purpose but there were so many things to do that I couldn’t find the time to eat or take my medicines. It won’t happen again – Alfred knows that.”

Clark shook his head and stretched to the floor the arm that was over Bruce’s body. The younger man watched intrigued and finally Clark presented him with a white fur ball with a thick black ‘V’ on his lower back.

“Look who’s here!” Clark exclaimed and Bruce’s eyes sparkled; Hero jerked in Clark’s hand and he let him jump to not hurt the kitten.

Bruce caught Hero in the air and touched his lips on the animal’s head. Clark chuckled.

“He sneaked out of Alfred and came to your room” he said watching Bruce tickling the kitten and play with his ‘threatening’ paws.

“He couldn’t get inside…” Bruce remarked.

“No, but he was scratching the door…”

Bruce’s eyes bulged.

“If he clawed the door Alfred will be furious!”

Clark laughed.

“I think that Alfred took his measures because your bedroom’s door has a layer of something that protects the wood from lethal claws” he teased Hero’s paws and the animal chased his fingers. “Your friend wanted so much to see you that I brought him in…”

Bruce kissed Clark’s lips.

“Thank you!”

“I did nothing” he shrugged though he enjoyed the joy in Bruce’s eyes that for a change was caused by him – he cupped his face with both hands to gain his attention from Hero. “Promise me, Bruce, that you won’t do that again.”

Bruce looked at him puzzled.

“What?”

Clark shook his hand.
“All the package of those past 24 hours.”

Bruce touched his lips on Clark’s neck and he felt goose bumps throughout his body.

“Many of the things that happened weren’t my doing – I just reacted: Joker crashing the party…” he supported his body on his elbow and rose a bit without losing Clark’s arm from his back and waist. “We discussed it with Thor and there are clues that his brother, Loki, is working with Joker and Crane.”

Clark’s eyebrows became a line and his eidetic memory brought back Thor muffling Bruce with his cape.

“You met again with him after last night?”

“Yes, I had to go to 1 Police Plazza for my testimony and I was strolling a bit at Battery Park till my appointment – Thor was there too before getting to the Avengers’ Tower for their meeting. We discussed what happened” his eyes watched carefully Clark’s tense face.

The Man of Steel felt his heart pounding from ire but he knew he shouldn’t show anything, shouldn’t outburst. He licked his lips.

“A chance meeting?” he hardly contained his boiling jealousy yet Bruce understood.

He caressed Clark’s cheek.

“What else it could be, Clark?”

Clark gathered Bruce tighter to his body.

“Bruce, I told you that I’ll do what you asked: I won’t see Diana again.”

The younger man saw that Clark said that to stop him from disengaging himself and approach – as Clark thought – other men. This was the only reason and that stung not only because Clark didn’t see his reasoning but also because he considered him eager to give himself to another man. He pressed his lips.

“But you don’t believe that she might not be who she says.”

Clark chuckled and his stare became blank.

“Of course not! But since that is what you want…I’ll do it…to not lose you…to Thor or anyone else…”

Bruce shook his head and narrowed his eyes.

“Clark, I didn’t ask you that out of jealousy…There are clues and you said several times that you feel odd so it’s better if you stayed away till we figure this out” he gulped. “Anyway, even if you don’t believe me, you’ll be safe keeping a distance from her and maybe Jor El’s tests help us find out.”

Clark didn’t say anything – he hadn’t done any test after the first and had no intention to do another. He wasn’t ill; all this was Bruce’s effort to draw him away from Diana and now that he was going to do that – he snorted inside – Bruce would consider him healthy again. He took Hero to his basket and in a couple of seconds he was back resuming his exact position cuddling Bruce.

Bruce could see that Clark was thinking hard. He brushed softly Clark’s broad chest and the man came out of his thoughts to look at him serious and a bit gloomy. Bruce met his eyes.
“You don’t seriously believe that Thor and I…?”

Clark lifted an eyebrow and Bruce kissed him softly on the lips.

“You’re the only man I ever loved, Clark” he said quietly; he had so many things more to say but he didn’t. “I met Thor by chance.”

Clark nodded and smiled.

“I believe you…” he captured Bruce’s lips in a passionate kiss that took the human’s breath away.

He brushed the locks that had fallen over Bruce’s forehead and brought them back with the other hair.

“Now…sleep again…you’re exhausted. I’m here.”

Bruce really felt his healthy body cry in aching fatigue begging for some rest. He wrapped his arm around Clark’s shoulder letting the warmth of Superman’s body relax his own suffering muscles; his head nestled in Clark’s chest and let his heavy eyelids cover his eyes.

Clark watched Bruce as sleep swiftly took over. He wouldn’t let anyone get from him that man…

Bagdana looked at the crystal, transparent surface of the pond in the middle of his cave. The waters turned pitch black but he could discern the bottomless black cave walls, the deep silence, the sound of boiling lava, the pillar-like narrow stalagmites that became wider to support the ceiling which was the Earth’s surface. Tartarus: his prison, his company in solitude and suffering.

A sparkling, blue, vibrating light moved in the labyrinth-like steep, narrow paths the thick walls formed. Bagdana recognized the light and the energy: Mjolnir – he was there when the powerful hammer was forged. Suddenly, the figure that marched his prison was visible, his beautiful face tense in determination. As he knew already it was Thor. The formidable warrior god of Thunders; the ancient demon remembered the blond god fighting him along Superman and Stark to save Bruce…

He smirked and closed his eyes: his body jerked from an ancient fire. In Bruce lay Lilith’s irresistible charm…even gods couldn’t resist. Yet Bruce’s charm had a different quality from his distant grandmother: innocence, unwillingness to seduce, shyness, real care for the others and their emotions.

Thor turned the steep corner to the chamber of the demon’s cave-cell: a well going even deeper, humid with its dark green walls dripping humidity and acid water; sharp like razors rocks emerging from the floor, in the middle of them a rectangular stone where a hunched shadow sat manacles at wrists and ankles sinking in the walls and the floor holding the figure still.

Bagdana smiled as the god of Thunders saw the chained demon and turned his back tricked by the demon’s reflection. Bagdana’s decoy seemed exactly the same with him, emanated even the same aura, had no smell like the demon.

“Bruce, you sent him there to check on me…” he cackled and shook his head amused, the silver short spikes shinning on his head. “You’re way too young to be so wise, child…This world isn’t worthy of you.”
Clark gathered his arm gently from Bruce’s body to not wake him up and settled the younger man on the mattress muffling him carefully with the blankets since he was to leave and he wouldn’t have his warmth to keep the cold away – not that the room wasn’t warm…

Bruce’s pajama had the top three buttons undone and Clark was absorbed by the visible flesh; he couldn’t fight the urge so he leaned and sucked that flesh closing his eyes in delight. A shine caught his eyes as he opened them reluctantly: the round, black platinum frame that held the Black Butterfly…

He touched with his fingertips the diamond and remembered the blinding light that night at the Fortress when Bruce was fighting for his life and Clark had set the gem on Bruce’s heart. A black light containing every color of the spectrum in its range, dimming every other light in the Fortress – the most beautiful light he ever saw: Bruce’s tortured soul that emanated every kind of kindness and benevolence.

Even if Bagdana was securely imprisoned in Tartarus, Clark felt gratitude for the powerful gem that dangled proudly on Bruce’s chest protecting him.

He stood as soundlessly as he could and placed his index finger on his lips seeing Hero staring at him. It was 6 o’clock but cats wake early.

“Shshsh…we don’t want to wake Bruce…Watch him…I’ll be right back…”

He wore his civilian clothes in a spin and flew out of the window closing behind him. It had snowed last night but it stopped too soon so the lawn, the trees and the bushes had only a thin, sparkling layer of ice that reminded of a priceless fabric under the still dark sky.

Upon landing at the deserted alley two blocks from Ms. Rose’s bakery, the delicious smell of fresh baked delicacies intoxicated his sensitive nose. Clark followed the smell like mesmerized, his stomach growling threatening.

The old lady was surprised to see him so early.

“Good morning, Mr. Kent! Saturday today – you should be sleeping…”

He smiled.

“Journalists work at Saturdays too.”

She nodded.

“I know but still at Saturdays you come much later.”

“Mmm…I didn’t want to lose the hot donuts…”

Ms. Rose chuckled and took the paper bag.

“Your favorite, huh?” she asked looking Clark pointedly and he understood that she wanted to ask other things too.

He nodded.

“And…” he blushed “the Prince’s Donuts.”

Ms. Rose’s face radiated from a big smile and she hurried to put the delicacies in the bag.
“Now I see why you were in a hurry to get your donuts…” she winked giving Clark his change. “I’m so happy things are fine again, Mr. Kent…”

Clark widened his eyes and gulped: he was so obvious? He grinned to the good lady and nodded.

Back in the Manor, Bruce was still fast asleep and Clark could sense the man’s fatigue but fortunately not last night’s erosive light pain. He put on his pajamas again and took his side on the bed cuddling Bruce, wrapping him securely in his arms. Only for Hero to climb and settle between them rolled in a ball; Clark glared at the smirking kitten.

“You’re indigous!”

Bruce stirred half an hour later and frankly Clark wished the man had slept more. He kissed him on the lips massaging the hot flesh and Bruce’s lips engaged him in a slow, sensual dancing.

“I’m glad you’re here…” Bruce murmured sleepy and then narrowed his eyes sniffing the air. “Is this…”

Clark took gently his chin and brushed his cheek with his fingers.

“Freshly baked donuts” he said locking eyes with Bruce and relishing the same enthusiastic, child-like, sparkle that crossed his eyes every time he treated him with donuts. “I deprived you of them lately…” he pressed his lips regretful but waved it off. “And since I can’t be in the kitchen to eat breakfast I thought we can eat something here…”

Bruce nodded.

“The boys…We’ll find a way for you to join us in the common rooms” he chuckled because all these seemed rather funny as if they were mischievous teenagers.

Clark chuckled too.

“I don’t mind being…banished from the other rooms of the manor if I still have the master bedroom…and the owner” he said and brought Bruce’s body closer to him planting a deep kiss on his accepting mouth. “Mmm…I think the thrill of…breaking the law is arousing.”

But Hero meowed annoyed and both of them looked at him, Clark ruffling his hair and pressing his lips.

“Outlaw or not I still have to share with this little rascal…”

Jason was already dressed and was slumped on the big blue foof chair, his legs on the table staring at his friend who sat on the edge of the mattress with his arms crossed and his jaw set.

“I’m hungry, man.’’

“The old man will bring us breakfast here – there’s no chance I’ll go down to see Wayne’s shitface!”

Jason snorted and lolled his head on the side.

“Sooooo…ya’ll make the grandpa bring ya food upstairs while you can take yar lazy ass an’ eat downstairs…Ya realize that ya’re becomin’ a fuckin’ diva?”

Dick twitched his lips.
“Where did you learn that word?”

Jason shrugged.

“I’m an informed man…An’ I don’t wanna stay here like being in detention – it’s enough that I didna get out last night.”

Dick pouted.

“So get out! I’m not stopping you…”

Jason hopped from his place and sat next to his friend.

“Ya stay shut in here believin’ that ya’ll annoy Wayne that way. But it is as if ya admit that he cares…else why shoulda give a damn if ya stay here for all yar life?”

Dick squinted at him and Jason smirked.

“If ya want to get on his nerve ya’ll go downstairs an’ made his life difficult!”

“Selina is still at New York…” Bruce muttered gazing around at the kitchen. “And Tony has too much work to do…”

Only he and Alfred were there for breakfast and the big kitchen seemed even bigger. He was eating breakfast on the black shining island – well, not eating because he had too many donuts earlier, but drinking milk and juice.

“Sir, if I may…” Bruce nodded prompting him. “Yesterday at Master Anthony’s penthouse you said that Master Kent isn’t himself lately and that you wouldn’t abandon him…”

“Yes” he sipped from his orange juice.

“Also, I noticed lately that you’re very tired and sad…” Bruce shook his head in denial. “Please forgive my indiscretion, sir, but like Master Anthony, I get the feeling that all these are due to Master Kent’s” he stopped looking for the right word “changed behavior” Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose uncomfortable from this subject. “I know I don’t have the right to say this but perhaps Master Anthony is right and you must protect yourself from Superman? You said that he isn’t himself lately and you do remember what happened the last time he was under a similar situation…”

The man’s agony was heartwarming for Bruce but he didn’t want his loved ones being distressed because of him.

“Do not worry, Alfred; he might be facing some problems but he won’t hurt me” he smiled “he cares for me, Alfred; he listens to me and so I can help him as he did for me. I don’t feel threatened…and he loves me.”

Alfred nodded.

“I’m relieved to hear that, sir.”

“The boys?”

Alfred raised an eyebrow.
“They woke up but I guess they’ll take breakfast in their room…”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded.

“I don’t want them to stay shut in the room like jailed…” he looked up at Alfred. “I hoped that Dick would take it easier… I mean staying here… but I guess I ask too much.”

Alfred patted his shoulder.

“Patience, Master Bruce: do not lose your hope” Bruce smiled at him.

“At least, Hero is here to keep us company…” his eyes fell on the kitten who had emptied his bowl and now was playing with one of his multicolored furry toys kicking it between his front legs.

Hero sensing Bruce’s stare, left his toy and ran to him climbing to his lap. Bruce laughed and began petting the animal’s back causing its loud purring.

Alfred smiled at the scene craning slightly his head to them; he had opened the black wooden cupboard at the right of the sink to gather the crockery for the kids’ breakfast: thank Goodness for that kitten… he thought.

“Sir” he said filling with milk a jug “in 20 days it’s Christmas.”

Bruce lifted his eyes to him puzzled and Alfred felt a pang because he could see that for his young master Christmas made no difference.

“It is your first Christmas out of Falcone’s grasp” he had to try “in my humble opinion, the Manor should be decorated accordingly… by its rightful owner for once.”

Bruce was so dumbfounded that when Hero mouthed his finger playfully, he twitched startled. Which Alfred noticed.

“Also, a child is staying now with us” Alfred used his last argument and Bruce nodded grinning a bit hesitant.

“Of course, Alfred; yet I’m completely useless in decoration stuff…” he took in his butler’s eyes getting sad “maybe Dick and Jason can help you and perhaps Tony or Selina.”

Alfred nodded: well, the purpose wasn’t to have others helping.

“Indeed, sir” he choked a sigh because Bruce wasn’t in the mood to celebrate.

“You’ve got a kitten?!” a thrilled voice entered the kitchen and Dick’s fascinated eyes were on Hero while Jason’s hungry ones were on the delicacies on the long island.

Bruce had heard them coming – now that the Manor guested someone… ‘non-initiated’ he had his ears set for the tiniest indication of his coming.

“He is Hero” Bruce replied petting the animal watching with the corner of his eyes Dick approaching to have a closer look to Hero. “Hero, this is Richard.”

The kitten looked curious at the newcomer, sat at his butt and twitched his paw as if wanting a handshake. Dick beamed and gave his index finger to Hero – Bruce smiled but his smile was vanished instantly seeing his ward frowning and pursing his lips upon because of Bruce’s smile.

Jason hopped in one of the chairs and grabbed a piece of vanilla cake.
“Can we eat?” he asked. “I’m starvin’!”

Dick stretched his posture.

“You can eat – I’m not hungry; I’ll return to my room…” Jason rolled his eyes and Alfred pressed his lips in disapproval.

But Bruce moved his chair towards the kitchen’s exit.

“No, stay; I finished my breakfast and I have some work to do…” he stared at the kitten in his lap. “Mmm…I guess you can keep Hero company” he grabbed the kitten from the armpits and gave him to Dick who although still sullen took the kitten. “Hero gets bored when I’m working and Alfred doesn’t want him rubbing at his legs while housekeeping…”

His chair slid to the exit.

“Later, I’m going to visit the GCPD to be informed about your grandmother” he saw the boy’s eyes sparkle. “You and Jason can come along” he pressed his lips “if you want.”

Dick gave a cold nod, Hero nibbling his chin. Jason snorted.

“Cops…Nice way to spend a Saturday morning…” he mock spat at the floor and Alfred cleared his throat scolding him.

Bruce was taking all the information he wanted hacking the police’s system yet Dick couldn’t know this so he had to take the boy to GCPD to learn any news and being sure that police searched for his grandmother.

When they entered the garage, Bruce’s sleek black car was there brought by the shipping company last night. Jason goggled.

“Wow!” he whistled impressed and began stroking the magnificent car causing dismay to Dick who crossed his arms and looked to the other side. “Can we take that beast, dude?” he asked Bruce and he smiled like every time Jason called him ‘dude’.

He lolled his head on the side.

“Well, I had something subtler in mind…yet…why not? But you’ll have to share the same seat because she has two seats” of course if the seat could contain him and Tony so it could two boys.

“No problemo, man!” Jason stormed at the passenger’s door trying to open but it was futile. “Damn! That house is a fortress; the same the cars!” he huffed frustrated.

Bruce touched his thumb to the invisible receptor in the door and it automatically opened. He gestured inviting them inside.

GCPD’s building was old, tall and grim with its rectangular shape radiating rigor and till few months ago cruelty. The walls were a faded maroon that at some places let the bricks be seen; there were too few windows increasing the depressing air of the building.

The last night’s snow stopped so fast that now at 9 in the morning there was no snowflake on the wet pavement; only the fierce cold reminded last night’s snowfall. Bruce was glad that the two boys had dressed warmly with coats, cups, scarfs and gloves – they were very cute.

During the road there through sideways glances Bruce could see Dick’s agony – the boy was
absorbed in this thoughts about what the police would say about his granny and only Jason’s bickering about the car made him leave his reverie.

Detective Curtis was in charge of the disappearances’ department; her desk was one of many stationed in a section of the second floor, separated with windows covered with blinds. She glanced bored at Bruce and the two boys.

“We don’t give info to minors and non-relatives, Mr. Wayne.”

“I’m Richard Grayson’s legal guardian” Bruce retorted calm showing her the document. “So I’m some kind of relative.”

The woman nodded. Ms. Turner’s car was found abandoned at the country road near Wong’s lighthouse. Dick frowned.

“But she had just left me to school…and she definitely had no reason to go there…”

Curtis shrugged.

“Did you find anything?” the boy asked and the detective looked him over her small glasses.

“Kid, disappearances are not easy cases…especially, in Gotham.”

Bruce intervened.

“We know that, Detective Curtis, but Ms. Turner is Richard’s grandmother, his only relative.”

She twitched her lips and eyed a young woman entering the office. She was a Detective and Bruce recognized Renee Montoya who immediately greeted him with a handshake.

“We’re here for Ms. Turner’s disappearance” he explained to her “she is Richard’s grandmother” Dick rolled his eyes because it was the second time Wayne was saying the same thing.

Yet Montoya’s stare at Curtis made the latter’s tongue loosen.

“There were no traces of robbery or attack – any violence” Bruce took in Dick’s relief. “Yet we have no traces as to where she might be – we have given pictures of her to every patrol car and to the TV stations” she looked at the boy. “You know if your grandmother had being diagnosed with dementia? Senile people often get lost and they don’t remember their identity or their relatives.”

Dick Jerked.

“No, granny’s mind was perfect!”

Bruce nodded.

“I can confirm that too” he caught Dick’s glare and in his expression Bruce could see that the boy considered dementia to explain why his grandmother made him his guardian. “But if you have doubts Ms. Turner had run some tests in Gotham General recently.”

Detective Curtis eyed Bruce and took off her glasses.

“Mr. Wayne, the fact you’re her grandson’s guardian shows that you’re pretty close to this family” Bruce frowned suspecting what was to follow and Dick snorted “so we could be facing a case of kidnapping.”
Dick slapped his thighs and huffed causing the stares of Curtis and Montoya.

“The story of my life! Losing people I love because of him!” he gritted his teeth.

Curtis frowned because she knew nothing about Dick being the second child of the murdered Phelps’ family but Montoya who worked at the MCU knew and looked Bruce with sympathy. Jason elbowed his friend and the older boy snarled at him.

“Mr. Wayne will notify us if anyone contacts him for ransom” Montoya said. “In the meantime, we’ll continue our efforts to locate Ms. Turner.”

An officer from the desk on the right glanced up at them.

“We’ll search the nearby shores too” the man said bleak shaking his head. “Because most of the disappearance cases end up there…eh, Montoya, Curtis?”

Dick’s eyes bulged and he stiffened which made Bruce forget his hesitance and take the boy’s hand in his.

“Your grandmother is alive and we’ll bring her back…I promise, Richard.”

Jayson wrapped his arm around his friend’s shoulders and the two women glared at the sturdy officer who shrugged.

“Is better to be ready for the worse…this is Gotham: people who disappear…”

But Bruce yanked his head and glared at him.

“Once, I was disappeared as well and police declared me dead; they stopped searching and considered me dead for eighteen years yet here I am; pretty much alive!” he nodded. “As Richard’s grandmother!”

Curtis pressed her lips and exchanged glances with Montoya while her male colleague got sweaty. On the other hand, Jason smiled to Dick enjoying Wayne’s outburst to a cop.

Bruce took the kids to the lift hasty to leave the building which feeling knew that all of them shared. But Montoya caught up with them.

“Richard, will do everything to find your grandmother” she said locking eyes with the pale boy and he nodded.

Yet Jason crossed his arms and cocked his eyebrows.

“Yeah…now that big money told ya off…”

Montoya looked at the little rascal with a mix of irritation and amusement; Bruce met Jason’s eyes.

“Boys, can you take the elevator and wait for me at the foyer?”

“Gladly!” Jason grabbed Dick’s hand and dragged him along to the elevator.

“Mr. Wayne, I’m sorry about Detective Spencer: he is pessimist and cynical but quite effective in his job.”

“I’d prefer it if he kept his personal opinions for himself and not present them as facts. He shouldn’t have spoken like that in front of the boy.”
She nodded licking her lips uncomfortable.

“I know… We’ll do our best to find her.”

“I’m sure, Detective Montoya; please, keep me updated” he pressed the calling button at the elevator’s wall.

“Commissioner Gordon assembles a team for your protection now that Joker is on the loose.”

Bruce lolled his head at the side and blinked.

“Commissioner knows already my opinion on this – I don’t want an escort. I have Wayne Enterprises’ security and Richard too – I’ll feel better if GCPD’s forces are fully occupied in protecting Gotham’s citizens so we don’t have other incidents like the Phelps family…”

The lift’s doors opened and Montoya entered after Bruce.

“I don’t disagree with that” she replied. “But I’m sure that Jim – the Commissioner – won’t accept it without a battle” she smiled. “You can expect a phone call…”

Bruce nodded.

“It’s always a pleasure speaking with Commissioner Gordon.”

As Bruce expected, the boys didn’t wait at the foyer as he told them but in front of the car.

“I’ve got some work at the Wayne Tower” he told them once they got inside the car. “After, we can go to the shops to choose a desk for Richard.”

Dick snapped at him.

“I won’t stay permanently with you!”

Bruce nodded.

“Yes, but till then, you need a desk to do your homework…”

“I wouldn’a…” Jason commented pouting and Bruce looked at him.

“And a PC for you to work.”

Dick slapped the seat.

“I already have a PC and a tablet!”

“Okay” Bruce answered calmly. “We’d go to your flat to take the PC, your books and whatever else you want. Then, we can go to Ms. Todd to ask her if Jason can stay for the rest of the weekend with us – if of course you want, Jason…”

The boy shrugged.

“Sure, man… But can mom come and eat with us? I don’t like leaving her alone…”

Bruce smiled at the boy’s affection for his mother and the way his sweet cheeks flushed for letting his softness being shown.

“You’re on my mind, big guy… But till I finish with my work, is there some place you want to go?
Maybe at the zoo?”

The two boys exchanged goggling, jeering glances and Jason giggled.

“Zoo is for babies!” Dick spat averting his gaze and Bruce blushed.

“I…I don’t know how bigger boys like to spend their free time” he mumbled. “When I was eight I loved the zoo…”

Jason pursed his lips posing like an understanding wise man.

“Ya were a baby…” he patted Bruce’s shoulder patronizing. “Being a guardian is a tough job, kid; but ya’ll learn” Dick glared at his friend. “I can give ya lessons; first tip for free – bowling” he winked and Bruce smiled.

“Lead me, Jason.”

Superman floated outside the whole wall window at Bruce’s office; the glass didn’t permit view inside but his super vision surpassed that limit. He could see Bruce behind his desk speaking on his phone to Stark. Of course, they can’t be left clear from the vapid playboy’s ill influence even for a day!

Bruce didn’t need much time to sense his presence; he finished the call and hastened to open the window for him to enter.

“I hope your office isn’t banned for me like the Manor’s common rooms?” he chuckled.

“You’re sure nobody saw you?”

Clark crooked his mouth and shook his head.

“Of course…Superman knows to be unnoticed when he wants – no kiss?” he pouted.

Bruce shrugged and eyed his chair.

“As you can see I can’t reach you…”

Yet Clark knew that rather than that Bruce was still reluctant to open up like before. And it was time for that to end.

“If that’s the problem…” he grabbed Bruce’s waist and lifted him with one hand wrapping his waist, the other cupping the back of his head to deepen the kiss he planted on his lips.

Bruce moaned from pleasure forgetting for a bit everything that Clark had said to him lately; he closed his eyes and grabbed Superman’s cheeks diving to that kiss with all his might. Deciding to pretend that they were still at the Fortress or the island…

Clark’s eyes were locked with Bruce’s sapphire-emerald seas which sparkled in pure, hot love; his lips were glued to Bruce’s mouth and all his existence looked for a place…The corner of his eye stopped at the modern desk and he dragged them there though in the room was a very comfy corner couch – yet Clark always fantasized having sex on a desk.

He held Bruce’s waist one armed, his mouth locked in a dynamic dance with Bruce’s and pushed the papers off the desk to lay the younger man there carefully controlling his mind fogging arousal.
Bruce still cupped his face and pierced his eyes with burning love but Clark detached his insatiable mouth to suck his neck; his hasty hand undoing Bruce’s tie and opening the first buttons while the other slipped inside the man’s pants groping his buttocks.

“You know” Clark breathed in a husky voice “I love white shirts on you…” *white on dark.*

“You know, I prefer you without the spandex…” Bruce growled raising his head.

Clark cupped the back of Bruce’s head and lowered him to the desk for him to gain more access to that intoxicating flesh around the beating jugular.

Bruce was ruffling Clark’s hair to let some of his arousal being relieved but then Clark stopped sucking – rather painfully – and looked him in the eyes almost fearful.

“Why did you stop, Clark?”

Clark realized that his groin was rubbing demanding on Bruce’s pelvis and blushed cupping Bruce’s hands that ruffled his hair.

“Not until you’re perfectly fine, Bruce…I can wait…” he looked around and his stare fell on Bruce’s tablet.

Half the screen had data on Zucco’s financial affairs and the other half a picture of Oliver Queen with detailed info.

“You’ve met Queen?”

Bruce supported himself on the elbows and Clark lifted him to settle him to the chair.

“Yes, at the party. And then I came across with him again at New York Police Headquarters.”

Clark clenched his waist with both hands, his eyes blank. He bit his bottom lip.

“By chance…”

“Exactly. I tried to get information about the Princess.”

*Here we go again*…Clark thought feeling a second pang accompanying the jealous one.

“And?”

“I asked him to describe the island…”

“And?”

Bruce swallowed hard.

“He described it like the ancient writers did” Clark nodded with confidence as if saying ‘I told you so’. “But if she is doing something to you then she might have done the same to Queen…” he raised his eyebrows. “I need to learn more from him and…”

Clark huffed and waved him off.

“Can we leave this, Bruce? You wanted me to stay away from her and I did but let’s drop that bullshit…” he turned to the window and Bruce watched him gnawing at his mouth’s interior.
“Where are you going?”

“Toma; I’ll come at the Manor late at night.”

Bruce moved the chair closer not minding to fix his shirt and tie – his lips and neck still feeling Clark’s mouth.

“You’ll go to the Fortress, too, then.”

Clark licked his lips – no, he wouldn’t go! But he didn’t want a quarrel with Bruce.

“Yes” he said without looking at him and Bruce choked the uncertainty that from somewhere wanted to cast its shadow.

“Give Martha my regards.”

Clark turned to him beaming.

“I will and she’ll be excited.”

Bruce watched him in the sky till he vanished. He’d have stayed there more but his phone rang. Lucius’ cheerful voice greeted him.

“Mr. Wayne, your suit just arrived from the tailor.”

“If you want an anteater find ants…” a strong female voice said and Superman halted midair.

He was over the Palisades returning to the Manor; it was late and the sky was completely black without moon or any star. Only the dim light from the public lighting bellow cracked a bit the darkness but he didn’t need that to see Diana’s gorgeous figure – the breathtaking woman glowed. She was floating like him; her hair waving at the cold wind, her beautiful eyes sparkling. The heavy rain were sticking her already tight clothes to her body, highlighting her body’s details and making his heartbeat frantic.

“I knew I’d find you here since you obviously avoid me…” she cocked an eyebrow and smiled.

Clark stretched his body and looked her in the eyes.

“Diana, this must end.”

She narrowed her eyes.


Superman shook his head.

“There is and you know it better than anyone. You kissed me.”

“I didn’t know then that you had an affair with…Wayne; after you told me, I think I made myself clear that I don’t want or claim you.”

“Your behavior last night shows otherwise.”

She widened her eyes angry.
“These are your words or his? Is it you that insult me or Wayne?”

Superman shook his head.

“Nobody insults you, Diana; but I must end this. All of this! I’m sorry.”

She began sniggering.

“Oh, dear! I can’t believe that someone like him could control Superman into making him an obedient puppy!” she clenched her waist and shook her head amused. “And you follow his orders! Unbelievable! You succumb to his stupid jealousy.”

Clark set his jaw and turned his back already flying away.

“Has he the right to demand things from you?” she dragged her words not making an effort to be heard sure that Superman would hear her.

And biting the bait, he flew back to her bringing his face to hers.

“Watch your mouth about Bruce!”

Her lips twitched and she yanked her head proudly completely unfazed by his anger.

“I didn’t say anything; I just asked…It seems that you had it already in your mind and don’t need someone else to say it” her lips almost touched his.

Clark frowned.

“What?”

“How can Bruce demand from you to end our friendship afraid of you cheating him?” her eyes glimmered. “When he already cheated you?”

Superman clenched his jaw and his lips twisted.

“Are you crazy?”

“When the League of Shadows held him a couple of months ago they used his body…”

“This is rape not cheating!”

She locked eyes with him.

“The result is the same! He let his body being fucked by others…” Superman shook his head and Diana brought her mouth to his ear. “Why he agreed to meet with Luthor in his suite? Even a moron could sniff the trap…but your clever boy went…Maybe he wanted to get caught…imprisoned, chained, being unable to resist” the air from her words made his body shudder but the meaning poisoned his heart and mind. “Maybe he craves to be used by others and looks for opportunities that would render him helpless, controlled by others…Maybe the most powerful being in Earth isn’t enough for him…Doesn’t satisfy him…Maybe you’re too soft…A nice puppy but when he wants real satisfaction he gets himself in trouble so to be…raped…”

She detached from him watching gleefully Clark’s dumbfounded expression; his narrowed eyes.

“You saw Thor laying his hands on him: for Wayne the god of thunder seems like the stallion he needs to satisfy him…Oliver Queen is also fascinated…” she said slyly “and Captain America? You
saw how he cuddled him...He is a real seductress your innocent Prince – and when he feels bored from your tenderness he can find someone to dominate him, to give him what he wants...take him violently.”

She pressed her lips and approached Superman; she placed her hand on his shoulder and met his eyes.

“He is projecting his own thoughts and desires to you – he believes that you cheat him because he did...It’s not his fault, Clark” she sighed “he was raised like that: to be a slut. But does he have to blame you of being a slut too? Has the right bossing you around like that? While he chooses even filthy criminals like Bane and who knows who else to give him cruel sex? He is filth, Kal; and dares to project his filth to you.”

She cupped his drenched from the rain face; her eyes shone sad and affectionate.

“You’re pure, Kal El, and he is defiled; his soul is corrupt and he blames you for his own corruption...Keep him, Kal, but do not let him have you like his pet...”

Superman snapped his head angry and flew away from her. Diana’s chest heaved as she clenched her teeth; she clasped her bracelets together causing sparkles and small blasts.

“Damn you, Wayne!”
Chapter 35

Dr. Quinzel stared at her reflection in the tall, rectangular mirror over the bathroom’s sink; it was almost eleven at night and in her fluffy, pink pajamas she had just brushed her teeth to go to sleep: she didn’t work at Sundays yet her sleeping hours were stable even though after Joker’s escape she had some trouble sleeping. So she opened the white cabinet at the mirror’s right, took a cylindrical plastic bottle that read Lexotanil and swallowed one dry.

She touched the angry purple-blue bruise on her left cheek that Joker’s punch had left. Harleen often recalled what happened that evening when Joker led the some inmates to escape: most of the inmates were easily recaptured since at the lounge room, were mostly inmates of medium danger – she couldn’t imagine what would have happened if people like Zsasz was there at the time…Probably, most of the orderlies and she would have been dead. Only Joker’s thugs were free along with their boss: it was evident now what a huge mistake was to gather them to the same institution with Joker.

She had made so many embarrassing mistakes with Joker that she was baffled she wasn’t fired yet… Maybe because everyone knew how dangerous and unpredictable Joker was so they didn’t really blame her. But she blamed herself for Joker’s escape…

And for keeping recalling the moment he grabbed her and put the metallic, sharpened pipe at her face. The worse wasn’t that her mind had been stuck there like someone who suffered from PTSD… no…the worse was that PTSD wasn’t her case…because for PTSD a traumatic event was necessary and what happened at the Asylum wasn’t traumatic at all…worse than being suffering from PTSD was that she enjoyed what Joker did to her…

She caressed the bruise which covered almost her entire cheek and she had to conceal it when going to work. Joker had spun her to be face to face and bitch slapped her shoving her to the wall and then to finally collapse to the floor. Harleen knew that she should be appalled from the man’s deed but far from it: she was thrilled every time she caressed the bruise and brought back the feelings of that moment – the pain, the excitement…

The young psychiatrist was aware that this was a disorder but every human was allowed some if nobody was hurt and it didn’t cause him/her major functioning problems. And, damn! she loved the energy behind that blow: energy that was only for her – Joker was interested in her. He could have killed her easily but he chose just to hit her; the sense of his hand still caused goose bumps…

Harleen had been very popular from her childhood due to her looks, her intelligence and her talent in gymnastics. She was easily the most popular girl in elementary, high school and beyond, with boys literally fighting to get her attention. Her family was a traditional urban family; her parents friendly, hardworking clerks who adored their only daughter and made her every favor. Young Harleen had her weekends filled with invitations to parties but this didn’t thwart her from being the top student of high school so it was easy for her to get a scholarship for college and then university; her excess in gymnastics helped tremendously.

She had many relationships with classmates and then fellow students at college and university however as much as handsome someone was or strong or popular, soon Harleen found herself bored – lacking something. After her studies in psychiatry she attributed it to the fact that she always had whatever she wanted: life always gave her everything without asking. And her lovers which each of them for every other girl would have been the Prince Charming for her were like food without salt. They had nothing special, nothing that would make her shiver and feel thrilled. And they were always posing as something they were not…
While that man, Mr. J, Joker, Jack or whatever his name was completely different - fascinating. She knew that her occupation’s ethics forbade that but she ought to be honest with herself. She was attracted by him from the first moment; the fact that he was a hard case for any psychiatrist, making him a challenge for her; the fact that he made her laugh even if she hid it from him; the fact that he was raw, primitive without any effort to adorn himself; his violence…

The sense of danger every time she went to his cell for a session aroused her and when that evening he grabbed her and violently pushed her on his body slightly grazing her cheek made her heart beat thrilled. When he bitch slapped her, Harleen fell not only from the force of the hit but also from a pleasant paralysis to her legs…And to add to the other things: Joker wasn’t an ugly man despite his scars that actually made his beauty unique…

The trade ring of her stable phone made Harleen jump and ran to her living room. She had turned off the lights and left only the table lamps casting a dim pinkish light from their coverings. The warm hue brushed the posters from various cult movies Harleen loved: Beetlejuice, Edward Scissorhands, Pulp Fiction.

“Haaaallooooo, Dr. Harlequin” her heart lost some beats hearing the so familiar nasal voice.

Harleen didn’t expect that; she had heard that Joker crushed the party at Avengers’ Tower clearly to find Bruce Wayne. She had to admit that Wayne was getting gradually more annoying to her: if she managed to save Mr. J from his obsession, then she was sure that not only Joker could be perfectly reformed but also hers…Harleen was certain that Joker shared the same attraction towards her and only this obsession with Wayne kept him from devote himself to her and his reformation.

“Tut-tut…Blondie-sugar, are you there?” Joker asked puzzled but with his usual snide tone.

“What do you want, Joker?” she retorted sternly.

The jester’s embarrassed giggled reached her.

“Why sooooo ag-GRESSIVE? Nooot that I don’t like it…” he huffed “I know: it’s the slaaap, huh?” she heard him licking his lips and when he spoke again his voice was serious. “I missed my Dr. Harlequin” he stuttered. “Ummm…why not calling me Mr. J? I really miss how it sounds…”

Harleen’s lips on their own twitched to smile but she pressed them; she shouldn’t let that clown get into her.

“You escaped: you can’t afford asking things” she said. “And yes, you hit me and I don’t tolerate that.”

Joker chuckled.

“I told you that I would leave that place – it was way toooooooo booooooring…nooot your fault, Dr. Harlequin. I couldn’t stay there – I have sooooooo many things to dooooo” a long pause and a deep breath. “Aaaaand I slapped you because I knew you wanted it – I sensed it the moment I glued you on my body…You liked that, doc, didn’t you?”

Harleen rolled her eyes.

“Of course not, Joker! It’s your sadism and your ego talking…”

“He. He. He…Youuuuu’re lying” he singsonged. “You see, after my farewell, I realized that our Stark-y had changed his system so that to knock me out every time there was fear around me aaaaaand when I grabbed you or hit you I didn’t pass out …Soooooo I think that youuuuu, my dear,
liked our...mmm...hot exchange.”

Harleed cocked an eyebrow: Stark should have informed her for the change.

“You’re wrong – your assumption has no base” she spat. “What do you want? I thought that now you’re free your only care would be to get your Bruce...” she bit her lip because she sounded like a jealous chic. “Which is bad, Joker: you must let the man alone.”

Joker giggled.

“A...A...Aaaa...That sounded like someone is jeaaaaalous of little Brucie...” he so much enjoyed that new game.

Harleen gritted her teeth and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Joker, what do you want?”

She heard his tongue licking his scars.

“I missed...our sessions, Dr. Harlequin...” a long sigh. “I know you believe that I was mocking you then but actually talking to you about my past...about everything...made me feel...hm...nice...” his voice was serious and thoughtful.

Harleen pursed her lips: she wasn’t an easy person to fall for someone’s words but always focused on the non-verbal signs behind those words. And the way Joker was speaking manifested honesty: after all, during the escape he didn’t kill or seriously injured anyone. Okay, he killed a man at the Tower but there Wayne was involved and the billionaire had a bad influence on Mr. J – while with her, Mr. J got milder.

Joker from the other end of the line smacked his lips.

“Mmm...Is this aaa therapeutic silence?”

“Joker, if you really want to continue those sessions then I can speak with the police and arrange your surrender” she heard Joker’s giggle. “I promise I’ll be all the time there and you won’t be harassed.”

Now Joker’s giggles became a fit.

“Noooooo, doll face; That is uuu--terly stupid! I...don’t wanna be captured by the cops and transferred to that loony bin – no offence but except than you it was rather boring...I was thinking more of an external therapeutic relationship – this is how youuuu call it, huh?”

Harleen cocked an eyebrow.

“You propose me to do sessions with a fugitive? A dangerous murderer?”

Joker snorted and she could see him lolling his head to the side.

“Now, noooow” he gargled “…a murderer? What an un--professional way to handle your patient! C’mon, Harle--quin! I need your help!” he shouted. “But the Asylum makes me mad...while being free I’ll feel more comfortable to share...”

“Share?”

“Everything. My paaaast aaaaand my present. And maybe...you manage to stop me from hurting
other people…Faaancy that feaaat!"

The young psychiatrist squinted: this actually wasn’t a bad idea.

“It’d be easier for me to open up if Brucie opens up too…” he chuckled. “I mean emotionally not physically – though that wouldn’t be bad, not bad at all…”

“Mr. Wayne would never accept to participate in your sessions.”

“Who said anything about accepting?” he giggled and it was almost choked by his laughter.

Harleen squeezed the telephone cable between her fingers.

“You talk about abducting and forcing him…I’d never take part in something like that – leave him out of this and we can have our sessions.”

“Nah…nah…nah…You see, Joker can’t be deciphered without Brucie – HE IS THE KEY” Harleen frowned – the prospect of deciphering Joker was fascinating. “This man completes me – if he talks I’ll talk…”

Harleen tapped her finger on her lip.

“Weeeeell?” he asked slyly and innocently at the same time. “If I get Bruuuuuucie’s participation you’ll be our doctor? I’m sure he is as fascinating as me…Hehe…”

Dr. Quinzel considered the prospects: if Joker managed to capture the young billionaire her presence there could protect him from getting harmed – and Joker was right: Wayne was also an interesting case with mystery surrounding him. And if he was the key for Joker’s reformation and salvation of many innocent people that Joker could kill, then it was definitely worth it. Not to mention that she could always claim that she was a hostage too forced to do as Joker ordered.

“Mr. J, I’d ask you not to attempt anything against Mr. Wayne…They’ll catch you – they expect you to do something like this.”

“Doooooon’t worry about this, sugar. Now to the Buuuuuut part?”

Harleen licked her lips and nodded her eyes sparkling decisively behind her rectangular, small spectacles.

“I’ll be your therapist…”

Tony was gazing New York’s illuminated skyline from the whole wall window of his Penthouse at Soho; it was late night and he was dressed in his pajamas; he needed some comfort and relaxation after that day.

He was absorbed in his thoughts recounting his Press Conference and the scolding headlines hoping that tomorrow’s press will change its attitude: not that he cared much about that lousy flock – he knew them too well. Yet the new S.H.I.E.L.D. couldn’t afford being buried in her first steps… And then he met the parents of the young man that Joker killed, Steve with him…Tony closed his eyes.

He heard the soft footsteps that approached him and saw Selina’s reflection on the window pane getting a mystic hue as the night outside twirled around her figure; she wore her loose nightdress and the playboy smiled turning to greet her.
“Tomorrow I’m returning to Gotham” she said.

He sighed.

“I wish I could do the same…but” he lolled his head at the side “I had obligations here.”

She pursed her lips.

“When you become a director that’s what you get…”

Tony scratched his hair and laughed.

“I guess you’re right: that’s what us, responsible men, get…” Selina rolled her eyes. “I expected that you would be already in Gotham with all the new exciting developments. Isn’t overwhelming how fast kids grow up?” he cackled. “The little guy becoming a father…”

Selina blinked and snorted.

“Guardian, Tony – and Bruce told me that it’d be temporary: he is positive that the boy’s granny will be found.”

Tony pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows.

“In Gotham though?” he retorted skeptical. “But it’d be for the best both for the poor boy and for Bruce…that boy hates him and I’m sure he’ll make his life harder than already it is. And Bruce doesn’t need this.”

Selina shook her head and narrowed her eyes getting what he referred to.

“You really believe that Superman can harm Bruce?”

Tony pouted.

“In many different ways…and if the super-asshole does that I’m going to kill him!”

The young woman crossed her arms.

“You won’t because Bruce doesn’t want this” her lips twitched in a faint smile. “But I hope that Superman wouldn’t…” she brushed her neck that was naked since her long hair was tied in a ponytail. “Maybe Bruce is right and despite the influence Bruce mentions Superman won’t do something awfully wrong…”

Tony nodded, his eyes widened in sarcasm.

“Because he cares…” he sighed and closed his eyes. “I’m no better…you were there” he pressed his lips “I spoke so hard to him…but he forgave me…”

Selina raised her eyebrows.

“This can be a lesson for you and next time be more careful…and patient.”

Tony laughed.

“Use the chance Bruce gives me, huh? I hope that fucking alien thinks the same… Anyway, given that you’re still in New York I expected to find you earlier in the penthouse.”
Selina cocked an eyebrow and smirked.

“What’s that? Parental control?”

“I’m older but not so much, pretty…” Tony pouted. “Just interest…”

“And curiosity?” she asked slyly. “Well, I had to give back to the police something that some thugs stole and wanted to sell to a rich bastard – a rare jewel.”

“The Heart of Fire?” he had read about the necklace with the huge red ruby that was stolen a couple of months ago. “You could have mailed it or given to me to hand back.”

She inclined her head half closing her challenging eyes and smiled seductively.

“Breaking and entering the Police Headquarters was more fun.”

Tony brushed her upper arms laughing.

“Of course!”

Pepper’s high heels echoed coming to the vast living room and Tony’s assistant sat on the couch.

“You said something about watching a movie in your cinema hall!” she yelled at Tony. “I hope you invited Selina.”

Tony trotted there and jumped into the expensive leather, wrapping his arm around Pepper’s shoulders. Selina following.

“Mmm…I was thinking a masterpiece lesbian porn…you see, my gorgeous environment inspires me – and we could do our own movie…” he twitched his eyebrows to the two women; it was easy to understand that he was joking.

Selina snorted.

“In your dreams, handsome.”

Pepper gave him a smack in the back of his head.

“Being with you tempts me to change my orientation: you sure you want to push me more into this?” she said snidely.

Selina sniggered.

“I think that this won’t be very flattering for your playboy fame…your girlfriend ditching males completely after her experiences with you! It’d be so hilarious!”

Tony gulped.

“Okay, then…” he narrowed his eyes pouting. “Zootopia?”

The door’s bell was a surprise, more so when Steve Rogers smiled to Pepper.

“Good evening, Pepper. I hope I’m not interrupting something?”

Tony jerked his head to him.

“Not at all! Do you fancy lesbian porn?” he chirped. “In HD” he stressed arching his eyebrows.
Steve blushed and Pepper chuckled.

“Don’t listen to him. Come in! We’ll see animation.”

Steve’s eyes met with Selina’s as the young woman stared at him with a faint smile.

“Actually, I wanted to speak with Selina.”

She stood up and walked to him, her eyes glimmering taking in his leather and jeans clad body.

“Yeah…that’s better than lesbian porn or Zootopia…” Tony nodded crooking his lips.

That floor seemed going on for ever today… He was mopping as fast as he could but doing it with one hand was exhausting and slow…Signora Bruna had cursed him several times already for being slacking off and when he tried to explain that he wasn’t but his arm was killing him today more than ever, she slapped him in the face. She barked that if he continued whining she was going to tell Falcone.

So he shut his mouth and hastened to rub off the blood that fell on the floor from his mouth. Hunger was piercing his guts and made him light headed yet he couldn’t afford to delay more so he clenched his jaw though Signora Bruna’s slap throbbed and continued rubbing the floor.

He heard the footsteps approaching but he didn’t give much attention: thugs and cabaret’s people crossed the freshly mopped floor indifferent about his hard work or on purpose to force him repeat the chore. So he didn’t even look just sighed – only inside because some of them got angry if he made sounds – and prepared himself to start all over.

But the footsteps stopped next to him and that was unusual for the store’s people who just passed him like a pest – only one used to stop and snatch him for his satisfaction but the footsteps didn’t belong to him…

He didn’t end his thought and a strong arm wrapped his waist pulling him upwards to glue to a tall, strong body and a palm smashed his mouth to keep him quiet – not that he ever yelled when people dragged him around but obviously the man was certain that the boy would understand that it wasn’t Chill who got him and feared that he might yell.

He was dragged upstairs; the man holding him tight to his body and keeping his palm over his mouth and half his nostrils almost suffocating him. Thankfully, he was able to breathe when the stranger stopped in front of a cheap door and opened, getting him inside.

Bruce knew what they usually wanted from him – the various thugs: rubbing, fondling, kissing, licking and putting fingers inside him; the other things were only for Falcone and Chill. He braced himself and wished that at least they’d be fast so to return to his work soon in hopes of finishing on time and not get punished. But why bringing him in a room? Usually, they just squeezed him in a dark corner and did what they wanted to do.

The man who held him put him down on his knees and Bruce didn’t dare raise his eyes from the carpet that wasn’t very thick or expensive but it was so pleasantly soft and warm that his eyes watered…actually, the carpet was the most interesting thing in the room.

Until he heard the creaking of a bed and then soft footsteps approaching and stopping right before him. He saw two pale white feet with red, painted nails – female feet; the smell of cheap perfume attacked his nostrils and he cried remembering his mom’s elegant, sweet perfume…
He didn’t dare look but fingers tousled cruelly his messy, filthy locks and Bruce after experiencing so many groping from men, he knew that these fingers were female. The same fingers took his chin and yanked his head, not too violently but still giving him considerable pain.

She wanted him to see her and his eyes stared. She was tall and lean: Bruce knew that men considered a body like hers gorgeous. She was dressed in an almost transparent black nightdress that reached the middle of her thighs and left the rest of her endless shapely legs naked. The woman yanked more Bruce’s head and he could see her face: she was beautiful; she had long hair in honey’s color and blue eyes that seemed not real; her nose was straight and her red lips heart shaped and juicy.

Bruce’s heart clenched: he knew her. She was Falcone’s latest interest – a young whore who just came to Gotham and immediately captured the boss’ attention. Without stopping Bruce’s own nightly duty… However the clench became worse because Bruce knew that woman from somewhere else…She was familiar…

But as she squeezed his cheeks to get his attention Bruce stopped trying to remember where he had seen her… She frowned and her lips twitched in disgust.

“What does Falcone find in you, kid? Filthy, skinny, ugly…”

She bent to him and nuzzled his cheek.

“Though your smell is special…and very enticing…” her nails dag his cheek and Bruce gasped. “So…what do you have that makes him leave me to come fuck you?”

She clenched more his chin, her nails scratching his cheeks and her other hand that ruffled his hair fisted his locks violently.

“Speak!”

Bruce gulped and tried to breathe but his heart pounded painfully as every time he knew that he was going to be hurt – and he hated this reaction because he should have get used to it by now…

“I don’t know, madam…Please, let me return to my work…Signora Bruna is going to punish me…”

The slap in his face came as a flash and he was tossed to the floor rubbing his busted lip while the woman chuckled.

“I can punish you too if you dissatisfy me” she barked baring her teeth. “And I can make Bruna and Carmine punish you more brutally than ever!”

Bruce didn’t dare look her at the face but even with the corner of his eye he could see the manic glimmer in her eyes though still these eyes didn’t seem real. However what mattered more now was that she could make his masters punish him – Bruce knew that she had great influence on Falcone… He gulped trying to calm his heart that squirmed in his chest pushing his whole body to tremble.

She marched right in front of his slumped form.

“I don’t like competition, boy; especially, from a filthy maggot like you! So I’ll find what you do to get Falcone’s infatuation.”

Bruce didn’t raise his head that was too heavy from her slap.

“Strip him!” the woman turned her head to the thug who served her.
He felt harsh hands grab him under the armpits and heave him to his trembling feet. The thug took
violently the rim of his ragged T-shirt and pulled it upwards to get it off his body, carrying along the
boy’s arms. Bruce gasped and his eyes filled tears as his cripple arm was jerked upwards with the
fabric that was tossed in a corner of the floor.

“His pants now!” she ordered with her hands clutching her waist.

Bruce as every time felt dread as his pants was pulled down in a swift movement; he didn’t wear any
underwear so his working hand went to cover his privates. He didn’t do that when Falcone or Chill
stripped him because there was no reason and the first two times he did that they beat him
mercilessly.

The thug gathered his pants from his feet and threw it away.

Bruce sensed rather than saw the woman casting a stern glance at the thug and he slapped Bruce’s
hand away from his genitals.

The woman eyed the boy’s shaking body and even circled him staring in a way that made Bruce
wish he was swallowed by the floor. Especially, when he felt her acid stare focusing on the dried
blood on his back from the whipping and on his buttocks and thighs from his master’s pleasure.

She sniggered and her lips twisted in disgust.

“You’re pathetic, kid! That body is truly disgusting…I can’t understand Falcone…” she cupped
Bruce’s chin and yanked his head. “Look at me, filthy rat!”

Bruce looked at her gorgeous face swallowing hard not only because his neck was stretched but
mostly because of the cruelty of her eyes.

“Our eyes are unique…” she muttered intrigued “yet I don’t think that a man like Falcone care
much about eyes…” she tapped her lips “let’s see how you’re in bed.”

Bruce jerked and began shaking his head desperate.

“No, please, madam…” he muttered to her back as she retreated to the bed.

“Bring him, Bart” she turned slightly her head to see the boy but addressed the man smirking at
Bruce.

Bart grabbed Bruce’s waist.

“Please...No...not...again…” he was used every night by Falcone and Chill: he couldn’t be put into
this other times of the day too... his eyes watered as his stare collided with hers.

Her eyes were frozen and Bruce saw his condemn before she gestured to the metallic bed for the
thug to throw the boy. Bruce pressed his lips.

“Strap him” she said casually to her thug and Bruce’s heart stopped. “Falcone loves to tie you,
huh?”

Bart leaned on the floor and took ropes; he grabbed Bruce’s cripple arm and it was real agony – he
tried to not yell as the man was strapping his wrist to the tall headboard’s black railing but some
sobs escaped because the rope dag into his bonny wrist and he flexed so much the limp that it felt
like being ripped from its socket...
He sensed two thirsty eyes watching avidly and looked up only to meet her satisfied evil smirk relishing Bart stretching Bruce’s short legs to reach as much as possible the railing at the end of the bed.

Bruce shut his eyes and let his head slump on the other side; he knew what was coming next…he knew it from every time they strapped him spreadeagled to his body’s limits.

The bed creaked as someone climbeded and the woman straddled him letting her weight on his pelvis. She clenched his hair and yanked his head to look at her.

“I want you to look at me, brat…” she let his hair and pushed her nightdress’ thin straps to slip from her shoulders and arms till her round shaped porcelain breasts popped out. “You like what you see, kid?” she cocked an eyebrow and smiled slyly.

She leaned over Bruce and squeezed his mouth to slightly open. She touched her nipple to the boy’s lips and put the thick brown flesh inside…

“Suck it, babe” she whispered “as you do with Falcone’s dick…” her nails that squeezed his mouth dag his flesh. “Now!” she ground her teeth “or I’ll make Falcone flay you alive!”

Bruce began sucking as Falcone liked it and the woman closed her eyes, panting; he felt her pelvis rub at his groin and the thug’s eyes goggling at the spectacle hardly containing his saliva as the woman brought her other breast to Bruce’s mouth.

She sighed and stretched her body.

“Nice enough…but let’s explore you more…”

Bruce’s legs jerked inside their suffocating binds as a nailed finger slipped in his gaping entrance, the nail scratching his tender flesh. His eyes widened…

“Please, madam…stop…”

But she smiled wickedly and shoved a second finger causing a cry from the boy who sobbed.

“Don’t play the virgin with me, little slut…” she bent her fingers inside Bruce and then opened them wide to shove two more.

Bruce’s pelvis jerked upwards as much as the ropes permitted and the woman pushed him back down to the mattress with her weight. She smiled and caressed his tears that streaked his filthy cheeks.

“How’s your name, bitch?” she asked emotionless, her eyes stabbing him as she brought to his mouth the fingers that just pulled out of his anal channel. “Lick my fingers, boy…”

Bruce closed his eyes and obeyed licked, the smell of his body nauseating him.

“What’s your name, hooker?” she pushed her fingers deeper in Bruce’s throat and he began choking and gagging.

She withdrew a bit her fingers and her other hand clenched his tiny throat forcing Bruce to focus his bulging, terrorized eyes on her eyes that were two pieces of blue ice.

“Your name!” she growled her eyebrows two angry straight lines.

Bruce’s body was trembling and sweating, his heart beating fast and painful…He couldn’t say to her
his name…He shook his head and his eyes were melting in tears.

“I…” he mumbled because her long fingers thwarted him and she withdrew them more. “I don’t know…” he whispered between his whines. “Please…”

She grabbed his chin and yanked his head up stretching his neck.

“You want to tell me that your mommy pulled you out and then dump her pup in a garbage bin?” she asked snidely.

Bruce closed his eyes and felt the tears burning him – no, his mom loved him so much…His chest was clenched suffocating and sending strong sobs to punch his fragile bones; his throat burnt. He was crying but the woman fist ed his hair.

“Speak!”

He tried to nod because his throat was burning but her grips were too strong to yield.

“No…but I” he panted “I don’t have a name…” his voice was choked in sobs and the woman released him only to slap him again on the nose sending his head to roll.

“Who cares about your stupid name, anyways?” she gritted her teeth above Bruce’s tightly closed eyes.

He felt her shift a bit over him and then heard a sound like the opening of a drawer and then a bang as the drawer closed again. The weight left his body but he knew that she still sat next to him. His heartbeat ached him and made him breathe as if he had an asthma fit; his body was soaked in sweat and trembling in his heartbeat’s rhythm because he didn’t knew what was next.

His limbs twisted in their straps as something spanked his stretched opening; he opened his eyes and gasped at the thing the woman held in front of his face smirking.

“Falcone has introduced you to these, huh?” she chuckled and raised an eyebrow. “I want to see you being fucked with this one to figure what’s drawing that mobster to you…”

She dragged the dildo through his body’s line, from his neck to his groin and then his opening making him convulse in despair.

“Please, madam…” he raised his head with difficulty to beg her. “Don’t do this, please…”

He saw her jaw clench and her lips protrude in anger; she lifted the dildo and hit his opening with such force that his legs twitched trying in vain to escape and Bruce yelped.

“I know” she rimmed the boy’s opening with the object “that Falcone uses far bigger dildos than this so you must not complain...Unless” he grabbed his genitals with the other hand and squeezed and Bruce’s body arched because it was like his genitals being ripped “you want me angry…”

Bruce bit his lip and swallowed hard; his head slumping exhausted at the mattress. Only to jolt upwards the same moment as the object that was wide as a cola glass bottle was pushed inside his opening...

He cried and the woman giggled pushing deeper only to be met with resistance since the channel was narrow.

“Your asshole is too narrow for a professional whore…” she clenched her jaw and pushed deeper,
the object moving.

Bruce’s body was twitching, convulsing like a dying fish, his hand clenching the railing where it was strapped…His neck had arched, an expansion of his torso’s arch, as the object invaded him deeper, intensifying the pain and his sobs.

“No…” he whined but this made her shove the object in him to the halt.

She lay on the mattress, plunged her elbow and supported her head to be above Bruce’s. The boy felt his anus beating around the foreign object ready to rip – there were already tears from other times. His eyes looked at his tormentor pleading, trembling from agony and pain under shaking eyelashes drenched in teardrops.

But the woman smiled and tapped her fingers on his chest before she took one nipple and rubbed hard – Bruce jerked more increasing the pain in his anus. She grazed the tiny, pink nipple with her long nail till blood sprung and then did the same with the other nipple; Bruce begging quietly.

“You’re a good sport, bitch” she huffed and raised herself in sitting position slapping the boy’s tortured nipples.

Bruce groaned but immediately he howled as the woman grabbed the dildo’s hilt and pulled it abruptly out only to shove all of it again inside with one swift movement; Bruce was drenched in sweat and his eyes bulged watched the woman thrusting the thing in his anus fast and deep, gritting her teeth and smirking.

“Why your little willy isn’t flying?” Bruce felt the same excruciating pain that his masters caused him when their thrusts became frantic.

He let his head slump on the side letting the sobs get out of his throat. The thrusts continued deeper with every movement; more painful…and Bruce tried to distance himself by looking at the various plants in the pots on the wall selves. But then a thrust deeper and more vicious than the other made him shut his eyes and clench the railing.

Till his anus felt empty and he heard again the drawer. Yet he didn’t open his eyes because his insides, down there, were burning and stinging…and his body writhed.

The woman stood and looked at Bart who was goggling at the panting boy.

“Fuck him, Bart” she dragged her words. “I can see your dick is already hard…” she chuckled.

Bruce’s eyes popped open and he looked panicked at her; he shook his head in denial.

“Please, no, madam…I beg you…”

Her grin became enormous revealing her white, shining teeth.

“This is your job, little shit…” she cocked an eyebrow and looked satisfied at the huge rock hard erection that jolted as Bart lowered his pants and underwear just before climbing the bed.

Bruce stared pleading at the man: his body’s opening hurt so much and if master figured that someone else used him he was going to be punished harder than usual.

“Please, sir…”

A punch shoved his head to the other side and the pain set his eyes into darkness.
“Shut up, ya hoe!”

His thighs were smashed by two clenching hands that kept him still for the man to thrust at once his entire length inside the boy who yelled and convulsed unable to escape. His yells became weak sobs as the man rocked him relentlessly to his in and out frantic rhythm that impaled him deeper irritating every time his old wounds.

As his fluids burnt his narrow channel Bruce was almost unconscious; he knew that he wouldn’t be permitted to sleep because he had the floor to finish but he couldn’t do anything else than tolerating the man’s cruel hands that after his climax explored his body playing painfully with his nipples and genitals.

“Thanks, Vivian…” he gasped to the woman. “I always wanted to fuck Falcone’s bitch…”

Bruce opened his exhausted eyes, drenched locks stuck around his face. He looked at her gorgeous face: they called her Vivian then yet Bruce now knew that she had another name: Diana…

Clark sat on the bed, his back supported on the headboard; he had just worn his pajamas and slipped under the blankets only to sit. His face was distorted in a frown and pursed lips. Clark wasn’t in the mood to gaze at Bruce’s sleeping form – Diana’s words still echoing in his mind and piercing his heart: can this man whom Clark considered as innocence incarnated being so rot? Doing everything to stage his capture only to get hard sex from his enemies? Cheating him?

His breath stopped and he clutched his face with both hands. The melody he heard upon entering the room was still playing at Bruce’s tablet; obviously, he didn’t intend on falling asleep because although the room was dark his tablet was open to his latest inquiries: Zucco, some other stuff from Lex Labs and as usual, Diana. He pressed his lips for Bruce’s obsession to defame her and for the song he was listening to before drowsing off…Clark had asked from Bruce to tell him about that song he loved so much.

It was about a lover being left alone by his mate…It was melancholic and beautiful. Clark clenched his jaw: he wouldn’t let Bruce alone…His hand softly ran the human’s torso…He wouldn’t surrender Bruce to any of those hungry wolfs waiting…and if Bruce wanted to get laid with them or worse, if he already had an affair with any of them and made up the whole fuss with Diana to fool him?

Sweat spurt all over his body and he panted: there was no way he’d let the field clear for them.

Hero stirred in his basket; when Clark entered the kitten’s flashing eyes found him narrowing angrily but upon sensing his familiar, safe presence, he slept again.

Clark looked again at Bruce and the human gasped his eyes popping open; his face was covered in sweat drops and he was panting. Clark switched on the night lamp over his bed side table and stared at Bruce.

Bruce was blinded by the lamp’s sudden light but when his eyes adjusted and he could see Clark’s face, a shudder ran his back. Clark was gazing at him but instead of the worry he always showed every time he woke up like this, now there was boredom and coldness.

“A nightmare or a flashback?” the Man of Steel asked unable to keep the tired, fed up tone out of his voice.

Bruce pressed his lips as the coldness in Clark’s eyes – that he was sure that the man didn’t even realize – froze his heart. However he could understand Clark’s fatigue and boredom from his
constant flashbacks and nightmares – Bruce was sick of them as well.

“A flashback…” he answered rubbing his forehead with both hands because a soft headache began throbbing there and Bruce knew that this was the first stage of a full blown migraine.

Clark licked his lips; he could recognize the distress in the younger man’s body, besides he was still panting slowly recovering a normal respiration.

“You want to share?” he asked more out of habit than interest and realizing that made him feel shame; he took in Bruce’s eyes, the remnants of the flashback’s terror and the puzzlement…which Clark suddenly understood that it was for his cold stare.

He licked again his lips and forced the coldness out of his eyes but Bruce wasn’t fooled.

“Are you sure?” the human asked him piercing Clark’s eyes as if reading his mind.

Clark grinned.

“Of course.”

Bruce’s eyes slipped from Clark’s: he couldn’t say what he saw staring at Clark’s clear, pure blue topaz eyes – the purity of the man made him feel even filthier and wouldn’t let him speak… He swallowed hard and began narrating what he saw; Clark should learn about Vivian/Diana.

Clark’s face was distorted listening to Bruce’s steady but emotionless voice recounting: he fought to keep inside the sighs. Why Bruce chose to share with him a flashback now? Now that he just wanted from him so many things, to make him answer? It could be that Bruce with Ra’s Al Ghul’s tremendous training had sensed that and through his flashback wanted to soften him reminding Clark of the Hell he’s been through?

The younger man was staring at the flames that moved idly in the rectangular, marble fireplace opposite the bed. His voice dragged monotonous as if narrating the story of a movie yet Clark could hear the heavy thuds of his heart and could see sweat drops over his forehead – new drops that were added to those the dream provoked. Clark pursed his lips: could Bruce been acting?

Bruce was engrossed in his narration; unfortunately, even mentioning the content made him reexperiencing it all over…But he clenched his jaw and fists because he should continue for Clark to know the truth about Diana. After the flashback Bruce realized that indeed he had seen her in the past. His eyes regained some life seeing Hero leaving his basket in front of the fireplace and climb the bed to curl on his unfeeling legs. His lips trembled in a smile and began petting the kitten.

“This woman’s name was Vivian…Falcone was fascinated by her but she suddenly disappeared and they couldn’t find her” he rubbed his temple because as his narration moved ahead the headache turned into migraine.

Bruce raised his eyes to Clark’s apathetic face which now flickered in an effort to show some emotion.

“Seeing again that woman, I recognized the Princess…” Clark’s eyebrows jerked upright as he gasped and Bruce nodded. “I know it sounds crazy…but the Amazon was in Dolcetto…”

Clark crossed his arms over the chest and let his head drop to his chest thoughtful feeling Bruce’s fervent eyes watching him avidly, waiting his reaction. What did Bruce expect from him? To believe that?
He raised his head and met Bruce’s eyes. He inhaled deeply.

“So…another thug got to fu…” he closed his mouth “rape you” he said because after his discussion with Diana Bruce’s rapes didn’t seem like tortures but stains.

Bruce narrowed his eyes, his mouth slightly gaping in astonishment. Clark could discern the hurt in those sparkling eyes and would have felt for the younger man but this time Bruce had an agenda and Clark wouldn’t get manipulated.

“Is this the only thing you pay attention to?” Bruce said; he had opened his heart, he had forced his mouth to articulate everything and Clark only focused on the thug that fucked him? It was a fuck for Clark? He pushed some wet locks back to his head.

“What else I should have noticed, Bruce?” Clark asked patient.

Bruce’s eyes regained their resolution: it was expected that Clark would doubt that she was there; he didn’t want to believe anything bad for her. Bruce knew that he had to fight.

“That the Amazon Princess was in Dolcetto for a time and she called herself Vivian.”

“What the Hell would an Amazon Princess want to a filthy cabaret?” he tried to be patient.

Bruce inhaled deeply.

“Exactly! And her hair was honey colored while her eyes still seemed fake. The fact she was in Dolcetto is another indication that she isn’t who she says!”

Clark shook his head and then jerked it upwards in frustration.

“No, this proves that you have lost your reason, Bruce. And also that your jealousy and hatred for Diana has turned you into a devious person!” his lips were pursed in anger as he sent daggers into Bruce’s baffled but mostly hurt eyes.

“But it was a flash…”

Clark’s head snapped at him rapidly.

“You expect me to take that seriously?” he spat and Bruce frowned. “First, how you can be sure that this was a flashback?” it was evident from his tone that he didn’t believe that Bruce really considered that a flashback. “After Crane’s treatment yourself told us that you see things that balance between real experiences and nightmares…” he shook his head amused. “It’s obvious, Bruce: the real experience was that scum fucking you and Diana’s part in the dream was what you wanted to see of her…”

Bruce’s face tensed in disbelief and insult.

“You think I made that up?!?” he asked exasperated though the answer was obvious.

Hero feeling the tension rose and Bruce petted him and lowered him to the floor.

“Go to sleep, Hero” he whispered to the kitten that however stayed there.

Clark closed his eyes and then looked at Bruce challengingly.

“Either that or you used one of the bizarre nightmares Crane caused as an opportunity to accuse Diana” he chuckled. “C’mon, Bruce…till now you never wanted to share your flashbacks with
anyone and suddenly you narrate me everything?” he arched his eyebrows and then shook his head in disapproval. “I’d never believe you’re capable of this, Bruce…”

Bruce swallowed his pride that screamed to him to throw the Man of Steel out of his bedroom.

“Clark, I’m not lying” he locked his eyes with Clark’s. “I really saw those things! You know when I’m having a nightmare and when a flashback by reading my brain waves. And you can discern if I’m lying with the same way.”

Clark blinked; Bruce’s eyes were sincere. Yet he couldn’t be sure that he wasn’t pretending: the man was trained perfectly to deceive people. He cupped Bruce’s face with both hands and relished the warmth of that beautiful face.

“With the difference that you’re able to change your brain waves to hide the truth” he smirked and saw Bruce’s eyes darkening.

“I’m not a liar!”

Clark shook his head without letting Bruce’s face.

“I agreed to stop seeing Diana because you wanted, isn’t that enough? Why you must slander her and embarrass yourself?” his tone was patronizing and almost jeering.

“You must realize the truth, Clark; and exactly because you already distanced from her I had no reason to lie...But this is the truth, Clark, and we must search what this woman hides” it was difficult for Bruce to not yell at Clark for calling him a liar but he knew that he was under some influence so he had to tread carefully; if he managed to bring Clark to his senses, to persuade him… But Clark’s mind twirled around other things.

“Why you went to Luthor’s suite?” he freed the younger man’s face.

Bruce was flabbergasted: this was…

“I think we covered that issue back then; I explained the reasons to you and you agreed.”

Clark ran his hands to his hair and huffed shaking his head in denial.

“I didn’t: I just couldn’t change your mind so I followed along trying to protect you but it was a futile task, huh?” he gave a faint smirk that made Bruce’s blood freeze. “So, why you took that road? We could have caught the League with a different, safer way.”

Bruce rubbed again his throbbing temple: why Clark was going back there? And this expression on his face…

“We discussed that and decided that THIS was the safer way: we couldn’t let the League continue plotting for much longer…” he closed his eyes really tired: this migraine didn’t permit him to elaborate on things that he had explained in the past. “Clark” he said determined “what do you hint at? Say it.”

Clark took Bruce’s hand that was rubbing his aching temple and kissed it feathery.

“I think” he locked eyes with Bruce “that you wanted to be captured.”

Bruce jerked his hand away. His eyes widened.
“Of course not! Remember how we planned everything? How you were rushing to assist Selina and me? If Bagdana hadn’t stalled you, you would have been there on time and Talia and the rest would have been arrested” he saw Clark’s eyes wary and he brushed his cheek. “Why on Earth I’d want to be captured by a woman who wanted to punish and enslave me?” he breathed.

Clark pressed his lips.

“Because you’re sick, Bruce…” now Bruce’s eyes bulged and his heart lost several beats.

The younger man’s body stiffened and he used his hands to distance from Clark but the Man of Steel grabbed his upper arms and brought him close again.

“Get off…”

Clark shook his head in denial.

“No…” he retorted calmly. “I heard your babbling patiently, now you’ll listen to me. You asked me to stay away from Diana afraid that I’ll cheat you” Bruce shook his head in denial. “While you did cheat me.”

Bruce’s cold eyes narrowed to slits.

“I didn’t!”

Clark felt a surge of rage but licked his lips calmly.

“Bane, Talia…both of them” there was a threesome – Bruce’s chest heaved violently from pressed breaths. He opened his mouth to retort that these were rapes but Clark knew already and cut him. “Rapes? You chose to be captured knowing what use they’ll do of you! That seems to me like free will”

Bruce felt hot nausea stabbing his stomach while his head got bleary.

“You can’t believe that I wanted to be raped…” his voice was low from disappointment and bitterness but harsh and throaty; his eyes turned inwards. “I knew what they were going to do to me and that’s why I didn’t want to be captured…but I couldn’t let them continue endanger innocent people: I had to take the risk and if I was captured their attention would be away from our project of dismantling the League…” he gulped and looked away. “Have you any idea how it is to be raped?”

Clark could discern the pain in the depths of Bruce’s voice.

“Then why you keep getting yourself in situations that would render you powerless to resist?”

Bruce closed his eyes and yanked his head to the other side.

“I don’t but when you try to do what you must things can get awry…”

“But you’re a man of contingencies: why you didn’t have one this time?”

Bruce rubbed his eyebrows.

“I had…” he managed to keep his voice calm and not growl but irritation was there. “Tony had implanted a tracker to my neck and I wore my special lenses – and we had ready the plan for the attack so you’d have found me quickly. But even contingencies are not perfect sometimes…”

“Exactly” he nodded “when you want them to!”
Bruce turned his stare calmly to him.

“Tell me, Clark: you met the Princess in the hours we were apart?” her influence could explain why he was saying all these things. These weren’t Clark’s words.

“Diana is always your way to divert things, huh? Is that why you act jealous or try to persuade me that I’m under some influence? To make me not notice Thor’s advances? You’re ready to cheat on me again…”

Bruce blinked; migraine was hammering his head.

“You can’t believe that…”

Clark set his jaw.

“I believe my eyes and the facts: why you keep his cape in your closet?”

Bruce looked at the white walk-in closet beside the door.

“You scan my clothes now?”

“Thor’s cape is an Asgardian item – it has a special aura that my sensitive senses caught.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I wanted to return it to him but he asked me to keep it as a token of friendship and alliance.”

Clark snorted.

“However it’s my friendship with Diana that causes problems…” he chuckled. “If you want to find the reason why some things happen I suggest you turn your attention to you rather in others” the twitching in Bruce’s eyes filled him with satisfaction; he nodded. “It was your unwillingness to listen to me for once, your stubbornness to do what you wanted even though you knew how much this upset me that made me run away to find the tranquility and strength to face your new madness not Diana!”

Bruce frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“All this time I have to fight everyday with your defiance and pigheadedness trying to stick some reason in you and keeping smiling even though I fail every time because you’re recovering and I don’t want to upset you; and then, the first time I feel the need to make a time out from this to breathe – remember? It was when I made” he sniggered “the crime of staying two days away from you - I’m being treated like I did the worst thing in the world: reprimanded and jeered and ridiculed by your friends and being on probation like a disobedient pet! You accuse me of being infatuated by Diana but you never treated me like your lover: you never confide in me what these people did to you. And the one time you did it was to defame Diana. You don’t trust me as someone would his lover…”

He caught his breath watching Bruce who seemed like not taking any air, his eyes completely still and emotionless. Clark sensed the younger man’s temperature dropping some more but those things seemed to be suppressed for time and now exploded.

Clark lollled his head to the side and blinked, his hands moved to cup Bruce’s cheeks but he jerked away and Clark’s hands stayed on the air.
Bruce felt suddenly all the sleep that the nightmare took away coming back crushing his bones; the medication’s effect stronger than ever. He used his hands to lie back on the mattress and then to turn his back to Clark; he muffled himself in the blankets because he felt cold as if he had returned to Falcone’s cage in his ragged clothes. His right lung burnt but he wasn’t worried that it could collapse. He closed his eyes because he wanted to sleep.

“The Kryptonian is just a dream, a stupid dream and you’ll wake and you’ll suffer!” he remembered Bagdana’s words from that old nightmare.

“You accused me of not trusting you because I don’t share with you what these people did to me: I think you know everything by seeing my flesh, my bones – your vision is so acute that you can figure what caused each mark; my body for you is like a book” his voice was calm but empty from any emotion and that hurt more than if Bruce had yelled. “You accused me of not sharing but I have shared things with you that I didn’t with anyone else…”

Clark’s eidetic memory replayed the moment in the greenhouse when Bruce shared with him EVERYTHING.

“You accused me of not trusting you…when you were under the effect Ra’s caused, Tony advised me to have Kryptonite with me” Clark stayed completely still. “But I didn’t because I trusted you that even under the effect you wouldn’t hurt me and would come to your senses. And then I trusted you with much more…” Bruce had his eyes closed stretching his arm to the floor petting his kitten who licked his fingers; he just couldn’t utter the rest. “If she made you believe that I wanted to be…used by my enemies and cheat you then why are you still here?”

Clark brushed the younger man’s back that was turned to him.

“Because I want you…Because I won’t let anyone lay his hands on your body” he whispered in his ear, his hands fondling strongly Bruce’s arm.

Bruce closed his eyes and gritted his teeth.

“I’m not your possession – I love you but I’m not your toy!” he so much hoped to hear something else.

Clark massaged Bruce’s ear with his lips.

“That defiance…We’ll be perfect again, Bruce, if you let go of your hatred towards Diana; and I will heal your sick desire of being dominated by others…”

“I do not have that desire! Bruce growled and his teeth rattled.

He felt his insides boiling with anger for Clark’s insults; there was a burning urge to kick him out of his bedroom; yet he knew that once Clark was ditched by him then this woman would control him totally and that could bring disaster not only to Clark but also to the world – they didn’t know what her plan was. And Bruce felt the responsibility: if someone could stop Superman being turned into a mindless tool this was him.

So he fist his hands and set his jaw recruiting all his love for Clark…and that love was limitless. If thinking that he must heal Bruce from his ‘sick desire’ was going to keep Superman attached to him till they found the solution and save him, then Bruce was willing to swallow it – because even manifested as possessiveness, Clark still didn’t want to leave him and that must be coming from his true love even this woman’s tricks had cast shadows. Clark hadn’t succumbed to his woman so Bruce wouldn’t give up on him – Clark’s choice was still to be with him rather with that woman.
It wasn’t the first time in his life that he had to tolerate – at least now was for someone he loved so much; and when Superman was healed and saved from that influence, things would be as before. Maybe Jor El was already close to the solution…

“You’re the only one I love, Clark” he said coldly without turning his head to look at him. “But you should hold true to your word and stay away from her and don’t let her speak to you.”

Clark closed his eyes. Bruce was unbelievable but he couldn’t let him slip away and succumb to the advances of other men…So he nodded.

“Rest assured, Bruce.”

Bruce sighed and caressed Hero’s fur; the kitten climbing the bed to lie beside him.

“You stopped calling me ‘Star’…”

Clark sprawled on the mattress.

“It is really so important?” he felt so tired and disappointed.

Bruce’s eyebrows flickered. Was it? He had so many things to tell to Clark: about the new armor Lucius finished, about his tonight's patrol and the bug he put in Dr. Quinzel’s phone to watch in case Joker calls her. But oddly not being ‘Clark’s Star’ anymore erased everything.
“I can’t function sexually; I can’t have an erection. I’m like a dead body. Al Ghul tried with every possible way to make my body react – and believe me: he knew the human body better than anyone - but it was futile.”

Clark smiled.

“Bruce, they were raping you from your nine years; of course, your body wouldn’t react to them. But if you let me try...” he made a motion to touch him but Bruce cringed and avoided him.

“No, Clark, I just can’t. And you’ll suffer. You’re blessed with long live and you’ll have only few decades with your mate. Those few years must be happy. You can give endless happiness to someone and you deserve someone who can give something back.”

“You gave it a thorough thinking.”

“I’m not that person, Clark. Your sun will be quenched by my darkness... Please, be happy...”

“How can I be happy without...”

Bruce rubbed his wounded forehead.

“You’ll find someone worthy, someone who won’t cringe whenever you motion to touch her or him, someone who won’t panic whenever you look at him with lust, someone who won’t feel disgusted even with the thought of you loving his or her body, someone who whenever you believe that you give him your love and happiness won’t feel Falcone’s cruel hands instead of your gentle ones, Chill’s sneering eyes instead of your kind ones, Al Ghul’s punishing thrusts instead of your pleasant ones, Bane’s teeth instead of your velvety lips... I have nothing to offer anymore; they took everything my body had to give. I can’t give happiness to anyone, not even to myself.”

Bruce felt something wet and pleasantly rough brushing his cheek and his eyes flickered. Though still in the sleep’s fog he managed to identify the feeling really quickly assisted by that smell which was so similar to fluffy toys: Hero was licking him. He could listen to his loud purr and feel the warmth of his furry body right next to his chest.

He smiled and petted Hero’s back with his eyes still closed and the licking became more insistent.

“Okay, buddy, okay...” he mumbled chuckling because despite the weight over his chest from last night’s events, Hero’s tongue tickled and forced him to forget for a bit his sour mood.

He turned his head though he already knew that there wasn’t anyone at his side: he pressed his lips because although Clark most times left before Bruce woke, today was Sunday, Clark didn’t work so he could stay...if he wanted to but Clark didn’t want.

Bruce hoisted himself in sitting position and took Hero from the armpits so to be face to face.

“You should be lying on your basket, Hero; don’t tell me you slept on the floor?”

The kitten meowed as if giving affirmation and Bruce gave him a peck on the small yellow smudge on his nose. He lowered the kitten on the mattress and settled on his wheelchair which reading his wish came to the bed.
Bruce brushed the almost transparent armrests and looked at the object with affection although he should detest it but Clark had made it for him so it was beautiful and vibrated love. He swallowed hard.

“Come, Hero!” he gestured for the kitten to jump gently on his lap.

The young man opened the drawer of his nightstand and threw some biscuits to Hero’s bowl but the kitten stared at the bag as if demanding more. Yet Bruce raised his eyebrows strictly.

“No more, buddy – you’ll eat in the kitchen.”

Hero gave an elegant jolt and landed on his paws right next to the bowl beginning to eat greedily. Bruce smiled and since his friend was occupied, moved to the bathroom to perform his morning routine.

Once done, he returned to the bedroom and slithered to the rectangular window: pressed the button to the remote and the heavy curtains opened to reveal a dark gray horizon with angry clouds that dripped water. The lawn was wet and seemed crestfallen as everything else on the grounds. He shook his head: typical Gotham weather and moved to wear his casual jeans and black blouse.

Hero had eaten and sat in his butt watching his human friend.

Suddenly, a thought crossed Bruce’s mind and he brought the wheelchair to his nightstand. He opened the drawer, pressed his thumb to the socket and the surface withdrew to reveal a dagger that its blade shone at the dim light of Gotham’s cloudy sky.

Bruce felt affection for the knife; it was a loyal companion that saved him twice…The Blade of Justice. He took it respectfully and brushed carefully its diamond blade and then the hilt of olive tree wood: it still bore his teeth marks from that night Ra’s used it to gag his screams as he fixed his cripple arm.

His eyes looked upwards a bit indecisive.

“You trust me, right? Close your eyes and focus on the sound of the sea…” those clear blue topaz eyes glimmered with love as Clark was holding him gently under the setting sun’s golden rays.

You still trust him, right? He asked himself and inhaled deeply; his heart pounding painfully. His eyes stared at the dagger hesitant.

But then he quickly stashed the Blade in the leather case on the headboard’s backside over his pillow. He knew that if anyone knew that he had created such a secret case would have called him paranoid but Bruce’s life was paranoid through and through…

Alfred had already settled the breakfast stuff on the island and now leaned over the oven. The salivating smell of baking muffins hit Bruce’s nostrils already from the moment lift’s door opened and Hero on his lap stretched his head sniffing.

“Good morning, Master Bruce, Master Hero” Alfred chirped but an imperceptible shadow passed his features because though his young master knew to hide his emotions perfectly with him it was ineffective.

Bruce sensed the change and hurried to dissolve his butler’s worry.

“Good morning, Alfred…though the weather is anything but good. The boys?” he asked and moved his wheelchair to the island to begin eating. “I’m starving!”
Alfred cleared his throat.

“First, let Master Hero down to eat his breakfast, then wash your hands and then you can start eating. And the boys are not up yet.”

Bruce shrugged and did as he was said.

“Lucius is coming for lunch” he mumbled chewing his cake.

Alfred blinked.

“It is always a pleasure for this humble butler” Bruce smiled “to have more people at the table but I’m afraid that he is not coming just to enjoy the meal and our company” he swept a glass with a towel.

Bruce pressed his lips; he had brought the parts of the new armor in a huge briefcase-like case and had taken it to the cave secretly but nothing was meant to stay hidden from Alfred.

“It is ready, Alfred” he said dead serious and the butler pursed his lips. “But I won’t use it before I practice enough with it: Lucius comes to supervise my first time – last night I didn’t use the new thing, I was all the time in the car.”

Alfred gave a nod.

“Although you know my feelings about that, I trust your wisdom, sir” Bruce gave a solemn nod and took a bite from his cupcakes. “Master Bruce, pardon me for my audacity but is everything alright?”

Bruce narrowed his eyes looking at his butler.

“Of course…Why?”

Alfred cocked an eyebrow and continued sweeping the same glass.

“Because I was expecting you to come for breakfast much later as you did yesterday. You see, since Master Kent is unable to take his breakfast down here with you, then like yesterday I assumed that you two would spend some time together before coming for breakfast.”

Bruce managed to not choke on the cupcake he was eating.

“You know that he has many obligations and he can’t do as he wishes…”

Alfred pressed his lips and placed the glass in the cupboard on the sink’s left.

“I surely hope that this is the case, sir…”

Bruce indifferently took his glass of orange juice and sipped.

“I dread the moment Jason will leave…” he mumbled and Alfred cocked an eyebrow.

“Everything will be alright, sir. Master Richard will realize how wrong he is about you.”

Bruce met his butler’s eyes uncertain.

“I just want him to be calm till his grandmother comes back. It’s alright if he doesn’t like me” he widened his eyes “I don’t blame him; but I don’t want to worsen his distress.”
“I hope one day he sees how much you care for him” Alfred said serious.

“The boys are coming…” Bruce mumbled.

“Morning, guys” Jason chirped and hoped on his stool while Dick muttered ‘morning’ without looking around. “My mouth is watering – what’s cookin’, doc?”

“Muffins, Master Jason.”

Hero left his bowl and climbed on Dick’s legs; the boy couldn’t keep his sullen face before the meowing kitten and began petting smiling.

“How are you, Hero?” he asked sweetly so much unlike his usual cold tone.

“He likes you” Bruce said. But Dick didn’t even acknowledge him.

“He is the only one in here that I give a damn if he likes me…”

Jason chuckled.

“Oh! He is on a mood today…I shoulda be like this: he forced me do my homework last night!”

Bruce smiled and sipped his milk grimacing.

“Actually, I intended to ask you if you’d like to call your school and tell them that you won’t go tomorrow but I see that you want to attend.”

Dick rolled his eyes and snorted.

“No chance I’ll spend more time with you!” he said haughtily enjoying Bruce’s uncomfortable blinking; and then lowered his eyes. “My granny doesn’t want me losing classes…”

Jason scratched his messy raven hair.

“If ya ask me I’d take every chance to scram from school…”

Bruce laughed.

“You don’t like school, huh?”

Jason shrugged and threw a cupcake in the air to catch it with his mouth.

“What normal person does?”

Bruce chuckled.

“I loved school back then.”

Jason rolled his eyes.

“Anotha nerd” he waved him off.

Bruce shrugged a shoulder.

“Other boys used to call me many names but ‘nerd’ wasn’t among them – maybe because we were
“all nerds…”

Dick lifted a bit his eyes.

“You were bullied at school?”

“Someone could call it that…” Bruce replied looking his hands “Hm…later my physiotherapist will come and we’ll swim: you’re both welcome to join – we have some spare swimsuits” he had bought a couple yesterday because he thought that the boys would like to swim.

Jason’s eyes bulged.

“You have an internal swimmin’ pool? ‘Cause it’s freezin’ out an’ I don’t think you’d swim to the pool in the backyard…”

Bruce lolled his head.

“I see you did some exploration, huh?”

Jason pouted and exchanged a guilty glance with Dick but in the end the younger boy sniffed.

“It’s forbidden?”

Alfred’s glance was crossed with Bruce’s and the young man smiled cordially.

“Oh course not! You two feel free to wander the house as much as you like.”

Alfred however cleared his throat sternly.

“To a certain extend…I would not like the two young masters disarrange the Manor. They should know how to behave.”

Bruce nodded grinning.

“I’m sure they know, Alfred; and they definitely respect your efforts to keep this huge house in order” he winked to the boys but only Jason smirked while Dick hastily turned his attention to Hero.

“As for the pool” Bruce continued “is in the backyard from my parents’ era: Falcone kept it and I let it there though I don’t use it. With my injury we had to build an internal pool for my therapy. Do you know how to swim?”

“Dick taught me – he is a star in every sport.”

Dick rolled his eyes.

“You exaggerate! And I hate swimming!” he spat and made to take a slice of bread only to hear a reprimanding cough from Alfred.

“First, wash your hands, Master Richard and let down Master Hero. Petting an animal even as perfectly inoculated as him isn’t appropriate for the time of the meal.”

Jason giggled.

“Is the fur ball a Master too?”

Alfred cast him a stern look.
“Some kittens deserve the title more than some humans, Master Jason” he said and leaned over the oven to pull out the muffins and serve them.

Jason gulped and shrugged attacking the hot muffins twitching from the burning but not letting the delicacies.

Bruce smiled but Dick glared at him returning from the sink to his stool.

“Some people have everything and others nothing!” he spat glancing at his friend and Bruce pressed his lips; his eyes darkened.

“I know: for eighteen years I had less than nothing – even now none of these feels like mine but at least they can be used to comfort other people.”

His sparkling eyes locked with the boys angry ones.

Selina yawned stretching her body in front of the window that covered the entire external wall – the frames of its rectangular panes so thin that didn’t disrupt the scenery; the view of the vast lake was breathtaking. Only a light, white robe covered her naked body and behind her Steve still asleep hugged tenderly her pillow; the blanket covered only the bottom half of his body leaving his impressively buff torso naked.

Selina couldn’t fight the temptation to cast another glance and smiled slyly because the rips of abs were dancing sensually following Steve’s breath and the way his arms hugged the pillow made her body relive his touch last night.

“If I knew you’d come I’d have worn something sexier” she had said to him last night after they entered her bedroom for privacy.

Steve eyed her body appreciatively and Selina cocked an eyebrow smiling.

“Actually, you’re absolutely amazing in that nightdress…” he blushed. “Actually, I prefer you with that…”

Selina snorted.

“Men are odd creatures…” she replied slyly and Steve cackled. “So…in what I owe that pleasant surprise?” she brushed the lapels of his brown leather jacket. “Do you want to spend our night together? If so, Tony has plenty of popcorn and won’t wait for us to start the movie.”

He suddenly wrapped her waist and pulled her body to his, locking his eyes with hers.

“I want to spend not only this night but the next day and the following day with you but alone…”

Selina pursed her lips.

“Mmm…Interesting; is there a proposal?”

Steve caressed her shoulders and the sense of the fluffy fabric along with Selina’s perfume brought a pleasant numbness that made him stutter a bit.

“I have a small cabin in front of the Placid Lake…I use to go there when I need to calm down and recharge my batteries…”
Selina lolled her head on the side and smirked.

“I thought that Captain America was impervious to that…”

Steve shook his head.

“Of course he does… I’m only human if you extract the…you know. So…The cabin is nothing special – I mean, don’t imagine something like Tony’s accommodations – but I love it: it is my haven. So…if you want we can go there and stay for a couple of days” he saw Selina’s eyes a bit hesitant. “One or two” he hastened to correct “If you don’t have something better to do…”

She sighed.

“I intended to return to Gotham tomorrow…” she said thoughtful, divided between being near Bruce again and spending two days with Steve.

Steve gave her a tight-lips smile.

“I know how important Bruce is and believe me I’d never try to keep you away from him.”

Selina yanked her head and smiled her eyes sparkling.

“Well, Bruce always feels bad believing that I’m not living my life as I want because of him …” she cocked her eyebrows. “And I’m sure he’ll be very happy suspecting that I had two lovely days…So what time should I expect you tomorrow?”

Captain America enclosed her in his strong arms and kissed her lips gently.

“Thank you, Selina!” he licked his lips and his eyes shone so pleased that Selina had the impression that he still enjoyed the taste of her lips. He ruffled his hair. “I was thinking of going there now…Don’t you like night travelling?”

Selina’s eyebrows arched and she clenched her hips.

“I enjoy travelling in the night but as far as I know the lake isn’t exactly near…”

Steve smiled shyly.

“The good thing when you’re an old man” he chuckled “is that you know shortcuts the contemporary people don’t – even maps don’t have them. Not to mention that my motorcycle is faster than the common ones – thanks to Tony’s tricks – so in two hours we’ll be there” he frowned. “Unless you don’t like motorcycles?”

Selina tilted her head and rolled her eyes.

“Careful, handsome: you’re insulting me now…I drive motorcycles since my ten and I own a Harley…” not to mention Batman’s monster bike, she thought cocking her eyebrow.

Steve laughed satisfied.

“So, my road queen, we’re ready to leave” he said moving already towards the door.

She huffed and shook her head.

“Easy, cowboy” she dragged her words seductively “I need some stuff: can’t stay two days only with my skin…”
He narrowed his eyes and approached again cupping her face with both hands.

“I wouldn’t mind that…” he mumbled sensually nuzzling her cheek and Selina felt goose bumps; yet she wouldn’t melt because she wasn’t a fangirl.

So she tapped his nose.

“I bet you wouldn’t, handsome, but I’m a girl with decency” she nodded. “So out of my bedroom and wait to get ready.”

He made to turn but she grabbed his face and gave him a deep kiss on the lips that she understood that took his breath away. She arched her eyebrows eyeing his flushed face and smirked.

“To hold you till I’m ready…and a reward for being a good boy” she said slyly, her eyes bearing promises.

He smiled and moved fast to the door to stop abruptly and loll his head to her with a shy shine in his eyes.

“Can you bring this nightdress with you?”

He left closing the door and didn’t see Selina rolling her eyes and chuckling.

“You sure you prefer a night excursion to the lake Placid instead of Zootopia and popcorn?” Tony asked from his position in the corner sofa, his arm wrapped around Pepper’s shoulders. His eyes’ glittering and his crooked smile shouted that even he didn’t believe that there could be a negative answer to that question and Selina snorted.

“That’s tempting, handsome, but this time I’ll pass…After all, you and Peps deserve some time alone” she winked.

Pepper smiled.

“Have a great time you two!” she said to both of them and Steve nodded.

Tony tousled his hair with one hand.

“Yeah, old man…Take care of our girl or else you’ll have to face my wrath.”

Selina cocked her eyebrows and Tony pouted.

“And Bruce…This lady is the love of his life…”

Steve nodded.

“I know…”

The violent rush of frozen wind as Steve’s motorcycle tore the asphalt made her leather clad body excited – she loved the night air and the way the road’s lights seemed to go dimmer as the hours dragged. She wrapped her arms tight around Steve’s waist and touched her entire torso to his back nestling her face to his neck; Selina sensed the shivers that this caused to him.

The young woman had seen his eyes bulging and goggling amazed when she entered Tony’s living room wearing her skin tight black leather pants and the fitting short jacket. Well, Tony’s eyes were as much dazzled.
As Steve had said, soon the motorcycle left the central road and took them through old paths that certainly few people nowadays crossed. Trees had grown on both sides of the narrow dirt lane and bushes made the whole scenery darker – especially, since public lighting was nonexistent there: the only light from the bike’s headlights. But Selina loved the wild environment; the icy cold that formed curtains of fog among the plants…

And then as they began ascending a mountain lane, in a turn the lake appeared. Distant because they were on a peck of the mountain, and majestic; lying peaceful in the night’s silence, illuminated by thousands of small lights through her endless body – the mountain peaks that surrounded her completed the impressive view and the feeling of grandeur.

Steve had stopped the motorcycle, took off his helmet and gazed.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” he looked at Selina who took off her helmet as well. “As many times as I see her throughout the years, she is always breathtaking…If you want will come here during daytime…My cabin isn’t far…”

Steve’s cabin was small but absolutely gorgeous: made of cylindrical thick logs with two small square windows at the sides of the door and a triangular roof completing the feeling of being in a fairytale.

Of course, after two hours of trip they didn’t lose time with the other rooms. The bedroom had an abundant view to the lake through the enormous window in the wall opposite the bed’s side and Selina gaped as soon as Steve opened the light, white curtains. She walked slowly to stand beside him gazing.

“It’s beautiful” she whispered.

“You’re more beautiful” he muttered and cupped her head to capture her lips with all the fever he felt.

Selina wrapped her arms around his back and fondled passionately, instantly relieving him from his jacket and shirt. He had lit the fireplace as soon as they entered the room yet they didn’t feel any cold. He did the same with her clothes and Selina hugged his hips with her legs as he brought her to the bed that surprisingly was very clean and with fresh sheet – Selina thought smirking that Captain America had planned it but she had no problem.

She found herself entangled in the strong body she craved, her nails digging her muscle bound back while he thrust in her…

Selina holding a cup of strong coffee stared at the lake’s waters that reflected the wild sharp mountains which surrounded the lake and the sky. Clear blue sky with a few happy fluffy clouds playing with the smiling sun. She thought the gloomy weather back in Gotham and wished this sun smiled to her friend too, elevating his spirits. Selina sighed and sipped from her coffee.

A calloused, powerful yet tender hand squeezed her shoulder and a hot mouth kissed her neck.

“Are you alright?” his voice was raspy from the sleep.

Selina immersed her fingers in Steve’s messy locks and turned to face him locking her lips with his.

“I was thinking of Gotham’s weather in contrast with this…I wish Bruce was gazing at the same sun…”

Steve caressed her chin.
“He is alright, Sel…He has your love protecting him even when you’re far away…”

She chuckled and brushed his cheek; Selina hoped that was true.

Bruce maneuvered his chair to the grounds; he was muffled in his thick, long coat – there wasn’t another way Alfred would permit him to wander outside with such freezing cold. It was afternoon and Clark hadn’t appeared yet forming a knot in Bruce’s guts. He was worried for Clark’s safety and for the things he could be thinking alone, recounting that woman’s poison…

He should be angry that Clark believed those things about him, believing her words over Bruce’s but he sympathized with him: the Man of Steel was affecting by something and was difficult for him to fight off the impact of these words. Clark was trying to stay true to his promises and avoid Diana yet Bruce didn’t kid himself: Clark was attracted to her either due to that mysterious influence or… due to her beauty.

He hoped that at least Clark had found refuge to the Fortress and was running those tests… His hands clenched the white roses on his lap, two bouquets. Two lonely, gray tombstones greeted him from the hill’s top and Bruce got the impression that they were actually happy every time he went there.

He snorted: two pieces of stone can’t be happy…two dead can’t be happy for anything; even their own son. He shrugged and sighed; it was just something his mind made up to comfort his need to feel connected with his parents.

He lifted his eyes to the sky: it was gray and the afternoon was dull except for a small strip where the clouds had receded a bit, permitting a glimpse of sun that managed to give a hopeful light to that day. Bruce gazed again at the tombstones that seemed to call him. Thankfully, Tony had taken care and a lane was carved to the small hill to allow him to reach the top with his wheelchair.

The humidity was increased even for Gotham’s standards and he felt it deep in his healing bones but he couldn’t stay inside. Jason had left after the lunch and although Bruce knew that the boy had to return to his home and his mother, he felt depressed because he could sense Richard’s misery for being alone in the house of someone he hated; someone who he considered responsible for every tragedy in his young life…

He looked down and sighed: Dick had retreated to his room right after Jason left taking the orphan child’s temporary carelessness; because though his granny’s disappearance never left his mind, Dick relished his friend’s company and let his mind escape its despair. The boy was almost happy with Jason around chirping and Bruce was sure that Dick was reminded of the days with his baby brother.

His raised his eyes to the balcony of Dick’s room; that room didn’t look to the hill with the graves. The boy was probably reading or watching TV: Bruce had asked from Dick’s trainer to excuse him from his training for the weekend to allow the boy to find his composure after his granny’s disappearance. Of course Dick used the Manor’s gym to keep his form and let some steam out of his system – Jason on the other hand joined him in the pool.

“Wow! Dude, ya’re fuckin’ fast for a…”

“Paraplegic” Matt completed Jason’s phrase, chuckling with the boy’s goggling eyes. “And, yes, Bruce is very fast.”

In the water… Because outside he was lame. He pressed his lips in a tight line. Lucius came for
lunch and exactly like Alfred, Leslie who was there too, looked the scientist rather angrily and Bruce was afraid that the boys could suspect something.

He understood their feelings: they were worried that he could do some madness having in his disposal the new armor Lucius made for him. Alfred and Leslie dreaded that he could find himself again in a situation like the one that almost killed him.

And he couldn’t deny the similarities: when he left the hospital to stop Joker from killing the children he was paralyzed and his mind’s power enabled him to stand and fight Joker. But then…He almost died…What if something similar happened? Bruce knew that he wouldn’t let anyone die even if this cost his own life or body wholeness: his loved ones knew it as well and that increased their agony…

But Bruce felt so great when he wore every part of the new armor except the cowl. And then, when Lucius grinning broadly gestured to him to rise from his chair …

“Make a step, Mister Wayne” Lucius said encouragingly and Bruce didn’t need more.

Actually, he felt very stable when he rose from the chair and that gave him self-confidence. He set his jaw and nodded…and then raised his eyes to Lucius whose eyes sparkled.

“This is…unbelievable…” Bruce exclaimed as his legs carried the step.

Lucius chuckled.

“I see that you didn’t have much confidence in my inventiveness…” he said mock insulted.

A big smile carved Bruce’s face.

“On the contrary, Lucius: I was sure. But still I didn’t expect it to be so…easy.”

Lucius’ face sobered and he crossed his arms.

“Actually, it’s not as easy as in natural walking: as you may have noticed there’s a considerable (in comparison with normal walking) reaction time between the brain’s order and the actual movement – you see, the nanochips we use are external. They are the same type that will be used in your surgery, only they would be more sensitive and incorporated to the new spinal parts that will replace the destroyed. Thus, I’m afraid, your moves won’t be as swift and stormy as before – that agility and speed would be restored only after the surgery and much training. Till then you must tread carefully and be very wise in choosing how to use your armor because I do understand the irritation and anger of your loved ones and believe me I’ll hate myself if anything happens to you…” the man swallowed hard every sparkle of playfulness out of his eyes. “I hope you’d spare me from that burden…and be as responsible as always.”

Bruce nodded and Lucius came closer pointing to the pieces covering his legs.

“We based that pieces to exosceletons similar to those used during your therapy with the difference that these pieces have microreceptors sending messages to the brain and receiving orders executed through electrodes. Exactly as in virtual reality.”

“And Robocop?”

Lucius chuckled.

“I’m glad the 80’s cinema assists our efforts…”
Bruce made more steps and gritting his teeth raised his leg in a simple kick that startled Lucius.

“I see you’re getting the hang of it, Mister Wayne.”

Bruce estimated that this simple kick indeed came a bit – a considerable bit when you’re facing a dangerous opponent – delayed and that certainly would be more obvious in more complex moves. So he needed more practice if he wanted to eliminate as much as possible the reaction time that intervened. However something else stuck in his mind.

“Lucius, you said ‘we’?”

Lucius grinned and lolled his head on the side.

“You didn’t expect Mister Stark staying out of this, didn’t you?”

Bruce shook his head beaming: although he learnt that his friend postponed his armor and probably would do anything for this armor to stay unfinished, after Lucius was ordered to move on, Bruce had the secret hope that Tony wouldn’t hold a grudge...

“Of course before confronting criminals with that armor – I’d suggest normal thugs – you need to practice a lot…”

“That goes without saying…”

And then as he made more steps under Lucius’ eagle eyes, Bruce thought of his last night’s flashback and Clark’s doubts. Well, Bruce was certain that it was indeed a flashback and not a mishmash of reality and horrific fantasy caused by Crane’s treatment. However, wanted confirmation: he didn’t want to be unfair to the Amazon neither misled in his searches. So when Lucius left, he called the only person that could do that.

“Mr. Petrou, do you happen to remember a woman called Vivian?”

The man chuckled.

“Who could forget someone like her?”

Bruce nodded, pressing his lips relieved: so it wasn’t a lie of his brain.

“Do you remember her features?”

“Mmm… I think so… Honey colored long hair, tall, lean with curves but she seemed strong. Very beautiful face: straight nose, red, heart shaped lips and blue eyes that had something odd… Hm… I think she wore lenses. Everyone was infatuated with her but she had eyes only for the boss… although rumor had it that she slept with a thug called Bart. I think only me and Chill didn’t salivate over her” he cackled.

“Mr. Petrou, do you know where she came from?”

“Nobody knew, Mister Wayne; it was like she fell from the sky. If she was from Gotham’s working girls Falcone would certainly knew her but she wasn’t. Even Bruna who was her friend didn’t know anything about her background.”

“And when she disappeared?”

“Falcone searched desperately for her with no result until he found another whore that got his interest and forgot her…”
The sky was still gray but it had stopped raining though the cold and the humidity was torturous. But the weak sun kept trying to light the afternoon.

Bruce placed tenderly the flowers on the base of each tombstone and stared at the names brushing with his fingers the carved letters. Suddenly, he felt that he wasn’t alone but didn’t show his awareness until his visitor moved closer.

“I hope I’m not intruding…” a sneering voice said pretending seriousness.

Bruce inhaled. He knew that voice though he hadn’t met the man more than twice. He didn’t turn to face him and the footsteps came right next to him.

“How sad…” the newcomer sighed “and how poetic: the orphan boy visits his parents’ graves on a rainy day…”

Bruce jerked his head towards him.

“You don’t give a damn if you’re intruding!” he spat narrowing his eyes.

Loki widened his eyes and raised his hands in appeasement.

“Relax, Bruce…” he sighed. “I see you didn’t miss me a lot, huh?”

Bruce rolled his eyes.

“No…What do you want?”

Loki put his hands behind his back and circled Bruce who remained indifferent.

“To see you” the god said arching his eyebrows. “You’re a sight to be seen after all” he smirked. “I tried to visit you at your bathroom” Bruce’s eyes bulged “to have a complete impression but there’s something in this house that thwarts me from entering exactly as with your mind…” he lolled his head on the side and eyed Bruce curious like an interrogator. “What is that, Bruce? I’m a trustworthy god, you know.”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“I doubt that…And I don’t know what are you talking about…maybe you lost your skill?”

Loki cackled jerking his head backwards and then calmed and shook his head in denial.

“No, I didn’t lose my skill…But you” he pointed his index finger at him “have something…”

Bruce looked at his parents’ graves feeling ashamed for all this fuss there.

“Leave” he said “please.”

“You shouldn’t want me to leave and let you alone” Bruce narrowed his eyes “while Joker is free and wants to get you. You know, it isn’t wise wandering alone in these grounds.”

“I see you know a lot about me.”

Loki pouted.

“I told you that I like mysteries and you tickle my…curiosity” he looked upwards “and more bodily parts of me…”
“Curiosity killed the cat.”

Loki laughed.

“Though I can transform into a cat, I’m not one…” he leaned to Bruce’s face. “Maybe I should help Joker get you…then perhaps it’d be easier to unlock your secrets…”

Bruce’s eyes twitched as if Loki helping Joker was a surprise for him.

“A god shouldn’t collaborate with a mad criminal who holds no interest on the human life. He killed an innocent young man just three days ago.”

A wide smirk appeared in Loki’s face.

“A god can do whatever he wants: your mortal morality has no value for us…” Bruce frowned.

“That’s a lie, Loki!”

Two strong feet made the soil shake as Thor landed; his irritation radiating from his tense face and the blue sparkles Mjolnir sent around. His eyebrows had formed a line and his baby blue eyes were dark and angry so unlike their usual kindness.

He glared at the other god and his fist clenched more around Mjolnir’s hilt.

“I told you to not bother Bruce, Loki!” he gritted his teeth but his brother crossed his arms, lolled his head on the side and smiled wickedly.

“How is this even possible when you, my dear brother, are so fascinated with him?” he winked and with a snap of his fingers he vanished.

Thor’s annoyed exclamation created a lightning and a thunder and a distant ‘ouch!’ reached them. He closed his eyes and looked at Bruce who was entirely calm.

“I’m sorry for Loki’s intrusion, Bruce” he shook his head. “I can inform Asgard and take permission to jail him if you want.”

“Thank you but for the time being I think it best to let him act till he leads us to his partners or show us if he is part of a broader plan. He just revealed his ‘intention’ to help Joker get me” Thor frowned and pressed his lips “he didn’t want to reveal that he already works with him and Crane.”

Thor nodded.

“Perhaps if we got Loki out of the picture we could catch the others easier.”

Bruce looked him in the eyes.

“Do not underestimate Gotham’s criminals.”

The blond smiled.

“After the incident at the Tower, how could I?”

The human nodded.

“And we must figure out if Loki knows anything about what else is evolving in the shadows” he furrowed his brow. “Thor, you mentioned once that Loki can’t invade your mind nor control your
thoughts.”

“Exactly and I heard him saying that the same goes for you too” he arched his eyebrows. “Of course, that is natural since you managed to defeat a mighty demon. Speaking of which, I went down to the Tartarus and Bagdana’s jail: he is safely chained there.”

Bruce lowered a bit his eyes and then looked at him again.

“Thank you, I really appreciate it” Thor smiled and gave a courteous nod. “Now concerning the mind control, can you tell if someone is under Loki’s influence?”

“Yes, I did it many times when Loki played with other gods to enjoy himself or get what he wanted” he frowned. “You suspect that someone is affected by Loki’s control?”

Bruce licked his lips and nodded.

“You met Superman at the party: is there a chance that Loki affects his brain?” he said determined piercing the god with his stare.

Thor was dumbfounded; he narrowed his eyes with real interest in them.

“No, Bruce, there was no trace of Loki’s influence on Superman” Bruce nodded. “Things with Superman are so bad that you suspect a foreign influence on him?” he leaned and held Bruce’s shoulders looking the young man in the eyes.

Bruce didn’t want to admit it – not that his question wasn’t revealing enough. He shook his head but he didn’t manage to articulate what he wanted because he heard the familiar whoosh and the soft sound of Superman landing. He turned immediately to him; his relief evident.

But like many times recently Bruce’s heart sunk. Superman’s imposing posture was stretched proudly and challenging, his hands holding his hips. It was his face – the face Bruce so much loved – that made the young man feel the freezing cold of the day devastating: Superman’s eyes were filled with sarcasm under two cocked eyebrows; they had the usual breathtaking blue topaz color yet Bruce could trace the angry red lurking underneath. His jaw was set upwards regarding Bruce and Thor who had risen.

“Superman, I’m honored to see you again” Thor greeted him cordially but Superman answered with a cold smirk.

“Really now?” he hissed.

Bruce’s eyes darkened because he knew that stare.

“I was worried” Bruce said.

Superman marched closer releasing his hips.

“You were worried so you called Thor here to organize a rescue mission?” Superman retorted snidely and then let his mouth agape pretending surprise. “But I’m Superman, babe: everyone knows that I’m unbreakable.”

Bruce looked him right in the eyes.

“I wish it was true” he answered.

But Superman rushed to him, his anger visible in his entire face.
“You were posing demands to me, you were telling a bunch of melodramatic things just to meet with him the next day behind my back! What are you doing with him after everything we told? After everything you said to me last night?”

Bruce stayed unfazed by Superman’s wrath even if only the air from uttering those words was burning his face.

“Calm down, Superman.”

Superman grabbed Bruce’s upper arms.

“Don’t tell me to calm down when I catch you…” the rattle of his teeth was loud and he shook Bruce.

Thor couldn’t stand it anymore: he understood what Superman implied and that infuriated him. But more he was enraged for Superman’s behavior to Bruce: if he had a problem he should confront Thor and not a man in a wheelchair. He snatched Superman’s shoulder and pulled him away from Bruce.

“Enough!” Thor’s voice was accompanied by a thunder and his hammer’s radiation.

Superman chuckled and looked a last time at Bruce’s completely calm eyes before glaring at the god.

“Don’t you dare touching me again! So…you’re his newest protector?” the Man of Steel said haughtily.

“Bruce doesn’t need protectors” the god answered meeting Superman’s glare with his own.

Superman lolled slightly his head backwards glancing at Bruce, smiling sarcastic.

“Yes, he doesn’t” he focused again to Thor “yet we like to protect him once we take his body…We enjoy so much his body that we like to think that he needs us…He is quite the fuck, huh, Thor? Even for an Asgardian god… so you naturally want to protect him – especially from the man he cheated.”

Thor’s forehead cracked in a thunder like wrinkle and his lips twitched angrily.

“You have no right to speak like this to Bruce! I didn’t do anything with him! Loki was here harassing him and I intervened because Bruce can’t reveal his true skills.”

Superman shook his head.

“So you indeed became his protector… And you found the right excuse: or Bruce thought it? He is very good at making up things. You should have heard him last night.”

Thor clenched his jaw and his hammer.

“You call me a liar?!”

Superman shook his head laughing amused.

“Not only a liar but a thief too” he moved to meet Thor challenging him with his eyes.

Bruce raffled his locks and looked sad at his parents’ tombstones: he asked them to forgive him for that. He looked at the two gods: behind them the clear slice of sky was covered again with heavy gray clouds and the chirping sun vanished.
“You’re not worthy of a man like Bruce if you believe such things.”

Superman nodded.

“And you decided that you are the worthy one so you fucked him in New York, huh?”

Thor raised Mjolnir ready to blow Superman as a lightning cracked the gray sky; the Man of Steel had already his fist ready to stop the mighty hammer but suddenly a gentle hand touched his elbow and he felt numb. He looked at his opponent’s face and he saw the same numbness, showing that a second hand touched him as well.

Bruce was between them unafraid of their power, his eyes two pieces of rock, his jaw set in absolute determination.

“Stop!” his voice wasn’t loud but stern as his flashing eyes. “None of you want to do this…And you tread on my parents’ graves…you disturb their peace. You’re both better than this!”

Both gods looked at the tombstones and Thor lowered his head; Superman looked at Bruce angry and took off.

Bruce closed his eyes and inhaled deeply; Thor squatted and rubbed his upper arms.

“I’m sorry; if I knew that he was so jealous of me I’d have found a subtler way to repel Loki.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Is nothing you did, Thor.”

Thor bit his bottom lip and gazed at the sky where Superman had vanished.

“Things are indeed serious” he remarked and looked again at Bruce. “I think he is dangerous for you, Bruce – in this state. Do you want me to speak to him? To explain?”

The human looked at the same direction.

“No, it’ll make things worse and probably will lead to a fight. “

“You can’t stay unprotected; if you want me, I can guard the Manor…” but seeing Bruce rubbing his temple tired “or I can inform Tony to take his measures.”

“No, I’ll be alright; Superman won’t harm me. Thank you, Thor – I mean it…But it’s better if you focus on Loki.”

Thor nodded.

“If that’s what you want but I’ll say it again: if Superman gets aggressive…, utter my name and I’ll come…”

Bruce smiled and patted Thor’s warm hand on his shoulder.

Clark flew anger blinding him; his body knew his destination without his mind guiding. He saw the Statue of Liberty at New York’s port and halted for a second before he moved to the Battery Park where Bruce met Thor – by chance; he snorted.
It was late and the fierce cold made New Yorkers to choose the warmth of their houses than wander to the park. And it was easy for Superman to conceal himself from the few that strolled.

Suddenly, he caught a smell: a mesmerizing smell of cinnamon, orange and hibiscus. Cinnamon…he thought: sweet and bitter like Bruce. He stood in front of a small, rainbow bridge made of rock.

His eyes saw the same scenery but under the pale, morning light, wrapped in the icy mist.

Thor held Bruce glued to his body and dragged him under the bridge to pin him to the pillar. The movement was fast and almost violent yet Bruce’s eyes were fervent, sparkling with delight as the blond god ripped his clothes off his body leaving him naked.

The unbelievably blue eyes of the god travelled Bruce’s body awed and gripping his upper arms, Thor made his own clothes disappear obviously with nothing more than a thought. Bruce’s hungry hands fondled the Asgardian’s broad back ending to his firm buttocks; his mouth tasting divine flesh as Thor caressed Bruce’s wet locks.

“You’re beautiful, Bruce!” Thor whispered to Bruce’s face.

“Do it!” Bruce breathed to him, his mesmerizing eyes sparkling determined.

The god captured his mouth in a passionate kiss that seemed like uprooting the mortals head; but the Asgardian knew as much as to hold the back of Bruce’s head to deepen more his kiss without injuring the frail man.

Bruce tousled Thor’s long locks arching his neck for him to suck and bite as the powerful chest rubbed to his making the cold morning so hot that sweat streaked Bruce’s breasts.

“Golden hair…” the human exclaimed with adoration.

Two divine hands grabbed Bruce’s buttocks spreading and with one thrust the god was inside him. Bruce moaned and Thor sucked his neck with abandon.

“Don’t stop!” Bruce grunted biting Thor’s ear, his hands fisting painfully the god’s locks. “I love your golden hair…”

“I’m thrilled…Oh, Bruce!” he took the paralyzed legs and settled them around his hips to thrust deeper.

Bruce had his eyes closed, his breaths wet gasps arousing Thor’s skin.

“I feel you in me…” Bruce moaned pleased and surprised. “How…”

“My body has the energy of the thunder – I’m happy this can revive your body.”

Bruce jerked his head backwards and Thor licked the arch his neck created making the young man groan and shiver, more violently when the god’s mouth sucked flesh from Bruce’s chest, the facial hair making the human chuckle.

“More…” he growled demandingly digging his nails to Thor’s back as the Asgardian gave a frantic pace to his thrusts hugging protectively the human body to not crush in the stone of the bridge.

Bruce’s body was dancing on Thor’s causing moans and roars of ecstasy from the god and deeper thrusts...

Clark’s eyes became all red; he had seen enough. He clenched his jaw and raised his fisted hand in
the air taking off to Gotham: he now knew the truth.

“Superman!”

He knew that voice and that intoxicating perfume of every flower in the planet – a pure perfume, a clean perfume; a perfume promising happiness and heavenly pleasure. A body that this cheating human ordered him to stay away…

He didn’t turn his face to look and flew in full speed.

Bruce wasn’t sleeping though his wristwatch on the nightstand said that it was past midnight: the medicine didn’t do anything to smooth his worry for Clark and the flashes that constantly cracked the dark sky just increased his agitation; he had let the curtains tied to have a clear view of the horizon hoping to catch a glimpse of Clark coming back.

He was working on his tablet for hours when he admitted that this agitation wasn’t doing him any good so he decided that a warm milk was necessary if he wanted to stand the night.

Bruce slithered his chair to the door and Hero rushed to him from his basket placing himself on his lap.

“What? Do you need some milk to sleep too?” he grinned to his friend.

Bruce moved in the darkness of the vast corridor to the lift but as he was ready to get inside the lift he heard muffled sobs from Dick’s room. He frowned and went there; he stood before the door listening to the boy’s sobs amidst the thunders and although hesitant he finally opened the door and got inside.

He maneuvered his chair to the bed and switched on the nightstand lamp; he placed his hand carefully on the boy’s trembling shoulders.

“It’s alright, Richard” he whispered. “Only a bad dream; wake up.”

Two wet eyes looked at him vulnerable at first but then recognizing him two pieces of ice.

“What do you want here?” he spat.

“I heard noise…and I came to see if you’re alright.”

The boy ruffled his hair and rubbed his eyes, remembering the nightmare and then his eyes bulged when a thunder roared.

“Want to tell me what you saw?” Bruce asked carefully. “I have many nightmares as well and I know how horrifying it is…”

“It’s…it’s nothing” he said coldly. “I don’t want you near me…”

“I know…I’m sorry…are you better now? Want me to get you something?”

“No, go away!”

Hero meowed complaining for the boy’s dismissal but Bruce turned to leave when a new thunder made the boy gasp. Bruce looked at him and Dick’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m afraid of thunders, okay? Mom used to sit with me until I was asleep and Brian cuddled me…”
after they were gone, granny sat with me – but now she is gone too!”

Bruce cupped Dick’s hand on the mattress.

“It’s not bad to be afraid of things…Braveness is the ability to realize our fear and face it. You will be again with your granny, Dick: I promise.”

The boy turned his head on the other side and Bruce huffed.

“Do you want me to stay here till you’re asleep? I can’t sleep either.”

Dick jerked his head at him snarling.

“Hell, no! I want you out of my life! It is so hard to get it?!?”

Bruce nodded.

“Okay” he took Hero from the armpits carefully and gave him to Dick who hugged him tenderly. “I guess Hero is a better company than me” he smiled with pressed lips. “And he likes you…so good night to both of you.”

He turned and smiled hearing Hero’s purring and Dick caressing the animal. Before leaving the room he went to the balcony door and pressed a button at the small control panel on the frame. The thunders’ sound was instantly muffled. He tilted a bit his head backwards sensing Dick’s eyes on him.

“A small emergency trick…” he winked and left the room.

Upon returning to the Master bedroom he rushed to the window: he always knew when Clark was coming. He opened the window and cold, fierce wind along with frozen raindrops invaded the room.

Superman hovered outside the open window, his blue eyes locked with Bruce’s. He was icier than the wind and the lightning on the sky behind him revealed his distorted in anger features.

“Hello, Bruce…” the creepy bang of the thunder wasn’t enough to conceal his voice’s anger.

Bruce raised his head.

“Clark.”
Chapter 37

The bedroom was cast under the soft, sweet light of the bluish secret lighting behind the headboard and the red-yellow dancing flames inside the fireplace. All other lights were off because Bruce didn’t want to alert Alfred that he wasn’t sleeping.

Bruce stared at Superman’s imposing, statuesque body hovering outside his window: an enraged god amidst a storm giving the impression that his ire caused the thunders. His eyes met Clark’s but those eyes although so familiar and beloved were also cold; colder that the rush of wind that surged the room as Superman flew in, causing the curtains to jerk in the air.

Superman stood in front of Bruce with his hands fisted at his sides, his red cape billowing behind him; water dripped from his body to the thick, expensive carpet; his messy hair was plastered in his head, some wild bangs framing his forehead which was creased almost like the bolts creased the dark sky.

Bruce could see the red of Clark’s wrath in his beautiful eyes; and he knew the poison that like acid burnt his mind… He was angry with him yet Bruce couldn’t feel terror or even fear although now the most powerful being on Earth stood before him with gritted teeth and a deep wrinkle in his forehead. The disabled human kept looking Superman in the eyes calm and unfazed by the vibrations this mighty body emanated; this body that always gave him love…

“Can you close the window?” Bruce asked him casually.

But Superman didn’t move, not a twitch on his face to indicate that he had heard; his chest was heaving, his eyes still. Bruce nodded.

“I know you’re invulnerable but maybe you should wear something dry and warm?” he passed him and brushed the key on the control panel of the window’s frame and the window closed. “Clark, we need to talk” he tilted slightly his head on the side gazing at him: Jor El had contacted him a few hours ago.

A rush of wind and his chair was rapidly turned around, Superman grabbing the armrests and leaning over Bruce so close that the rest of the room was out of his vision range except from a line of fire that cracked the black sky foretelling the coming of a thunder.

“No, Bruce” Superman snarled and the ground of his teeth distorted his voice before the deafening bang of a thunder completed the impression. “For once, I shall talk and you listen!”

Bruce didn’t flinch even though Superman’s hands from clenching the armrests passed to clenching his upper arms. His eyes were locked with Clark’s.

“Jor El contacted me and said that you never went to the Fortress since that first time… you didn’t run the tests again” he set his jaw. “You were lying to me” he didn’t raise his voice neither used an accusing tone.

Clark’s cheeks bloated from the air his ire held in his mouth and his eyes became blazing slits. Bruce felt the grip on his arms becoming bruising and in a rush his body was lifted abruptly and he was crashed on the mattress, flat on his back, Clark’s dripping body pinning him down; but still he was looking at him as always without fear and with love.

Yet for Clark Bruce’s eyes were arrogant, challenging, mocking… He felt the familiar flare of resistance in the healthy part of Bruce’s body; Clark ran it with his eyes slowly, from the groin up to
the chest and then touched his body on the human’s torso to place his tongue on the dimple of Bruce’s neck. He licked sensually and a bit harshly along the neck’s line ending up to his jaw and capturing greedily the younger man’s lips, sucking and chewing brutally, his hands grapping Bruce’s face.

“Bitter and sweet” he rasped piercing Bruce’s eyes with his “like the cinnamon the perfume of which you have…” he smirked sensing the trapped body trembling slightly as every time he hugged him and immersed his fingers in the brunette locks. “You like being pinned, don’t you?” he asked snidely.

Bruce met his eyes. Clark’s body over his torso felt so heavy like his lover didn’t do any effort to spare him from the burden.

“Clark, you didn’t do the tests…” he pressed his lips. “You were hiding the truth from me all this time.”

He massaged Bruce’s head with his fingers entangled in his hair.

“I didn’t need the tests” Clark cocked an eyebrow, his eyes sparkling with glee. “It was you that demanded those tests and wanted to make me feel ill” Bruce narrowed his eyes, a deep frown in his forehead. “And that’s the reason I didn’t tell you: I know how pig headed you are – you never admit you’re wrong and always want things your way; so I didn’t want your selfishness to worsen your health or even harm you because I knew how agitated you’d become and how insanely you’d continue argue about this. Now, my turn!”

Bruce bit his lips and shook his head to evade Clark’s hands that now caressed his cheeks but in a possessive way that didn’t feel anything like Clark…

“I didn’t do it from selfishness, Clark; I want you protected from any danger” Clark smirked and his eyes flashed with irony. “And there’s indeed something going on implicating you” he locked his eyes with Clark’s “Vivian is a real person, Clark: Mr. Petrou confirmed it.”

Clark yanked his head backwards letting out a cackle.

“That man would say anything you want!” he said exasperated. “So drop that ridiculous issue – it doesn’t help your case…”

Bruce eyes sparkled.

“My case?”

“Yeah! Let’s talk about you, Bruce: your sins…” the younger man felt Superman’s body tensing with boiling energy and his pajamas that were drenched from the intimacy with Superman’s wet body becoming ice on his skin. “And first of all” Clark tilted his head on the side and narrowed his eyes imitating puzzlement “why you closed the window?” Bruce’s eyes filled with bewilderment. “Thor’s warmth doesn’t linger long enough?” he cocked his eyebrows.

“What has Thor to do with anything?” Bruce knew the newest poison in Clark’s mind but he wanted him to speak openly.

Clark bared his teeth and his hands that pinned down Bruce’s upper arms tightened. Yet Bruce remained tranquil.

“Why don’t you say clearly what you’re thinking?”
“I said it clearly, Bruce, already! When I caught you in your parent’s graves” he snorted. “I’d never expect you to choose your parents’ graves for a romantic date... or more.”

Bruce’s eyes bulged.

“It wasn’t anything like that!” he shook his head. “You would never have thought that if your mind wasn’t affected.”

Clark grabbed Bruce’s chin and snorted.

“The fact I’m not naïve anymore is a sign of something ominous that threatens me, huh, Bruce? How...convenient!”

Bruce inhaled deeply.

“I visited my parents’ graves and Loki appeared suddenly taunting me and Thor came to stop him: we had talked about Loki’s involvement in Joker’s attack at the Avengers’ Tower so Thor was watching his brother’s movements” he explained calmly though Clark’s weight on his torso was getting more and more tiresome.

Clark cocked his eyebrows sarcastic and nodded.

“Of course...” he released Bruce’s chin. “There’s New York…” he brought both his hands to the younger man’s neck brushing. “So...in Battery Park you discussed about...Joker and the attack.”

Bruce wasn’t a fool: he knew what bothered Clark’s mind.

“It was a chance meeting, Clark, and, yes, we discussed what happened” he didn’t try to avoid his ministrations or move away because he wanted Clark to believe him.

“Bruce, stop playing games with me!” Clark’s shout was a surprise. “The least I’d expect from you is to be honest and stop mocking me! But you want everything, don’t you?” Bruce narrowed his eyes as Clark nodded. “Me and Thor and who knows who other...So you make me feel sick and run around for tests and you get all the time to...play with gods...You’re really greedy, huh, Bruce?”

Clark was really pissed with Bruce’s hypocrisy; the human using his perfect training into filling his mesmerizing eyes with honest puzzlement.

“I saw everything, Bruce!” he clenched Bruce’s upper arms and shook him. “Stop denying it!”

Bruce gritted his teeth; his patience running thin, his hands fist to withstand the pain from Clark’s grip.

“Denying what? What you saw, Clark?”

Superman relaxed a bit his grip and nodded.

“So you want to hear it...Okay! I saw you under the rainbow stone bridge at Battery Park, pinned on the pillar” Bruce frowned and Clark smirked with his eyes shining gleefully. “Completely naked under Thor’s body...his dick pounding your ass and you moaning and begging for more...”

Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head exasperated.

“You kept caressing his...” he sniggered “golden locks and dug your nails in his back urging him to go deeper... What do you say now, babe?”
Bruce opened his eyes that sparkled determined.

“When did you see all these?” he inquired tranquil.

Clark sniggered.

“Today, after I caught you with him at the graves and you ousted me.”

The younger man huffed.

“I didn’t oust you, Clark…And I was at the Park two days ago so what you saw wasn’t true” his voice was kind and patient explaining again what was obvious.

Clark leaned his head above Bruce’s increasing the weight that the human had to endure.

“Your smell was strong under the bridge, lingering there: a smell indicating great sexual satisfaction…”

Bruce bit his lip.

“I didn’t even see the rainbow bridge you mention…and…Clark, get a grip: you accuse me for something that you say that has happened two days ago but you imagined it today! That’s crazy!”

Superman growled frustrated and cupped Bruce’s face panting angrily into his eyes.

“Crazier than you accusing Diana of being an impostor just because you think her hair is dyed? Crazier than you claiming that she was one of Falcone’s whores based on a nightmare – if that was a nightmare and not another fairytale you made up to frame her!” the wind howled wilder than before and made the downpour whip the window.

Bruce supported himself to his elbows and rose a bit before Clark forced him back down pressing his weight on the human’s torso.

“I didn’t lie! Mr. Petrou…”

But Clark had had enough and didn’t let him continue.

“You slander her – a noble, brave warrior – of being a whore while you are the whore!” the thunder’s bang was creepy yet Clark’s words hurt more Bruce’s ears.

His eyes bulged and all the blood left his face and his heart that missed several beats before starting beating fast and desperately.

Clark pursed his lips and raised his chin disgusted.

“You had told me that you were filthy but I didn’t believe it” Bruce just couldn’t breathe: yes, he always believed that his abusers left their filth on him but hearing it with Clark’s voice was a stab in his heart. “I was blinded by what Al Ghul did to your body to enslave me to you and destroy me; I almost lost my powers then…Blinded to the truth.”

Bruce managed to control his heartbeat and his breath.

“I told you then…” he inhaled deeply “I repeated that even after you were inoculated; I kept shoving you away but you…” he licked his lips “insisted…”

Clark caressed cruelly Bruce’s locks, his eyes glimmering insanely.
“You didn’t put your foot down!” that was another stab in his heart and Bruce hardly held down a
gasp. “You knew that the effect was still strong but you didn’t care…”

Bruce gulped and shook his head, his eyes maintaining his dignity.

“I had told you that it was too soon…”

Clark put his palm over Bruce’s mouth tenderly but decisively.

“But you didn’t refuse when I made advances on you…you let me slip over indifferent to my
condition” he brought his mouth over Bruce’s lips. “Because it flattered you that someone normal
loved you… even if you knew that this love wasn’t true: you just ignored it.”

Bruce’s eyes had turned into stones: two glimmering gemstones lacking any life.

“Is that what your mind tells you?” he asked coldly.

“Then the effect slowly worn out and my eyes finally opened to the truth…and I realized that you
were right: you’re indeed filthy. Your body thirst for more than my tender love: you wanted me but
you also wanted wilder experiences like those yours past lovers gave you.”

Bruce detached cocked an eyebrow.

“Past lovers?”

“Falcone, Chill, Al Ghul, Bane and all those random scum that cornered you at Dolcetto.”

Bruce shook his head pressing his lips in a tight line.

“You don’t believe all these, Clark…someone plays with your mind.”

But Clark grabbed his upper arms and raised him from the mattress to be face to face; Bruce’s torso
rejoicing the lack of weight.

“You admitted all that, Bruce…”

The younger man yanked his head backwards, his eyes shining with decency and his jaw clenched.

“Yes! I told you that I’m filthy, that I carry those men’s filth in me…but they weren’t my lovers! I
hated what they did to me; I was dying every time they…used me!” his voice wasn’t loud but a
determined growl.

Clark brought his mouth on Bruce’s.

“You missed, you craved for their violent sex: you arranged to get captured by Bane and Talia so
that I won’t suspect anything! So that you could cheat me and I wouldn’t have the right to say a
word” Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head. “But your need didn’t stay satiated enough” Bruce
looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Thor saw you completely naked during Bagdana’s attempt to
take you and it was unavoidable to fall for you.”

“No” Bruce gritted his teeth. “Thor hasn’t made any advances on me; he never left any innuendo.
Nothing happened at the park” Clark closed his eyes grunting and then cackled amused shaking his
head mocking. “And today at my parents’ graves Loki appeared and Thor chased him away.”

Clark pinned Bruce back on the mattress, straddling him again, his arms trapping his body.
“The last five months you deny me any satisfaction…”

Bruce frowned: that was unfair.

“I always urged you to make love to me.”

Clark snorted.

“Yeah…knowing that I’d be afraid for your frailty and having Leslie and Alfred and the gang glaring at me all the time, accusing me even for wanting you. But the truth is you didn’t want my sex because you found it dull, lukewarm…”

“Clark, no…” Bruce said pressing his lips.

“You needed to be fucked by a god, hoping that you’ll find what you craved for. What your sinful body cried for.”

Bruce’s face contorted in pain; he huffed.

“For the last time, Clark: Thor came here only because Loki pestered me.”

“I didn’t see Loki but even if that it is true then I see” he smirked and Bruce’s chest clenched painfully for what was coming “that Bane and Talia taught you the pleasures of threesome so what better than two gods fucking you?” Bruce’s eyes bulged and his heart stopped beating. “Maybe if I told you that Diana and I would both fuck you, there wouldn’t be a problem…But since I didn’t, you took the first opportunity you found: Thor and Loki: Who got your ass and who your mouth? Or they changed positions? You’re doing the same with Rogers and Selina in the Tower? I imagine you prefer to fuck your friend than…”

Bruce couldn’t stand it anymore; nausea was burning his stomach and every word from Clark’s mouth was acid. He raised his hand and brought it with all his speed and force at Clark’s face…

But an unbeatable force stopped his hand midair and the Man of Steel pinned his arm on the mattress above his head clenching Bruce’s wrist. Immediately a violent slap made Bruce’s head roll on the side and the familiar taste of iron choked him as blood sprung from his nostril and lip slithering slowly to his cheek. A deafening thunder worsened the buzz in Bruce’s ear but he looked through his narrowed eyes at Clark who was smirking smugly.

Superman tightened his grip on Bruce’s wrist, feeling the familiar arousal from the struggle of the body trapped under him. The human had his jaw clenched though it must hurt much from his slap; he knew to control his power to not permanently damage or kill him but also to pass the message across. His mocking eyes lowered a second to see Bruce’s heaving chest: the human never liked being defeated.

He brought his face over Bruce’s enjoying the smell of his blood, of his defeat…His groin twitching from the defiance underneath him.

“I owed you that, Bruce, remember?” Bruce’s blazing eyes stared him unfazed; certainly he remembered the day he slapped Clark because he accused him of having an affair with Matt. “My memory is eidetic…” he breathed licking Bruce’s blood though the younger man turned his head to avoid him. “I know your every movement…”

But he frowned instantly, his shock great when something sharp burned his jugular; the flesh protested as a drop of blood dripped slowly. Clark saw with the corner of his eye the Knife of Justice firmly grasped in Bruce’s free fist; its diamond blade flashed in the dim secret light of the headboard
– a cracking bolt enhancing the impression of the blade’s sharpness.

Bruce had taken advantage of Clark’s smugness at the moment of his supposed triumph and slipped his free hand rapidly behind the headboard in a flashing motion bringing the blade to his pulsing vein. It was so easy to kill right now the most powerful being in the planet…as Ra’s had taught him…as his former master destined him to do…

Their eyes collided in a battle of determination.

“You know just the 1/100 of my movements, Clark” Bruce said calm and decisive but still with affection. “The Blade has defeated a mighty ancient demon: it can harm you” it was an advice.

Clark snorted and felt the Blade’s menacing presence on his neck.

“Two demons” he corrected cocking his eyebrow. “Two demons who fell for your body…Well, Bruce? What are you going to do with that? Kill me?”

Bruce clenched his jaw; Clark’s grip on his wrist had loosened under the surprise of the Knife in his now vulnerable neck. Bruce’s hurt cheek throbbed.

“I just want to stop you before you do something you’ll be sorry for all your life! Think, Clark!”

Clark’s face was sweaty: the sense of sharp metal grazing his skin was unusual for him.

“What about my satisfaction, Bruce?! What did you offer me?!”

Superman was still here, Bruce thought; perhaps if Clark after all this time made love to him, maybe he would remember the truth, maybe the poison cleared from his mind. And then he could keep him away from his enemies and start again the tests in the Fortress.

“Then take your satisfaction but stop shouting! There’s a distressed boy in the Manor and nothing of these it’s his fault!” he lowered the Knife keeping his eyes locked with Clark’s: using the Knife against him would manage only to galvanize Clark’s beliefs but if he surrender his body to him, then maybe he would realize that he was true in his love and prove Vivian wrong.

Bruce placed reverently the Knife on the nightstand and Superman found his chance: he grabbed Bruce’s free hand and pinned now both his hands on the mattress over his head, stretching his body so beautifully that Superman felt his groin demanding. Bruce was always looking him in the eyes calm, dignified and affectionate.

“You know that I didn’t give my body to anyone else” he said steady and jerked his head upwards capturing Clark’s lips in a tender kiss, filled with love and agony to help him see the truth.

Clark deepened the kiss, loosening the bruising grip on Bruce’s wrists.

“I can give you everything the others gave you and even better…” he whispered sucking his lips passionately and then nuzzling his stretched neck and the small part of chest that the three open buttons left uncovered. “You’re mine, Bruce…”
proudly.

“I love you with all my existence but I’m not your possession…”

Superman closed his eyes frustrated and bit the cotton pajama shirt softly at first but then in a burst of accumulated anger he tore with his teeth Bruce’s clothes not minding that he was scratching also the tender skin; his hands clutching the trapped wrists to not permit any other surprise and to keep that body flexed.

His skin stung from the violence of Clark’s teeth and although he couldn’t feel beneath his waist and Clark blocked his vision, he knew that he was now completely naked; his clothes mangled shreds on the floor. Clark rose a bit and watched appreciatively the bare body under him and Bruce for the first time after that night in the greenhouse felt uncomfortable being naked in front of him.

Superman brought Bruce’s arms down without releasing them and turned him on his stomach; Bruce felt his healing arms almost ripped from their sockets as Clark twisted them behind his back.

“I can give you everything the others gave you…” he leaned over Bruce’s hair and the force of his breath burnt his neck.

And then in a swift, violent motion Clark settled one wrist upon another and Bruce frowned, feeling hard bounds tightening around his wrists and his elbows. His arms felt completely paralyzed.

Superman turned him around and smirked smugly to his face.

“The energy casts are Fortress’ property – that is to say mine; they obey my wishes…You like that, Bruce, don’t you?” he travelled the younger man’s chest with his palm to end at the ripped abdominals. “Losing control, being helpless…”

Bruce controlled his heart that cringed remembering every time he had been tied up.

“Clark, you know what I like…”

Clark shook his hand bringing his fingers lower, to Bruce’s groin.

“I thought I knew, Bruce, but I was wrong; but finally my eyes are opened. I won’t let you give your body to anyone else ever again…I won’t permit you to disgrace yourself and me by getting screwed in parks or participating in threesomes.”

Bruce closed his eyes and yanked his head backwards.

“I never did that! You know it: you’d have caught their smells on me.”

Clark brought his head over Bruce’s groin and began sniffing, the younger man fighting a devastating wave of nausea.

There was no foreign smell.

“You’re sly, Bruce” Superman raised his head to look at him. “You warned them to cover their smell.”

Bruce gritted his teeth and raised his torso to bring his head close to Clark’s.

“Even you don’t believe that! Till the incident at the Tower you didn’t give a damn about who was talking to me or for Joker being free to get me. But then when I asked you to stop seeing that woman she poisoned your mind with the idea of my supposed infidelity and you found the best way to
justify your attitude.”

“Enough!”

He grabbed Bruce’s shoulders and threw him on the mattress, settling his body on him; he captured violently Bruce’s mouth with his and began sucking and devouring, his teeth chewing cruelly the lips. He licked the drops of blood and opened his eyes to stare at Bruce’s sparkling ones.

“So beautiful…so rot…a real powerful seductress, indeed” he whispered caressing with both hands Bruce’s face to finally grab both cheeks and resume his cruel kiss, this time thrusting his tongue deep in Bruce’s throat choking him.

His body that was rubbing demandingly felt sticky under the uniform and he raised his body a second keeping Bruce’s body clenched between his knees, permitting the human to take some air. Superman roared satisfied when his body stayed bare without the burden of his clothes.

For the first time, Bruce’s eyes stared coldly at Superman’s naked body; the man’s half erection making his guts clench.

Superman’s body demanded to feel the warm human flesh and he obliged, rubbing his torso to Bruce’s so hard that it pained…like Superman’s unbearably hot mouth that trailed Bruce’s neck kissing, biting and licking the little blood his teeth evoked.

The more he conquered Bruce’s unresponsive body the more the fire in him rose…An insatiable fire. He fisted Bruce’s hair and pulled his head down forcing his neck to arch for his mouth to gain better access. He licked and sucked, his other hand groping the younger man’s ribs.

“Moan for me, Bruce…” he growled. “As you did for Thor!”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Nothing happened with him; Clark…”

“Shut up!” he cut him tightening more his clench on Bruce’s hair and brought his face over Bruce’s devouring the fire of his eyes. “You cheated me, Bruce! But I’ll keep you…” he kissed his cheekbones moaning. “I’ll give to you what you crave for and you’ll drop your bullshit about Diana…”

“She is poisoning you, Clark…You need to take your distance from her and run the tests Jor El told you…”

Superman’s gleeful eyes were Bruce’s entire world as he raised slightly his head.

“You have no right to pose demands! You should be begging me to forgive you and not trying to defame a great woman like Diana!”

Bruce’s eyes widened and for a second he stopped breathing…

“I did nothing wrong to ask your forgiveness and I’m not defaming her I’m just stating the facts! Think, Clark!

But Clark indifferent grabbed his thighs and opened them. Bruce couldn’t feel the pain but saw and heard the violence of Clark’s ministrations even though the wind’s blowing was wilder than ever; the man he loved was rock hard and Bruce wished he could be happy for their coming unification; staring at Clark’s gleeful eyes that looked down at him triumphantly, Bruce wished that making love
to him could lead Clark to the truth…

He didn’t expect that from Clark but the Man of Steel thrust his entire, huge length in him with one single swift movement, without any preparation, without any softness or caution just choking by force the resistance his unprepared insides posed after five months of inertia.

Bruce gasped…It hurt like Hell and his heartbeat peaked…No, that was impossible: his body didn’t feel below the waist.

Clark cocked a sarcastic eyebrow regarding Bruce’s dumbstruck expression.

“You’re a helluva actor, babe! Pretending surprise…We both know that it is Thor’s thunderous prick we have to thank for reviving your dead asshole…”

Bruce gritted his teeth: he couldn’t continue listening Clark speaking like a creep…like all those who used him.

“Stop talking like that, Clark; this isn’t you…We both know that some neurons survived the injury – it seems that some of them are in my rectum” he tried to reason with him “but we never tried before…”

Superman smirked and settled his hands on Bruce’s hips beginning thrusting in him, establishing immediately a fast and hard way that made Bruce’s sensitive body cry in protest but he pressed his lips and swallowed the pain.

The thrusts became faster rocking Bruce’s body but Superman’s thirst wasn’t satisfied; he leaned over the sweaty but simultaneously cold torso under him and swallowed one nipple, sucking so fiercely that Bruce wrinkled uncomfortable since this along with the pounding of his anus was overwhelming. But Superman didn’t care; he knew that Bruce enjoyed that – he needed it like this to be satisfied…and also Superman relished that too. He bit the tender nipple and sucked the liquid but more he sucked the violent heartbeat under the human skin; Superman knew that Bruce stubbornly choked his moans and grunts but he was stubborn as well.

He bit the other nipple and at the same time sent a low intensity heat beam to hit the nipple he tortured before and stood erect from his ministrations. Bruce’s torso jerked but Superman cackling moved his hips inwards smashing the momentary resistance with a stampede of thrusts.

“You like that to your nipples, huh?” he said smugly to Bruce’s narrowed eyes and inhaled the delicious smell of a trapped wild animal underneath him.

Bruce bit his bottom lip that was already torn in many places from Clark’s bites: no, he didn’t like having his nipples tortured – Falcone did that when he was really young…Clark knew it but that didn’t stop him casting heat to his other nipple too. Bruce jerked his torso upwards using Superman’s length inside him as support but the Man of Steel hugged vertically Bruce’s shoulders to glue their bodies together, impaling him mercilessly, faster, deeper…

Superman was pressing the younger man chokingly on him knowing that the human breathed difficult but Bruce clenched his teeth to hide his suffering and that pissed him: his lover denied giving to him what he gave to others. He sank his teeth to Bruce’s shoulder, blood springing along with a sharp intake of air from the human. Superman cupped with both hands his head and stared at those defiant, fervent eyes.

“Don’t hide your pain from me…I know it gives you pleasure and I can give you more pleasure than anyone…” he breathed and captured the maimed lips kissing passionately, his body pushing
enthusiastic inside Bruce.

Clark’s clenching in his shoulder became bone crushing and the Man of Steel roared in his mouth as boiling liquid from the alien’s ejaculation burned Bruce’s wounded insides. He didn’t moan or grunt though a new wave of pain travelled his spine to stab his head but his weak body convulsed like in the past when he was a child and adults used him.

Bruce appreciated the softness of the mattress when Superman lowered him tenderly yet his lover’s length was still inside him, stretching his anus to its limits and throbbing demanding more. He looked at Clark’s face that watched him like a hungry vulture; Superman’s locks were wet from sweat and framed his beautiful features. He smirked to him and placed his body over him kissing his breasts and digging streaks with his nails on his back.

Superman’s eyes stopped to the Black Butterfly that dangled on Bruce’s chest: he knew from a long time ago that this rare, precious diamond was like Bruce. He touched his lips on the sparkling stone…and jerked away because it burned his lips.

He saw Bruce staring at him as Superman touched his lips shocked: he felt that the human was mocking him, his gem demonstrating that he could escape him…No…He grabbed again Bruce’s thighs and began thrusting stronger than before making the human writhe and sweat from pain and effort to control his restrained breath – to not moan…

When Superman turned him to his stomach, he had already cum in him three times and Bruce felt his hot liquid filling his anus and the inside of his thighs; he knew that it slithered lower but he couldn’t feel there. He was also aware that except from semen something else streaked his body – his own blood…

The sheet was drenched under his pelvis and the stain expanded fast as Clark started for the fourth time his in-out movements; each time faster, deeper and stronger than the last. Bruce bit the pillow to stop a scream: Superman’s stone testicles whipped his stretched anus with every wet sound of flesh invading flesh. His eyes were covered from thin but annoying mist.

“I have more endurance than any of your lovers, Bruce” Superman said haughtily setting Bruce’s knees on the mattress for him to get a new, better ankle; clenching his thighs to crush the human body on him so to get deeper. The sound of flesh slapping flesh a mesmerizing melody to his ears.

He released Bruce’s thighs and brushed his trembling back, relishing the fine, strongly bound muscles.

“I should whip you, Bruce” he whispered massaging the covered in cold sweat human flesh. “I know how much you enjoy that…But I couldn’t stand it…”

Bruce shook his head as much as he could.

“You can’t do that, Clark, because you’re not that kind of person and you know that I don’t like it…Falcone used to whip me as a child and it was awful…” his voice almost cracked.

A thunder howled near…

“There’s only one way to bring a rotten child to the right path…” Falcone’s voice echoed through the thunder’s roaring and the boy’s head dropped and before his terrified eyes the Gray Wolf took out from his pants his heavy leather belt.
He closed his eyes desperately as the leather howled and then crushed on his back a loud scream leaving his exhausted throat as the excruciating pain flooded his body – the merry melodies and the seducing giggles drowning the sound; he was crying like a baby and he was ashamed of that but as the whips continued progressively faster and stronger, he just wanted the pain to stop, to pity him... But his pleads only made his master to belt him faster, simultaneously chuckling or cursing him.

Bruce blinked: it was a flashback – Falcone had died and he wouldn’t cry...

Clark’s hands massaged his trembling back softly now; even his thrusts became slower and Bruce hoped that finally he had found himself. But suddenly a powerful hand clenched his hair and forced his body upwards, his neck bent so much that Bruce was almost choked, his back brushing Clark’s torso. Superman touched his hot mouth on his stretched neck sucking.

“Beg me like you did with Bane…” he whispered sensually.

“Beg me for what your master ordered you to achieve” Bane sniggered.

Bruce blinked to chase away the mist from his eyes. Clark had no problem thrusting in him for hours but his body felt like broken – no, his body was already broken since the factory incident but now it hurt all over.

“I begged him only once…when the lives of my loved ones depended on showing my obedience to Ra’s – and he had asked me to have Bane use me for him to watch…” he tried to catch his breath but Clark’s grip and his continuous pounding wasn’t helping. “I never again begged him…”

Clark’s fingers tightened more uprooting his locks and arching his neck.

“He says to everyone that you begged him for more at the mountain…” he mouthed Bruce’s earlobe.

Bruce found the strength to snort.

“Of course he does…You believe him?” he sensed Clark’s hesitation. “I won’t beg you, Clark, because at my parents’ grave…some months ago…you told me that I wouldn’t have to plead anyone again in my life…” he closed his eyes exhausted “and I still believe in you…though you don’t believe in me…”

Superman stretched more his neck, biting the soft skin where jawbone met the ear.

“Who’s the best of your lovers?” his wet, hissing breath attacked Bruce’s ear.

He closed his eyes to recruit some air from his stretched neck.

“You’re the only lover I ever had, Clark” he said in such a steady voice that it was a surprise for him too.

That pissed Superman: he threw Bruce’s head to the mattress keeping his clench on his hair and pressed his face down.

“You like powerful beings” he hissed through gritted teeth. “I’m Kal El, the mighty Lord of Krypton, and you’re a cheap human…”

Bruce closed his eyes; his breath laboriously maintained through his pressed nose and mouth yet he managed to take in some air to speak.

“This isn’t you, Clark; you know that I’m not enjoying this…”
But Superman buried more his face to the mattress and clenching his bare teeth increased the already frantic pace of his thrusts, drilling the stubborn human’s insides, enjoying the loud sound of his flesh slapping Bruce’s so similar to the sound of rain whipping the earth.

Bruce gritted his teeth; the pain was unbearable: he knew that weren’t for the energy casts inside his body he would have been demolished…He felt his blood running from his wounds on the foreign length that stretched him to his limits. The pain was intolerable but he wouldn’t scream…The pain was unbearable like then…

The pleasant smell of burnt pinewood from the fireplace suddenly vanished and his nose stung from the foul stench of junk and urine; his eyes stared at the withered bricks of the wall he was pinned. He knew that place; he knew that horrible human smell behind him; he knew the sniggers coming from the men at the entrance of the alley; he knew the smell, the air of that alley; he knew that on the cement, right next to his position lay his parents, the police sketch of his parents’ dead bodies, a miserable white rose upon them: the awful flower their unworthy son managed to bring them one year after their untimely death…

“Call yar mommy to save ya!” the Vulture who was ripping his soft insides growled.

No, he wouldn’t call his mommy to save him because his mother was dead and he didn’t deserve to be saved…Superman’s roaring pants demonstrated his pleasure, his satisfaction but Bruce was trapped in that alley…

Bruce’s eyelids slowly uncovered his eyes: he wasn’t asleep but he didn’t want to stir; his body was wreckage: a mix of pain, stiffness, itch and exhaustion. He was on his stomach, completely naked – thankfully, his hands were untied and the energy casts had returned inside his arms giving again life to his limps. His anus throbbed and screamed from pain and Bruce snorted – he should be happy that there was another neuron which recovered from the injury but instead he felt disgusted.

Underneath, the expensive sheet was drenched all over from semen – Clark had ejaculated five times in him or six: he lost count – and blood…The wounds in his rectum stung aggressively reminding him of the days with Falcone or Chill or Ra’s…He had friction burnings and scratches…

He persuaded his stiff neck to turn and regard the other side of the bed – Clark’s side. He knew that he wasn’t there…Bruce stretched his hand and touched the mattress. It was cold…but Clark’s eyes were colder.

When Clark left, Bruce wasn’t sleeping; he lay as Superman had released him after the fifth or sixth time. His face wasn’t visible but Clark could figure that he was awake…but he didn’t care…as he didn’t care to say to him something…Bruce pressed his lips and the pain told him that they were swollen and badly bitten: why feeling the need to tell him anything since Clark believed that he liked what was done to him? Superman didn’t even care to throw a blanket on his sweaty, cold, naked body…

He stared at the big window; the curtains had stayed opened and he could see the black sky above the scary-looking, drenched Palisades. The storm was raging, the wind still blew angrily and the horizon was constantly cracked by lighting. So unlike the peaceful sky at the island or the aurora borealis.

He looked at his wristwatch on the nightstand: 03.45. He placed his palms on the mattress and clenching his protesting jaw raised his torso: he couldn’t stay lying…It was a miracle Alfred hadn’t come already to check him so he had to tidy up before he came and understood what had happened.
Bruce wished these past hours were another one of the nightmares Crane’s drugs created…but everything in the room confirmed his certainty that they were real…

He stared at the wheelchair that read his mind and came there for him: Clark’s creation…

“I’d be extremely happy when I’ll smash that awful chair once you’re standing on your feet” Clark beamed as he lowered him gently to the astonishingly beautiful wheelchair.

“It’s very beautiful, Clark” Bruce brushed the transparent armrests. “Thank you” he smiled and Clark kissed him sweetly on the lips.

Bruce hesitated to use it but Tony’s wheelchair was in the closet, so even if he used the remote or his mind, it couldn’t come to him. He inhaled deeply and pushed his screaming body in the chair…His hairs stood upright when the cloud-like sense of the chair touched him: it was soft and warm but for Bruce was as if Clark held him again and his stretched, abused anus felt as if it was penetrated all over again.

But Bruce yanked his head and fisted his hands till his heartbeat became normal. He gathered hastily the stained sheets and dropped them in a pile at the floor grateful to Alfred for choosing an expensive mattress that was waterproof. His eyes stopped at the pieces of his pajamas that were scattered over the floor; he pressed his lips tasting once again his blood and hurried to bring them to the same pile.

He moved to the chair where his robe was laid over the back and wore it for the first time that night; before Clark came, he felt that the fireplace and the heating system of the Manor was more than adequate but now it was cold…

And he needed a shower: his body smelt awful from his sweat and Superman’s that had dried on his flesh…yet the worse was the stench of semen and blood…

Bruce barely made it to the toilet and his hands almost of their own accord surged to grab the porcelain, a second before his torso jerked violently dragging him to the floor; his grip on the toilet was the only thing that saved him from smashing his face on the hard surface, his useless legs carried away by the force ending up on the tiled floor.

He jerked many times till everything Alfred so affectionately prepared for him left his stomach and still his body convulsed pushing bile out of his system as if this too could poison him. His mouth stayed agape…he was too exhausted to even close his mouth and he just hugged the cold porcelain, hearing the pounding of his heart and his ragged breaths drumming the caverns of his skull.

Bruce didn’t know if seconds or moments had passed but he realized that he should take himself from there; he swept his cold nose with the back of his hand and felt the puffed, hot flesh…He had to return to his chair but his arms trembled from exhaustion. He closed his eyes and recalled Ubu’s training: the mind forcing his power over the flesh; he breathed calmly, deeply, his focus on his weak hands and the task before him…

He left the toilet and put his palms on the cold, shining floor; his chair was there waiting. He turned his body and held the armrests hoisting his unresponsive body till he was settled in the seat. A long huff: it was the first time after months that this simple task seemed so difficult…even impossible. He went to the sink but didn’t look at the mirror; he just rinsed his mouth a couple of times since the acid taste of vomiting vanished.

Bruce rubbed his eyes: training was definitely out of the question for tomorrow – he had to call Matt first thing in the morning. He willed his wheelchair to the tub and pressed the touch screen of the control panel so that the surface inclined a bit for him to slither in the seat: Bruce was grateful that the
seat had the railing around his waist otherwise he wasn’t sure if he’d manage to not fall…

He took off the robe and dropped it at the wheelchair; he looked at his naked body with repulsion: the skin was red or purple and there were scratches and bite marks everywhere; above the waist he felt itchy since his flesh was sticky from Superman’s saliva…His nipples were swollen and red from the light burning. But what startled Bruce was the drops of blood that fell fast on the white porcelain…his anus was still bleeding…he frowned because he could feel the excruciating pain but not the liquid slithering nor the stuck semen…

He sighed: the normal feeling had returned only for the hours of Superman’s pleasure…Of course… he cocked an eyebrow mocking himself. The irony: the neurons that overcame the injury were those associated with anal violation; other than that his pelvis was as good as dead.

The sense of hot water washing his skin was delight: he jerked his head upwards with closed eyes…it felt sanitizing…relaxing…comforting. He wished he could stay there forever.

He closed the water: there were blood drops around the toilet and he had to mop them. He crawled back in his wheelchair and after dried himself with the towel, muffled himself in the robe moving to the sink; the chair elevated at his wish to reach the mirror and the view of his face confirmed what he already knew: swollen cheek, bruised nostril, puffed, scratched lips, some dried blood – he needed makeup and some butterfly stitches for his anus. He stretched his neck and sighed: bite marks and bruises from Superman’s sucking – more makeup.

It was a boring task but necessary and he did it meticulously. He inspected the result: the marks were covered. He touched hesitantly his rear end: there wasn’t new blood drops so the butterfly stitches were enough…of course, his anal channel throbbed and screamed from pain but there was no other senses from there.

His bedroom was as he left it; the rain still whipping punishingly the window fortified by the wind’s rage. A bolt lightened the pitch black horizon highlighting the bare tree branches that resembled menacing hands.

The view absorbed him for some seconds but he had work to do; Bruce moved his wheelchair to the pile of destroyed fabric and got ready to take them down to the cave. But the corner of his eye caught the Blade of Justice on the nightstand and his hand hesitantly held its hilt: he felt as if he had betrayed that proud weapon.

“Hurting him wouldn’t be a solution…” he whispered to its blade and placed it reverently to the secret case inside the drawer.

Thankfully, there was no obstacle between him and the cave. He looked relieved the huge cavern, the waterfall’s roaring sound bringing comfort to his pounding heart. He closed his eyes and took a deep inhale.

Then he threw the sheets and the rags of his pajamas to the rectangular small oven in the far end of the cave; he had it there for destruction of dangerous things. He closed the glass seal and pressed the round indication burning the evidence. He wished he could do the same with the marks in his mind and body…

Another flashback added to his wide range…he sniggered. But as with most of his experiences nobody was going to find out. This would stay between him and Clark…and maybe this would work like a motive for Clark to find his true self; to chase his therapy…Because Clark wasn’t like this. And there was still hope since Clark resisted the allure of this woman and stayed loyal to him despite the slander: if Clark didn’t give up on him he wouldn’t either. Despite the pain… He was
used to the pain. He had promised. And there were so many things at stake, more important than his dignity or happiness…

He was strolling in the cave unconsciously when suddenly his eyes fell on the cowl left on the long rectangular case containing the new armor.

“I’m not a victim!” he said again for the cowl to hear him as well.

“Then stop acting like one!” Tony’s ashamed voice echoed through the cave. “Joker took away your mobility and the alien your personality!”

Bruce closed his eyes and took the cowl.

“Be happy, Bruce” his mother’s soft voice whispered to him desperately as she was leaving him. “Please, be happy…”

If only that was possible…He felt suffocating and his eyes looked desperately around and at the ceiling as he was doing when imprisoned in Falcone’s cage. His loyal companions weren’t there: they were out hunting. But his greatest companion was there staring at him patiently and sternly: the cowl’s empty eyes pierced him. He who permitted him to escape from everything; from himself…who gave him peace, freedom, oblivion…

There was only one thing for him to do: he took off his robe and began wearing the pieces of the armor.

“You’ll need much practice before going out with the suit…” Lucius warned him.

But he just couldn’t stay there: he needed to be out there, in Gotham’s embrace.

Clark sat on the rooftop of Gotham’s City Hall, his arm lazily set on his bent knee, his other leg stretched. He was gazing at Gotham’s skyline, the downpour steadily clearing the sinful city and him. His mind was boiling with images and thoughts…

Light but strong footsteps took him out of his reverie and the elegant, intoxicating perfume of every flower in the planet tantalized his nostrils. Diana was there but he didn’t turn to see her.

“Problems with Bruce?” her proud voice hued with honest interest caressed his ears before her beautiful form filled his eyes as the Amazon marched in front of him.

He smirked.

“It’s so obvious, huh?”

She shrugged.

“The way you flew away from New York, ignoring my call – I knew something very bad happened and you’d be in Gotham.”

Superman stood and looked her in the eyes.

“I did something awful.”

She snorted.
“You? No! You can’t do anything awful!”

“I had sex with Bruce” he saw Diana inhaling deeply and crossing her arms.

“That’s normal for a couple” she said indifferently with a hue of disappointment in her voice and cocked an eyebrow. “It was really…that awful?”

“Violently…Cruelly… I made him suffer… I made him bleed…”

She pursed her lips unimpressed.

“Then you gave him what he wanted…” she shrugged. “I’m positive he enjoyed it” she snorted “more than any other time with you; besides he deserved to suffer” her teeth rattled “to be punished for his infidelity.”

Superman ran both his hands in his drenched hair; the rain waterfall washing his face.

“Bruce never cheated me…when I did that to him, I thought that my wrath for his infidelity fuelled my oppressed for months passion – I didn’t want to endanger his wounded body” Diana’s face was carved from a frustrated twitch of her lips. “My body was burning from anger because Bruce gave his body to others…and…” Clark sighed longingly “his body is gorgeous! But Bruce was right: my certainty for his adultery was only an excuse: I knew he’d never cheat me” he arched his eyebrows and sighed. “I wanted my revenge because he tried to keep me away from you.”

A thunder roared over the city but Diana’s sarcastic huff wasn’t muffled.

“And now you feel guilty.”

Superman shook his head and inhaled.

“No…though I know I should…”

“Then you’re satisfied?”

He laughed.

“When I was impaling him, when I made him writhe, I was…But now I realize that I’m not satisfied…” he moved closer to her feeling mesmerized by her sparkling eyes. “I crave for Bruce’s body but he isn’t enough – something is lacking…”

“What?” she whispered sensually, her eyes reaching the depths of his mind bringing him numbness.

He pressed his lips in a tight line and yanked his head.

“You, Diana! I need you; I long for you” he shook his head. “I’m incomplete without you…but I won’t let go of Bruce either.”

The Amazon laughed stretching her sturdy but curvy body; a lightning illuminated her beautiful but smug face.

“Now, you’re talking as you ought. You deserve whatever you want, Kal El: you’re the Lord of Krypton. And a pleasure slave is a luxury you definitely can demand.”

A huge branch-like lightning flashed the gloomy sky and washed Diana’s body in shine. Superman gaped at her body: water running over her half naked bulging breasts; streaks hugging her muscle bound thighs calling him to touch… Blue-raven bangs were plastered to her forehead and cheeks;
raindrops were stuck on her ruby, rich lips. Her eyes burnt as she met his charmed stare, urging him.

He wrapped his arm around her neck and his lips surged at hers only to be met in the middle of the distance with hers in a powerful collision that made him see stars. Their mouths began moving in a dance of passion; greedily, powerfully, without any hesitation… Superman bound to that lips grabbed the rim of Diana’s corset and pulled it down releasing her big, round shaped breasts, relishing the desperate way the woman fondled his back, digging her nails…

Batman walked on the rooftop stopping at the ledge, his lenses covered eyes watching the deserted street in front of the 80 floor building; his cape waved behind him. He heard footsteps but he didn’t turn.

“Who are you?” he growled indifferent and the stranger chuckled.

“One of Gotham’s residents named me Arrow – I like that name.”

Batman turned slowly to him. A modern Robin Hood dressed in dark green leather, a hood covering his head and casting his face into deep shadows. Only his eyes shone like fires, a smug hue there.

“I don’t like people like you in Gotham!”

“Xenophobic then…But Gotham has so many things to offer to tourists…sights…people” he lolled his head to the side. “Especially, people: you can’t see anywhere two clowns, breaking and entering the City Hall…”

Batman clenched his jaw: Joker was planning something and the City Hall was the center. Thankfully, the building was near: he pointed his grapple gun without second thoughts and let the cable take him to the opposite building, ignoring the protests of his body.

Arrow rushed behind him covering the gap between the buildings with a long, breathtaking jump. He followed Batman’s route towards the City Hall and stopped where he stopped: to a rooftop close to the City Hall’s rooftop. Batman brushed his forearm and the diagram of the building emerged in neon green.

“Nobody is inside the building” he snapped to the Arrow who stood behind him. “No bomb either.”

But there were vibrations on the rooftop and Batman’s artificial gaze focused there…and the blood froze in his veins; the blow of the raging wind felt like a punch in his face.

Superman’s nude back and buttocks…the Man of Steel was kneeling of the floor thrusting inside the body that was hugging him. Her long, beautiful legs were wrapped around Superman’s impressive thighs, opening widely her hips for him to enter. She was grunting and with every thrust stabbed her nails to his back, jerking her head backwards stretching her chest for Superman to have plenty of access to her erect thick nipples; he was sucking and licking the rain water that ran the skin. The Man of Steel roared louder than the thunder, pushing harder.

“I disagree: we have our bomb…” Arrow remarked slyly in Batman’s ear.

“You’re the best, Diana…” Superman moaned, licking her bulging breasts.

Batman remained impassive and turned his back to the spectacle.

“You can watch the peep show – I have more important things to do” he spat to the Arrow and
pointed his grapple gun to the opposite fire escape launching away.

Arrow smirked and pulled out of his suit a smartphone to start shooting the sex scene.

Batman kneeled on the street at the depth of a filthy, dark alley: he supported his hands to the wall. He was exhausted, every pain in his body screaming; his head throbbed by the vibrations of a raging migraine. His eyes seeing again the scene on the City Hall’s rooftop: there was no hope anymore… He was a fool…

He felt the presences before hearing their footsteps: six big people. The sound of guns loading and blades protruding towered the buzz in his ears.

“Tough night, Batman?” a sniggering voice jeered. “Let’s lighten his spirits, boys!”
Chapter 38

Batman turned calmly his head to the bundle of goons that looked smugly at him; he remained on his knees: despite the fact his armor had micro-power generators that enable the exoskeleton-like pieces of his armor move his legs he knew that he couldn’t rely on them to fight these men. Even though he was thrilled the first time he made a moderate kick in the new armor, he knew that this move seemed in slow motion compared to his previous skill.

Furthermore, he didn’t have the stamina to use his legs; he was exhausted and the healthy part of his body screamed in agony from the various kinds of pain. But the worse pain was in the place where his heart used to be where now a burning mass was branding his insides while a heavy stone was smashing his stomach with constantly repeated blows.

However, he didn’t want to show weakness to these creeps because if they spread the news then the cowing thugs would step forward claiming a central role to Gotham’s underworld which for the time being stayed in hibernate.

He pressed the tiny button in his belt and without the sniggering thugs realizing their guns were blocked. Lucius made an armor that could withstand almost every known type of bullet yet the force of the impact, especially from close proximity could have a great toll on his battered body.

Batman raised his head proudly, threw casually two batarangs before their feet – which startled them even before the batarangs emitted thick smoke - and snarled at them which completed the fear effect. Batman understood from the first moment that they were small timers or medium ranked goons looking for an opportunity to become crime lords. These people fed on their victim’s fear but this fear was easily turned to them when met with tougher meat than they could chew. And suddenly the alley became too silent and the wind’s howl sounded scaring creepy.

“Shoot, boys!” the guy who obviously was their leader ordered terrorized and frustrated but their guns remained silent even though they continued pulling the trigger after the first failed attempt.

They were confused and their self-confidence faltered but Batman waited the right second to exploit their state; he had seen the lightning from the opening of the alley…

When the thunder blew like a bomb the goons jumped and looked around for a second which was what Batman wanted. He used his cripple legs only as a vault and launched his body on them; both his hands found immediately their target, clenching the necks of two men who goggled at him just before he crashed their heads together. And before his feet touched the ground he threw the unconscious men at their comrades sending two of his attackers to the wall.

He was weak but the exosceletons around his legs and the micro-generators permitted him to stand; there was also the option of using his mind’s power to force his legs to operate normally yet he didn’t want to use that and his mind didn’t have the appropriate level of concentration to achieve it: Clark’s naked body entangled with Vivian’s squirming body was flashing constantly in his mind, stabbing his heart and cracking his thoughts.

Batman ground his teeth and caught the hand behind him that surged clutching a big knife to stab his back. He dragged the man to collide with his back and when the thug’s head was above his shoulder he jerked his forearm to blow his mouth and nose as the back of his fist hammered the place between the thug’s eyes. As he heard the guy’s scream, Bruce thanked mentally Matt’s training and the hundreds of pounds he was lifting daily.
Rapidly his fingers struck the man’s neck knocking him out. However the man’s heavy body fell on him and Batman clenched his jaw feeling his body protesting. With a growl he shoved the unconscious thug on the wall; he sensed the rapid descend of a knife – the sixth goon.

In normal conditions he’d have ducked it instantly but the new suit required a considerable reaction time for movements under the waist so he dag his elbow to the man’s belly. Yet the goon was very sturdy and the hit despite heavy didn’t stop him; Batman yanked his head butting the goon’s jaw – since the man was towering him – and heard the bone cracking; at the same time he raised both his hands catching the hand with the knife stopping it before stabbing his back.

An ordinary creep would have collapsed by now yet the man was strong and Batman was weakened so he gritted his teeth because the hand he held almost overcame his grip…Sweat dripped underneath Batman’s armor as he recruited every drop of strength he had to at last manage to lower with a painful crack the enormous hand; he twitched it swiftly and dragged the man down giving him a palm blow on the forehead that drove him unconscious.

With the corner of his eye saw the flash of another blade reaching his back: one of the goons had recovered. He turned to stop him though he knew that it was too late, only to see the blade shattering by a bluish ray and the goon twitching and collapsing, his hair standing erect and smoking. He was alive but knocked out by electricity and Batman didn’t waste time: squatting, dragged his body from goon to goon handcuffing them feeling two eyes constantly on him.

When he closed the handcuffs around the wrists of the last crook, Batman stood and let his arms fall loose on his sides; he kept standing but he felt his body trembling. He knew who was there; he inhaled deeply and turned slowly as the newcomer walked to him.

His broad figure filled the alley, Mjolnir still emanating waves of energy; his golden hair waved to the wind along with his red cape.

“You loved his golden locks…”

Thor’s armor shone to the flash of the lightning but the worry in his eyes as he stared at Batman made Bruce’s chest clench. He pointed his grapple gun up and let the cable drag him up.

“Thank you” he growled to Thor.

He landed on the rooftop but although the exoskeletons did the job his hands sought the wall for support. His head swam in a white light with Clark and Diana in the middle; his heart felt like it was stabbed.

The wall wasn’t there and the ground was surging to his head. Suddenly something impossibly strong grabbed him softly but decisively and kept him erect supporting him.

“I’ve got you, Batman…” Thor said calmly. “It’s okay…”

His eyes slowly regained their clarity, Thor’s kind face a nice welcome back from the Hell. However, Batman jerked away and Thor pulled away his hands.

“You fought bravely there; you’re a great warrior” his voice vibrated from sincere admiration yet Bruce shook his head. “It’s my honor I witnessed you in action.”

Batman stretched his posture proudly and snorted not for the god but for himself: he was sad, angry and disappointed; an acid mixture that filled his mouth with a bitter taste.

“I was lame” he spat in his cold raspy voice and the blond frowned. “However thanks for your help”
he added sincerely but coldly.

Thor crossed his arms on the chest because otherwise would touch Batman’s shoulders and knew that the great man didn’t want to.

“You’d have managed without my intervention but I couldn’t hold myself” he nodded. “I’m sorry for intervening.”

Batman shook his head.

“It’s okay” he turned his gaze elsewhere to avoid those honest, caring eyes: Bruce just didn’t want anyone to care for him.

Something tickled Thor’s tongue but he hesitated to utter it: the man before him was so dignified, so proudly distant. However his worry pushed him over the edge of his reluctance.

“It is a miracle…” he said and Batman understood he meant the fact that he stood and walk.

“Just science” he replied.

Thor raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“And willpower; unbelievable strength of character.”

Hearing praise for him was for Bruce the worse: it made the wounds, the scratches and the bite marks stung viciously.

“Our cape thwarts Loki from getting in places” it wasn’t a question but a conclusion which made Thor smile for the man’s smartness and his resolution to divert the discussion and stop any compliment.

“Exactly…I think it’s handy but the combination with the gem makes its effectiveness greater and we must not forget the Knife: Loki is a strong but he can’t overcome these three objects combined” he arched an eyebrow emphatically and Batman gave a solemn, sharp nod.

Thor knew that now he should say what stagnated in the tip of his tongue.

“I’m not Eir, the goddess of healing” Batman frowned but Thor couldn’t see under the cowl “but I can sense that your body is in much pain and your soul in great agony and suffering…” Batman didn’t reply so Thor continued pressing his lips. “I…I had told you to call for me…”

Batman raised his palm sharply in a stopping gesture and Thor respected that.

“Things got nasty with Superman?” the god of thunder growled and a bolt cracked the entire sky. “Because of me” his eyes bore into Batman’s lenses and the tranquility of the human made him calm down. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault” Batman turned to the rooftop’s edge ready to jump but Thor touched his shoulder.

“Let me take you to your home…” he closed his eyes. “Believe me I don’t mean any…offence but maybe it will be better if you didn’t excess yourself more…”

“My car is near” Batman replied without turning his head and jumped opening his arms like a giant bat, his cape solidified immediately.
Bruce knew that the god understood his exhaustion and weakness and his subtlety to not mention it really touched him. But he couldn’t accept Thor’s offer; he didn’t want anyone’s hands on him tonight even in a friendly touch; Bruce felt filthy… He was aware of his exhaustion and the danger if he collapsed but he had called the Tumbler and it was rather near…

Thor clenched his jaw and gazed at the gracious flight of the human; he brought his clenched fist in his heart and mentally persuaded lightning and thunders to stop for seconds to not hinder Batman’s effort. Who could imagine that this emanating strength and willpower being was disabled, doomed to a chair? Who could believe that the creature blessed to have this human chose to torment him? Because Thor sensed that Superman had done something really bad to Bruce and had used him as an excuse…And that infuriated Thor but mostly made him sad about Bruce’s suffering.

Superman held Diana’s waist with both hands relishing the feeling of her arms around his neck; they floated in the sky over the fields away from Gotham, dressed after the explosion of their love making. Their foreheads touched each other and their bodies glued in an embrace cried to be naked again so that nothing would thwart their new union.

Diana mouthed Superman’s lower lip, caressing the back of his head.

“Why we left Gotham?” she asked slyly. “You’re afraid that someone might see us?” her smile was wicked and her magnificent eyes sparkled reading his.

Superman captured her lips moaning.

“I don’t want to let Bruce pray to all the men who drool on him and if he finds out about us, he’ll break up with me.”

Her eyebrows’ arch almost reached her hairline in disbelief and she snorted.

“Break up with YOU?! C’mon, Kal El…As if you’re a human loser and Wayne has the right to dump you” Superman lick his lips and Diana smiled. “You know my opinion about Wayne and that he is unworthy of you but since you want to keep him he can’t do otherwise!”

Superman understood what she meant and he didn’t like it.

“I don’t want to use violence on him…” he shook his head and scenes of Bruce’s semi-dark bedroom flashed in his mind shaking him. “I’ve already done that once…” he turned his head to the right, towards the Palisades, sighing – the toll on Bruce’s body must have been great.

But Diana cupped his jaw with both hands and brought his head to look at her.

“Do not feel bad about that: he enjoyed it. He likes being screwed like a cheap street hooker.”

Superman pecked her nose and rubbed her back that was drenched from the downpour that continued.

“I’m not so sure, Diana…”

She shook her head in disapproval.

“You’re too good for this human and he takes advantage of you” Clark frowned and she nodded. “Did he ask you to stop?”
Superman shook his head in denial and Diana pursed her lips.

“You see?” her hands slipped to his buttocks fondling almost violently. “If he didn’t like it, he’d have asked you to stop or beg you” she smirked smugly. “Though I’m sure that he gets horny when cries and beg his masters to stop and they don’t.”

“Bruce is proud…” he replied “he wouldn’t beg me even if he felt that I was going to kill him…” his voice was respectful.

Diana grunted.

“You give too much credit to him, Kal El. Your judgement gets distorted by your passion: he is extremely beautiful for a human, sure; a great fuck but that’s it. He isn’t a hero for Zeus’ sake!”

Superman grabbed her face with both hands and looked her deep in the eyes, the rain drops plastering his locks in the forehead.

“I won’t permit anyone to lay hands on Bruce’s body!”

She narrowed her eyes which flashed wickedly.

“Of course, Kal El. He is yours. Nobody has the right to take him even if Wayne wants it” she shook her head. “Find a way to keep him yours even if he learns the truth about us…” she whispered and the air from her lungs caressed his eyes.

Superman nodded frowning, a thought crossing his mind.

Alfred stood in front of the kitchen’s sink gazing at the endless green of the grounds; the big window looked at the right side of the grounds and the butler always appreciated the view when washed the dishes (he preferred it over using the dish washer a machine he considered completely useless, after all).

That bloody storm had finally stopped and now the nature was peaceful under a light gray sky and a shy sun that sent some dim light. Of course, Alfred knew that a great storm always leaves some aftermath and his chest was clenched from a sinister premonition.

He swept with a towel the plate he had washed. Master Bruce had called him at 6:30, knowing that the butler woke up that precise hour, and asked him to drive Dick to his school. The previous day his young master had told him that he would accompany the boy. But obviously something changed.

Alfred raised an eyebrow and sighed: he dreaded what caused that change…His master’s voice was steady and casual; the young man knowing Alfred’s worry, didn’t force his butler to ask but gave the answer himself: he just wanted to sleep in today – he felt a bit tired. So the British respected his young master’s wish and didn’t disturb his sleep though something urged him to go inside the bedroom.

Yet his master had assigned him a job and that should be his priority. So he had awoken young master Richard, concealing his surprise for seeing Hero sleeping on his bed. This intensified Alfred’s concern while he wished his gut feeling was wrong and Master Bruce indeed wanted just to sleep a little more. Though he doubted it…

He turned on hearing the light footsteps of the Manor’s newest resident and saw Hero hooked in the boy’s chest; the animal meowed greeting him.
“Good morning, Master Richard, Master Hero” he bowed slightly his head. “The breakfast is served.”

Alfred’s experienced eyes caught the change in the boy’s eyes as he scanned the kitchen and didn’t see Master Bruce. The boy’s joy was more than evident and Alfred sighed internally. At least, the kitten was searching his master looking around and finally jumped from Dick’s arms to rub to the stool right next to which Bruce’s chair used to stand.

“Would you like anything else for breakfast, sir?” Alfred asked Richard seeing the kitten disappointed walking to his bawl to eat.

“No, thank you” the boy replied settling in a stool. “How am I going to go to school?” he asked morose taking a muffin. “I doubt the bus will come here…”

“I’ll drive you to the school, Master Richard.”

The boy arched his eyebrows.

“I’d rather go with the bus…” he said chewing his muffin and drinking his milk.

Alfred shook his head.

“I know, Master Richard, yet we can’t oblige Gotham’s city to send the school bus to Palisades: it is much too far from the main city.”

Dick shrugged and continued eating, so Alfred resumed settling the glasses into the central cardboard over the sink bench.

“Wayne likes to sleep late, huh? I didn’t expect anything better…”

Alfred kept his composed expression and turned his back to continue his work but suddenly something warm rubbed to his calve purring. He hardly stopped a smile as he looked down and saw Hero rubbing and looking at him puzzled.

“Master Bruce needed some extra hours of sleep” he heard Dick’s snide snort “but I’m sure it is nothing serious.”

“I hope it IS something serious!” Dick gritted his teeth.

But that was too much for Alfred whose hands formed fists at his side; he turned to the boy keeping his calm though inside him a storm was raging.

“I beg your pardon, Master Grayson, but I’d suggest you watch your mouth.”

Dick frowned seeing the always calm and polite eyes of the butler sparkling.

“I know your sentiments about Master Bruce and I respect them – though I consider it unfair to be so harsh on Master Bruce because Joker hates him so much to kill innocents in his name. As you may have noticed these two days we have the pleasure of your company, Master Bruce tolerates your rude and insensitive remarks about him. However, Master Bruce isn’t the only resident of this Manor, I live here too.”

The man’s voice bent from emotion.

“Master Bruce was taken from his parents and if I am permitted, from me, when he was 8 years old: for eighteen years I stood witness to the tortures he suffered at the hands of the late Falcone and
every day was agony and dread that it could be the boy’s last” Alfred caught his breath. “Almost six months ago, Master Bruce almost died and I had to watch again unable to do anything”

He yanked his head dignified and locked his eyes with Dick’s.

“You seem to be very sensitive with everything concerning your loved ones, Master Grayson; Master Bruce is my loved one” his voice became strict. “So I’d kindly ask you to keep your ill thoughts for yourself when I’m present” he shook his head. “I’d be very sorry if you force me to deny you my services” he gave a tight-lips smile. “I believe I made myself clear?”

Dick’s eyes had widened with the man’s mild but so effective way: it reminded him of his granny – expect that his granny was far too lenient since she had a soft spot for him that obviously Alfred had for Wayne. He nodded: the butler considered Wayne like his son so it was understandable that he didn’t want to hear Dick slander him.

Alfred grinned broadly.

“I’m glad we cleared this out. Now, please do finish your breakfast because we don’t want you to be late for school.”

The boy mumbled his agreement and bit hastily his bread.

When John Grayson died Trevor Breizic was his head coach; Tony Zucco was still member of the team but everyone knew that John had downgraded and he was ready to shoe him. The video was from the national championship that counted as trial for the selection of the team that would compete in the world championship representing US.

John Grayson’s performance at the Horizontal Bar was breathtaking and reminded much of his son’s movements; it was mesmerizing so it took a second viewing to watch other things apart from the great athlete.

The second viewing was for watching the presence of Breizic, the 65 year old legendary trainer who although John had demoted him in favor of Zucco, when the athlete asked him to be again his trainer, accepted gladly. He was of average height if not short with a sturdy body that shouted the man’s great career as a gymnast; gray hair and a round bald spot in the center of his sculp. His Russian gray eyes were cold, calculating every tiny detail of his athlete’s figures but in the end his affection for John melted the professionalism and he rushed to hug his athlete with emotion coloring his wrinkled face: everyone knew that this performance gave John the ticket for the world championship and Breizic was clearly proud and touched since this came after his athlete’s misfortune with the illegal drugs and hard effort to regain the trust of the people and the federation.

A third viewing for Zucco. He stood on a corner watching avidly with his arms crossed on the chest: tall, average weight, raven hair and blue sneaky eyes. His mouth crooked in a grimace of interest and indifference at the same time indication that he was acting; a shine in his eyes as his stare followed Breizic who embraced John. His expression remained neutral but someone could discern a flicker of irritation if stopped the video and zoomed on the outcast trainer.

Bruce drummed his fingers on the computer bench: if only he could find footage of the accident that cost John’s life…He searched through his inclusive search engine that looked into sources not so known. There were some short videos from the training of the national team’s gymnasts yet – as expected – nothing from the day of the accident. He leaned on the back of the chair and rubbed his lip but withdrew his finger immediately because it hurt really bad… Actually, his lips hurt even
without touching or moving, they were swollen and the scratches throbbed unstoppably…

Rubbing his jaw was out of question too…

He felt that Breizic could provide some help in finding Zucco’s role in the incident – if Ms. Turner was right and Zucco had some involvement.

A bat stirred and made its companions on the stony ceiling cringe. Bruce looked upwards and his lips formed a faint smile: he was at home. When he returned from his patrol went immediately to the master bedroom to take his knife and Tony’s wheelchair: he was seated in it right now but he had taken Superman’s wheelchair to the cave as well: the absolutely beautiful throne-like chair sat deserted on a dark niche of the cave under the big arch in the right.

He knew that his long stay in the bedroom would at some point alert Alfred and force him to get inside and then the British would realize that Bruce didn’t sleep as he told him but was in the cave all time. He didn’t want anyone with him as much as they loved him. He relished his loneliness as he had learnt all these years when being alone was the only short time he didn’t suffer. He loved them and it was nice with them but right now he didn’t want any other presence, especially of those loving him – their love was unbearable right now.

Alfred would be discreet but definitely would touch subjects that Bruce didn’t want to discuss…He had called Matt to cancel today’s session – it was more than certain that Bruce would do the same tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. But Bruce knew that calling off one week’s sessions at once would cause questions and concerns.

However, more than a week would be necessary for the marks to disappear and Bruce didn’t want Matt to see because his physiotherapist had made it clear than if he saw a mark would immediately speak to Tony. And these marks all over his body were so angry, as much as Superman’s wrath; Bruce pursed his lips.

He was sure that his body was sore and would have felt awful if he wasn’t paralyzed below the waist; his arms ached and were a bit stiff from the energy casts that had bound them… As for his thighs…last night, while showering even through his dizziness, he had seen the finger shaped bruises…well, not yet black-purple bruises but a vomiting, even worse, white: Superman’s clenches must have been almost bone crashing…

Bruce inhaled deeply and let the air come out in a long exhale: the cowl was always suffocating but it felt like home and today he didn’t want to pull it out. He had only deactivated the lenses because it was difficult to work on the PC screen with them.

It was so nice being engrossed in work and not thinking anything related to last night…and still he had slipped there. He gritted his teeth and growled: stop that! He turned his gaze to the cave ceiling where the live, black velvet stirred in places: bats always stilled him…He saw again the face of Nemesis’ high priest from his dream and then frowned seeing two tiny emeralds sparkling in the middle of the endless black velvet.

His hand brushed the blade of the sacred dagger he had placed in a case under the bench. Maybe the goddess felt ashamed of his last night’s attitude? Perhaps she was angry with him? He shook his head clearing his thoughts: he did what he considered best and nobody else was damaged except than him…but he was damaged already so no big deal there. At least, he learnt the truth and stopped fooling himself.

He set his jaw determined and focused on the computer screen that was divided in two frames: Breizic on the right and Zucco on the left. His gloved fingers flew over the keyboard and in the
second screen over the bench a stream of data about Breizic appeared. The man continued training athletes always in prominent places inside the federation; for the time being, he lived in Washington from where he made his expeditions through the States to scan for new talents which he later consulted and trained. He hadn’t said much about John’s death but his devastation was evident – so evident that the man never visited Gotham again.

Batman snorted: no surprise there. During Falcone’s reign which decent person would decide to stay in Gotham – if was able to live elsewhere? And once he lost his great athlete in such a tragic way, why lingering? Or maybe he was afraid…Because if he stayed the murderer with the suspicion that the trainer might have known something could kill him as well…

He had to bring Breizic to Gotham. Almost fourteen years had passed and Falcone’s decadence had ended so the man could trust that he’d be protected. Or if not staying permanently in Gotham, maybe Bruce could revive Breizic interest for the city. He arched an eyebrow under the cowl: if he was informed about a new great talent that was his greatest athlete’s son? And if the national team was invited in Gotham to do a demonstration for a charity event with local athletes participating? Then there would be no suspicion that someone digs that old case and needed Breizic for information.

He closed his eyes and controlled his breath: a sharp stab from his rectum filled his brain with white light…He just hoped that the stitches he had applied there still held and he didn’t bleed…At least, the armor wouldn’t let that be visible. The white light was filled with Clark’s face contorted in anger and wild, evil satisfaction, coming forth and backwards fast and strongly…and the pain intensified along with the sound of flesh slapping flesh…along with Superman’s grunts that sounded like roars of triumph…

“I told you that when he’d fuck you it’d be like a train crushing you…”

Ra’s’ smug, velvet voice echoed through the cave and Bruce didn’t look around because he knew that nobody was there.

“You thought that he loved you? That someone like him could love someone like you, my little whore?” the voice came closer and its malice brushed Bruce’s ear. “The substance I applied to your body made him fall in love with you and you were so stupid to believe that after the inoculation there wasn’t any remaining effect but only true love…” he sniggered. “Tell me, Bruce: you made your ass stop bleeding but what about your heart? Can you make her stop bleeding too?” his cackle erupted like thunder in the silence.

And Bruce focused on the place where his heart should have been…No…He shouldn’t be occupied with that: the dull, painful thud that pushed venom in his veins and sadness.

Suddenly, he heard the lift descending to the cave and he clenched his jaw which hurt.

In less than a minute the lift’s door opened and the light footsteps of Alfred crossed the steep corridor to the computer bench. Alfred regarded his young master as soon as he disembarked the lift: it was eleven o’clock in the morning and he still was in Batman’s armor and cowl: he had gone out last night. His guts clenched more but he didn’t sigh just placed the silver tray on the bench.

“I brought you breakfast, Master Bruce…and your medication.”

Batman kept his eyes on the screen.

“Thank you, Alfred” he tried to dismiss him as fast as possible.

And Alfred understood but he was determined to not make back.
“This armor isn’t a casual outfit, sir; so wearing it so many hours is not recommended; I suggest you make a nice, hot shower and wear something more casual and comfy? And maybe do your work upstairs, in your remarkable tablet? The moisture here…”

But Bruce interrupted him because he wanted Alfred to leave him alone.

“Some work has to be done here, Alfred” he said coldly without looking at him. “And I’m comfortable enough in the armor. Is everything alright with Dick?”

Alfred pressed his lips and swallowed a sigh; he knew that his young master wished to be alone; he didn’t want to share with anyone. He noticed that he sat on Master Anthony’s wheelchair; the other chair was barely visible behind a rock.

“Indeed, sir, I drove young Master Grayson to his school and I made sure that the security you ordered for the boy was in place.”

Batman nodded.

“Thank you, Alfred; I’m obliged.”

“You shouldn’t, sir, it is always my pleasure to grant your wishes.” There was an uncomfortable silence where Batman pressed buttons on the keyboard; but Alfred couldn’t bear it more: he knew that his young master was in a great suffering and after what the butler had seen… “Sir, pardon my indiscretion, but I took the liberty to enter your bedroom while you obviously didn’t want me to… But when the time passed I was worried.”

Bruce knew it; he stopped typing orders and nodded.

“This was expected” he said. “It doesn’t matter, Alfred.”

“Forget your insolent butler, sir, but maybe we should call Leslie to examine you?”

That fell like a thunder and Batman’s body stiffened; his hands staying above the keyboard and for the first time his eyes found Alfred’s face. The worry, the affection and even the pain in that wrinkled but proud face made the burning mass where his heart used to be charred his chest more punishing.

“There’s no need for that, Alfred” he answered nonchalant if not defensively. “I’m perfectly fine.”

Alfred’s eyes were shadowed and the faint frown made Bruce wary; Alfred could read him like an open book.

“Sir, would you be so kind to make me the great favor to remove the cowl?”

Batman shook his head in denial and returned his gaze to the screen wishing that Alfred would receive the message and leave.

Alfred’s agony all of a sudden broke the walls of his butler professionalism: this boy was more important than anything else. He pressed his lips turning the worry into strength.

“Because you don’t want me to see how bloodshot your eyes are or the black circles underneath; the exhaustion. Because you didn’t sleep at all last night, sir!”

Bruce continued typing pretending and trying to manage indifference to Alfred’s cracked voice.

“You wear makeup, Master Bruce, is that right?” he asked shaking his head. “Like the days you
were under Falcone’s brutality and Batman needed to conceal the marks that would connect him with Falcone’s slave” his clever eyes captured the change in his boy’s breathing and Alfred needed a big inhale to continue. “Because your face is battered, sir, and you want to hide it from the people who love you!” his voice rose slightly because he was unable to control his emotion.

Batman turned to him holding his breath.

“Alfred…” he mumbled. “I’m fine – there is no reason for you to worry.”

But Alfred stretched his posture.

“I beg your pardon, sir, but I must disagree. I couldn’t find the sheets of your bed anywhere, Master Bruce, neither the pajamas you wore last night” he hoped that these would be enough for Bruce to open his heart.

But Batman shrugged.

“I opened the window miscalculating the power of the wind and both sheets and pajamas were drenched from the rain so I took them off; you must have noticed that the carpet was wet too…”

Alfred pressed his lips.

“I didn’t find them anywhere to take them for laundry…”

“I never liked them so I dumped them” suddenly Bruce felt exhausted: the lack of sleep, last night’s confrontation with the petty thugs and Superman’s treatment finally showing their teeth – it was painful.

His butler yanked his head determined and proud; his eyes stern but with a heartbreaking glimmer on them that made Bruce’s head ache. Alfred’s heart broke witnessing his boy finding petty excuses to not admit the truth: to not hurt him and because his young master felt ashamed as every time Falcone and the other monsters abused him. But never this courageous human being asked anyone’s comfort; always smiled and pretended that he was alright. Alfred gulped and gathered his courage.

“What about the butterfly stitches, Master Bruce?” Batman gulped and Alfred continued. “Their case in the First Aid kit was almost empty and I had filled it a few days ago…”

Alfred saw his young master’s body hunching a bit and that made his heart squirm with sympathy: Bruce shouldn’t feel threatened by someone knowing what happened. It was unfair his boy suffering because a monster abused him…again.

“No, sir; I think that those sheets were stained with…” Bruce turned his eyes on him and those beloved eyes had taken the texture of a stone – probably, his boy now wished that the lenses were activated “blood, sir…and…” he licked his lips: he couldn’t utter the word ‘semen’ “other body liquids.”

Bruce closed his eyes and turned his head to the other side. He took some breaths calmly and finally took off his cowl, locking his bloodshot eyes with Alfred’s.

Alfred’s guts were sliced by an invisible, huge razor; the fatigue and the deep sadness that hid under the glimmering sapphire-emerald were talkative enough. Each time the British had been forced to watch his boy’s torture and suffering came back to intensify the current pain.

“Also, I gather that Superman did horrible things to you last night…and I’m sure that you told Mister Leench to not come for him to not see the marks. You didn’t want anyone to know; to protect that
bloody, horrible monster…” he panted from rage. “And you donned the cape and cowl, while in
great pain and distress, patrolling the city in order to find escape and oblivion…like you did when
Falcone tortured you. We must inform Master Anthony to hold Superman away from you.”

The youth shook his head in sharp refusal.

“There’s no need to bring Tony into this.”

“But, sir, if Superman used force against you last night…”

Bruce raised his palm to stop him; he looked Alfred straight in the eyes.

“Everything happened with my consent, Alfred” he said calm and steady.

Alfred squatted before him and took his gloved hand in his trembling one.

“Sometimes consent is worse than rape…” he said softly his other hand caressing his master’s
plastered locks. “And when a sensitive youth loves so deeply someone for the first time in his life…”

“I never said to him to stop” he retorted shaking his head in denial.

“Because you were afraid that he wouldn’t stop and then your beloved would be nothing more than a…”

Bruce’s gloved hand rose in a stop gesture; he couldn’t hear the word ‘rapist’ for Clark.

“It won’t happen again, Alfred” he cut him in conviction.

The Englishman shook his head and his hand that caressed Bruce’s locks lowered to touch the
youth’s cheek feeling with pain the swelling there: Superman had slapped Bruce.

“You can’t know that, sir: the person who raises once his hand to punch his loved one and acts so
carelessly in other fields will do it again.”

Bruce widened his eyes and pursed his lips.

“No, he won’t” he said with confidence and Alfred frowned. “He decided to end it.”

“He told you so?”

“No; but he has an affair…with the Princess.”

“You can’t be sure…”

Bruce stilled his eyes on him and a faint bitter grin brushed his face.

“I saw them having sex…last night, on a rooftop. It’s over.”

Alfred closed his eyes: not only that man abused sexually his young master but also the same night
cheated him. His boy’s heart must be shattered. He cupped his young master’s face with both hands.

“I’m so sorry, sir…” he shook his head “honestly…” especially since his young master’s stare was so
empty of life. “But…you know…” he tried to smile for Bruce’s sake “when something ends new
things start, better things” he pressed his lips “And you’re so young, Master Bruce” but the youth’s
stare was empty. “Please, do come upstairs, Master Bruce…Your wounds need tending…We must
call Leslie: there could be new damage done, a new injury…” Bruce was shaking his head resolute.
“I implore you, Master Bruce…”

“No, Alfred; nobody should learn about this” his eyes were flashing and Alfred nodded.

“At least let me take care of you, sir…You need rest and good food and…and some painkillers like when…”

A sharp intake of air from Bruce made Alfred stop abruptly.

“Please, Alfred” he smiled patting his butler’s wrinkled hand. “I’m fine; you just take care of Dick.”

Alfred stood and nodded though his heart had fallen.

“As you wish, Master Bruce.”

Suddenly, a black and white fur ball jumped out of the lift and hurried to Bruce who startled saw Hero halting abruptly some inches away, seeing his master dressed like this – and there was no smell. But after a second of thought the kitten surged to his human friend and climbed to his lap purring and rubbing his head to Bruce’s hand urging him to pet. He obliged and looked at Alfred who smiled despite being distraught.

“He followed me. I tried to stop him but…” he shook his head “he is a stubborn kitten – like his master – and slipped through my feet in the lift. But he stayed there till now” he snorted “I guess he is a very discreet animal. You have a very clever kitten there, sir!”

Bruce smiled scratching the back of Hero’s head making his purring louder.

“Superman found him…” he said thoughtful and Alfred realized that his young master worried that Superman might take the animal from him.

The Englishman shook his head pursing his lips.

“Indeed. But he gave the kitten to you and from that moment you’re the one who takes care of Hero and, if I’m permitted to say, it is obvious young master Hero that favors to you.”

Bruce chuckled and for the first time Alfred’s world became a little lighter that day.

“You think that we might end up in courts for Hero’s custody?”

“I think that Superman right now gives priority to the most meaningless things and neglects the really important.”

Bruce just pressed his lips which move was paid with a sharp pain and the wince wasn’t missed by Alfred who however didn’t comment.

“You talk about abducting and forcing him…I’d never take part in something like that – leave him out of this and we can have our sessions.”

“Nah…nah…nah…You see, Joker can’t be deciphered without Brucie – HE IS THE KEY. This man completes me – if he talks I’ll talk…”

“Weeeell? If I get Bruuuuucie’s participation you’ll be our doctor? I’m sure he is as fascinating as me…Hehe…”
“Mr. J, I’d ask you not to attempt anything against Mr. Wayne…They’ll catch you – they expect you to do something like this.”

“Doooooon’t worry about this, sugar. Now to the Buuuuuut part?”

“I’ll be your therapist…”

Bruce tapped his fingers on the bench as the record from Harleen Quinzel’s phone calls ended. So that was Joker’s plan? To get him and with Quinzel’s help – and Crane’s – put him through a ‘therapy’? That way Joker hoped to make Bruce admit that he was Batman and trap his psychotherapist driving her to his world.

From the first time he met Dr. Quinzel Bruce sensed that her relationship with Joker wasn’t plain and when he watched the video of his escape this feeling galvanized – it was the reason he had put a bug to her phone line. Bruce was sure that Joker would want to exploit his victim to the end.

He turned his head to the Tumbler from where a pissed meow echoed; a smile cracked his tired face. Hero had climbed on the car’s roof and made several jumps trying to catch the bats that hanged upside down from the ceiling. Of course despite sleepy the birds managed to twitch and avoid the aggressive feline.

“Hero, let the bats sleep! They are friends!” he told him but he was sure that his four-leg friend wouldn’t listen so he returned to his console.

Another thought sprang: Arrow. What was he doing in Gotham? Last time he saw him was in New York and though Bruce had searched every local news outlet there was no mention of this Robin Hood fan; so he wasn’t a local vigilante. Bruce frowned. What was his role? He definitely saw a great interest for Bruce Wayne. Perhaps he came here to see him again. Why?

“I disagree: we have our bomb…”

Arrow had remarked slyly in Batman’s ear when they saw... Bruce sighed. When they saw Superman and Diana having sex on the City Hall’s rooftop. And it was Arrow that told Batman about the supposed clowns entering the building though Batman didn’t find anyone. Maybe this guy wanted to lure him there to see them...But why? Maybe to brag and mock the two superheroes... Or...Well, that was farfetched but still...Maybe Arrow knew the importance of what was happening for Batman – but if that was true then Arrow knew Batman’s true identity. Bruce frowned. He absolutely had to investigate that man and find out if he knew and what he wanted.

He looked at the time in the right, down corner of his screen.

It was almost one in the noon and Bruce dreaded the moment Alfred would come again to bring him some brunch because now that a pupil lived in the Manor they had to eat later, after his return from school. He had reluctantly eaten some of the breakfast his butler brought, only to offer some console to the kind man who found out the truth and was devastated: Alfred was a helluva detective. And of course he took his medicines: Alfred was reluctantly persuaded to not call Leslie after figuring out about last night; if Bruce hadn’t taken his pills, surely he’d have called her.

Clark hadn’t shown up…His heartbeat became slower. Bruce was sure that he’d come back but today was Monday so he had to be at work. He clenched his fists – since he couldn’t do the same with his jaw; the pain became worse as the hours passed. He’d end it as soon as Clark came. Bruce had promised to stand by him through this…but Clark decided that didn’t want to. And maybe – Bruce at last could admit it – it was better to handle this case without keeping Superman close to him; Bruce would respect Clark’s decision...
He saw again Superman and Vivian naked on the rooftop, Clark’s inside hers, his passion for her unmatched; his satisfaction evident. And her triumph flashing in her eyes that despite the fact that behaved normally weren’t real.

“I don’t like competition, boy; especially, from a filthy maggot like you!

The burning iron in his chest pierced deeper and sent the pain to punish his mind.

Bruce jerked his head; he knew that whoosh and that presence that came to stand right before his computer bench the furniture between them. Hero hissed and arched his back in aggressive stance, his hair on edge; and then the kitten jumped from the Tumbler and rushed to Bruce standing between him and Superman who had marched around the bench to stand closer smiling benevolently.

Bruce stood using the utilities of his new armor and Superman’s eyebrows arched impressed. Clark made to move to him but Bruce raised abruptly his palm and stopped him several feet from him – Hero’s growl intensifying the meaning.

The Man of Steel could easily discern the wounds and bruises he had done to Bruce’s face and neck but the new armor – although it was exactly the same externally with the previous, Superman knew it wasn’t the same - like the former was lined with lead and thwarted him from seeing; however he was sure that the human’s body was in worse condition – especially his ass…his groin twitched remembering last night’s exertion and Bruce’s naked, writhing body shining with hot sweat.

“Wow! Now that’s a cold welcome! So you can stand, Bruce” he tilted his head “Lucius finally gave you the new armor.”

Bruce kept his arms loose at his sides.

“I thought to tell you but you had more important things in your mind.”

Superman nodded and his eyes took a sad hue that made Bruce’s heart squirm urging the youth to hug him but he knew better.

“Yeah…” Superman inhaled deeply “these last days I was in a daze.”

Bruce’s eyes remained impassive, still and cold: of course, he didn’t expect to hear an apology and Clark wouldn’t offer any. He hadn’t realized what he did.

“I thought you’d be at work” Bruce remarked indifferently.

“I took a leave” he smiled “I thought to spend the day with you.”

Bruce frowned internally and snorted but didn’t answer.

“I first went to your bedroom but the window was locked with something I couldn’t pass” Superman continued frowning.

Bruce nodded.

“Indeed” he wasn’t going to explain to him the shield he used to keep the Man of Steel out of his house.

Clark licked his lips uncomfortable and Bruce felt nausea feeling again that cruel tongue torturing his throat and his nipples aggravating even the current pain.

“Anyway, the cave is always open for Superman, huh?” the Man of Steel shrugged chuckling.
Bruce shook his head keeping his cold stare.

“Not always…”

“Listen, Bruce…I understand your feelings…”

Bruce tilted his head smirking.

“Really now…”

Superman cleared his throat: the human’s attitude annoyed him yet if he wanted to achieve his goal he had to stay poised.

“Yes…And about that. You were right for the tests I didn’t do in the Fortress” Bruce raised his head pursing his lips. “I should have done them – I was stupid. But it’s not too late. We can do them now.”

Bruce’s eyebrows arched.

“We?”

Superman nodded smiling and his eyes sparkled with the innocent, clear shade of blue that made Bruce’s heart melt.

“Yes…that’s the reason I took a leave. We’ll go together to the Fortress to have my tests done”

Now Bruce frowned.

“Why am I needed for that? You’re a big man” he asked coldly.

“I want you to see with your own eyes that I’m not fooling you again.”

Bruce twisted his eyebrows and shook his head.

“If you say that you’ll do it I don’t need to come and see.”

“I also hoped to have some days just for the two of us” Bruce opened his mouth in realization and nodded “Like the good old days…to escape from all these. Your bedroom there waits you… Remember?” his voice became touched and sensual.

Bruce remembered and these memories were salt in his aching heart yet he isolated this weak member of his body. A smirk carved half of Bruce’s face.

“And” he pierced Superman with his eyes “you’ll lock me there and threw the key, right?”

Superman pressed his lips and his eyebrows formed an ugly frown: Bruce was so clever. Damn!

Bruce nodded.

“So that’s the plan, Kal El? Imprison your human slave not allowing him to pester you constantly about the supposed Diana?”

Superman regained his calm expression and stared at Bruce innocently but Hero’s constant growling was very talkative.

“You’re not my slave, Bruce; you’re my lover” he said sensually and made to fly to him but Bruce’s
cold glare stopped him.

“Not anymore, Superman” his voice was icy and fierce.

Superman narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

“It is about last night? I know I was a bit harsh but admit it, Bruce: you do like it this way – you never asked me to stop; you didn’t say anything” he said accusingly and Bruce shook his head with cocked eyebrows affirming in a sarcastic way. “And you promised that you’ll stay with me…” he continued aggressively.

But Bruce didn’t let him finish.

“Until you’d decide otherwise.”

Superman nodded with conviction.

“Exactly. I didn’t decide otherwise; I want you with me.”

Bruce grinned though his heart ached and his guts twitched but he ignored them.

“You decided, Superman, to shove me away.”

“I never said…”

“You decided with your acts!” he cut him abruptly with a voice sharp as razor and Superman’s eyes bulged. “I saw you having sex with her on the City Hall’s rooftop” his emotionless eyes flashed like lightning.

That was a great surprise for Superman who crossed his arms lowering his lead and licked his lips; after some seconds, he lifted his eyes to Bruce and there were animosity and jeering.

“So you stalked me! As if snitch me to Jor El wasn’t enough!”

“I didn’t say anything to Jor El: I didn’t contact him” Bruce snorted “you see I trusted you and I didn’t imagine that you’d lie tome for something so important. He was worried because you never went back for your tests and he contacted me through the wheelchair’s communication system.”

However this didn’t appease Superman.

“That doesn’t change the fact you stalked me last night! You should have stayed laid on your bed since” he cocked his eyebrows “I supposedly hurt you but you wore that suit and followed me to watch my every move!”

Bruce grinned and shook his head.

“Don’t be more ridiculous that you already are!” Superman clenched his fists ready to attack but he restrained himself gritting his teeth. “But when you choose the City Hall’s rooftop to get laid then it is as you beg for Batman to see you.”

Damn! How could he imagine that Bruce had a new armor that enabled him to stand and walk and that he would leave the Manor to patrol the city? Especially, after what happened; he had seemed completely defeated when Superman quenched his desire and let him collapse on the mattress.

Bruce continued.
“After that you realize that you have no place in the Manor or the cave again: as a matter of fact, after you leave, you’d find that both places are from now on inaccessible for you. You made your choice and I respect that, Clark; now it’s my turn.”

He turned to the computer bench, his back a clear sign of dismissal. However, Superman was determined to not retreat so easily: he couldn’t stand the thought of Bruce being obtainable for all these men surrounding him. The images of Thor fucking him under the bridge, although he knew that weren’t true, haunted his mind.

“Don’t you dare blame this to me!” Superman roared and several bats startled flew from their positions yet Hero didn’t even glance at them gritting his teeth and growling at the alien, his eyes sending daggers. “You never believed in this relationship! Though you knew that the devious plan of Al Ghul threw me to your feet, not only you didn’t thwart me from slipping in a relationship with you, but also enjoyed having me burning from desire and not satisfying me!”

Bruce’s eyes were wide, emotionless, still, looking at the days of the past…at the Fortress, at the island…

“You never invested in this! You always expected me to do everything – to offer you my love. And now with the first difficulty you put an end to what we have! You wear this armor to confront me because you’re afraid to do it as Bruce Wayne because Bruce Wayne is a scared brat who in the first ordeal whines and sniffs and runs away!”

Bruce’s heart was already stabbed so many times the last hours that these new stabs felt like scratches. His eyes remained steady as his breath.

“You put that end, Kal El; you were the one who acted like a brat – you promised to fight this, you promised to do the tests and stop seeing that woman but not only you didn’t do anything of these but also you accused me of infidelity, you punished me for this and the next moment you did the exact thing for which you accused me. You came here with no intention to tell the truth but to fool me into going to the Fortress so to imprison me to keep me along with that woman. And when I saw through you, you blame me for everything” he snorted. “Very brave, Superman…Very mature, indeed.”

This was an insult for Superman; he clenched his fists and his teeth rattled.

“I saved your life, you ungrateful bastard!”

Bruce didn’t turn to see him just yanked his head.

“I know and I’ll be always grateful to you, Superman. But that doesn’t mean that I have to tolerate you telling me lies, accusing me for being so filthy to cheat my loved one and fucking me worse than you’d do with a plastic doll” he finally turned to look him in the face calmly but resolute as granite.

Superman was shocked at how stony that face was; how determined those eyes were and at the same time bereft of any emotion.

“Stay away from me and Gotham” Batman growled in his raspy, cold voice.

Superman shook his head and smirked.

“You can’t keep me away from Gotham” he chuckled. “I know the true condition of Batman and he isn’t as formidable as he was” he licked his lips. “You think that you can intimidate Superman?” he cackled. “Please, Bruce: your armor might be able to make you stand and walk but your legs are useless! You’re a cripple!”
Bruce’s hand like a flash took the Knife of Justice that was stashed in the case under the bench and threw it so fast that Superman saw just a blur and realized that it was a knife only when the blade cut his upper arm ripping his suit, grazing his skin and spurting blood drops. It hurt like Hell.

In the same blur, the knife hit on the rock wall behind Superman and scratched again Superman’s upper arm before ending up to its master’s hand. Bruce caressed the blade and placed it in his belt. He stabbed with his eyes Superman who was squeezing the wound to stop the blood: It was so obvious that the Man of Steel was completely unused to these things. And the skin wasn’t healing itself like it should because this wasn’t a usual blade.

“I warned you about the Knife…And you’re right: my legs are useless but my hands are still quite skilled with knives.”

Superman pressed his lips and looked infuriated at him, red waves in his irises and sweat drops on his eyebrows.

“I’d suggest you don’t use your heat or laser vision on me…you remember how effectively Ra’s Al Ghul used the blade to deflect it” he said indifferently.

“You’re willing to kill me?”

Bruce grinned.

“I don’t kill. But I know how to protect myself and my city.”

“What has Gotham to be afraid of? I’m Superman, damn it!”

Bruce nodded.

“Exactly…You have an entire planet to protect…”

Superman fumed but didn’t retort; he just turned and took off through the waterfall.

Bruce pressed a button on the keyboard activating the shield that would stop Superman from returning and collapsed in Tony’s wheelchair. The migraine he had managed to imprison in the depths of his head now attacked with full force. Exhaustion and pain allied with it. And mostly, Bruce didn’t want to stay erect anymore even if the armor permitted him to… He was drained from energy or will and suddenly his world had lost its sun, drenching him in icy darkness…

Hero meowed reluctantly but sweetly and climbed on his lap, licking his jaw and staring at him with big, shinning, sad eyes. Bruce caressed the animal’s head.

“I know, buddy…I miss him already…”

Bruce’s eyes watered and the cave became distorted behind a liquid veil.
“Kate, unfortunately the situation is getting completely out of control as the fire has spread to the entire floor” the reporter’s face was contorted in agony as he spoke to the small TV’s screen; behind him the top floor of an apartment building was on fire, thick black smoke clouded the clear blue sky and red flames licked the building’s walls.

He was mopping the greasy floor of Dolcetto’s kitchen and his mind was numb, filled with the pangs of his crippled arm and his clenched hungry stomach. Signora Bruna stood above a pot that emanated mouth watering smells.

“Firefighters and helicopters can’t approach due to the black smoke and the debris that sprang everywhere...oh!” his eyes turned to the direction of the assembled officers. “Kate, news getting worse...people that got rescued from the burning site say that a woman is still inside…”

A nightmarish collapsing sound made everyone duck.

“Tom?” the female newscaster asked her colleague.

“Kate, it seems that there’s no hope for the trapped woman…”

Bruce raised his bruised, bloodshot eyes and looked at the screen: perhaps, he shouldn’t but still he was devastated when a person died; his eyes watered.

“What’s this?! Tom, the reporter, exclaimed as thrilled and happy as the crowd that was looking anxious to the sky.

The camera turned rapidly at the sky, at the spot where several fingers pointed and Bruce gaped: it was something in the sky, an angel with red wings, who emerged from the burning building, unscathed; in his arms, he held bridal style a battered woman. As the angel descended to the paramedics who ran to him to take the injured woman the top roof of the building collapsed.

The crowd cheered as the man – it was a young man not an angel - landed and Bruce saw the poor woman nestled in his chest crying loudly; her clothes were churned as her hair but she seemed alright.

The man gave her softly to the paramedics and took off swiftly smiling to the people that were clapping and whistling to him.

The camera followed zooming at him unable however to catch up with him for long yet Bruce was watching goggling the rapidly vanishing man. He was young, around 20 years, with raven, silk hair that formed a cute curl on his broad forehead; his eyes that Bruce managed to see when he turned to the crowd for just a second were the most beautiful eyes in the world: their color was the same with the blue topaz in his mom’s ring and shone as much. And his smile as he gave the woman to the paramedics…was sweet as the most delicious dessert.

Bruce’s heart missed several beats and he stopped breathing: his widened eyes were fixed on the screen where they played and replayed the footage from the flying man. That young man was so beautiful, so bright, like the sun and Bruce’s eyes filled with tears. He forgot his hunger and the pain; he was filled with that beauty and that kindness: the flying man’s face was full of love as he saved the woman...he was goodness and grace incarnated and Bruce wished he was the one in his arms and the burning building was Dolcetto…He closed his eyes feeling the bliss...imagining himself saved under the angel’s affectionate eyes…
But then a new crushing pain at his abused buttocks…and a cruel laugh. Signora Bruna had kicked him and now fisted his hair.

“Stop dickin’ around, ya shit! Ya’r not here to watch TV!” her gleeful eyes looked at the screen and Bruce felt that she defiled the flying man; Bruna smirked. “Ooooh! Ya like his bulging prick, huh? That suit definitely shows off his rich…credentials…” she croaked and Bruce blushed.

She pushed him to the floor and his face fell on the rag he was mopping with but he didn’t care because he still had before his eyes the flying man: an angel in blue and red, with his waving red cape and the yellow diamond in his broad chest.

“Yes, Kate” the reporter’s elated voice said “once again the day was saved by…”

Bruce was scrubbing the floor but his ears were focused there to hear the angel’s name but then a loud click stopped everything and he knew that Signora Bruna had turned off the TV.

“Ya’r enough horny, already, littl’ slut! Do yar job an’ forget foreign pricks! Yar asshole is only for Mistah Falcone!”

Her foot pressed Bruce’s back to the floor and he gasped from the pain. His eyes filled with tears and his throat burned: beautiful angels weren’t for him…he deserved only demons… He wasn’t worth to be saved by such a beautiful angel…by anyone…

Bruce felt a compassionate hand touching softly his shoulder and he raised his eyes to see Alfred’s serious face over him, his blue eyes filled with understanding and silent commiseration.

“Master Bruce, I think it is time you took off that armor and got your much needed rest” the older man’s voice was tender as if speaking to a wounded person but also determined.

Bruce pressed his lips in a tight line: the sadness Alfred so masterfully hid was so clear for him that became the latest rod to pierce his screaming guts. He didn’t want the kind man suffering because of him: if only Alfred loved him less…Sometimes Bruce wished that to spare the loyal Englishman from baring with him the constant blows.

He smiled to Alfred and Bruce knew that it was a pathetic attempt of a smile but for his butler was a ray of hope and Alfred reflected that smile, trying to encourage the youth. Bruce nodded because he was afraid that if attempted to utter anything, Alfred’s loving eyes would make his voice choke.

Alfred took the chair’s handles and stretched his body: he understood that his young master had spent tons of physical and emotional strength and stamina and he didn’t want the youth to exhaust himself more.

Bruce didn’t protest; he felt exhausted, on the verge of collapsing, but more he didn’t have the mood to continue…Also, he knew that for Alfred pushing his chair would be a great comfort; being allowed to offer his services. So he rest his hands softly on Hero and let Alfred steer the wheelchair to the lift and then to the master’s bedroom.

“I would suggest a nice, hot shower, sir” Alfred chirped as they entered the bedroom.

The room was tidied up – Alfred’s work. New, clean maroon beddings, open curtains permitting a mesmerizing view of the grounds and the Palisades. The blue sky caught Bruce’s stare: there were some fluffy, cute clouds hovering around but the sun was bright. Nothing short of last night’s infuriated sky.

Alfred followed his young master’s gaze and pressed his lips.
“The sun always rises again, Master Bruce…” he said hiding his emotions. “Even after a great storm.”

Bruce didn’t reply because he didn’t want to sadden Alfred; he just nodded and petted Hero’s soft back. Yes, the sun does rise every day but some storms leave grave disasters back: especially, to some trees that have already seen and been hit by many storms…They remain standing after each gale but bare the marks till a new mark brands the deepest and leaves a huge wound gaping…

Alfred pushed gently the chair to the bathroom and Bruce downed Hero on the floor; he smiled to his butler.

“I can shower, Alfred; I assure you, I won’t collapse.”

“If you say so, sir… I’ll place a set of pajamas on the bed and I’ll prepare something light for you to eat…”

But Bruce shook his head.

“I’m not hungry, Alfred.”

“Very well, sir” he reluctantly let go of the wheelchair and Bruce still wearing Batman’s armor opened the door ready to slither inside. “MasterBruce” the youth looked at him “I have refilled the case with the butterfly stitches in case you need some; you know I’m here for everything you wish” he widened his eyes for emphasis “for whichever aid you’d like.”

Bruce’s smile was faint; a shadow of the previous months’ smiles and Alfred’s insides formed a tight knot.

“I know, Alfred, thank you but I can manage” he lowered his eyes to Hero who was staring at him almost with agony. “Hero must be hungry” he muttered and locked his eyes with Alfred’s “can you…?”

Alfred nodded.

“Of course, sir! I’ll prepare your pajamas and I’ll feed him right away.”

“Thank you” his laborious smile dissolved and Bruce gulped “I don’t know what I would have done without you…” his voice became raspy and hurried to enter the bathroom.

The Englishman sighed but only after the water started running. He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“I wish I was truly so capable to make your life a little better, Master Bruce…” he looked at the kitten who was staring at the closed bathroom door. “He’ll be alright in there, Master Hero, but after we must take care of him.”

When Bruce came out of the bathroom with the bathrobe tightly wrapped around his body, the exhaustion was overwhelming and his eyes hardly stayed open. Truth be told, he had kept his mind stubbornly blank letting the water’s sound echo in his skull’s cavities; he didn’t want to think anything because everything will lead to the same…

And his insides were already clenched painfully pressing the air in his lungs. In the bathroom, he realized that some stitches had ripped and he was losing some blood so he replaced them; as well as the makeup in the visible bruises: Alfred had understood yet he didn’t have to see them with his own eyes.
“I’ll tidy up the bathroom, sir” Alfred said taking in his master uneasiness at seeing his butler in the bedroom because Bruce didn’t want him to see the marks on his body while dressing. “Please, do call me after you finished.”

Bruce nodded and Alfred moved to the bathroom granting him some privacy; only Hero stayed in the bedroom interrupting his food at times to stare at his friend who placed in the headboard’s secret case the Knife of Justice that had stashed inside his bathrobe and dressed as fast as he could.

The need to close his eyes and mind to be hugged by the sleep’s oblivion was dominating and Alfred had prepared the bed with the fluffiest, warmest blankets but Bruce hesitated to lie there…He averted his gaze and looked at the sweet, mesmerizing flames in the fireplace: the warmth emanated from there melted his tormented body.

“Alfred, you can come” he said.

“Is the room’s temperature comfortable enough, sir?” Alfred inquired catching the youth’s stare on the fireplace. He was carrying the laundry basket filled with the parts of Batman’s armor.

Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“Perfect.”

Alfred covered the distance between them.

“Then you can sleep now.”

Bruce stared at his eyes reluctant to be at this bed again and Alfred bit his mouth’s inside guessing what might have happened there last night and how difficult would be for the youth to remember the good moments in contrast with his last night with Superman. However, Bruce grabbed his wheelchair’s armrests, lifted his body and brought it on the mattress, Alfred hurrying to help him lie down.

His body screamed desperately upon touching the softness of the mattress, the toll of last night’s violence and the overall exhaustion punishing as his healthy muscles relaxed. Bruce had to clench his throbbing jaw to not moan but Alfred took in the wince and the sharp intake of air. He touched Bruce’s cheek and the youth made a valiant effort to smile.

“I beg you, sir, do not spend your strength trying to hide your pain from me: I’m here to assist you fight the pain…” he remembered Ms. Wayne’s beautiful eyes that night she left the Manor to go at the alley to get back Master Bruce from Falcone; the trust in those eyes was paralyzing – the trust that the little boy would be safe with the butler. Alfred lowered his eyes because he never managed to save the boy …The boy saved him.

Bruce’s eyes were fixed on him, reading his sadness.

“It doesn’t hurt much, Alfred” lying to him was futile and disrespectful for the man and Bruce felt ashamed every time he was forced to hide the truth from Alfred; minimizing the facts was more acceptable. “I’m just tired. And it’s not important – I mean what happened…World has much more important and serious things than my love life…And actually now I’ll be able to focus on my work: there are so many things I need to do.”

Alfred nodded touched by his boy’s effort to not lie to him…entirely. However he knew that it really hurt.

“Then a little massage, sir, might help ease the tension and since Master Leench isn’t here I can offer
my most amateurish efforts” he smiled and Bruce reflected that smile and rolled his body on his stomach.

Alfred massaged carefully his young master’s back, angry at how stiff those muscles were. What that bloody alien was thinking?! Bruce’s body needed extra caution and care not be handled with such harshness. He could imagine what Superman did to his master and Alfred dreaded to think what could have happened if there weren’t those energy casts to hold Bruce’s body…

Suddenly, Bruce tensed.

“We must pick Richard from school” he uttered. “What time is it?”

He rose a bit to look at the nightstand’s clock but his butler pressed him softly back on the mattress.

“We’ve got time, Master Bruce. And I was thinking of sending someone from Wayne Enterprises to bring home young Master Grayson.”

Bruce’s eyes widened and become frozen. He saw again Chill’s enormous silhouette in front of the Wayne Enterprises’ car waiting him outside the school yard.

“No! I don’t want anyone else picking up the boy!”

Alfred understood what connection was done in his young master’s brain.

“I understand, sir; I’ll be the one who brings Master Grayson back home but I’d certainly prefer to not leave you alone.”

Bruce looked up at him and gave a grin.

“He isn’t coming back, Alfred” and seeing his butler’s disbelief, Bruce nodded and shook his head. “You’re right: I made some bad judgment on him lately…but the Manor and the cave are perfectly shielded: he won’t be able to come in unless someone lets him – not that I believe he’ll try to…” he inhaled “attack me.”

He remembered Superman’s shocked expression when the Knife grazed him; Bruce could say that there was a flicker of fear at realizing that he was vulnerable. So he doubted that Superman would dare another encounter with the same blade.

Alfred stopped his massaging movements.

“You won’t let him in, sir…” his voice though stern hid pleading and Bruce pressed his lips.

“You can rest assured, Alfred: I won’t.”

Alfred resumed his gentle movements that slowly had managed to ease somewhat the tense from Bruce’s muscles.

“Pardon me, sir, for my insistence but you had said that you’d stay with him…and that worries me that you will accept him back.”

Bruce stilled his eyes on the chocolate thick wood of the headboard.

“I was willing to stay and support him yet I realized that I don’t have any influence on him anymore so I couldn’t offer him anything. I sent him away because if I continued being with him, as he wanted, then I’d give him the chance to do worse things than he did” he lowered his voice. “And Clark doesn’t deserve to stoop so low…”
“To you…To do worse things to you…”

Bruce bit his swollen lip and closed his eyes to fight the pain.

“Not only. Superman’s contact with me would constantly increase the emotional battle inside him that led to so much aggressiveness lately and I’m afraid that he could burst out at random occasions. Clark had sex with her so there’s no reason to continue this sick situation; now I’d be able to investigate things more objectively.”

Alfred didn’t like his young master continuing being occupied with Superman: he believed that it would open the wounds every time yet he couldn’t object. He closed his eyes and resumed his gentle up-down movements with the tips of his fingers until he saw his young master’s eyelids trembling, ready to cover his eyelids. He went to the window and lowered the heavy curtains so that nothing could disturb Bruce’s sleep.

When he returned to the bed Bruce had rolled his body on his back and Alfred muffled him meticulously with the blankets noticing a faint crooked smile on the youth’s sleepy face.

“Alfred, I’m not a child to tuck me in bed…” a half asleep voice told him.

But then Bruce felt a slight disturbance on the blankets and saw Hero climbing swiftly to curl beside his master.

“I won’t be alone” Bruce yawned “Hero will look after me: he is a formidable opponent” he chuckled and relished Alfred’s grin “you can ask the bats in the cave…or Superman.”

His face became serious.

“Do not worry about me, Alfred: I’m alright. I…I survived from worse…And” he tilted his head on the pillow, his eyes becoming blank “we all knew that this was a dream from which I would have to wake up some day…” his eyes returned to the present and looked at Alfred’s tense face; he pressed his lips and raised his eyebrows. “The sooner the better, right?”

Alfred nodded and caressed Bruce’s hair.

“I know you’re the bravest and the strongest man there is however…” he inhaled deeply. “There are people around you to listen to you whenever you want to speak – and I’ll be honored if you consider my humble self one of them.”

Bruce looked him in the eyes.

“Always, Alfred…” but his eyelids were already too heavy and Alfred’s caress was so relaxing that he let them cover his eyes.

The British watched carefully Bruce’s breath till he was sure that the youth was sound asleep and petted Hero that was licking his paw and rubbed it to his nuzzle.

“Stay with him, Master Hero; I trust you that if you see something worrisome you’ll come and alert me, right?” he winked and the kitten did the same causing Alfred’s smile.

Superman stood on the rooftop of the Daily Planet building; he was gazing at Metropolis which was washed by a bright sun that made its imposing, glimmering buildings blinding. People were marching the pavements and cars sped: it was noon and everyone was either returning home or
taking a lunch break.

He heard Diana’s landing and her strong feet approaching him but he didn’t turn; he was deep in his thoughts and his feelings. The wound from the Blade hurt: it began healing but too slowly – he was sure that it’d take days and that was unbelievable. That damn knife! He couldn’t believe that Bruce used that to wound him…and the fucking blade grazed him and the flesh was struggling to heal itself…it stung horribly.

He had changed his uniform because he didn’t want anyone to see Superman’s attire ripped or suspect that he could be hurt. More he didn’t want Diana to see him like this; to consider him weak. He could admit to himself that he had acted stupidly: Bruce was far too clever to fall for his trick. Superman had overestimated the human’s will to sustain their relationship; he had believed that Bruce would still want to persuade him for his loyalty and love and would accept to follow him at the Fortress muffling his paranoia and suspiciousness. Unfortunately, Bruce had seen him and Diana on the rooftop – damn! How could he imagine that the human would manage after that stormy sex to dress up and patrol Gotham? Damn you, Bruce!

He had tossed the dagger to hurt him; he saw the hatred in Bruce’s eyes. He would have killed him if he wasn’t so self righteous: it was Bruce’s moral code not his love that stopped him from stabbing his heart.

He felt Diana’s strong and simultaneously sensual hands touch his shoulders; she kissed the back of his neck sending goose bumps to every corner of his body. Her perfume made the sun shine more jubilant.

“You secured Wayne?” she whispered in his ear and Superman though at first felt that this sounded evil he immediately changed his mind.

“No” he sighed. “He didn’t agree to follow me.”

The warmth of Diana’s body distanced a bit from his and Superman turned to her seeing her narrowed eyes.

“Didn’t agree? You didn’t need his agreement” she said exasperated. “He is yours; he shouldn’t disagree with your will.”

Superman grinned.

“Bruce isn’t like that…”

She snorted and crossed her arms.

“I know! He is an arrogant, insolent brat who likes to pose as a proud human and insult better people than him. You could have made him follow you” she said arching her eyebrows with emphasis and determination.

Superman shook his head: right now that he was somewhat calmer he knew that he didn’t want to kidnap Bruce though he could admit to himself that he wouldn’t have managed even if he tried – that Knife was really dangerous in Bruce’s hands. But of course he couldn’t say it to Diana: he didn’t want to lose her admiration.

“No, I don’t want to be violent to him or become a common pervert by kidnapping him” he pursed his lips. “I don’t think that Bruce is worthy of it” he brushed Diana’s jaw and smiled. “So I ended what I had with him: once and for all. I realized what I really want” he cupped with both hands her
face and brought it near his. “You…”

He touched his lips to her rich, ruby lips and sucked closing his eyes in delight; however Diana had her eyes open and watched Superman’s every reaction following his rhythm at first and then immersed her fingers in his locks ruffling them violently as she deepened the kiss. It was time she celebrated her triumph.

Superman wrapped her back in his arms and shoved his tongue in her mouth to tangle with hers; his groin twitched madly sensing the vibrations of Diana’s hips. This pleasure was enough to forget the numb feeling and the void in his guts from the moment he ran from the cave…He was glad that Diana didn’t imagine that Bruce saw them together and he was the one that ditched Superman away.

“Then we don’t have to hide from anyone…” Diana murmured slyly stopping abruptly the kiss. “We can show that spoiled human the real happiness and love the Lord of Krypton deserves and now has” she smirked. “Make him understand how inadequate he is.”

Superman widened his eyes: Bruce already knew but still Superman didn’t feel ready to let the people around him know.

“You hesitate?” Diana asked frowning, her voice demanding.

“We don’t have to prove anything to anyone; everyone will know eventually.”

Diana lolled her head to the side cocking an eyebrow.

“Certainly…” she crooked her lips and captured again Superman’s mouth, who didn’t resist the chance. “Besides who cares if anybody knows: it’s enough that we’re finally together…” she wrapped her arms around Superman’s back and rubbed her strongly built body to his. “My apartment is at the suburbs…” she bit softly Superman’s bottom lip and the intoxicating air from her lungs caressed his hot flesh.

Her eyes filled his entire world as his body began burning in desire to get inside her so he wrapped her waist and took off to the suburbs.

Tony was sprawled over his ergonomic desk chair inside his office at the Avengers’ Tower. Feet crossed at the ankles on the table he was tolerating his employees’ reports about the coming StarkExpo. The happy sun that invaded the room from the three whole wall windows was a big consolation but also a big temptation to brush the teleconference option at his phone’s screen: Screw the businessmen – fly to Malibu – enjoy the sea and the sun. Big sigh…When he decided to become an adult? Stupid, Tony…

“I want the central exhibition stand for Wayne Enterprises” he interrupted with his almost rude way one of his suit-dressed, serious employees.

The man in the one of the five holograms in front of Tony’s desk frowned and his face filled with mockery.

“Mr. Stark, I know how fond you are of these Enterprises but I’m not sure that anything they can produce is worthy of the central stand in the StarExpo. This stand is throughout the years devoted to Stark Industries” he nodded. “And rightfully.”

Tony chewed the end of his pencil and stared at the man – a yuppie at his 35.
“Mmm…” he pouted “Brenda, right?” the man rolled his eyes exasperated.

“No, Mr. Stark” a blond hot stuff that happened to be his best engineer corrected him from the hologram on the right. “I’m Brenda, he is Brandon.”

Tony smirked.

“Call me Tony, hon…” he winked and the girl – hardly 23 – smiled. “Sorry for that but Brandon – Brenda, who cares?” he said to the man shaking his hand dismissingly. “Well, Brandon, I appreciate your loyalty to my company but I happen to know the best for MY company. And Wayne Enterprises had already manifested their pioneering creativity” Brandon was ready to interrupt him but Tony fixed him a sharp glance and stopped him. “And what we’re going to exhibit in StarkExpo is gonna make a great impression.”

Brandon shrugged.

“As you wish, Mr. Stark.”

Tony stretched his body almost lying on his chair’s back and brought his hands in the back of his neck.

“It goes without saying, my friend…” he uttered self-satisfied.

But his loose posture stiffened when the door opened almost silently to reveal Pepper – of course, Tony knew already who was because the door opened automatically only for her, him and Bruce. Well, Bruce was in Gotham, so…

Pepper was collected as ever but with an angry frown that Tony didn’t like.

“Thank you, boys and girls” he dismissed them with a snap of his fingers and brushed the option on his desk phone dissolving the holograms; he took his legs off the table to lean towards Pepper.

“He was a doppelganger of mine” he hurried to say cocking his eyebrows innocently “a bad replica” he saw Pepper rolling her eyes. “The one in the strip club last night – I was here with Fury…You can ask him” he arched his eyebrows “not that he is my employee but he is veracious…” he almost choked in that.

Pepper marched to his office holding her tablet and Tony scratched his hair.

“Luthor is released” she said without further delay. “Gotham’s DA office made a short announcement.”

She sat at the small, round armchair opposite his desk and Tony fisted his hands, pressing his lips.

“The bastard!” he huffed but then lolled his head. “However we knew that they couldn’t hold him much more in jail” he snorted and slapped the desk. “Fuck! Thinking his smug, stupid face makes me want to smash his bold head…” he noticed that Pepper was upset and it was obvious that the reason was something else.

His eyes stabbed hers.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Pepper gritted her teeth, her eyes sparkling touched and infuriated at the same time.

“Local and national media rave about something else” her voice was distorted with seriousness.
“It’s Bruce, right?” he felt his blood freezing in his veins and a shadow was cast over his features.

She stood determined, made the circle and placed her tablet on the desk in front of him; Tony frowned, bad assumptions filling rapidly his brain. Pepper leaned and brushed the screen starting the video she had on full screen.

The video began with the image filled with the bottom parts of two intertwined naked bodies: it was pixelated yet it was easy to figure that it was a perfect male ass in front of a female vagina; the ass moved back and forth with such strength and speed that Tony cocked an eyebrow in admiration, with his eyes widened. The woman’s legs were wrapped around the man’s hips and clenched him pushing her blurred groin to his.

“It would be a better porn clip if they hadn’t covered the essential parts…and under heavy rain in a rooftop…nice idea” he pouted and lolled his head to the side to get a better view.

However Pepper remained stern and stiff which caused Tony’s suspicion. He looked at her but she gestured to the screen.

The focus left from the couple’s joint genitals and got distance to contain slowly their entire bodies. The sound of flesh rubbing and slapping flesh towered the roar of the heavy rain that washed their perfect bodies.

“Great boobs!” Tony exclaimed and then narrowed his eyes. “I have seen these boobs before…” he looked immediately at Pepper appeasingly “professionally…”

Pepper didn’t have the mood even to glare at him and Tony knew that this was a bad omen. And finally figured the reason: the camera zoomed to the faces that were united as their mouths danced together; the image was completely clear; two flashed faces, sweaty with plastered locks framing their sparkling eyes that were almost black from their dilated pupils.

Tony gaped; his eyes two blazing stones. And then his face became distorted with rage. He punched the desk and Pepper wondered how the wood didn’t crack.

“The motherfucker!” he shouted and his breaths were rasps and roars.

Pepper pressed her lips.

“The video was broadcast by GCN and rapidly was taken by every news outlet in the states and worldwide: the date is of yesterday.”

Tony yanked his head backwards.

“The bastard! I warned him, damn it!”

Pepper bit her lip; she wasn’t sure if he was referring to Bruce or Superman. She touched his shoulder.

“Tony…”

He shook his head gritting his teeth.

“I told that fucking alien that Bruce is sensitive; I told him to not engage him if he wasn’t sure; I warned him that he would break Bruce’s heart…but he didn’t care! He thought only his dick”

He pressed his hair to his head and instantly Ironman’s armor engulfed his body while the whole
wall window opened.

“Where are you going?”

He looked at her, his face still uncovered.

“To Bruce” he shook his head and huffed. “Bruce…” he lowered his voice “you believed so much in this scum…Aaaah! Little guy…”

Pepper held his upper arm and her eyes became stern.

“You need to be careful and not your usual impetuous self” she blinked. “Bruce may have not learnt anything yet.”

Tony licked his lips.

“I doubt it: Bruce is constantly updated about his city’s news” he inhaled. “However, I’ll be discreet” the face plate took its place and Pepper shook her head sighing because Tony Stark and discreet were two contrasting concepts.

He rushed out of the window that closed after his departure; Pepper watched his figure in the sky getting smaller and shook her head. She was sure that Tony although he always liked to be right this time he wished to had been wrong in his opinion about Superman.

Alfred was ready to leave the Manor to head for Richard’s school to pick him up; he wanted to be early there to oblige to Master Bruce’s wish. Of course he didn’t feel right to leave his young Master alone while asleep and with Superman dissatisfied on the loose; yet he couldn’t disobey him.

When the doorbell filled the ground floor with its stentorian sound Alfred was already in front of the door. He frowned but opened.

“Leslie?” he asked flabbergasted seeing his old friend; it was her evident upset that made him the greatest impression. “Is anything wrong?”

She burst into the foyer and looked around.

“Is Bruce here?” her voice was firm as always but also with a discernible agony.

Alfred closed the door calmly.

“Master Bruce is sleeping and I was ready to bring home Master Grayson.”

Leslie nodded but her eyes were narrowed.

“He isn’t feeling alright? I know it’s not in his habits to sleep at this time of the day.”

Alfred remained poised; he wasn’t going to betray his Master’s trust.

“He was feeling very tired so he decided to take a nap.”

Well, Leslie’s face was full of disbelief but the reason she had come was other so he let that aside for now.

“So he hasn’t seen the video yet.”
Alfred frowned.

“What video?”

Leslie inhaled deeply.

“Every TV station in Gotham plays it constantly and the nationwide too” Alfred was fraught: what that video could be to concern Master Bruce? Leslie gulped but her eyes were sparkling furious.

“Superman with that Wonder Woman on a rooftop, fucking!” she spat and pressed her lips.

“Asshole!”

Alfred didn’t seem shocked and Leslie noticing narrowed her eyes.

“Bruce knows already…” she exclaimed realizing. “How? Superman confessed to him?”

Alfred hesitated to answer; he didn’t want Leslie to make a fuss about Bruce wearing the armor and going out.

“No, Superman didn’t say anything to Master Bruce.”

Leslie crossed her arms and locked eyes with him.

“Alfred, you know how much I care about Bruce and I’m his doctor so tell me everything. NOW.”

“You won’t pester or reprimand him…”

Leslie let a bitter smile crook her lips.

“After what Superman did?” she shook her head. “I’d only hug him” she cocked her eyebrows. “If he lets me of course – we all know how he likes to hide his suffering.”

Alfred nodded thoughtful.

“Well?” Leslie prompted him.

“He saw them that night; yes, he was out in his new armor…”

Leslie yanked her head and huffed slapping her thigh.

“That boy! That stubborn brat!”

Her friend understood her feelings but now that wasn’t the point.

“He had to get outside; to clear his mind, to feel free” he inhaled. “I don’t blame him, Leslie. But a video? Who could have seen and recorded them?”

Leslie shrugged.

“Maybe Bruce has some idea but I really don’t give a damn. The only thing I care about is our boy and his broken heart. How is he?”

“He finished the relationship with Superman and tries to persuade me that it was nothing” Leslie arched her eyebrows prompting Alfred with her eyes to tell his impression. “But he suffers, Leslie… it is so unfair and so cruel: all this time, for the first time in his young life Master Bruce was happy; he began living again; his eyes shone almost like when he was a child.”
Leslie pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I’d like to see him, Alfred.”

“Do not wake him up, Leslie; he needs sleep.”

She smiled.

“Of course not, Alfred.”

He gestured to her to follow him.

Bruce was aware that he was asleep; his exhausted, aching body felt like hovering between
the clouds but he knew that these clouds were actually his mattress…No, he didn’t want any thoughts
shadow the sky he was floating…with stubbornness he shut every attempt on thinking…But then a
beautiful perfume caressed his nostrils…a strong masculine smell, sweet and fierce, grass and wind,
and clear, blue sky over the salty sea, and safety and love…

He moved his body towards the smell and hugged the pillow next to his without waking; he plunged
his nose and mouth to the soft pillow and the smell paralyzed his mind and made his heart whine
from pain…Clark’s perfume was so powerful…as if he was still lying beside him…like he used to
do, the good days…

And then Clark began singing with his suave, sweet voice, the hot air from his lungs caressing his
ear:

*Moon river, wider than a mile*
I'm crossing you in style someday
Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker
Wherever you're going, I'm going your way

Two drifters, off to see the world
There's such a lot of world to see
We're after the same rainbow's end, waiting, round the bend
My Huckleberry Friend, Moon River, and me…

“Bruce, I know you hear me even though you’re far away... Come back to me...Out there is a vast
world and you haven’t seen anything” he laughed bitterly. “You’ll see that the world has many
beauties not only horrors...you’ll see: the world is beautiful and waits both of us. I’ll show you...
But don’t leave me, okay? You’re too young and precious to die...and life owes you so many happy
moments...I’ll give you that happiness, I promise” he whispered. “Just give me the chance, Star...”

Bruce’s healthy body filled goose bumps from the pain and the love that cracked this voice. He
hugged the pillow and clenched it desperately because he didn’t want to let this Clark leave…

He was kneeled on the snow-covered forest floor, he was naked above the waist and his pants
opened and drenched. Flass was dragged away from him by something…Something that Bruce was
fully aware that was Superman – the greatest hero of all, the most beautiful being in the whole
world.

His body was trembling and the icy cold wasn’t the only reason; his heart was writhing thrilled. He
had seen the man in Falcone’s party at the Manor and then at the press conference but he was
under his civilian identity: Clark Kent.

He heard his light footsteps on the snow approaching him and his heart kicked in his ribs; his eyes
wanted to turn up to marvel at him but he was Falcone’s slave and Superman should not suspect the truth. He had no right to look at any man.

Superman’s beautiful, blue topaz eyes were on his downcast eyes...so kind...so sweet...but not for him...Bruce knew that he wasn’t destined for such a pure, bright being...He wasn’t destined to be loved, to be happy...

“Can I call you ‘Star’?” the most beautiful, shy smile caressed Superman’s embarrassed face and the man’s eyes were fixed at Bruce’s eyes.

Bruce couldn’t fight a smile; his lips felt odd because smiling was so rare.

“I’ve been called worse...” he replied raising a bit his eyes to Superman’s face.

He muffled him in his red cape and it was so warm, so relaxing, with Superman’s perfume so strong...Superman lifted and hugged him to take him back to the Manor, back to Falcone...but Bruce for some minutes, in his arms could forget everything in the world, even himself...He had melted and his head nestled in that broad chest lulled by the alien’s powerful heartbeat...

“Are you afraid of heights?” Bruce could hear the satisfied smile in Superman’s voice and also he felt his body’s shiver...and Superman never felt cold so the Man of Steel really liked the sense of Bruce’s body on his. “I won’t let you fall...”

But suddenly a thunder hurt Bruce’s ears and the sky became pitch black and the rain was falling like waterfall – the wind was howling like a pack of hungry wolves.

“You slander her – a noble, brave warrior – of being a whore while you are the whore!”

The sound of the soft sea waves that splashed on the shore made his heart loosen; two blue topaz eyes were staring at his face hued by the setting sun’s golden-orange rays.

“...the moment you’ll be healed, I swear to Rao that you won’t get out of our greenhouse for two months!”

He was hearing the sound of flesh on flesh, the wet rasps and the moans...the so familiar moans of Superman and those of a woman. Their groins were united; rubbing each other...greedy hands were hugging possessively Superman’s naked back, nails digging the impenetrable flesh. Superman was rocking forward-backwards making her body arch and convulse, her mouth open in groans of pleasure as he sucked her round, bulged breasts...

Bruce felt his heart being squeezed inside his chest, big iron nails clawing at the tender beating flesh, every drop of blood echoing like a drum. His lungs were burning and he felt like there wasn’t any air as if he was having an asthma attack.

Hero meowed sorrowfully and caressed his hurt Master’s cheek with his paw and then licked as his mom used to do before someone took him from her and threw him to a bin.

“It hurts so much, Alfred...” he whispered in his sleep in an exhausted voice.

Alfred stepped closer and caressed Bruce’s locks.

“I know, Master Bruce...I know” he mumbled. “But it’ll be alright...I promise...” he wished he was confident about his promise but he wasn’t.

Leslie who stood over his bed looked at Alfred and the rugged doctor’s eyes were cracked with
sorrow, wet: she just couldn’t bare the sight of Bruce’s suffering.

“After all the pain he’s been through all his life, being stabbed in the heart by the one he loved with all his heart…” she pressed her lips so hard that they lost their color. “My angel…”

Leslie patted her friend’s back.

“He is strong, Alfred, and we’ll help him: he is not alone…”

Alfred nodded.

“I just hoped against hope that Superman would not do that to Master Bruce…” he shook his head and decided that he should finally oblige to Bruce’s wish. “Leslie, I wonder if you can stay with Master Bruce? He asked me to pick Master Richard from school: he doesn’t trust anyone with the boy. I don’t want Master Bruce to be alone and Master Hero is definitely a formidable bodyguard but I’d like a human here as well.”

“Certainly” she glanced at Hero who kept rubbing his head to Bruce’s cheek purring soothingly. “Having all these problems of his own and taking care of this boy as well: a boy that hates him. You know how much I admire our Bruce?” she chuckled.

Alfred shook his head grinning.

“I have some idea…”

Alfred had just gone to fetch Dick from school when Leslie who was sipping some bourbon from her round glass saw Ironman hovering outside the big, arch shaped window of the grand salon. She hurried to open and he landed on the thick carpet immediately deactivating his face plate and looking anxiously around.

“Hello there, young man!” Leslie said to him mock reprimanding.

Tony looked at her but his solemn face didn’t crack in some grin.

“Hi, Leslie, I’m glad to see you. Where’s Alfred? And Bruce? I called at his office but he didn’t go today.”

Leslie nodded, understanding the reason of Tony’s haste.

“You saw the fucking video” she spat.

“Who didn’t?” Tony replied exasperated.

“Bruce; he is sleeping” she said gulping the rest of her booze.

Tony watched lustfully the descent of the liquid in Leslie’s throat: he wouldn’t say no to one.

“Is he alright?” he asked, his raspy voice filled with worry.

“I asked Alfred the same; he is fine, just tired.”

“So he doesn’t know? I scanned an odd field like a shield around the Manor and the cave.”

Leslie pursed her lips.
“I don’t know about the field, Anthony; as for the rest you should wait for him to wake up” she didn’t want to say more because she considered it best if the two friends discussed it together without a mediator.

Tony fumed like a beast looking around restlessly hardly containing his rage and energy.

“The sonovabitch! He is going to break Bruce’s heart and in this delicate stage of his recovery!”

“Don’t worry, Tony: I’m perfectly fine.”

Both turned towards the corridor that led there from the kitchen. Bruce smiled to them petting calmly Hero on his lap. Tony cursed loud for not hearing him coming but then noticed the chair Bruce was on and realization dawned to him: Bruce was using his wheelchair and although that satisfied him, his love for his buddy made him pain for Bruce since he understood what had made him chose his chair to Superman’s.

Leslie placed her glass on the small, round, marble table under the window and rushed to Bruce.

“Did you sleep well? Are you well rested?”

Bruce nodded.

“I am, Leslie, thank you” he took her hand and shook it.

Yet the doctor was looking frowned Bruce’s tired face and Tony who had in the meantime approached did the same.

“Your eyes…” the billionaire from Malibu exclaimed. “You didn’t sleep at all last night…” he shook his head and slapped his forehead. “Fuck!” he shouted and Leslie glared at him.

“Yes, Tony: I was out patrolling last night with the new suit Lucius and you made me.”

Tony yanked his head backwards and groaned frustrated. He slapped his face with both hands and squatted in front of Bruce taking both his hands.

“Why? Why are you doing this, Bruce? Do you want to kill yourself?” and then he remembered the video and the consequences and bit his lower lip – if Bruce learnt about Superman and that woman his mindless behavior would become worse.

For Bruce Tony’s concerns were so obvious.

“I’m alive, buddy” he pressed his lips in a line reminding a smile. “I can protect myself and the armor you built for me is full of gadgets” he inhaled deeply. “I don’t intend on doing that more often so you can rest assure” he looked up to Leslie who was anxious too and then back at Tony’s fervent black eyes. “And I saw them on the City Hall’s rooftop” he licked his bottom lip. “And…I finished what we had with…” he hesitated to utter the name because even that burned his throat but reprimanded himself “Superman.”

Tony’s mouth stayed agape; he caressed his friend’s neck with both hands and locked their eyes together.

“I’m sorry, little guy…”

Bruce smiled with pressed lips and shook his head.

“It’s okay, Tony…Actually, it gives me a lot of time and clear mind to work on so many things that I
have neglected – unforgivably.”

But Tony like Leslie could see behind his determined, nonchalant eyes and feel the dim thud of Bruce’s wounded heart. His friend’s bravery to hide his pain to not sadden his loved ones made Tony’s mind go crazy with love for the boy he thought dead for eighteen years and hatred for the man who had broken his sensitive heart after all the pain he suffered. He tightened his grip to Bruce’s head and brought their foreheads to touch.

“Did he threaten you?” he mumbled and Leslie’s stare became aggressive only on thinking about the powerful being threatening a disabled human.

Bruce smiled.

“No, he had made his decision. I just eased his job…”

Tony twisted his lips in disbelief.

“Yet you put a new shield around the Manor and the cave which I bet has Kryptonite radiation and it is impenetrable for him” he gritted his teeth. “Did he…” he remembered Pepper’s warn to not be impetuous “did he become aggressive?”

Leslie cupped Bruce’s hand.

“Did he, Bruce?” she asked affectionately.

“No, he didn’t” Bruce replied though he felt bad saying lies to them but he didn’t want Tony to do something irrational.

Yet Tony still fumed; he jerked to his feet.

“I’m going to make him pay for that! I warned him to stay away from you; to not play with you… and he…he…the bastard!”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Tony, please. It wasn’t his fault: I let that happen. I’m not angry with him: he offered me so much… Actually, I’m grateful: he saved my life” Leslie pressed her lips unable to keep her eyes dry; she caressed the youth’s locks. “He taught me that there’s pure romantic love in the world” he smiled to Tony’s stony face “for a short time he gifted me the idea that this love can be for me as well…His feelings just changed…either normally or with some effect. I can’t blame him for this…”

Tony felt his eyes watering and this wasn’t a time for tears; he turned his head towards the open window.

“But I can!” he spat and rushed to the window taking off.

Selina was sprawled on the blue couch in the lounge room of Steve’s cabin: the fireplace in the corner was lit with the logs tactfully arranged in their metal square case. It emanated an intoxicating smell of burning pinewood to the entire room and Selina thought that she would start purring if she could.

It was afternoon and they had just returned from a stroll to the lake; they had lunch on a restaurant with a splendid, panoramic view of the sun- washed lake. She turned on the television and let it on a
program with video clips.

Steve came out of the kitchen bringing two mugs with steaming, hot coffee. He gave her the one and leaned above her to meet her hungry lips in a deep kiss.

He jumped over the sofa’s back and settled beside her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. Selina nestled in his strong chest pouting and Steve laughed.

“What?”

“I’d prefer it if that chest wasn’t covered with anything…” she touched her fingertips to his neck and kissed his Adam’s apple.

She placed her mug on the shining wood table and grabbed the rim of his blouse and pulling upwards. Steve tried to not spill his coffee laughing.

“How about we drink our coffee first?” he cocked his eyebrows amused.

Selina rolled her eyes and pouted.

“Are we married already?” she asked mock pissed and grabbed the mug from his hand to put it on the table.

She took off Steve’s blouse and threw it on the armchair; then suddenly stopped arching a playful eyebrow, her fingers caressing sensually his chest numbing him.

“Mmm…Perhaps you’re right: let’s drink our coffee first…”

But he smiled broadly.

“No way, missy!” he grabbed her armpits and brought her to glue on his hot chest, removing hastily her top leaving only her black lace bra. “I think I hate coffee…” he sighed rolling the straps on her upper arms releasing her round breasts.

Selina arched her eyebrows slyly and kissed his lips; she was straddling him.

“Now you’re talking, handsome…” she breathed sensually to his ear and Steve’s mind went frenzy.

He grabbed her waist and rolled her under him, plunging his mouth to her soft breasts. Selina ruffled his blond hair, moaning to his hot kisses on her aroused breasts. Her hips began rubbing to his half hard groin; her hands clutched the zip of his jeans lowering it in a swift motion as his hands grabbed the crotch of her gym pants and underpants pulling both down freeing her throbbing vagina.

Selina arched her neck, her eyes half closed, groaning as Steve’s dexterous lips sucked her taut underbelly going lower… But then she caught with the corner of her eye something on the TV screen and her hands stopped brushing Steve’s back. Her interest focused entirely on the video playing on the screen and her eyes narrowed as her breath was held in her lungs.

Steve stopped his ministrations and followed her stare; he detached and sat on the couch as Selina gathered herself and sat properly to watch the footage on the screen.

Superman and Wonder Woman were fucking on a rooftop under heavy rain…

Steve watched frowned Selina’s icy eyes that sparkled angrily like a wildcat’s; and then the young woman stood up abruptly, pulling on her clothes and wearing hastily her top. Captain America stood up, as well, wore his clothes and cuddled Selina from behind, kissing the top of her head. She turned
her head to look at him.

“I must return to Gotham ASAP!”

It was late afternoon and the sky had taken the deep blue color that foretold the falling of night; clouds had started gathering again but it didn’t remind last night’s storm. The grounds looked too gloom under the setting sun.

Bruce guided his wheelchair aimlessly through the tiled paths trying to escape from his thoughts. He didn’t manage to find Tony: even Jarvis didn’t know his current location nor Pepper who however tried to soothe him.

But Bruce did worry: his friend was distraught thinking him heartbroken and sought Superman to confront him. He pressed his hair on his head and huffed; it was his fault all this mess.

At least, Alfred took Richard to his training and the boy didn’t seem to notice anything. Leslie had returned to the free clinic. Bruce was alone: he had left Hero at the back drawing room to play.

He didn’t even raise his eyes at the hill where his parents’ graves stood; he couldn’t stand even to think his parents right now: how ashamed they’ll be of their son…once again.

He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly to calm his heartbeat and make his breath normal; Leslie’s eyes were so worried when she got in her car to leave; she had suggested to exam him but Bruce refused every time because he didn’t want her to see the marks…If Leslie saw the marks then the rest wound find out too and things would get out of hand.

His body still ached where his senses were operating normally.

Suddenly, he looked around to orient himself: he was moving without noticing his surroundings. His heart lost several beats and his eyes narrowed staying still, fixed on what was in front of him.

A rectangular building with glass walls and triangular transparent roof. It was long deserted but it seemed so alive…

Bruce pressed his lips to cause pain in his face so that the pain in his chest was muffled: his heart after so many hours of suffering felt like a stone smashing his chest. And now with that building in front of him his guts felt like getting stabbed.

He opened the door and slithered inside; his gaze brushed the pots with the withered plants, the working bench, the heater…the creaks of burning logs invaded his ears…he moved to the bench and touched the oil lamp and the greenhouse was set under the sweet hue of the lamp’s light.

“Let me melt the ice, Star and illuminate your haunted heart…”

He had panicked and averted slightly his lips but upon realizing that the pleasant paralyzing wave from the kiss began leaving his body as Clark sighed and began reluctantly taking off his lips, he touched again his lips to Clark’s.

…Clark’s hands cupped the back of Bruce’s head caressing greedily his locks while his other hand touched gently his jaw to deepen slowly, carefully the kiss.

“I can show you how it is to be loved…” he whispered purposely looking all the time to Bruce’s eyes giving him the ability to check his honesty. “If you want...If you allow me…”
Bruce had inhaled deeply: he felt like drowning; his heart beat frantic both from something he was experiencing for the first time and from something he was very familiar with. The first he had read about, it was what normal people called arousal - well, a very shy arousal in his case -, the later, he was experiencing his entire life: it was a deep dread whenever he realized that someone was ready to use him. But Clark didn’t want to use, he wanted to give to him, to give him his vast love.

“You make me happy, Star…I love you…”

“Clark, I’m…”

Clark didn’t need to hear from Bruce that he loved him; it was too early and Bruce had already made huge steps. He rubbed soothing circles on his back.

“Hush, Star…There’s no need for you to say anything…”

“I want your first time to be perfect” Clark whispered in Bruce’s ear causing a shudder in his spine.

Bruce’s moans through the kiss were enough for Clark to take him in his arms and lay him on the blanket. Bruce’s eyes pierced Clark’s eyes and saw that Clark was ready to be kicked away.

“You said you could show me how it is to be loved” he said determined.

Clark grinned broadly and let his body touch Bruce’s without letting his weight fell entirely on him. He trailed kisses to Bruce’s jaw line and nibbled his neck that arched to allow him better access and… Bruce moaned when Clark’s mouth sucked his collarbone; yet his hand was still holding the cape tight on his naked body and the Man of Steel was rasping, his heart beating frantically eager for what he desired so many months and finally was so near…

“Let me worship your body…” his voice was cracked from passion and arousal and Bruce just released that the fabric slid a little but didn’t reveal flesh.

Damn that cape! Clark thought and Bruce chuckled giving him the unsaid permission to do what he wanted so much. However, Clark grateful for Bruce’s trust took gently the younger man’s hands and led them to his suit’s unseen spots that allowed the fabric to roll of his body. Bruce’s eyes widened surprised and a bit overwhelmed but Clark brought Bruce’s palms to his lips and kissed them softly; then he guided them in lowering the upper half of his suit till the hips.

Clark smiled fondly seeing Bruce’s awed stare; it was so cute seeing that child-like expression.

Bruce couldn’t help but gape at the endless layers of perfectly chiseled muscles in Superman’s body. Even the tight latex of his suit didn’t prepare for the naked body. Bulky deloids, wide chest with round shaped pectorals covered with curly raven hair disrupted by two erected, big brown nipples, his abdominals dancing slowly with each breath.

Bruce rose and caressed with shaking hands Clark’s breasts. The Man of Steel was watching without breathing Bruce feeling his body which welcomed him and asked for more. When he touched his lips to Clark’s pectorals, kissing, it was too much…

The Man of Steel hugged Bruce’s body and laid him gently on his back ‘trapping’ him between his naked arms; he bent his powerful body like a snake without falling on Bruce and brought his face above Bruce’s.

“Tonight, I’ll worship you…”
He began unwrapping gently, respectfully his cape that stubbornly clung to Bruce’s body...

He didn’t want to grab those thighs and just hastily spread Bruce so he massaged the taut flesh from the knees to the hips and Bruce grunted only to moan, groan and breathe shallow when Clark began nibbling the inside of his thighs that began trembling uncontrollably.

Only then Clark opened gently his legs revealing his opening. His ragged breath showed that he wanted to surge inside and claim Bruce forever but his sharp intake of air stopped Clark; he rubbed soothing and arousing circles to Bruce’s underbelly and penis causing him to close his eyes and sigh.

Clark covered his index finger with aloe and slowly caressed the perimeter of Bruce’s anus bringing his finger in gradually only when felt the muscle trembling ready. He tensed for a few seconds and then as the finger massaged his inner muscle relaxed, fixing his eyes on Clark’s sweaty face framed by his wild locks.

When Clark felt Bruce ready added a second finger carefully teasing the muscle into relaxing it more and then he tinkled Bruce’s prostate making Bruce gasp and shake. Clark pressed his lips, his raspiration was uncontrolled: this gorgeous body was so much neglected of pleasant stimulation like a Strativarious violin played for the first time after a hundred years of violent scratches.

Bruce both wanted Clark to continue and dreaded it, something clenching his insides painfully urging him to escape. His heart beat fast from arousal, want and urge to flee; he saw Clark frowning and leaning above him to kiss his lips lovingly.

“Do you want me to stop?” he breathed huskily searching Bruce’s irises but his Star’s gaze became determined.

“Proceed” he said calmly.

Bruce closed his eyes and tried to breathe calmly though Clark’s length filling him was his entire world. As Clark began thrusting incredibly gently but stimulating at the same time, electric currents ran his spine making him convulse; his body was waking, enjoying what for years was meant to cause him shame and excruciating pain. He wrapped his legs around Clark’s firm glutial muscles doing shyly the rubbing dance that excited so much Tony. It was exciting to know that this powerful being was nestled between his legs holding back his own satisfaction to not hurt him and he wanted to show his gratitude for that.

“You can’t imagine how gorgeous you are, Star…” Superman rasped.

He nibbled Bruce’s jaw line and breasts as his head lolled backwards overwhelmed by the hotness in his anus that spurt to his groin to burn his spine with violent jerks that Superman’s body absorbed.

Clark came when Bruce did gaping.

They stayed like this for much time till Clark felt Bruce’s breathe feathery light and his heartbeat peaceful in sleep. He pulled himself begrudgingly from Bruce’s body holding him. Then he leaned him gently back on the blanket but Bruce half asleep looked at him.

“I love you, Star…”

“You stopped calling me ‘Star’…”

Clark was sprawled on the mattress.
“It is really so important?” he answered tired and disappointed.

“I won’t let anyone harm you again…” Clark had breathed in his ear.

Suddenly, a thunder roared; yes, it was a stormy night over the greenhouse then…

The eyes he so much loved were over his face again but the way they looked at him was different: sarcastic, triumphant, angry, hostile…The red of his ire was visible under that breathtaking blue topaz color.

“So beautiful…so rot…a real powerful seductress, indeed”

“You like powerful beings” he hissed through gritted teeth. “I’m Kal El, the mighty Lord of Krypton, and you’re a cheap human…”

Pain…Disgust…Despair…

“Don’t hide your pain from me…I know it gives you pleasure and I can give you more pleasure than anyone…”

“Beg me like you did with Bane…”

“Don’t you dare blame this to me!” Superman roared “You never believed in this relationship! Though you knew that the devious plan of Al Ghul threw me to your feet, not only you didn’t thwart me from slipping in a relationship with you, but also enjoyed having me burning from desire and not satisfying me!”

He saw again Clark’s beautiful eyes, warm with love, gazing at his naked body placed upon the blanket…his cheeks became hot and his head ached. Bruce felt so ashamed: being naked in front of someone…opening his legs to someone…his body trembled. His brain screamed to him indiscernible things that in the end constructed one word: “ridiculous!”

He should have never let that happen. Bruce was seeing inside Clark’s irises himself naked with spread legs and it was the same he was seeing every time Falcone, Chill and Ra’s used him: an ugly, disfigured, disgusting body…his real body…

He hid his face in his palms but the air wasn’t enough, he couldn’t breathe so he yanked his head drawing desperately oxygen…his heart beat like a convulsing dying fish…You should never let that happen…It was stupid, it was a huge mistake…it’s unforgivable…

He heard soft footsteps behind him.
It was late midnight and the small ghost shuffled out of the heavy, metallic door dragging a huge bag with garbage. His right arm hanged like a log from his shoulder and small clouds formed in the cold night as pants left his mouth: the sack with the garbage was too big and heavy for him and his legs were too skinny to carry the burden, especially some nights that the exhaustion and some severe beating worsened the situation. So every other step he stumbled, hardly maintaining his balance.

Selina looked around carefully for hostile eyes and rushed out from behind the big garbage bin to help her friend. They were both at 14 years yet she, albeit a girl, was taller and with more meat than Bruce: the food at the orphanage wasn’t great but still was luxurious compared with the piece of bread her poor friend had to live on... He looked much younger than her as his development was stalled: he wasn’t short but he should have grown more, and the worse was how skinny he was.

Bruce’s eyes bulged suddenly as he felt the burden becoming lighter and realizing that it was his friend. Truth be told, he was engrossed in his thoughts otherwise he’d have seen her earlier and stopped her before running to him. He looked around like a small deer waiting to be attacked by a pack of hungry wolves.

Selina wrapped her free arm around his shoulder and dragged him to the bin carrying most of the burden.

“Nobody is watchin’, cool down, kiddo…” she whispered and released her friend’s shoulder to hoist the lead of the bin; they lifted together the bag and tossed it inside.

They hurried behind the rectangular garbage bin that hid them every night. Selina rubbed soothingly Bruce’s back that trembled from the freezing cold and as always from some brutal blows...the times her palm filled dried blood and deep gashes were countless but she shuddered every time for Bruce’s suffering.

She hugged and held him to her chest to not see her pouting like a crying baby; she wanted to hold him like this forever but she knew that it wasn’t possible. Bruce kissed her cheek and then patted her arm affectionately; Selina knew that they didn’t have much time so she let him detach from her and gave him his sandwich.

Bruce began eating but Selina could see that he was elsewhere...well, Bruce always was somewhere between this world and the other world where his parents were now but tonight his giddiness had a different quality...his eyes sparkled...well, her friend’s eyes always sparkled but in a melancholic way ready to burst to tears while tonight his eyes were...thrilled...mesmerized. Selina frowned watching carefully Bruce eating, his eyes looking inwards.

Suddenly, the boy focused again to the reality and locked eyes with the girl who smiled.

“Sel?” he asked shyly.

“Mmm…”

Bruce’s eyes flashed.

“Have you ever seen him?”

Selina narrowed her eyes.
“Whom, sweetie?”

Bruce lowered his eyes and cleared his throat to hide his enthusiasm.

“That flying man who saves people: he wears red and blue and has a red cape that waves and…and a yellow diamond in his…” the boy flashed remembering “chest and…and he’s beautiful…”

Selina’s eyes widened because she could understand some things from Bruce’s shaking voice and more from his lowered eyes. She took softly his chin and lifted his face to look at her.

“Mmm…I think I know who you mean…”

Bruce smiled in his shy, scared way that screamed how unused this boy was to smile.

“He’s an angel…His eyes are the eyes of an angel…Like…like gems…”

Bruce’s voice was so touched and warm that Selina felt her heart melting.

“He isn’t an angel: he is Superman.”

Bruce’s eyes widened innocently and he gaped.

“You have seen him many times?” his breath was cut in his chest and Selina cupped his skinny cheeks.

“A couple of times when the cameras caught him, rescuing people or kittens…”

The boy arched his eyebrows.

“I…I saw him today…in Signora Bruna’s TV in the kitchen…Many times you said?” his voice was disappointed because he was sure that he wouldn’t manage to see him again.

Selina caressed his cold, soft cheeks and Bruce realizing that he had betrayed his enthusiasm lowered his eyes. But the girl brushed the stray locks from his forehead combing them back and met his eyes.

“Bruce, you like him, huh?” she asked kindly.

He avoided her eyes and looked down, gulping.

“No” he shook his head “how could I? I…I just saw him and…” he sniffed because his frozen nose dripped a bit.

The girl shared the pain in her friend’s bonny chest.

“I thought many times go find him and ask his help…” she said swallowing hard and biting her lips but Bruce jerked panicked shaking his head.

“No! No! No, Sel…you shouldn’t…” he breathed hard. “I can’t be saved…” his voice dropped and Selina hugged him again trying to ease his uncontrollable shaking.

“Ssssss… sweetie…calm down…People say that he was saving people for years…but then he wasn’t showing his face…they were calling him ‘the Blur’…now everyone calls him Superman and they adore him…” she was caressing his back and she felt his trembling eased the more she talked about the angel from TV.
She had covered the miles to Gotham in record time thanks to Steve’s motorbike and his knowledge of secret shortcuts. Selina saw the Manor but her instinct told her that Bruce wouldn’t be there so she didn’t waste time there; she knew where to find him like that morning.

And now his proud figure, imprisoned in that awful wheelchair was before her in the shadows of the day’s last light; re-living the moments of the happiest night in his life…Making the stab in his heart deeper…

She felt weak to help with that much pain: Bruce had already suffered so much and that new blow… The young woman cursed inside: life was an ugly bitch! She couldn’t accept such injustice, such cruelty. Life played with Bruce so brutally bestowing him all this happiness, fulfilling his biggest dream and then taking them away, breaking his heart that just opened up sucking some of the warmth of sun…

She pressed her lips: she should not let her cowardice keep her away from her friend’s side. She marched inside the greenhouse.

Loki was sprawled in his throne, legs bent at the knee over the armrest. Before him in thin air, broadcast from mortal’s TV played covering the space from floor to ceiling. He was chewing with noise a glistening red apple and watched rather unimpressed some reportage about a starlet that stole the husband of another actress. He yawned: some news: this was the world’s oldest story!

Suddenly, the newscaster, an old guy with gray hair and wicked eyes announced the next theme as something ‘for adults only’ and Loki raised an eyebrow: he wished it was indeed something juicy because he was bored to death and that wasn’t good news for Earth.

His eyes bulged seeing a blurred male ass and a female groin and the naughty god wondered since when humans became so cool to show such videos in the news but soon his wonder was answered as the faces became clear.

“Bloody Me!” he exclaimed and jerked his legs off the armrests, his eyes sparkling.

He lolled his head to different ankles to have a better view yet he was disappointed.

“C’mon, guys! This is the NEWS! This is reality! We need the naked truth not the Smurfs!” he threw his half eaten apple to the nude male statue opposite him hitting the genitals. “Bull’s eye!”

The news had changed theme and Loki grim and disappointed plunged his chin to his palm: he wanted more. He snapped his fingers and a lit lamp emerged on his head; he raised his hand and pressed the button putting out the light.

“Is Superman fucking Wonder Woman…the one who shot that Oscar worthy short film must have posted also the director’s cut of his masterpiece…” he chuckled. “And there’s only one place for free speech…”

“Did you call, Your Highness?” a fairy popped out from thin air before him and bowed.

Her lean, curvy body was lilac and her long, straight hair raven while her wings were silver. Loki regarded her licking his lips: under her transparent white silk rags she was completely naked, her small breasts singing to him.

“A God can speak to himself, Pixy!” he spat pissed for the interruption.
“Is Dixy, Your Majesty” she answered smiling sensually.

“Whatever…” he mumbled, snapped his fingers and the fairy vanished.

“Now…YouTube…for the naked truth!”

In front of him, the same image without any blurring.

“HD, 3D, if you please…” he said and the image became crystal clear and the bodies almost alive.

“Now we’re talking…and zoom…”

Loki pursed his lips and chewed the inside of his mouth watching Superman’s length penetrating Wonder Woman’s vagina with such force that could break a wall.

“Wow!” he exclaimed and his mouth stayed agape; he lolled his head as the panting breaths became faster to the pace of the thrusts and Wonder Woman’s rich breasts hopped frantic on her chest.

Out of thin air a banana fell on his lap and he grabbed the fruit.

“Huh! You’re in my mind…No, it is indeed my mind…” he pealed the banana mechanically, goggling at the screen. “Ow! Ow! I’m jealous, guys!” he gulped a huge chunk of his banana.

And then his smile became sly and his eyes shone gleefully.

“Poor Brucey…” he shook his head. “How can you sleep alone from now on?” he cocked an eyebrow. “Or maybe my dear brother will come to comfort you and fill…your void which judging from Superman’s huge…inner world” he lolled his head to see better “it must be pretty big…” he grabbed the armrests and jolted to his feet. “It’s time good Loki did his matchmaking duty…”

He trotted to the shining floor but then stopped and glanced at the frozen frame of Superman sucking Wonder Woman’s swollen thick nipple.

“Don’t go anywhere, guys…I’ll watch it again for scientific purposes, of course…” he winked and vanished.

Bruno Mannheim’s secretary entered his office after being allowed.

“Mr. Luthor at line 4, Mr. Mannheim.”

The enormous businessman cast her a grim glance filled with contempt which the young woman didn’t care for since she was used to bad behavior from her employers; Mannheim was paying better than every other so she was willing to tolerate his snobbish attitude. After all, who gave a shit about those filthy rich bastards? She only cared about her thick pay check.

Mannheim waved to her dismissively and the brown haired woman bowed slightly and left.

As soon as she closed the door, Bagdana dressed in his leather attire emerged out of thin air sat at the gray armchair in front of Mannheim’s desk. The gangster blinked and Luthor’s voice echoed to the room.

“I’m on my jet to Metropolis; as soon as I land we can meet to discuss our next moves” his voice was cheery, smug and full of confidence.

Bagdana twisted his lips with distaste and Mannheim cocked an eyebrow: he knew the demon’s
hatred for the tycoon and the reasons for that.

The raven haired businessman snorted.

“We don’t have to meet, Luthor: there’s nothing to talk about” he spat. “Make me my machine immediately or else…” he inhaled deeply. “Well, I don’t think that I must elaborate on that. You failed me once…a second failure will be un…forgivable.”

Luthor was heard clearing his throat uncomfortable.

“You’ll have your machine, Mannheim; I’m not ungrateful.”

He cocked an eyebrow and Bagdana smirked.

“Prove it! Because I hate ungrateful humans” the connection was cut without him having to do anything, just with his thought.

Bagdana crossed his legs and leaned to his armchair’s back.

“Tell me something…” he mumbled narrowing his eyes. “Why you chose a human to build your machine?” Mannheim regarded him. “I mean, you hate humans; you consider them worthless pests so why trusting Luthor of all humans to build it?”

“Because this machine must know the characteristics of the species it will be used to” he arched his thick, black eyebrows. “And to be able to adjust to these characteristics, it is necessary to be created by a representative of that species.”

Bagdana nodded, grinning slyly.

“Luthor caught my eye immediately: he is a very typical human specimen. Sly, greedy, mean, smug, devious and…easy to be manipulated – stupid” he said like spitting.

Bagdana touched the tip of his nose with his fingertip.

“And with all these…pros you trusted him to make your machine?”

The gangster tycoon stood and came in front of his desk leaning his waist to the glass surface.

“He’s very efficient in constructing shady things and he doesn’t ask questions when he’s handsomely rewarded or when he believes that he’ll be part of a new world order; and he has many connections and his corporation has premises expanded everywhere” he snorted. “Of course, your human” Bagdana raised his head “cropped up in the middle to thwart our plans but…” he gritted his teeth “he’s another human so he won’t be a trouble.”

Bagdana shook his head amused with his ally’s wrong estimation for Bruce.

“You know, every human being is not like Luthor…The human nature has countless variations.”

Mannheim cocked his eyebrows smugly and roared.

“Variations that twirl around Luthor’s qualities and” he locked eyes with his minion having a gleeful shine in his abysmal orbs “it’s entertaining invading their minds and learning their every secret; every petty dirty sin…” he sniggered. “I know why Luthor was so cheery…”

Bagdana’s rich lips twitched.
“He was just released from prison” he widened his eyes for emphasis.

The other crossed his arms that were enormous even in his human form.

“This is the least…” he puffed and in the air two naked bodies took shape; two bodies united in wild intercourse. “I’m sure you recognize them?” he asked snidely cocking an eyebrow. “These images eradicated everything else in Luthor’s mind: he was elated for every naughty, dirty, degrading comment and jeering for the Kryptonian. Luthor was entertained because the…Boy scout fell from his moral throne and became the star of stupid talk and gossip shows.”

He let the scenes play exactly as in the popular video and watched eagerly his minion’s reactions; however the demon’s face was expressionless, granite like his favorite form.

“I’m not surprised” Mannheim said snobbishly. “The Kryptonian is a superior life form…compared to these humans so he was bound to be fast bored by a cripple mortal…Only you seem infatuated with that pest” he pursed his square lips and his black mustache twitched. “I really can’t understand you, Bagdana…”

But the ancient demon wasn’t listening to him; his blank eyes were focused on the couple’s mating but he was seeing Bruce; his beloved Bat’s stunning eyes had become Bagdana’s entire world the moment of his victory; the moment the demon believed that his Lilith would come back to him; the mesmerizing flash in Bruce’s eyes when he stabbed the Blade to the demon’s back. His Lilith backstabbed him for a second time…

“Now you feel how it is to be betrayed by the one you love with all your existence, Bruce: your heart got stabbed as my back that day…You love him but he snubbed your love and chose someone else leaving you burning and melting in memories of past happiness and present suffering…My Lilith, finally, you tasted what you did to me and now maybe you’ll understand and feel me…”

“Of course now the Kryptonian came closer” Mannheim continued his rant arching his eyebrows mockingly “too close with the Amazon and her alliance is guaranteed.”

Bagdana left the dark caves of his mind and heart where Bruce was the king.

“Are you afraid of the Amazon?”

The businessman roared sure that the stupid human employees outside wouldn’t hear anything.

“I am not afraid of anything this miserable planet has to show.”

Bagdana smiled and changed the crossing leg: his ally’s ignorance was so entertaining…

“You should be afraid of one…” he retorted nonchalant.

The new God seemed affronted and in disbelief.

“And who this might be?” he asked.

Bagdana shrugged.

“Earth always produces surprises.”

The office vanished and suddenly they were at the underground throne hall under Mannheim’s Mansion. Darkseid stripped from his human form and was now standing between the elliptic vessels that contained perpetual fires. He flexed his gigantic body and his eyes spit daggers of fire, the flames
in the vessels blowing to the high ceiling.

“Not for Darkseid, the ruler of the Universe and extinguisher of worlds. Nobody equals me!” he ground his teeth and the hurricanes all over his throne howled.

Yet Bagdana wasn’t impressed; his face filled with dark shadows and his eyes became red like rubies that no human had ever seen.

“I have seen many great warriors, kings and Gods getting smashed by their arrogance” his voice became throaty. “Nemesis lurked them to give her final blow and doom them.”

Darker side loll his head staring smugly at him.

“Like yourself?”

The demon stabbed Darkseid’s eyes with his.

“Exactly…and I lost everything” he replied bitterly. “But I became wiser.”

Darker side’s laughter shook the thick, huge ancient pillars.

“Judging from the fact I found you chained and ragged in the Tartarus” Bagdana jerked as if hidden by an invisible whip “NO. On the other hand, I’m already wise and invincible; and your Nemesis is a long forgotten and downfallen Goddess who has no power anymore” he inhaled deeply and yanked his head. “Now that my machine will be complete Earth’s end is near and along another victory for Darkseid.”

Bagdana didn’t care for the New God’s insults or his arrogance or the Earth’s destruction – this planet had offered him only pain. The only thing he cared about was getting Bruce.

“Never forget what you promised me.”

Darker side narrowed his eyes.

“Now that the Kryptonian doesn’t give a damn about your cripple toy you can snatch him.”

“Then your plan will fail: do not forget that Bruce has many protectors. Moving against him now will alert him and your machine would probably never be built and the great Darkseid for the first time will be defeated” the shadow of a smile carved his square face. “You see, I bare your interests and our agreement in first priority: I can wait…patience after millions of years became my biggest weapon.”

Darker side fumed hearing the words defeat and Darkseid; he turned furious and marched to his throne.

“Do as you like with your pet” he spat. “You’re dismissed!”

The ancient demon made a bow but his eyes were filled with slyness and mockery. Of course he’ll do as he liked with Bruce because Bruce was his…

Joker looked himself on the whole body rectangular mirror in the center of the warehouse he had made his hideout. During the day they dwelled in the ground floor – the playroom - while the second floor’s rooms had been turned into bedrooms.

He swirled around himself watching carefully his purple coat and patted the velvet fabric on his chest
and buttocks. It was his new dressing coat and he wanted to be sure that it was perfect before he wore it in a public appearance.

“Looookks and clothes are not everything aaaand they shoow vanity” he said to his tailor who was slumped on the pink armchair opposite the mirror “buuuuuut, myyy friend, I’m a public figure aaaand my wife is this city’s Prince sooooo I have to keeeeeep my status: I’m the Prince of Crime after all – ruuuuuuler of the underworld…” he grimaced narrowing his eyes “I sound like Count Dracula, huh? Aaaanyway…You should be proud, buddy: you did a splendid work” he lifted his thumbs to the tailor that didn’t seem quite thrilled with his client’s praise.

Joker made a rapid spin and lolled his head looking curiously at the old man. He pouted at the bulged, petrified orbs of the tailor and the edge of a blade that protruded from his chest: blood had painted his entire front.

“Of course, it is a posthumous praise” he mumbled sorrowful and patted the man’s shoulder. “Buuuuuut you know that every great artist gets recognized only after deeeeeeath” he sighed dramatically. “Except for me…but…I’m one of world’s wonders after all… How many are they?” he scratched his skull squeezing his eyes.

Suddenly, he took in the ruckus from his clowns who were gathered around the old TV in the far end of the vast space. He narrowed his eyes and whistled.

“Eeeeee, kiiiiids? Don’t you think that my new coat is splendid?” he scratched his head. “You don’t know what ‘splendid’ means…mmm…nice?”

Yet nobody seemed to hear him and Joker more than pissed was intrigued: what these morons were watching? With two jumps he reached them and pushed away the three who covered the screen.

“Ow!” he exclaimed seeing a butt and a female groin pixilated; he bent to see better; he scratched his ear and sighed. “I guess it is the time to make the big talk, huh, kids? Buuuuut: you should show some respect to your daddy – I know you’re in a tough age and your hormones boil yet…youuuu HAVE to follow daddy’s example! I’m a fuuuuckin’ roooole model!”

He punched the goon that was sat in the chair before the TV and jumped in his place leaning to the screen. The camera left the big boobs to ascend to their faces and Joker pouted.

“HEHEHEHEHEHUHUHUUUUUUUUUU! I always knew it that this laaaad hadn’t found his true inclination…AHA-AHA-HAHAHAHAHA!!! Yup! Supes boy: from the first time I saw you I knew you’re a natural porn star: the way you showed off that buuuuulge down there… UHUHUHUHEHEHEHEHEEEEE….an’ your coooooostar….” he muttered nasally and smirked. “Ouch!” he exclaimed as the camera returned to the groins that shook stormily – his eyes widened. “Now that’s a STAKE! I knewwwww it wasn’t shocks! Poor Bruceyyyyy…I guess Falcone’s training with dildos came handy after all, huh?” he turned his eyes down to his own groin and blinked a bit sad: “Jokey, you have sooome veeeeeery big…shoes? To fill! HEHEHEHEHE! Not shoes buuuuuuut kids are listening…”

He clapped his hands.

“Off, boys! There’s nothing for youuuuuu to see” he sobered abruptly and switched off the TV.

He supported his head to the armchair’s back deep in thought, his eyebrow twitching.

“Sooolllll… dear Bruceyyyyy was cheated…Noooow that Superoaf broke your tender little heart maybe you’ll understand who deserves your love…” he slapped his eye. “Who I’m kidding? Who
cares about your love, Batsy? Your hot body…Noooooo, I wouldn’t say no for your loooove, too…I’m deeply romantic after all… Let daddy Joker give you comfort, myyyyy pooor boooy…”

He cackled.

“Buuuuut our love must wait” he waved his fingers to the air pouting his lips “fooooor the conditions to ripe buuuut my heart and mind will be with you, baaaabe…especially, when you’re in the shower…completely nakaakd and weeeeeeet…” he rolled his eyes and licked his lips. “That perfect chiseled god-like body with the bulging muscles shining under the water…the brown locks plastered to the sharp cheekbones…” he popped his tongue and panted like a thirsty dog.

He slapped hardly himself.

“Get a grip! If you continue like this I’ll storm that Manor right now an’ that would be tooooo predictable…an’ moronic.”

He jerked up and hopped to the armchair were the dead tailor lay; Joker squeezed himself next to the corpse and gave the dead man a one armed hug touching his head to the corpse’s like he was going to confide in a dear friend.

“Do you gather that Brucey would be sobbing right now because Superman cheated him?” he fistst the dead man’s hair on the back of the head and made him shake in denial. Joker nodded. “I believe the same thing: my Batsy probably has already kicked that bastard’s sorry ass…” he touched his fingertip to his lips thoughtful “well, I don’t know how but I’m sure that Batsy made Super-goofy runnnn…”

His cackle became an uncontrolled giggle that caused the stares of his goons who had gathered again around the TV. Joker smiled to the dead man’s crystallized eyes.

“You know, buddy, I’m sooooo delighted that the SuperBeef would never touch Brucey again” he nodded pouting and rolling his eyes. “I know what you’re thinking…that I’m happy because that huge stake won’t ever get in my Batsy’s sweet hole…mmm…” he closed his eyes. “I want that hole only for meeeee, pal…”

He opened his eyes and pushed the corpse to the floor.

“Your help was priceless, buuuuuddy…” he huffed. “They’re right about a friend’s shoulder…One obstacle off but still Batsy is difficult to be tamed” he arched his eyebrows. “That’s the reason I loooove him sooooo much!” he cheered like a schoolgirl rubbing his gloved hands together.

Dick entered the gym’s small cafeteria, his backpack on one arm, craning his head around to find his friend. They had spoken earlier on the phone and arranged to meet there.

“There you are…” he muttered seeing Jason sprawled on a chair at a corner table and marched there.

He snatched the cigarette from his friend’s hand and snapped it in half gesturing to the sign on the wall.

“You don’t know what this sign means?”

The younger boy rolled his eyes and scratched his hair.

“No smokin’?” he cocked his eyebrows.
“Exactly!” he sat in the opposite chair.

Jason twitched his lips.

“Ya’re on the mood, huh? Ouch!”

“Two orange juices” Dick said to the young waitress before Jason managed to utter what he wanted.

“Fuck!” the younger boy exclaimed. “I’m in for a helluva drive again, huh? An’ I had a good day till now…”

“Yeah?” Dick asked aggressively. “Why not? You’re not forced to live with Wayne…Though at least today I was spared of his presence” Jay chuckled and Dick frowned. “Yeah. His butler drove me everywhere – like a fucking bodyguard. Thank goodness, he went to the granny’s flat to get me some things” he sighed “I couldn’t stand going there and not seeing my granny… so he left me alone to the gym” he shook his head “but he’ll come to get me back…” he slumped his head on the table.”

Jason arched his eyebrows.

“Then I’m shocked ya didn’t run away already!”

Dick yanked his head and slapped his forehead.

“Careful…” Jason said amused “you’ll make a lump…”

The older boy leaned to him to not be heard.

“I would have run away but I have the feeling Wayne put people watch me…Fancy that! I’m imprisoned!”

They both looked the waitress who placed their orders on the table and left. Jason crossed his arms.

“Not imprisoned, man…c’mon…Ya’re a Wayne now” he saw Dick’s angry frown “ouch!” a hard kick was delivered to his ankle. “Why ya did that, ya asshole! Temporarily, ya’re his protégé so bad guys might want to get ya for ransom…” he stopped abruptly narrowing his eyes. “Maybe I shoulda kidnap ya an’ ask for money?” he stretched on his chair’s back “Anyway, as soon as it’s known that Wayne has yar…mmm…” he tried to remember the word.

“Guardianship.”

“That. Well, after they learn that ya’ll be a target – not to mention, that nutcase Joker who’s loose an’ grabbed ya in the past. However, for the time being I don’t think that anyone will notice ya…”

Dick drank from his juice.

“I think that he put people watching me to keep Tony away and increase my misery…” he groaned.

“That’s a possibility…” Jason sipped his juice grimacing with disgust. “What they put in that juice? Eeeek! Anyway, granny” he cleared his throat “yar granny must have spoken to Wayne.”

Suddenly, Dick remembered what Jason told.

“Wait…Jay, why you said that nobody will notice me?”

The younger boy laughed.
“Oh! That! Ya don’t know, do ya?” he rolled his eyes. “Why do ya have that goat gizmo?”

Dick huffed and pulled out of the backpack his Cosmos tablet.

“What am I supposed to look for?” he spat impatient.

Jason was chuckling amused.

“Google Superman an’ Wonder Woman an’ ya’ll see…”

Dick did that having his eyes fixed on Jason.

“There’d be million results, Jay…”

“Nah…Ya’ll see…”

And indeed, on the top of the page with the results was a video. Dick looked at Jason who nodded.

“Open it; is the censored version so ya won’t be traumatized…” he snorted and Dick glared at him pressing ‘play’.

“That’s the top news of the day an’ the month an’ maybe the year” Jason said after the video ended and a blushed Dick stared at him; the younger boy pouted for his friend’s blushing. “Ya knew how the babies are born, right?”

Dick gave him a little slap on the head.

“You think that’s why Wayne was absent almost the entire day? I mean, remember the video with Superman carrying him and the rumors…” he asked him. “And at the lunch he was extremely pale and with circles under his eyes…”

Jason snorted.

“For someone who hates him ya seem to be very observant of him…”

“I just noticed that Alfred was worried and antsy since morning and Wayne was supposed to drive me to school but he did. So I thought that something must be wrong and I had my eyes open: I hoped for a sign of a terrible illness…”

Jason shook his head.

“C’mon, man…He’s stuck in a chair…” he said serious.

“Yes, but this won’t kill him…” his eyes sparkled and Jason sighed. “It was certain that Superman would see him through, be disgusted and dump him. As he deserves.”

Jason shrugged.

“Yeah, sure…” he replied indifferent. “But now we won’t get the chance to see Superman in the Manor…”

Dick rolled his eyes.

“But you’re one of the bad guys, remember?” he whispered. “A thief…”

Jason shrugged.
“Absolutely. But Supes is a Star, man, an’ since the chances of seein’ Batman are zero, seein’ the Boy scout would be a refund.”

The mentioning of Batman made Dick forget everything else: his eyes dropped seeing into the past. In an inferno of fire and collapsing woods and metal, thick, suffocating smoke and a black cape protecting him from everything. Batman shoving him away and then a horrible bang; he looked and Batman was under tons of debris…crashed.

“Nobody is gonna see Batman again…” he mumbled. “He died to save me…”

“But that Catwoman said that he’s alive an’ ya told me that she was there that night…”

Dick shrugged.

“She’s crazy or he might have asked her to speak like that if anything happened to him.”

“I don’t know, man… People have seen him recently…”

The older boy was tired of this discussion and yanked his head pissed, growling. But then his shoulders slumped.

“The butler is here…” he spat.

“Bruce…”

He couldn’t fight the smile forming although he’d prefer it if Selina had not come; he wasn’t ready to speak with his friend, to look her in the eyes… because he knew that it would be difficult to hide from her. Now, he hesitated to turn and look at her; he didn’t want to make her sad.

But Selina rushed to him and squatted in front of him, engaging his eyes. Bruce pressed his lips seeing her sad eyes, although there was also a sparkle of anger.

“You shouldn’t wander the grounds at this time, Bruce; it's too dark and too cold…you need warmth and comfort.”

He grinned to her though his lips were too reluctant to make that move and the swelling was the least of the reasons.

“It isn’t so cold, Selina…”

“Because you feel frozen inside, right?”

“You shouldn’t be here, Sel” he took her hands in his and squeezed them softly; he didn’t want to answer to her remark.

“There’s no other place in the world I should be, Bruce” her eyes flashed and Bruce discerned the pain from her realization that his eyes were emotionless.

So he reprimanded himself and chased away from his eyes the darkness that swallowed everything else.

“You saw that dreadful video” he shook his head. “Really, Sel, you should have stayed with Steve – you deserve have great time and” he raised his eyebrows in emphasis “you know me: I’m tougher than this…” he smiled.
Selina placed her palm over his heart.

“I know you, sweetie…I know your heart…”

Bruce shook his head.

“Nothing happened, Selina…He just chose another person: such things happen every day; it’s normal.”

“Not to you, Bruce: he shouldn’t have done that to you…” she pressed her lips. “You spoke now that you saw the video? His cheat?”

Bruce chuckled.

“I didn’t need the video – I knew it before.”

She frowned at the realization.

“You were there that night” she exclaimed. “You were patrolling Gotham and you saw them. Wait…How you got up there? They were on a rooftop.”

“Lucius finished my new armor. And yes I saw them.”

Selina swallowed hard imagining the blow her friend got when he saw them.

“And?”

“He came to the cave, we talked and I finished it” he answered indifferent though in Selina’s eyes saw that she wasn’t persuaded by his act.

She nodded.

“You did the best; he wasn’t treating you as you deserve and once he cheated you there was no meaning in dragging it…” her voice was cold but seeing Bruce’s eyes became softer. “He stabbed you in the heart” she caressed his cold cheek.

“It’s not so bad, Sel; I had worse experiences than that” he shrugged. “Now, he is going to see the world with someone else” he knitted his eyebrows but then relaxed his face and smiled. “Actually, I’m relieved…because me and…” he couldn’t articulate ‘Clark’ “and he are so different and I am not meant to ever leave this city: Gotham should be my entire world – my life is tied forever with hers. And I didn’t want him to be attached to someone like me. He deserves to be happy, Selina; he really does…”

Selina’s heart was clenched; she cocked an eyebrow.

“With her? She is a bitch and you told us about something that affects him” her eyes sparkled with hope and her voice became happier. “He’d never cheat you if there wasn’t that effect and as soon as it passes he’ll return to you begging for forgiveness…”

Bruce brushed Selina’s hair smiling.

“Right. I’ll do everything to find out what this effect is and save him from her. But after that, after he is free, he’ll find someone else to create a new life – someone appropriate for him…not me”

Selina frowned.
“You’re the best in the world!”

“My dear Sel…” his voice almost cracked. “You know that what happened between me and him shouldn’t have happened.”

“Don’t say that!” she inhaled. “Look, sweetie…I’ll be honest: that morning we couldn’t find you and I panicked…Tony’s fear was infectious: he implied that something had happened that could have affected you very badly.”

Bruce nodded.

“When my feet brought me to the greenhouse” she continued “my guts were clenched. And then Superman came out and his face was glowing” Bruce lowered his eyes; the memory of Clark’s happiness that morning stung “and I realized what took place there the previous night. I was angry at first and I wanted to rip his face with my nails because I feared that he forced you…”

Bruce shook his head.

“Clark would never force me…” Selina nodded.

“He spoke to me and his voice, his eyes, everything persuaded me that he was there to protect you and…you…had let him make love to you. From that day onwards I always saw his love in his eyes, in his face, in his body language… That night must have been so beautiful but also a helluva battle with all your past demons howling…” her eyes saw again Chill rape that skinny, crying boy.

Bruce crooked his lips.

“Clark was all the time fighting with me as if this was his battle too…and then when he saved me from the collapsing factory he stayed constantly on my side to not let me surrender to darkness” he clutched his forehead and huffed looking at the sky. “It was awful saying him to leave…but there wasn’t another way…”

Selina hugged him.

“I never believed that he would do that to you. I” she bit her lip “I believed that he’d manage what I always wanted but I don’t have the strength to do…”

Bruce cupped her cheek and Selina kissed the inside of his palm.

“What was that?” he asked softly.

She tried to chuckle to break the tension but it came out like a sob before she stubbornly turned it into a groan.

“I wanted to create a better world for you to live in…”

Bruce’s eyes widened and got fogged with liquid; his mouth stayed a bit agape. He cupped her face now with both hands so that he could stare at her sparkling eyes that were down cast.

“You have done that already, my sweet, sweet heart…” he kissed the top of her head. “Every night, all those years, as soon as I was seeing you behind that bin everything changed: you made my world lighter, warmer…” he laughed but the sound was throaty. “That night of Christmas’ Eve…you gifted me the most beautiful world I could ever dream…”

Selina smiled although her eyes dripped.
“I don’t deserve your love, Sel” he said and Selina snarled because she couldn’t make her eyes stop: damn! Bruce always was able to do that to her. “I feel that I’ve been taking advantage of your kindness… You always sacrifice yourself for me and I’m not giving anything, always demanding more with my misfortune and making you sad while you should be happy – you so much deserve the best…”

“Cut the nonsense, Bruce! You give me everything! You gave meaning to the empty world of an orphan that felt so alone… You became my entire world and from then I never felt alone again… You made my heart open to other things than blind hatred… to care for the misery of others even though I always posed as an indifferent, tough little creep; with your kindness, your care for the others despite your own suffering; your self-sacrifice. You saved me so many times, Bruce…” she shook her head. “You make me a better person…”

Bruce caressed her cheekbones wiping her tears gently with his fingertips and Selina looked him in the eyes.

“Bruce, please, do not regret what you had with him… I know it hurts now but that night and the months till now were so beautiful: I was seeing the happiness in your eyes – the love, the hope, the fulfillment.”

He smiled and brushed her hair but his eyes were seeing elsewhere.

“I don’t regret that night, Sel; neither the months that followed. I know it was a mistake – I know that it is selfish but I don’t regret anything…”

“No, no, it’s not selfish, Bruce. And… and it might seem impossible now but your heart will speak again: that night and those months will come again with someone else” Bruce shook his head.

“No, Sel; it’s over with that thing! I had enough from this for several lifetimes – I don’t want anymore.”

“No, sweetie: what they did to you was rape; what you experienced with Clark was love. It is beautiful but you had so little of that.”

But Bruce continued shaking his head.

“I’m not made for that: it’s over.”

Selina’s head slumped on the side.

“I know it’d be tough to get over him; he was your first love.”

“My first and last love: my only love” he replied emotionless.

Selina shook her head stubbornly, desperate.

“With one betrayed love – even if it’s the first – life it’s not over. You’re so young, sweetie… you’re going to fall in love again for someone else, although I believe that Superman will be sorry for what he did and he’ll come back begging…” Bruce rubbed his temple. “But out there are wonderful people to love you and you’re so young…”

“Young… I feel I have lived too much…” he spat. “No, Sel, I don’t need that thing in my life: I’m happy with all of you around me – I’m so lucky: your happiness makes me happy too.”

Selina lowered her head and Bruce touched her cheeks and smiled.
“You have forgiven him already…” she said.

“There’s nothing to forgive…It is my fault all of this…I acted carelessly.”

“No, Bruce…you did nothing wrong.”

Bruce shook his head pressing his lips.

“I can’t find Tony: neither Jarvis nor Pepper knows anything about his whereabouts” he huffed. “He saw the damn video and left enraged to find Superman…I’m afraid.”

“For Tony or Superman?”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Both” he looked around; it was dark. “We must return to the Manor: I must find Tony before something awful happens…”

Thor stood on the cloud that was attached like balcony to his palace; his gaze was focused down as if it was possible to see Earth from there. Suddenly, he jerked because he sensed the change.

“Hello, brother” Loki walked to him smiling hoping from cloud to cloud and raised his hands in surrender looking Thor’s angry eyes and the glow of his hammer. “Don’t shoot! I’m your little half brother, remember? The one you so many times defended from the vulgars of Asgard?”

Thor stretched his neck and eyed him suspiciously.

“But you seem to forget that, Loki.”

Loki shook his head.

“I never forget that, big guy” he patted Thor’s rock upper arms. “But you know my character: I like pranks – remember how many times I made you laugh?”

“Most of the times I wasn’t laughing because your ‘pranks’ were evil…”

Loki pouted.

“Evil…You’re so cruel.”

“No, you’re the cruel: why are you pestering Bruce Wayne? Leave him alone, Loki – he has had enough!”

The naughty god nodded and he gave a sorrowful glimmer to his eyes that however didn’t fool Thor.

“I know…I know…and I mean no harm” he placed his palm on his heart blinking innocently. “I really like the human.”

Thor gritted his teeth.

“Do you take me for a fool? You mean no harm? Leave him alone then! Prove your innocence.”

Loki shrugged and smiled revealing his white teeth.

“Oh, brother, I might not be able to read your mind but it is so obvious that you fell for this gorgeous
mortal: does Bruce realize?”

Thor grabbed his brother’s shoulders.

“Is that why you torment him? Because you think I’m in love with him?”

“Are you not?”

Thor closed his eyes and huffed, causing Loki’s eyebrow arch sarcastically.

“I’m not in love with him: Bruce is Tony’s best friend and he is a remarkable human being with a horrible past – I respect him and I want to help Tony protect him so that he won’t be hurt ever again.”

Loki pursed his lips.

“Then now it is the time you act because the Prince of Gotham is really heartbroken” Thor frowned because he knew about Superman’s awful behavior to Bruce but how did Loki knew?.

“What do you mean?’

Loki lolled his head on the side and smiled.

“Too bad you’re not in love with him because right now the poor thing would definitely need an affectionate shoulder to cry and a new hot body to cuddle… Not to mention a new powerful protector…”

He snapped his fingers and Thor saw in the grim sky Superman with Diana.

“Everyone saw that through their TV” he shook his head. “Poor boy, must be crying his heart out… and feel so much the need of a strong, kind god to take the pain away and save him…”

With a puff he was gone but Thor didn’t care because his mind was racing and he immediately took off as well.

Tony stood before the heavy, black wooden door.

“I know you want him, I mean I am a very experienced man and your... desire is evident.”

Superman’s face flushed.

“I... It’s not...”

Tony stood in front of him.

“You think that you have feelings for him?” his posture was demanding and although his distaste was evident Superman didn’t react.

“I don’t just ‘think’; I’m sure!”

Tony smiled and rubbed his brow.

“Do you know how many times people are sure and then treat their ‘loved one’ as a shitbag and hurt him or her?
“You know because you’re one of them?” the other snapped.

Tony laughed.

“You’re right! I’m the worst example but I’d never put a traumatized soul in more torture by promising him love, showing him love, only for me to transform to a monster.”

“I’d never!” Clark roared insulted. “I’d never cause pain to him” he said lowering his voice “I’d rather die than hurt him or let anyone hurt him ever again.”

Tony nodded and sighed.

“You’ll ask me to leave him alone? To never come near him again?” Superman asked determined but his agony was clear.

Tony lowered his head.

“Of course, not, I’m not the cruel bastard you think me but don’t you dare press Bruce into something he is not ready for or hurt him.”

Clark moved his head in disbelief.

“I don’t think that I can press him” he looked pointedly at Tony reminding him that they were talking about Batman “in anything.”

“He is emotionally vulnerable; his emotions although he hides it well are his greatest weakness. Don’t you dare use that!”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“Are you in love with him?” Clark’s voice was harsh from agony.

Tony didn’t speak, just pierced him with his black shining eyes.

“He is too good for me; too pure for me to even think carnally of him. But...” he made a gesture “but that doesn’t mean that you have my blessing to lay your hands on him – let him have his peace. He needs friends not people seeing him as a body to...”

“He is not that for me” his tone wanted to make Tony understand “I promise you, Mr. Stark, I won’t make anything to upset him; if I do, I’ll gladly let you feed me a kilo of kryptonite.’’

“My friend” Tony’s eyes shone wickedly “if you hurt Bruce, I won’t need you to let me do it...”

His eyes sparkled determined as he pressed the doorbell keeping Ironman’s armor minus the faceplate; the back of his head still covered by the helmet, sure that Bruce wouldn’t find him as he didn’t till now.

He was able to hear footsteps approaching on the other side of the door though he was so sure that the luxurious flat was soundproof. The door opened and Tony’s steel eyes stabbed Superman’s awestruck face.

“You didn’t expect me?” Tony asked cocking an eyebrow and Superman frowned.

But he opened and let Ironman enter the spacious foyer leading to an enormous lounge room decorated in dark green and white: dark green corner sofa and armchairs and white tables. The thick, velvet carpet was brown with black floral designs but what stroke Tony even in his state was the
intoxicating perfume of the flowers that filled earthen pots of various sizes and forms on shelves over
the wall and on the small tables.

The shower echoed from the depth of the flat.

Tony didn’t let the perfume and the flowers draw his attention, his eyes stayed fixed on Superman’s
blue and red figure.

“How did you find me here?” the Man of Steel asked crossing his arms and frowning.

“How did you find me here?” the Man of Steel asked crossing his arms and frowning.

“Not very easy: but when Tony Stark has a target he never fails” Superman cocked an eyebrow in
sarcasm.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. watches Diana?”

“Hardly…” he caught with the corner of his eyes the Metropolis’ skyline under the night sky: there
was a long and narrow rectangular window that covered the center of the wall on his right. “Yet the
stratosphere is filled with ever watching satellites so if you get access you can discover almost
everything.”

Superman had no mood for Tony fucking Stark’s brag; he reminded him of things that were over and
he didn’t want to look back to them.

“What do you want, Stark?” he spat.

“You promised to never hurt him” his voice was cold and flat; his eyes two shining, sharp blades.

Superman smirked and cackled.

“He crawled to you weeping?”

Tony heard but didn’t make the effort to engage in the words.

“I told you to not force him in something that would hurt him. I told you to not break his heart…and
you said that you would never cause him pain…but you did. Is this your morality?”

Superman shook his head, pinched the bridge of his nose and looked sideways at Ironman.

“Listen, Stark, things are not black and white as you see them” Tony cocked his eyebrow. “I don’t
need to explain myself to you but what happened it wasn’t my fault: Bruce and you knew very well
that the damn mutation Ra’s caused to Bruce’s body affected me and this effect was too powerful
even after my inoculation.”

Tony shook his head laughing.

“So it was our fault then?”

Superman yanked his head smugly.

“I never spoke about you” he spat degradingly. “I was a straight before meeting Bruce…”

Tony gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

“You dare to accuse Bruce??”

“The fact is I was straight, can he claim the same?”
Tony’s eyes widened flashing madly but what Superman was saying was so ridiculous that he laughed.

“How on earth can he possibly claim this or the opposite?! He never had a choice and you know that! What bullshit are you hinting at? Maybe that Bruce seduced you?” his eyebrows almost reached his hairline.

Superman lolled his head on the side and narrowed his eyes.

“You don’t think him able? He almost seduced you…” he said mockingly.

That was the breaking point for Tony: his right glove became green and Superman’s eyes bulged as he felt weak, dizzy and nauseated. He stumbled and his trembling hands found support on the back of an armchair. For a second, because an iron fist found his mouth almost breaking his jaw and sent him to fall on a small wooden table smashing the tiny pots there; he collapsed on the carpet.

Superman wiped the blood from his mouth with the forearm and the wound in his upper arm from the Blade of Justice cried. However he looked sarcastic at the furious billionaire.

“Kryptonite. Very brave, Stark…”

Tony’s face cracked in a smirk.

“Accusing Bruce for everything…very brave, Superman. Besides, it was the only way for you to feel like Bruce…”

Superman’s eyes widened: did Stark know what he did to Bruce?

“He came to you and whined about me?”

Tony’s lips twisted in disgust.

“Bruce never came to me: he is so proud and dignified that you can’t even imagine…” he made two steps closer and glared at him. “People admire you; they consider you a saint but I know who you truly are.”

To Superman this sounded as a threat to his secret identity.

“I know who Bruce is, as well” he retorted and Tony narrowed his eyes. “If you reveal my secret identity I’ll reveal Bruce’s secret and I’m not the outlaw, the wanted vigilante…”

Tony’s lips twitched in disgust and he shook his head.

“I’d never stoop so low to reveal your secret identity” he sniggered. “But I’m not shocked that you are willing to do this to Bruce…”

Superman’s eyes were down cast: it was like the Kryptonite along with making him feel sick also shed some light to his head.

“I’d never do that to Bruce – I don’t know how this came out of my mouth.”

“Sure…” Tony mocked him with arched eyebrows.

Superman was ready to ask how he learnt about him and Diana since Bruce didn’t tell him.

“Kal, what’s wrong?” a completely naked Diana came running from the corridor.
Her long wet hair was stuck in her back and long trails of water traced the curves of her breathtaking body. Despite the fact Tony was an avid admirer of beauty the spectacle of the naked Amazon brought only disgust to him.

Diana cocked her eyebrow and her face took its usual smugness eyeing Ironman, don’t even a care for her nudity. But then her eyes caught the fallen Superman and rushed to him helping him rise supporting him. She snarled at Stark seeing the glowing green glove.

“You came to avenge your petty friend’s virtue?” she asked snidely. “Not that he had left any…” she lolled her head on the side. “I’m not surprised that his knight is a coward that uses sly methods to prevail!”

Tony stayed completely unfazed; his face a rock, his eyes two flames.

“Bruce’s virtue cannot be harmed by anything this worthless worm can do… I came to fulfill a promise…” he grinned at Superman. “He gave a promise that if he failed on his word of honor he’d spare me the trouble to do what I’m doing now” he yanked his head. “But I guess his masculinity is enough only to fuck you.”

She gritted her teeth while Superman couldn’t gather his power to stand on his own.

“Kal El is more man than you ever will be, Stark!” she growled. “Your life a line of sequential fucks – how dare you speak like that for him, you insolent human?”

Tony cackled as she rushed to hit him only to be met with the golden energy shield that surrounded him. She roared pissed as her punches and kicks managed only to hurt her. In the meantime, Superman having lost the support of her body fell on his knees.

“I should hit you” Tony said to her “just for the insults and the poison you spat to Bruce but I don’t attack lad…” he shook his head “no, no, you’re not a lady. But still you have boobs and that other thing so I won’t hit you.”

Diana rattled her teeth.

“Is this why you’re goggling at me?”

Tony cocked his eyebrows and snorted.

“Trust me, sugar: I have seen far more dazzling bodies than yours and… absolutely mortal. And I’m not goggling but I’m sure that every pervert loser on this planet will spend endless hours of jerking off with your cheap porn…”

Diana launched a full attack with round kicks and blows only causing small explosions to the shield’s field and Tony’s yawn. Finally, she stopped: her pants from the futile effort sounding like roars of a wound beast.

Superman asked what she didn’t.

“What porn? What nonsense is this, Stark?”

“It’s how I learnt what you did. Bruce didn’t tell me anything: he is too proud and too strong…” he blinked and from his forearm emerged a round shaped hologram with the video from their intercourse on the rooftop. On the right top corner, the logo of GCN was visible.

The eyes of both lovers goggled; Superman lost more of his face’s color.
“Who shot this?” Diana hissed.

Tony shrugged.

“Tough!” he lolled his head on the side. “Now: you made me a promise, UFO – remember?” his voice was razor sharp.

Superman remembered.

“Since you’re not willing to do it yourself, I’ll help myself…” Tony stretched his arm and a white energy field wrapped Diana sending her to the wall unable to move. Then a glowing green dagger popped out from the launcher under Ironman’s wrist.

Superman stretched his head ready to take the blow: Stark wouldn’t stop where Bruce did.

“Tony, I know you hear me…”

Tony closed his eyes and inhaled: Bruce’s determined but warm voice sounded in his ear from the communication system of his helmet. The best hacker in the world, his little guy, had eventually managed to break his firewall. Yes, he could hear him and the chirping of the bats: his friend was in his cave. Not now, Bruce…he thought raising the dagger.

“Tony, I know how you feel but don’t do anything to Superman…You are hurt thinking that I’m suffering but I assure you that I’m okay…as long as I have you at my side.”

Tony aimed the dagger at Superman’s chest; Diana’s eyes widened.

“Do it, Stark, what are you waiting for?” Superman spat. “I know of what you’re made: I know that you wanted to kill me from the first moment you realized that Bruce loved me. Because you’re jealous…jealous of me being able to do what you don’t dare…”

Tony’s hand clenched the dagger’s hilt.

“Tony, for eighteen years you believed me dead; for eighteen years they separated us…I know what you’re ready to do: it is the reason you don’t answer me. But, Tony, if you do that we’re going to be separated again.”

Tony’s still eyes flickered.

“And this time it’ll be with your own will…” Bruce’s voice cracked. “And I’ll be forever haunted because I destroyed my best friend, my brother…As I killed my parents…”

Tony bit his lip and the launcher opened to swallow the dagger; to Superman’s and Diana’s astonished looks. He twisted his lips in disgust.

“Bruce saved your pathetic life…Again” he snapped and spat in Superman’s face.

Superman’s eyes bulged because right now the saliva felt more acid than the Kryptonite.

Tony activated the face plate, hiding his face; he turned and left the room like a boss closing the door with a loud bang.

Diana released from the weakened energy field rushed to Superman who began slowly recovering now that the Kryptonite was out of range. She was raving but Superman wasn’t hearing.

Tony marched on the thick carpet of the spacious corridor heading to the back metallic door he
smashed to get in: he had dropped a handful of dollars for the repairs. He was somewhat calmer.

“Tony, please talk to me…” Bruce was still there almost begging with his determined voice.

Tony just couldn’t hear that agony in his friend’s voice though he was a bit pissed with Bruce for stopping him. Albeit he knew that it was the best.

“Cool down, little guy… You saved his sorry ass” he grunted.

“It’s you who I care about, Tony” Bruce’s voice was serious.

“I’m leaving now; I feel dirty only for being at their presence.”

Bruce turned and looked at Selina who was sat on the computer bench beside him watching avidly his effort to dissuade Tony from what he was ready to do. He pressed his lips and although his face was solemn she discerned a shine of relief in his eyes.

“Okay…” he said. “He is on his way here.”

Selina closed her eyes and huffed.

“Good!” she opened her eyes and smirked. “Now we can go upstairs and relax – it’s late, kiddo, and you need rest.”

Bruce opened his mouth to reply but he stopped because the lift was descending. They both looked at Alfred getting out.

“Master Bruce, you have a call.”
"I’ll take it from here, thank you, Alfred.”

The Englishman gave a court nod.

“As you wish, sir. May I ask if we had any news on Master Anthony?” his expression was stoic as ever but Bruce could discern his agony under his cool blue eyes.

“I managed to speak with him” he answered smiling. “He’s on his way here…” he locked eyes with his butler. “Everything is fine, Alfred.”

“Thank Goodness! Thank you, sir…” he turned towards the lift but stopped. “Oh, I almost forgot: Miss Potts is here” Bruce nodded. “The dinner will be served in a while so it’d be so kind of you if you don’t linger in the cave. The children must eat early.”

“Children?” it should be ‘child’ unless… “Is Jason here?” his eyes shone.

“Yes, sir; he was with Master Grayson at the gym and I took the liberty to invite him to have dinner with us – of course, Ms. Todd was informed.”

“Thank you for everything, Alfred.”

The butler nodded grinning.

“You’re mostly welcome, sir” he was relieved seeing his young master at least grinning – and that shine in his eyes was most hopeful despite the fact Alfred knew how competent Bruce was in posing as nonchalant to not cause sadness to his loved ones.

Selina hurried to catch Alfred at the lift as Bruce pressed the button in his keyboard to transfer the line from the Manor; he looked at her.

“I’ll see you upstairs, kiddo” she said shaking her index warningly “don’t be late: I’m starving.”

“Call Steve to join us” Bruce told her and enjoyed the playful sparkle in her eyes.

“Okay” she said as the lift began ascending, though after the first jolt of delight for Bruce’s invitation to Steve Selina felt hesitant: she was afraid that being in the presence of a couple would twist the knife in Bruce’s wound.

“Bruce Wayne” he said on the microphone puzzled about his caller’s identity.

“Hello, Bruce” a hesitant, sad and a bit shaking female voice answered him and Bruce frowned.

“Ms. Kent?”

“Martha, sweetheart…” she corrected him gently.

Bruce licked his lips and pursed them looking at the waterfall; the call system in the cave was equipped with an isolator of external sounds.

“Of course…” he replied. “How can I help you, Martha?”

“I hope I’m not bothering you” her voice was shy.
“No, not at all: on the contrary, I’m happy to hear you” though he felt oddly since he was sure that she had seen already the horrible video: who hadn’t after all?

He heard a sigh from the other side of the line and then a gulp.

“How are you, honey?” she asked and her voice was raspy from deep concern and sadness. “I…I have seen…I’m terribly sorry, sweetheart…I couldn’t ever imagine that Clark would do such a horrible thing!”

Bruce yanked his head inhaling and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Martha, it’s alright…” he answered dryly. “Have you spoken with Clark?”

“No, I can’t find that brat!” she spat pissed. “I’m sure he is hiding from me” Bruce closed his eyes. “But as soon as I find him…”

“I don’t think he is hiding, Martha: Clark wouldn’t do that; maybe something came up.”

Martha chuckled bitterly.

“You still defend him…Yeah…Clark wouldn’t hide from his Ma but Clark wouldn’t cheat his man either.”

“Martha…”

“Are you alright, dear?” she sounded like being on the verge of tears. “I hope this didn’t affect your health…believe me: it doesn’t worth to let such things affect your health. You must focus on your recovery and forget everything else. Have you talked with him? Have you scolded him? I hope you gave him Hell!”

Bruce pressed his lips because under Ms. Kent’s angry voice he could discern her suffering for her son’s fall from grace.

“Yes, Martha, we talked and…cleared things. We finished it.”

“Uhu…” the lady on the other end gave her affirmation though it hurt her.

“It was for the best, Martha…”

“I’m not sure, my dear boy…”

Bruce remembered that night Clark had taken him to his parent’s house; Martha’s words coming from the depths of her heart.

“…I always dreaded that someday he’d lose his path: all this power can corrupt and the way some people sniff at him may take the better of him; or someone could find a way to control him into horrible deeds…But then he met you and since then I’m peaceful because he speaks about you in a way that shows his admiration, his respect: how much he cherishes you…I’m not good in this…You’re his moral compass, Bruce; his anchor…The warmth in his heart: a star that shows him the way. As long you’re by his side he is safe.”

“I don’t like that woman and…” she stopped abruptly. “What I’m saying…The important thing right now is you, sweetie: he broke your heart” Bruce closed his eyes and bit his lips. “I can’t believe he played like this with you…”
“He didn’t play with me, Martha” he replied calmly. “He meant what everything; he believed…but things change.”

“A few days ago he brought you here to meet me” Bruce nodded though the woman couldn’t see him. “I was making preparations to have you here for Christmas…” she laughed.

And Bruce reflected that.

“I’m sure it would have been very beautiful, Martha; thank you for all the love you gave to me; that you welcomed me so warmly.”

“He fooled both of us…” she said bitterly.

“No, Martha, no: Clark was fighting with himself; he didn’t want to break his promises” he breathed in “but it was above his power.”

“He is Superman, for God’s sake, sweetheart…Nothing is above his power.”

Martha was so angry with Clark, Bruce thought, and he didn’t want for him to lose his mother’s support.

“Martha, please, don’t be so harsh on him…” he heard her exclaim of despair.

“You love him so much even now that he cheated you like this – oh, my God! He should be on your side supporting you in your healing.”

“He did, Martha…He saved my life: without him, I’d have died. And weren’t for him I wouldn’t be able to rise from my bed. He did so many things for me that I couldn’t ever repay my debt.”

Martha huffed.

“I can’t believe that my son is so ungrateful! I’m sure the idiot even now doesn’t realize what have he done…what he lost…”

Bruce felt his breath began becoming harder and hastened to control it before Martha realize and believing that he is suffering, become more furious with Clark.

“Martha, believe me: it was better for both of us.”

“He wasn’t treating you right?”

Bruce shook his head: he just couldn’t admit that to her.

“No, it’s not that; but I know I’m not the right person for Clark and he deserves to be happy…This wasn’t going to last long and it is better it ended now before Clark could get hurt.”

Ms. Kent’s frowning was audible.

“And what about you, dear? He broke your heart; you needed him now more than ever and he walked away. How can you speak so kindly about him? He doesn’t deserve your forgiveness till he crawls back to you and beg you to take him back.”

Bruce chuckled.

“There’s nothing for me to forgive, Martha. I just want the best for Clark and I couldn’t offer him that.”
“But he was happy with you, dear! I was seeing it in his eyes… The days you were in coma… his despair… his tears… his weak anger. And then when you woke up: you can’t imagine the joy in his eyes – I could hear his heart flapping…” unconsciously Ms. Kent’s love for her son dripped from her words.

Bruce smiled: he could imagine, he have seen that happiness in the most beautiful eyes in the world.

“You made Clark a better human being, Bruce; you were his humanism, his morality, his love. Now, this woman…”

“Martha, Clark has all these qualities himself; he doesn’t need me… As for this woman… you’re his mother, you’re the most important person in his life. For that you must stay by his side…” he gulped. “I…I’ll continue… I will never stop caring about him” he breathed. “I won’t let anything happen to him.”

Ms. Kent cleared her throat and Bruce realized that she was touched.

“You’ve already forgiven him, huh?”

Bruce huffed.

“I told you, Martha, that there’s nothing to forgive; I’m grateful to your son: he saved my life, he gave me so much love” he chuckled “as a matter of fact, he gave me more than I could wish for… I’m the luckiest person in the world for having the love of your great son, Martha – even for a few months. The happiness he gave me…” he stopped to inhale. “I just can’t be angry with him.”

“You’re an angel, Bruce…and my son is a moron…I’m sorry, baby. I’m sure he didn’t apologize to you but I do.”

“Please, Martha, you don’t need to do that: I’m so happy I had the chance to meet you and the fact you called me is so kind. Do not have a worry about me – Clark’s existence in this world is enough for me to be satisfied” he pressed his lips. “Just do not give up on Clark, okay? He needs you and your guidance. And he is your son…”

Martha chuckled.

“You are my son too, Bruce…” she almost whispered and then coughed “if… if it’s alright, of course.”

Bruce rubbed his eyes with his fingers.

“It is an honor for me, Martha” he said serious. “And this makes me Clark’s brother!”

Ms. Kent laughed.

“I believe that Clark’s destiny is with you, Bruce. When this bad dream ends he’ll realize it…”

Bruce lowered his eyes and clenched the armrests of the wheelchair.

“Martha, I hope this isn’t true: Clark must find happiness and this can’t happen with me. However, I’ll always care for him and you. I want you to feel free to call me for whatever you need or for everything that troubles you” he chuckled. “You said that you feel me like your son, after all.”

The old woman laughed touched.

“Absolutely. Thank you, sweetheart… For me you’re the best Clark could ever have…And Clark
deep inside knows that and still loves you. You told me to not give up on him…” she breathed heavily. “It’d be too bold if I ask you the same?”

Bruce rubbed his forehead above his right eyebrow.

“I can’t give up on him, Martha…even if there’s no hope for being together again…I promised you that I’ll take care of him and I’ll keep my promise.”

“Okay, honey…Just calm down now, don’t be sad and take good care of yourself. I’m sure that it won’t be long before you walk again and I’ll be very proud of my second son…”

Bruce smiled.

“Thank you, Martha.”

Diana wore her royal red, long robe made of the finest silk to cover her naked body; she was wiping with a handkerchief the blood from Superman’s face. The Man of Steel sat almost slumped on the dark green corner couch; the sickness from the Kryptonite and the pain from Stark’s punch had almost evaporated leaving some discomfort behind yet Superman was morose keeping his lips pressed hard and his eyebrows knitted: he didn’t want his affair with Diana be so soon exposed, especially in this embarrassing way.

He reached the remote on the waist table and switched on the small flat TV that was built in the wall above the white wooden rack where various pots were settled.

The Amazon stopped treating Superman’s wound which after all had almost healed and watched him with narrowed eyes. She stood up and clenched her hips with both hands.

“Stark’s words have affected you that much?” she cocked an eyebrow looking but not focusing on the fast changing channels.

Superman stopped his search in a 24 hour news channel and waited. He looked up at Diana and hugged her waist bringing her down next to him. She crossed her arms, her expression exasperated as Superman’s face became grimmer watching the video starring him and Diana. Finally, he pressed the button closing the TV after only a few seconds: the spectacle nauseated him.

“Who shot that abomination?!” he spat ruffling his hair.

The Amazon frowned.

“Abomination? You consider our coupling an abomination?”

Superman shook his head and kissed her lips.

“Of course not, Diana. Abomination is what was done with our coupling: some bastard shot and posted our most precious moment and made it a spectacle for everyone.”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“So what?” her voice was full of contempt.

Superman locked eyes with her.
“I don’t want people see Superman like this: you feel fine with everyone seeing you like this?”

“It is definitely disrespectful for me that mortals can see me naked and in the most private of moments and they should have been punished” her eyes flashed menacingly. “But since we are not in my world where divine punishment would have been delivered, I won’t intend on give it much thought or trouble myself with that” she shook her head.

But Superman’s eyes were shadowed.

“You give them too much value, Kal” she said softly. “You’re superior of the entire humankind: you shouldn’t care about their opinion. You did nothing wrong, after all: Wayne had declared publicly that you two didn’t have an affair” she cocked her eyebrows. “As for him, what you two had was finished before that video surfaced, so what’s the problem?”

Clark couldn’t tell her that he felt bad because his Ma and his friends would see that video and thus learn that he cheated Bruce. He couldn’t tell Diana that he was raised by humans and had human friends which he loved and cherished and their opinion was always important for him.

Diana huffed impatient.

“You act as if you’re going to be scolded like a misbehaving student…C’mon, dearest! You’re Kal El, the Lord of Krypton, Superman: the one who protects and saves them all the time. They worship you. They have no right to judge the acts of a God!”

Superman smiled: Diana had the ability to lift his worries or make them look less important. However he couldn’t stop his mind from thinking his Smartphone that lay forgotten in his apartment where he had left it a couple of days ago when he left hastily to stop the collapse of a building. After that he had rushed to the Wayne Manor suspicious of Bruce cheating him…he found him with Thor and then went to New York…

He wanted to laugh loudly with himself: he was wary that Bruce might cheat him and later sure that he had done it already while he was the one who was on the verge to cheat Bruce. And now everyone who mattered knew it.

He was glad he didn’t have access to his Smartphone both because it would make a lame impression to Diana (someone like Superman using a petty gadget made for mortals!) and because he wasn’t ready to face his loved ones. Though he knew that soon he’d have to…

Diana put her arms around him and captured his lips in a breathtaking kiss. Then unlocked their mouths, touched his cheek and looked him in the eyes.

“We have finally found each other…” she breathed sensually. “That’s what counts for me, Kal…” her stare became tough. “For you?” she demanded.

He grabbed her waist and laid her flat on her back on the couch bringing his body upon hers. He untied the belt of her robe and unwrapped her body diving his mouth to her neck that stretched to give him free access while she folded her arms around his neck.

Superman lifted slightly his head and locked eyes with her.

“I feel I found my destiny” he said. “I don’t care if everyone finds out…on the contrary, I’m proud they know…”

Diana smirked and her eyes shone gleefully.
After Bruce’s paraplegia was confirmed the passage from the Manor’s first floor to the cave had been widened (Lucius and Tony did the job personally) in order to contain a wheelchair because as slim as Tony’s wheelchair was still the old dimensions of the passage were forbidding.

As he moved out of the lift and steered the wheelchair through the dark passage that was illuminated by the chair’s dim lighting, Bruce once again thought of thanking his friends: he had done it many times already but his gratitude to them was nudging him all the time.

Of course before stepping out of the passage to the corridor he listened carefully for any presence that should not see him there. Now with Richard and Jason at the Manor they should be careful as during Falcone’s reign.

“You can come out…” Selina whispered; she was leaning on the wall, with one foot touching the wall, her arms crossed.

Every time he opened the passage to get out steering the wheelchair, his paraplegia struck him strongly. It was so much easier to do that on your feet despite the fact the chair was slim and rather easy to move. However he grinned to his friend hiding his discomfort.

“It was Clark’s mother” he said to her because Selina was too discreet to ask though Bruce knew that she was curious.

She puckered her lips.

“Yeah…He had taken you to meet her and I’m sure she liked you…Poor woman seeing her son like this, learning that he is a scum.”

Bruce tilted his head on the side regarding her disapprovingly.

“He isn’t a scum, Sel.”

She detached from the wall and unfolded her arms.

“You have to be a scum to punch someone while you got super powers!” Bruce sighed and Selina nodded and leaned to him. “You thought that I didn’t feel the swelling in your face? I didn’t say anything in the greenhouse because I didn’t want to worsen your upset” her voice softened. “It was almost dark, sure, yet eighteen years I learnt to visualize your injuries in the darkness by touching…”

Bruce pressed his lips and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Of course…” he replied.

“I understand why you covered the marks with makeup…If Tony had seen you battered he’d have killed that bastard no matter what you told him.”

Bruce knew that but didn’t answer.

“What else he did, Bruce?” her voice was a bit raspy but determined.

Bruce yanked his head and locked eyes with her.

“Nothing I didn’t consent to” he replied calm but absolute.

Selina nodded; all these years they had learnt to figure things about each other without needing the
other to say them. She pressed her lips till they lost their color.

“At least, let Leslie examine you: there could be a serious damage” she said understanding what Superman had done and her friend would never utter “she’s here for dinner.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes and tilted his head on the side.

“The conspirators are summoned, huh?” he chuckled.

“Me, the first of them!” it was Tony who just put his feet on the final step of the right stair.

Bruce turned to see his friend but despite the distance between them Tony had managed to be there in a couple of seconds; he hugged his friend kneeling down. Bruce smiled.

“You’re alright?” he asked eyeing Tony carefully.

Tony pouted and looked around.

“Me?” he laughed. “This insults me, little guy… Tony Stark is a formidable opponent. And Superman, believe me, isn’t as…super as his name indicates” he sobered. “You saved his life, little guy…”

Bruce locked eyes with Selina who sighed.

“I’m glad you didn’t do something you’d have regretted later, Tony.”

The older man shook his face in conviction.

“I wouldn’t regret it, little guy.”

“Tony, I know who you are: you’re not a killer.”

Tony nodded.

“This wouldn’t feel like a killing” he looked conspiratorially Selina who had killed Chill.

Bruce clenched his fingers around the armrests.

“You’re S.H.I.E.L.D.’s director, Tony: you worked so hard to heal the damaged status of the organization. Would you like it if all this was destroyed because of me?” he blinked. “I wouldn’t…”

Tony brushed Bruce’s upper arms.

“You’re more important than S.H.I.E.L.D. and anything else.”

“Tony, you’re what matters to me: doing this madness would have taken you away from me. Nothing is worthy of that, Tony. And, after all, there was no reason to hurt Clark: I’m perfectly fine. Breakups happen every day…it is normal.”

Tony gulped and closed his eyes: once he had yelled at Bruce that he wasn’t normal.

“Not when it comes to you” he said dead serious “the one you love should stay with you forever because you’re special and there’s nobody better than you” Bruce shook his friend. “Someone playing with your feelings is pervert not normal and that alien played with your feelings…”

“No, he didn’t; he made me happy. And I knew that it wouldn’t have lasted so I’m fine…somewhat
relieved…waiting the unavoidable is worse” he smiled and patted Tony’s shoulder. “I’m the luckiest man in the planet having all you around me – I don’t want to lose anyone of you. I need you here, Tony” he locked eyes with him “and if you had hurt Clark you’d be gone…” Tony cleared his throat that felt constricted. “We lost so much time, big guy: let’s not lose anymore…”

Tony dragged Bruce to his chest and squeezed him; he closed his eyes rubbing his little guy’s cold back. Indeed, he didn’t want to lose Bruce again, especially for a motherfucker like Kent. He let Bruce and sniffed.

“I smell something delicious and I’m starving. Ufff! It’s nice being away from that suffocating flowery odor…”

Bruce frowned.

“What do you mean?”

Selina touched from the scene she just witnessed came closer interested.

“I found Superman in…” he bit his lip because saying that Superman was in the Amazon’s home would hurt Bruce, but the younger man understanding waved his hand prompting him.

“It’s okay” Bruce knew that Clark wouldn’t bring her in his tiny apartment; she was too arrogant to accept something so inferior for her lover. Clark didn’t want her contempt.

“First I looked for him in the Daily Planet and his flat but he wasn’t there so I figured that they were at her place. So I gathered info from every possible satellite and camera and I found that they went to a luxurious apartment in Metropolis’ suburbs: her apartment… When the alien opened the door without peeking first – the idiot – and I followed him in the living room, I was literally attacked by the smell of flowers and plants; pleasant, warm smell but at the same time suffocating, overwhelming, upsetting. The living room’s walls were decorated with white shelves filled with pots of various sizes with all kinds of unknown plants and flowers – and small tables the same. It was dizzying but Ironman’s armor can filter the air, thankfully.”

Bruce’s eyes flashed.

“Exactly as her room at Dolcetto…” he recalled his flashback.

“Dolcetto?!” both Selina and Tony exclaimed and Bruce looked wary around for anyone listening.

“Don’t worry” Selina said “the boys are in Grayson’s room.”

“And Pepper, Alfred and Leslie are in the kitchen.”

Bruce nodded.

“Remember I had told you my suspicions of this woman not being the real Diana of Themyscira?” they nodded. “I had a flashback with her: I had met her in the past.”

Tony’s eyebrows arched.

“That’s where Dolcetto comes, huh?”

“Exactly. In this flashback I re-experienced a moment from Dolcetto…” he wasn’t going to tell them all the details. “I saw again a woman, one of Falcone’s occasional mistresses, one his favorite; she was called Vivian and she had honey colored, long hair but everything else was the same with the
supposed Amazon Princess.”

Tony tilted his head on the side and rubbed his goatee.

“I know what you’re thinking, Tony: I thought myself that it might be caused by Crane’s treatment; so I called Mr. Petrou and he confirmed that indeed this woman existed: with the characteristics I saw in my flashback.”

Selina smirked.

“That would explain why she is a slut…” she sniggered and Tony cackled and made her the thumps up.

“What I noticed in my flashback was that her room in Dolcetto was filled with pots of various sizes bearing flowers and peculiar plants; the smell was dazzling but also suffocating, exactly as you described it, Tony. Vivian had appeared all of a sudden and disappeared in the same way; nobody knew anything about her and we never heard again about her.”

Tony shrugged.

“There’s no fucking way an Amazon Princess to be a whore at Falcone’s.”

“Absolutely” Bruce answered “and if we discover the truth about her identity we’ll also have a lead to the whole plan.”

Both his friends rolled their eyes.

“You still care about the sonovabitch, huh?” Tony asked what both thought; he shook his head and ran his hand through his hair; his disapproval evident. “You know, Bruce, I wish that impostor do the worst damage to that scum!”

Bruce pressed his lips and blinked uncomfortable; Selina felt for his discomfort though she agreed with Tony.

“Tony, if she is an impostor – and I believe she is – then there must be a broader plan behind her…a plan that doesn’t target only Superman. I think that if someone wants to control Superman then the danger is for everyone…I mean if she isn’t the Amazon Princess how she manages to fly? To fight like this? To be so strong? And her Lasso?” he widened his eyes. “You see there are many unanswered questions. All this can’t be performed just by one person. Think! She first appeared at Thasos when those green creatures attacked me: how she managed the perfect timing?” he arched his eyebrows and was glad to see Tony pouting thoughtful

Selina pursed her lips and tapped her index finger.

“You told Superman about your flashback and your theory?”

Bruce cleared his throat.

“Of course but…he didn’t believe me: he believed that it was my jealousy that dictated that flashback and that I just wanted to slander her” he replied indifferent though it was evident to his friends that it still hurt.

Tony tilted his head on the side and cocked his eyebrows.

“Then whatever happens to him it’s his choice: he could have listened to you.”
But Selina was looking at Bruce’s melancholic eyes.

“Tony, he was under some kind of effect that he couldn’t fight…like when Ra’s concoction made my body affecting him. We can’t hold him responsible for being trapped by her…”

“Yes, we can!” Tony shook his head but then he remembered something and frowned. “Effect or no effect the scum still pretends: at some point he threat to reveal your secret” in Bruce’s eyes flickered a sparkle of real pain “but when I scolded him for his indecency he pretended to regret it and said that he didn’t know why he said that.”

Bruce’s eyes got warm.

“Maybe he had a glimpse of clarity? I mean maybe he overcame the effect for just a second? You were using Kryptonite, right?”

Tony snorted and shook his head. Then patted Bruce’s shoulder.

“Do not have false hopes, little guy…He was acting trying to save some grace.”

Selina didn’t say anything though Tony looked at her for confirming his words. She just couldn’t give another stab to Bruce because in his nonchalant eyes she could discern the deep care about that man and the tormenting flames of hope. Hope not for getting Superman back but for Superman escaping that woman and the potential enemies behind her. Hope that Superman would be saved.

Thankfully, light footsteps approached them.

“Gentlemen, Miss Kyle, Mister Rogers has just arrived and the dinner will be served in a few minutes” Alfred’s poised voice shattered the tension and a big radiant smile lit Selina’s face.

“Sorry, boys but I’m starving” she hurried to the stairs and Bruce beamed looking at Tony who pursed his lips.

“For what exactly are you starved, sugar?” Tony asked her playfully and the young woman turned to him and popped out her tongue.

Tony laughed and Bruce grabbed his hand grateful that his friend was here with him without Superman’s blood on his hands.

The sensual melodies of a Luis Armstrong jazz solo filled the semi dark vast space making warmer the atmosphere despite the cold Gotham skyline that gloomy peeped inside from the whole wall window. A sweet, soft blush light coming from the four corners of the hall broke slightly the darkness, adding to the red-golden flames in the round, built-in fireplace.

Thomas Elliot wearing only his blue royal silk robe was massaging the nape of his mistress. They were in his apartment’s living room, sprawled at the huge white L sofa; on the elliptic glass waist table lay two half empty glasses with red wine and a bottle.

Thomas touched softly his lips on the girl’s neck and she shuddered and moaned causing his gloating smirk. Kelly was dressed in her short red silk - laced nightdress which barely covered half her thighs as she kneeled on the sofa for Thomas to massage her neck. She was holding her long hair to not thwart his fingers and her eyes were closed in delight.
Her boyfriend was three days out of town for a congress and Kelly had missed him desperately; not that she wasn’t calling him ten times a day but most of them he wasn’t answering because he was busy since he was one of the major speakers of the conference.

But now he was back, Kelly was happy and the diamond bracelet he gave her as a present wasn’t the only reason – the dark red velvet slim case laid open on the table the elegant jewel sparkling in the dim light. Kelly was happy because she missed so much his touch…And now he was compensating: he was too tired to take her out in one of the luxurious restaurants he loved yet as soon as he stepped his foot on Gotham soil he rushed to her flat and brought her to his own whole floor apartment.

“I leave Gotham only for three days and look what happens…” he laughed.

“You mean the video with Superman and Wonder Woman?” she asked. “You saw it.”

Thomas rolled his eyes: of course, you idiot girl…

“Yeah, some colleagues came upon it and told me. And they did it on Gotham’s City Hall rooftop: it seems that this city has something arousing…” he chuckled.

Kelly giggled.

“Only for superheroes?” she asked sensually turning her head slightly to look at him innocently.

He smiled in what Kelly thought his most charming smile.

“Absolutely not, babe…”

Thomas pushed gently, slowly the thin straps of Kelly’s nightdress and rolled them down her shoulders till the wrists. The fine silk assembled to the girl’s waist freeing her small breasts and leaving her breathless as the charming doctor trailed kisses to her neck’s base.

She tilted her head to the other side to let plenty of space to Thomas’ hot lips and she plunged her fingers in his locks, sucking his expensive cologne.

Thomas was fully aware of how much in love was the young nurse with him: she was his…His hands began fondling her ribs sensually slowly going up to caress her tender breasts making her shake uncontrollably and whine.

“I missed you, Kelly…” he whispered inside her ear, nibbling her lobe. “You can’t imagine how hard those three nights were…”

Kelly snorted.

“Yeah, sure…I bet you enjoyed the company of some super model…”

Thomas bit teasingly her ear lobe and slipped his hand under her nightdress groping her thigh up to her buttock.

“You know, kiddo, microsurgery congresses aren’t Kate Upton’s places of choice…” he groaned and the air from his mouth tickled Kelly’s back before hot lips began tracing her shoulder line.

She sighed as Thomas’ magic hands lowered the thin straps of her panties and then pushed them down till the red laced piece of cloth was on the floor.

“I’d have gone anywhere Dr. Elliot was…”
Thomas cocked an eyebrow and with a swift motion turned her face first to him pulling her hair down gently for his lips to suck her breasts; her body was trembling in his hands, her breaths already raspy.

“How was our little clinic all these days?” he asked indifferent but for him was the main concern and the reason Kelly was with him.

She raised her head with effort and chuckled as the man mock bit her nipple.

“You’re so dutiful, Tommy…Just got back from a congress…exhausted and your interest is on the clinic you volunteer…I admire you…”

Thomas wanted to snigger because his interest wasn’t in the bloody clinic but in Leslie Thompkins and her protégé, Bruce. Yet as his hands pushed the nightdress down and off Kelly’s horny body Thomas was sure that her admiration peaked.

“Everything was calm…” she whispered, her head falling backwards as Thomas’ tongue licked her flat belly. “We’re not living in Falcone’s era anymore…and Dr. Thompkins seems less nervous…”

Thomas placed her flat on her back and took off his robe revealing his naked body to Kelly’s dazzled eyes; he dove his head to her groin and began licking her throbbing clit making her breath asthmatic and her body arch. She began yelling when he sucked…

“And when that video surfaced?” he asked but Kelly’s eyes were fogged and her heartbeat too crazy to register any words so he repeated the question stopping his treatment.

“Wh…what?”

Thomas growled.

“The video must have damaged Leslie’s tranquility…”

“Why?” her voice was frustrated because she lost the stimulation in her groin. “Ah! You mean the supposed love affair between Superman and Wayne? But Wayne denied it recently…”

Thomas resumed his mouth’s strokes on her vagina and Kelly hot and sweaty collapsed on the sofa; her thighs spread to leave space to Thomas convulsed making her body arch every time the man’s teeth grazed softly the sensitive skin.

“But who believed him, huh?”

Kelly giggled and fisted the sofa as Thomas’ tongue entered her; she cried.

“A…actually, Thompkins left a…a…abruptly the clinic toooooodaaay after the video was…” she couldn’t end her phrase because her panting was too intense. “We were…ah!...commenting… oh!...Superman’s…ugh! when we saw her…oi!...leaving…”

But Thomas didn’t need anymore; he smirked and led his aroused length to Kelly’s gaping entrance watching smugly her salivating mouth.

A video broke your little heart, Brucey…A blow below the belt…

He thought as he thrust in one solid move inside Kelly.

“More, Dr. Elliot!” she screamed fisting desperately his hair and he was grateful for his soundproof apartment.
I wonder, Brucey...How many more such blows can you get before collapsing?

Pepper stood in front of Tony keeping a distance between them; her green eyes were ablaze, pissed and Tony had no mood to play with her; he was dead serious.

They were in the kitchen alone: Alfred and Leslie had gone to prepare the dining room.

“Where have you been?” she demanded and Tony approached pressing his lips and looking her.

“I think you already know that…”

Pepper crossed her arms.

“You blocked every channel of communication, even your trace in the satellite: I was worried and Bruce…” she sighed. “He was sick with worry – desperate to find you before you…”

Tony stepped even closer and put his hands on her shoulder, Pepper glaring at him.

“How could you do that to him? Especially after what Superman did with that bitch…Fine, I know you didn’t care about me, but Bruce?”

Tony’s eyes widened and he shook his head.

“Of course I care about you, babe, but I didn’t want anyone attempt to stop me…”

Pepper snapped her eyes closed.

“Killing Superman? What imbecile would decide that? I know that thinking Bruce in pain is tormenting but still…” she clutched her forehead. “Whom do you think you’d help with that? Bruce would have been devastated if you succeeded…” she breathed deeply. “And I…”

Tony smiled self satisfied cocking an eyebrow.

“And you?” he asked slyly.

Pepper clenched her jaw and slapped him hard on the face.

“Ouch!” he exclaimed and brushed his red cheek.

“I’d be relieved of your stupidity and irresponsibility!” she shouted.

But Tony gagged her putting abruptly his arms around her and capturing her mouth with his, kissing passionately and dragging her resisting body to touch his. They stayed cuddled after the kiss and Tony caressed her long, red hair.

“Bruce found me and stopped me…”

“Thank God for Bruce…” Pepper huffed. “But next time I’ll put you in an Asylum…”

Tony rubbed her back.

“As long as I have Dr. Quinzel as my therapist…I think that therapy with her will be…”

Pepper stabbed her stiletto heel to his foot and Tony screamed.
“I think you’re a red hair sadist, babe…” he said dead serious and Pepper looked him in the eyes.

“Only with you, Tinman…”

Selina was talking avidly with Steve, their eyes locked: he sat on the high backed armchair in front of the lit old fireplace and she was sprawled like a cat on his lap. And the real cat of the house, Hero, was licking his paws meticulously curled up on the carpet.

Leslie and Alfred were in the dining room and having being expelled and denied his offering for help, Bruce had brought his chair in front of the arched shaped window looking at the right part of the grounds. He always loved the view from that window even when he was too short and he had to stretch and stand on his toes to see – now at the wheelchair felt like then.

Suddenly, something caught his attention and he hurried outside – Selina too absorbed to notice, thankfully. He slithered the ramp and stopped before Thor who smiled seeing him.

“You sensed my arrival…I should have known…”

Bruce shook his head.

“Is everything alright?”

Thor looked at him.

“Funny you ask me that…I must ask that.”

Bruce nodded.

“You saw the video…” he twisted his lips.

“I’m sorry, Bruce” Thor’s voice was deep.”I know he was treating you bad yet I wouldn’t believe that Superman was able to do this…Of course you asked me if I traced Loki’s influence on him so I should have suspected that things were serious… But he did a whole jealous scene to you that day and the next day he coupled with another person…” he shook his head disappointed. “How are you feeling?”

Bruce smiled and gazed at the frozen scenery. The sky was clear and filled with sparkling stars; the silence was relaxing and Bruce sucked the clean, cool air.

“I’m fine, Thor: I knew that this was inevitable…I had seen them that night you met me at the alley.”

Thor nodded.

“I realized that when I learnt about the video…that explained the reason you were so tired that night…” he squatted and locked eyes with Bruce. “You don’t deserve that, Bruce” he whispered and pulled out of his armor a small glowing vial; it was shaped like a tear and looked like made of melt diamond.

Bruce frowned and Thor’s eyes relished on the way the divine light highlighted the human’s beautiful face.

“This is from Eir, the goddess of healing” he pursed his lips seeing Bruce’s blank eyes. “It contains the tears of the first Easter dawn…it eases the pain of the heart…and prepares the heart to welcome to a new love…” he offered the vial to Bruce who stared at it almost frightened.
His body got rigid as if he expected to be attacked; he just brushed the vial with his fingertips and didn’t take it.

“Thank you, Thor, and please, do give my gratitude to Eir…but I can’t take it…”

Thor frowned.

“Why?” he asked astonished by his denial.

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I want to learn from my mistakes…this pain would remind me to not repeat the same mistake and thus many people will be saved from the consequences of my idiocy. I must cope with my own strength like every other human being.”

Thor’s eyes filled with admiration but also bitter realization.

“You deserve the best, Bruce…And it is a matter of time before someone gives you true love…” he frowned and smiled. “But you don’t want to love again – in a romantic way…”

“This kind of love isn’t for me” Bruce retorted with conviction, his eyes fervently determined.

“But you’re love incarnated, Bruce: everyone around you knows that!”

Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Justice is what motivates me” he said “my heart is a piece of ice.”

Thor raised his eyes to the sky cursing Superman and his betrayal that turned that beautiful heart into stone…only for Bruce’s own happiness because Bruce’s heart – Thor knew it – would stay forever open for every human being.

“Fine” he consented “but keep it as a talisman…” he cupped Bruce’s hands in his and placed softly the vial in them.

Bruce felt the vibration of the divine object and yanked his head, inhaling freezing air, feeling his body revitalized.

“How you discovered the video, Thor?” he asked to divert the discussion in things that mattered.

The blond god lowered his eyes.

“Loki told me.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“So his interest continues to be focused on Gotham…We must be prepared for the time he meets with Joker or Crane to organize their next ‘prank’.”

Thor smiled realizing the clever way the human diverted the discussion in an innocent subject. He stood.

“I’ll return to Asgard immediately and keep my eyes on him. Good night, Bruce” he turned to leave. “And please, change your mind about Eir’s elixir.”

Bruce felt bad because it was as if he had told Thor to leave.
“Thor, don’t leave” the god turned and his baby blue eyes glimmered. “Would you like to have dinner with us?”

Thor’s eyes widened because as much as humans goggled at him apart from Tony nobody had invited him to dinner. He smiled.

“I don’t want to intrude in your family life…”

Bruce chuckled and shook his head.

“With Tony and Steve Rogers around the table is already like a mini Avengers’ meeting so…you don’t have to worry. And Alfred loves to have many people to enjoy his cooking.”

Thor kneeled again and put his hands on Bruce’s shoulders.

“Thank you, Bruce.”

He shrugged.

“You should thank Alfred: he takes care of everything.”

Jason goggled as he and Dick entered the vast dining room: it wasn’t just the champagne colored tiles of the floor that shone like gems where the floor wasn’t covered by the thick carpet. Neither the rectangular table from brown wood covered with a rectangular white linen tablecloth; nor the chairs that they were simple but still looked like elegant work of art; nor the beautiful dinnerware that sparkled in the light; the three crystal, almost transparent candlesticks placed in equal space between them; the green, real leaves that were spread on the tablecloth. Neither the chandelier with the crystal lamps that send soft light around nor the fireplace on the opposite wall decorated with crème colored stones. The all glass rack with few but elegant decorative artifacts.

“Holly shit! Ironman, Captain America an’ Thor in the same place!” Jason exclaimed and everyone looked at him amused.

Dick snorted and elbowed him.

“They came to confront the monster in the wheelchair…”

Jason chuckled.

“Let me introduce you” Bruce offered smiling. “Although you know most of our company: this is Miss Pepper Potts and Selina Kyle” the boy’s eyes widened at seeing the two gorgeous women “and Thor, Steve Rogers and Tony Stark” he then turned to the adults “and these fine young gentlemen are Richard Grayson, my ward and Jason Todd, his best friend.”

“Nice to meet ya, guys” Jason said and Dick mumbled something similar.

Jason continued staring at the Avengers and Dick leaned to his ear.

“Don’t tell me you’ll ask their autographs…”

“Why not? I’ll snatch fat bucks for each…”

Dick rolled his eyes.
“You’re insufferable…”

Tony looked at the boys wrapping his arm around the chair’s back.

“Between us, boys, I’m sure the only Avenger you’d want to see is Natasha…” he tilted his head on the side and arched his eyebrows as the boys exchanged embarrassed glances blushing.

“Is her boobs really so gorgeous?” Jason asked and Dick elbowed him hard while Bruce laughed. “Wha’? TV changes things…”

Tony winked.

“I like that fella” he sighed. “Besides I’m so close to your age…”

Pepper snorted.

“Sure…in maturity.”

Tony leaned his head to the boys.

“My mommy…Be careful of mammas, boys…”

After the dinner, everyone gathered at the grand salon to drink coffee and chat.

Bruce noticed that Richard had left the room and excused himself to find the boy. He found him in the small back salon gazing at the grounds from the whole wall framed window, caressing Hero in his arms.

“When your grandmother comes back we’ll repeat that dinner” he said softly.

Dick turned to him with narrowed enraged eyes.

“When my granny comes back I won’t see you ever again!”

Bruce lowered his eyes.

“Fair enough…I’m sorry for what you’re being through, Richard; I know you don’t like me.”

The boy let Hero on the floor and rushed to Bruce.

“Don’t like you?” he sniggered “you wish! I hate you!”

“I understand” Bruce answered stoic.

“If you thought that you’d impress me with all these fucking heroes around, you’re stupid!”

“I didn’t make it to impress you: Tony is my friend and the Avengers are his colleagues and friends. Richard” he pressed his lips; he wanted to hold the boy’s shoulders but he knew it was unacceptable “I’m honestly sorry for having to stay with me but there’s no other way…but I assure you: it’d be temporary.”

Dick jerked his head upwards.

“There is another way! Get out of the way and let me live with my uncle!” Bruce looked at him and Dick nodded. “Yeah…the one who should be with me right now and the one you thwart to get near me!” he rushed to the opposite to leave the room.
“Richard…” Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

Dick stopped on his heels and tilted his head to his unwanted guardian.

“You lived eighteen years imprisoned by Falcone: why are you doing the same to me? It’s not enough that I lost my family because of you?” he ran away and Bruce held his forehead, a headache developing swiftly like a wave.

He let his hand drop to his lap where Hero had just climbed; he had heard young feet approaching with vitality and he didn’t want Jason to see him like this. He turned his wheelchair and smiled to Jason who stopped abruptly.

“Oh!” he exclaimed surprised seeing Bruce.

“My presence is annoying?” he asked.

Jason pouted and shook his head.

“No, man; I just didn’t expect to find ya here…I was lookin’ for Dick.”

“He went probably to his room…”

Jason approached with his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

“I see…He gave ya a Hell again, huh? Are ya okay? Ya seem a bit pale…do ya want me to call the grandpa?”

Bruce laughed for the ‘grandpa’ for Alfred. Jason pouted.

“Dicky is my best buddy but I admit he’s a dick to ya… Sorry for the term…”

“It’s okay, Jason” he smiled “I grown up in a whorehouse surrounded by thugs… And thank you; Dick is lucky to have you” he patted the boy’s shoulders. “Thank you for that – you’re a great young man.”

Jason shook his head.

“Nah…I’m a punk: ya can ask…”

Bruce laughed.

“Jason, I’m happy every time you come here but I don’t want your mother to feel that we take you from her.”

Jason frowned.

Wha’? No…no! Mom for years was all alone struggling to feed us an’ nobody cared…” he pressed his small lips. “She was doin’ drugs an’ sellin’ to get her dose…She did time in jail…” he said in a voice that didn’t remind at all the cheerful little punk.

Bruce nodded; he knew that already.

“You are a very brave boy, Jason…Your mother must be very proud of you and you of her.”

“Now you gave her a job an’ show interest for me…an’ she is happy.”
Bruce nodded grinning.

“Listen to me, Jason: for whatever you or your mother need I want you to come to me – do not hesitate, okay?” the boy nodded. “The same goes for Richard: there’s no chance he’ll ever come and confide in me so” he shook his head “I don’t want you to betray his trust, no, no way. But if things become serious…”

Jason nodded.

“Ya’re a good guy, aren’t ya?”

Bruce chuckled.

“Nah…I just want to see happy people around me, that’s all” the boy laughed. “Your mother will expect you, so say good night to Richard and off we go. We’ll put your motorbike to the trunk.”

Jason frowned.

“You are braver than what people believe.”

“Why’s that?”

“Joker is loose an’ he targets ya…but ya leave yar company of superheroes to come to town.”

“He or anyone else won’t expect me in a small car and the car is bulletproof. And between us, I need some fresh air” he frowned “we can’t say that Gotham’s air is fresh, huh?” Jason pouted and shook his head. “But we do love that air, right Jason?”

“Mmm…ya said ‘small car’? So we won’t ride that monster?”

Bruce chuckled.

“Some other time, cross my heart.”

It was half past midnight. Bruce had delayed going to sleep as much as he could: most of the times he didn’t have a problem to stay alone, on the contrary he needed some loneliness. But tonight he wanted to stay in the common rooms with his loved ones: maybe it was that he didn’t want to be in the master bedroom where every good or bad moment he had with Clark would haunt him.

Leslie had asked a last time to examine him.

“Now I see the reason you honored us with your presence, Dr. Thompkins” he retorted playfully.

She frowned.

“What are you saying, young man: it’s not the first time I had dinner with you.”

“Yes, but this time you wanted to observe your patient for any sign of weakness, right?”

Leslie smirked.

“I always like to combine work and pleasure…” she answered teasingly.

She leaned to him. Selina with Steve had left the Manor earlier because she wanted to show him her
apartment; Alfred went to make his night tea and Tony with Pepper had a tele-meeting with some cross Atlantic partners. As for Dick, after the short interaction with Bruce he went to his room and stayed there.

So only Hero was with them stretched on Bruce’s lap, licking his paw and purring.

“Bruce, let me examine you” the youth closed his eyes. “Just your heart…at least.”

Bruce thought his nipples bearing the marks of the slight burns Clark did with his heat vision and the teeth marks and bruises all over his body. He denied once again.

But now after Leslie left and Tony with Pepper went to their bedroom, Bruce couldn’t delay it anymore: it was almost the time Alfred went to sleep too and he didn’t want to torment him keeping the old man awake to make him company.

So he sat before the big window and stared outside where Superman hovered last night: he almost wished seeing him again. It seemed like a year had passed: this day was endless…dragging and dragging…Clark coming back…

He pressed his lips; that wouldn’t happen. He yanked his head and clenched the armrests: always pressing your lips with every misfortune. Swallow the pain, grit your teeth and comfort yourself saying that it’s not so bad, after all – it doesn’t matter. Smile because your loved ones are all around and you don’t want them more sorrowful for you…But you don’t smile only to them: you force yourself to do that even when you’re alone, slapping yourself saying that it’ll pass and you shouldn’t break from something like this…Everytime clenching your fists to take strength and continue.

But maybe for once you should succumb to sadness? Stop fighting the depression and just let the sorrow wash your body and soul? He shook his head disapprovingly: no, he couldn’t allow that, although some times like now this option seemed tempting, to just stop fighting the sadness: like when he was a weak, cripple being in Falcone’s hands having seen his parents being murdered.

He chuckled bitterly: sorrow and bitterness were always there inside him; the foundations of his existence – he just decided to take from them the helm when Ra’s breathed confidence to him: confidence that he could defeat his enemies and save innocent people. He blinked: but he would never be entirely saved… However, he always felt them – sadness, bitterness, hopelessness, depression -; he recognized them but just let them be…float around.

He ran his hands in his hair and closed his eyes; when he opened them again, he moved to the bed that was ready for him to sleep; Hero was already asleep in his basket.

Bruce noticed that the pillows were brand new and grinned: Alfred takes care of everything…My good Alfred.

He looked at the bed indecisive but in the end took off his robe determined and slipped under the blankets turning off the table lamp and the secret lighting behind the headboard.

His body above the waist screamed from all kinds of pain; the hardship and fatigue of the day taking their toll despite the fact he had a nap at midday. The pain was so intense that stopped his respiration for a few seconds and he groaned. He stared at the slowly dancing flames in the fireplace hoping to divert his mind from the pain and be lulled.

But a thought cracked like a bolt his mind: what if Clark decided to remove the energy casts from his body?

“The energy casts are property of the Fortress and serve me.”
He shook his head: that would render him completely immobile and bound to a bed, at least till Tony, Lucius and Leslie found something to replace them. No…Clark would never do that, even if he was under the influence of that woman. Bruce inhaled deeply and let the air slowly leave his lungs: he had made arrangements for returning to Clark what belonged to him.

Clark…Only the thought made him feel like his chest was bleeding again.

*I believed that we would fight this together as we did that night in the greenhouse; that I could help you defeat your demons as you helped me escape mine. But you didn’t want me and my presence only made your demons stronger…I wasn’t able to make you believe in this fight; if I had inspired greater love in you, you’d be able to overcome the effect…but after all I’m not a person who can create that kind of love to someone…I wasn’t good enough…But I won’t abandon you, Clark, even if I am far from you…*  

He was tired but he couldn’t sleep and his eyes kept staring at the dark ceiling, his mind making up forms, bats: his loyal companions in every pain he had suffered.

Suddenly, a small light from his wristwatch made his blank eyes sparkle: Jim had lit the signal: he couldn’t ignore his call again. His loyal ally needed him. He forced his body to sit and Hero stirred in his sleep but Bruce could be completely stealthy when he wanted.

He reached the cave and put on his new armor.

Jim was waiting as every time beside the signal and even though his movements with the new armor weren’t as good as before still the police commissionaire was startled.

“Those chilly nights are charming…” Jim said abstracted by the starry sky but swiftly changed into business. “I was worried; you didn’t come.”

Batman clenched his jaw.

“I was busy” he replied flatly and Jim nodded.

“You’re fine, that counts.”

Bruce saw a flicker of relief and joy in the good cop’s eyes; a flicker that soon was quenched.

“We found a man’s body…with Joker’s card pinned on his lapel.”
Joker paced the roof of the warehouse he had made his hideout. He was hunched and his face tightened. He had his hands behind his back and whistled a tune – a tune of his own inspiration. Suddenly, he stopped and looked at the starry sky; he twisted his lips: no giant flying rodents…of…course.

The Bat wouldn’t come to catch him…The Bat was confined in a horrible wheelchair after the accident his stupid goon caused…He frowned: how that idiot, Lou, can be still alive after what he did to Batsy? He pouted: one of these days he had to look into it – he should noted to his Smartphone…wait: he didn’t have a Smartphone but his mind had a four-core processor so he didn’t need these petty and boooooring gizmos…

Joker turned his wrist and looked at the Micky Mouse plated wristwatch: 1 o’clock. Those idiots at GCPD must have found by now his tailor…well, what was left of his tailor… He stretched his arm, gazed at the sleeve and brushed the expensive fabric.

“C’est magnifique!” he exclaimed in a hilarious mimic of French accent that reminded of screeching tires; Joker stared at the morose gargoyle of the opposite warehouse and shrugged. “I’m a comedian, paaaal! Now drop the critic aaaaaand smiiiiiLE!”

He tilted his head on the side studying the grim, dirty statue and finally licked his lips.

“You’re tough audience, huh? At least, my good tailor smiles all the time now…after death…” he widened his eyes innocently. “Buuuuut they say that the important stuuuuuf is after death, do they?”

He waved the gargoyle off.

“Ugh! You’re boooooring!” he twirled around himself. “This city is booooring without Batsy flying around aaaaaand kicking asses…”

He tapped his fingertip on his bottom lip thoughtful.

“Batsy decided toooooo play with us” he dictated waving his hand as if giving a lecture. “He found a way to persu--ade people that he is still out there while he is home siiiiick. Once again the sneaky litt’ boy, fooooools everyone; like he did with the late Falcone” he gave his eyes a mock sorrowful look “God rests his soul…Mou…HAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!” he held his belly. “Uph! Each time it’s the same laughs…He was fuck--ing the boy, he was thinking him a pet and the pet ate him! UHUHUHUHU! He couldn’t discern the kitten from the tiger…” he frowned. “No, no tiger: a panther, black panther…” he whistled and sighed rolling his eyes lustful ‘I’m a fun of bestiality, what can I say?’ he shrugged “HEHE!”

He scratched his green died curls and looked at his gloved nails.

“I need to wash my hair…I dooooo love animals but I don’t want pets strolling oooon my head…”

He turned again to the gargoyle.

“What I was saying?” he waved him off disappointed. “Never mind…”

His eyes found the sky.

“Yeeeeeess…” he nodded. “Well, Batsy wants to play with us pretending that he is fine…well, I
wanna play too…”

His eyes became blank: he needed a new suit and dressing coat, he really needed. So he ordered one of his goons to call that grandpa – yeah, the guy was an old professional – and Joker admired (HeHe! Nice one…admire…), liked his work. He was Joker, damn!, he deserved the best – and since Brucey had Armani, he should be elegant looking too…No, he wasn’t vain.

They arranged an appointment at the man’s atelier…How was his name? Ori…Rio…aaa…D’ario. He wouldn’t ever forget the man’s expression when Joker entered his workspace with a deep bow: his terror was such that he didn’t dare even to move to his phone to call the police…or it was cleverness? The old man obviously knew that if he did the wrong move he’d be killed instantly either by the armed henchmen or Joker himself.

However, he didn’t want the esteemed tailor dead…Joker knew how to not blend business with pleasure.

He tilted his head on the side: no, no, no, scratch that. Okay, he blended them but in some cases he didn’t. And this was one of these cases.

Joker had sat beside him at the backless setee and wrapped his arm around his shoulders like an old chap. He talked to the old man kindly and sweet – when he wanted (not that he wanted to brag) he was an angel…exaggeration. He promised him that he wouldn’t be hurt and that he just wanted a good dressing coat for the winter and a suit. He’d be handsomely rewarded. But…to be sure that the grandpa wouldn’t trap them, he should take the necessary and come to work to their place: food, sleeping and entertainment on the house.

It was D’ario’s choice to come with them – if you didn’t count Joker’s kids’ firearms and his own charming smile: Joker knew that his smile was his most powerful weapon…

Well, the grandpa was a talent! Joker wasn’t sure if it was pure skill or the blade that constantly mentally hovered above the man’s neck: always mentally because Joker couldn’t pose as a model and held the knife at the same time or could he?

“I muuuuust try it…” he shook his head.

The guy made a fine job and Joker paid him the best way: he spared him from the tough declining years: rheumatism, pain in the bones, high blood pressure, dementia. Brrr…Joker shook his head hysterically: he didn’t want even to consider it. Not to mention the loneliness, the abandon, the depression of seeing yourself decaying alive…Now, good ol’ D’ario had a permanent smile on his face probably considering from what he escaped.

Joker tilted his head on the side and narrowed his eyes pouting.

“Noooooow I’m thinking about it, I overpaid you, old fella” he shook his head. “Anyway, I caaaaan’t ask my money back, can I?”

He jumped and sat down on the cement, his legs dangling to the void.

“Well, Brucey-Batsy, Batsy-Brucey, youuuuu found a trick to fool people that you’re still flying…” he hissed. “Youuuuu wanted to play but I’m aaaa kid an’ I wanna playyyyy tooooo” he pouted like someone had taken from him a lollipop and then sobered. “What if I begin killing people?” he sniggered serious “and demanding from you to cocoome and stoooop me?” he cocked his eyebrows while his eyes glimmered evilly. “All theeeeeeese time you played with us – now you’ll have to come out and really play” he narrowed his eyes. “You dooo have to find a way and come to me, babe…”
he shook his head. “I intend on keep you ‘running’…HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

“The man’s name is Silvio D’ario and he was a well known tailor” Jim explained showing the picture to Batman.

He was an elderly man around 70 years with white, thin hair and white thick eyebrows. His face was wrinkled and as he was sprawled on the cement of Saint Mary’s Park, the macabre Cheshire smile, Joker’s trademark carved his plumb face even more. His eyes were bulged in terror. Thankfully, death had come instantly by the blade that protruded from his heart.

“He had no family; only an old housekeeper and some friends and associates. His disappearance had been stated to the police two weeks ago but…” Gordon pressed his lips in a thin line.

Batman nodded.

“He wasn’t found…” if Bruce was truly in the business and wasn’t absorbed in his sex life he could have found the man and saved him from Joker.

Gordon was looking at Batman over his glasses and although the lenses covered his real eyes, the cop could tell that his ally was blaming himself.

“You can’t save them all” he said sympathetically but firmly.

Batman yanked his head.

“Do you think that this comforts him?”

Jim closed his eyes.

“Of course not…” Jim replied hoarsely.

“Neither do I. Joker’s card?”

Jim opened the folder he was holding and pulled out a Joker card inside a police case. He held it in two fingers and showed it to Batman who straightened his head.

Red letters which were obviously written with the victim’s blood read:

“I’M PLAYFUL LIKE YOU, BATSY –CoM’ OUT AND PLAYYYYYYY”

Gordon came closer to him watching wary Batman’s pressed lips.

“Don’t play his game: he wants to draw you to a trap.”

Bruce’s mind was racing: Joker suspected, was almost sure about Batman’s identity. He knew that Bruce Wayne was paraplegic and he heard that Batman was active so he planned to either prove that Batman wasn’t really active or – most probable, he wanted to drive Bruce to his limits. He could imagine the smirk of the clown: if you want to still play the protector of the city, then you must protect her from real dangers – for Joker was a game. Something to enjoy himself or even manage to capture a vulnerable Batman and demask him.

“Are you alright?” Jim asked with real concern.

Batman didn’t answer because he never had to answer that: Batman couldn’t afford to not be alright.
“I’ll stop him, Jim” he said flatly and walked casually to the ledge and jumped to the void spreading his wings, his body forgetting exhaustion and pain because now he was in the sky.

Gordon sighed.

“I hope you’re really alright, son…” he watched his ally’s route and turned to return inside.

His body ached all over but these pains were different from those he remembered. They were pains of beating and the acid burning of lashes on his back; he was exhausted yet his exhaustion was intense even below his waist.

So all this paralysis-thing was false…and Superman cheating him…Superman being with him was a dream. Yes, a dream because Bruce had his legs spread on a gynecologist-like chair that left his opening exposed.

And he was seeing himself in Ra’s’ gray eyes: he was small, he was 14 years old. He was scared and his body shook uncontrollably wanting to jolt from the chair and run. Where to run? There was nowhere to go to: Ra’s was his salvation, Bruce knew it and knew that he had to stay with him if he wanted to have a chance. But he was appalled of the chair; he had obeyed the lion-like man and sat there yet now he couldn’t take it anymore…

“Please, sir…” his eyes searched in Ra’s’ eyes and found impatience under his sweetness. “I don’t want to…”

The older man caressed affectionately his hair and kissed feathery his forehead.

“Do not be afraid, child” he widened his eyes “you don’t trust me?”

Bruce nodded trembling but his hands clenched the man’s forearms desperately.

“What are you going to do, sir?”

Ra’s’ features hardened.

“You don’t honestly expect me to explain my actions to you, child?” his voice was mild but stern at the same time and Bruce felt dread. “It’s for the best and I know that Falcone put you in a lot of worse things than this.”

Bruce bit his bottom lip and sniffed because his nose began leaking: he thought that with this man it’d be different.

Ra’s as if he had read the boy’s thoughts smiled with sympathy.

“I understand your distaste, Bruce, but I need to take some samples from your body to make some tests and see if you’re healthy. You are the son of a doctor so you know how these things go.”

Yes, Bruce knew: his dad was taking blood samples from him once in a while, but not from down there…And now a bigger terror settled in Bruce’s bonny chest: “see if you’re healthy”. He wasn’t healthy: he couldn’t be. And what if Ra’s abandoned him once he found out that he wasn’t healthy?

“Samples from…from there…?”

Ra’s nodded and lifted his head to the man waiting and he took a syringe-like thing from the table and came closer. The closer he got the more the size of the syringe registered with Bruce: he hadn’t
seen anything that big and such a thick needle – it was like a blade…

He jerked from the chair: Falcone put things in him and now Ra’s was going to do the same. Ra’s grabbed his upper arms and pressed him down.

“Hush, Bruce…Don’t be like that!”

But Bruce twitched weakly in his enormous arms, his face distorted in fear.

“Please, don’t hurt me, sir…don’t hurt me like the others…” he felt warm liquid washing his cheeks and saw Ra’s’ huff of impatience.

“Falcone’s disaster depends on this, child! This will make us powerful…”

Bruce frowned and then a flash image of a giant creature with silver spikes for hair and two short, straight ivory horns in his temples cracked his mind; the creature was using him and filling him with his hot liquid that didn’t drip from his opening but felt like being absorbed in his body.

“If you were a girl you’d be with a baby…” Ra’s’ voice echoed from far but Bruce didn’t remember where and when.

Ra’s’ arms tightened around him keeping him still and smoothened; suddenly, he felt a cold thing entering him and it wasn’t the first time but still Bruce squirmed and Ra’s clenched his jaw and hugged him squeezing the trembling boy in his stony torso.

“It’ll be over in a minute…” the lion-like man whispered in Bruce’s ear “just stay calm and it won’t hurt much.”

The older man captured his lips and began massaging gently but determined; and it was so intense that Bruce’s mind went numb.

His scream was muffled in Ra’s’ mouth when a sharp pain smashed his insides and Bruce’s eyes began watering. He could feel a giant metallic beast sucking chunks of his flesh inside his anus: the sample Ra’s needed.

“I can’t take the second sample” the man told Ra’s “his rectum is clenched.”

Bruce was shaking inside Ra’s’ arms and the older man looked at the boy whose face was drenched in sweat; his eyes stared at the adult asking mercy and Ra’s’ eyes bent. He cupped Bruce’s face and the boy watched the beautiful, lean fingers of the powerful man massaging gently, slowly his face until a paralyzing calmness flooded his body and brain; his eyelids felt too heavy and he tried to stop them from trembling, to keep his eyes open but Ra’s’ movements were irresistible and soon he succumbed…Bruce was always too exhausted, too needy of the small escape sleep offered; he let his eyelids cover his eyes…

He was asleep but he felt the strong lips of Ra’s Al Ghul kissing him in the forehead gently.

“Continue…” he ordered in a low voice his minion.

Bruce was sleeping but still could hear; thankfully, the pain inside him was just a sting. The door opened and someone left – the man who took the samples – and someone else entered closing the door behind him.

“Are you sure for what you’re going to do, Ra’s?” Ubu’s deep voice asked and his usual tranquility was cracked.
Ra’s’ strong presence left from his side as the lion-like man stood.

“I can’t let that chance go wasted” he answered in his smug voice. “Bruce’s body absorbed Bagdana’s semen as expected: it’s a chance unique. The demon’s seed, Bruce’s DNA which bears the DNA of another demon, Lilith; and my own DNA” his madness, his lust vibrated his voice.

“It isn’t enough that you’re turning the child’s body into a deadly magnet for the Kryptonian?” Ubu’s disapproval was clear.

Ra’s gritted his teeth.

“You don’t understand, Ubu?” he hissed. “You can’t grasp the possibilities of the offspring that would be created? Two powerful demons, a unique child and Ra’s Al Ghul’s blood...The ideal successor, the ideal warrior...he or she shall be invincible” his voice softened. “If Bruce alone is so gifted, imagine the baby that will be come from him, Bagdana and me.”

“And what if your creation doesn’t satisfy your dreams: the procedure is risky and even if indeed a baby is created we can’t be sure that it’ll be in perfect condition.”

“Then I’ll dispose of it.”

Ubu made a sound of disapproval.

“And if he or she is an uncontrollable monster?”

“If I can create a man who will bring Superman to his knees I can control anything...” his smug smile was evident in his voice.

His body felt heavy like a log and there was a feeling of stiffness and pain in his stomach. He could say that he was lying on a bed; his head was in a fog that had nothing to do with sleeping. He wanted to remember where he was and what happened but his memory stubbornly shut all the doors.

But Bruce was more stubborn even from his mind, so he dug deeply in his memory and he came upon tormenting thirst, stabbing famine and all kinds of pain all over his body – even burns and migraine. He couldn’t clear how all these happened to him, after all in his entire life was hungry, thirsty and famished. Yet there was a pain more excruciating from the others; a pain that had nothing to do with his body though there was a connection with the current throbbing in his stomach. This pain was deeper, eroding; this pain was the pain of the heart – the irremediable pain of betrayal.

He didn’t want to open his eyes: it was much better like this – the external world never offered him anything but cruelty and misery. But always there was something pushing him to stand up. His eyelids flickered: he knew that it was time once again to face the world.

The golden light of the sun coming from the window blinded him for some seconds but once his eyes adjusted, he took in the space. He knew that luxurious room – he could even see the cage where he was jailed for days: like a wild animal, like a bat. Only bats didn’t live in cages.

All came back to him like an icy cold waterfall: his abduction from the Manor, his transport in the desert, in this camp; the tortures Ra’s Al Ghul submitted him; the mysterious boy who stared at him; the revelation that this boy was in a odd way his son; he tried, he had managed to find the courage to make his attempt to escape with his son: he couldn’t let the boy at Ra’s’ mercy, the demon’s head had done enough damage to him.

But the damage was already too big: the boy had followed him only to stab him in the stomach as he
And now he was again prisoner of him. He was sensing him in the room: after all, it was his bedroom. Ra’s could be invisible to anyone but Bruce could sense his presence even when his former master didn’t want to. He had mastered that skill after many years of being used by him and many cruel punishments…

Ra’s didn’t wish to hide his presence from Bruce because he immediately entered his field. As Bruce expected he had that annoying smug expression, a mock sympathetic grin on his lips. He approached the bed with long, confident strides and sat at the stool beside.

“I see you finally woke” he chirped. “Our great child is a bit compulsive with knives; extremely skillful but he can’t control himself with them and his blows are heavier than they should” his grin became broader with pride for the boy and irony for Bruce. “Like the small snakes which can’t control the poison in their fangs so their biting is deadlier than that of the adult snakes. You’ve been unconscious for two weeks.”

Bruce didn’t look at him just shook his head disgusted.

“You really like what you have done with him, don’t you?”

Ra’s face sobered.

“Since I failed with his…’mother’, that is you” he pursed his lips and cocked his eyebrows. “But do not credit this success to me alone: he is the offspring of two demons, of me and…” he took softly Bruce’s hand and although Bruce wanted to take it away he couldn’t make a move. “Of a unique human being, you.”

Bruce clenched his jaw and his lips upturned in rage.

“You have paralyzed me…”

Ra’s nodded amused.

“Completely: it is not the first time and each time is extremely satisfying to witness your weak anger. I paralyzed you below the neck; otherwise I should use heavy bondage hard and in your condition I find it cruel: our boy -treasure instead of just stopping you from escaping, almost killed you.”

Bruce shook his head still not looking at him.

“He didn’t have any inhibition to do it: you poisoned him against me.”

The lion-like man shook his head in denial.

“No, Bruce: I didn’t poison him, I told him only the truth about how you backstabbed me. I hadn’t told him that you were his father but then you told him and didn’t leave me another option. His hatred for you is a consequence of your own actions.”

Bruce bared his teeth and turned to lock eyes with him; his own eyes two blazing seas.

“You didn’t tell him what you did to me! You never told him what you truly do with your stupid League: you never let him free to see the world, to learn the truth.”

Ra’s cocked an eyebrow.

“And you think that this would change anything? I’m the boy’s god: nobody can change his
opinion” he snorted “not even his traitorous, unworthy begetter...You just saw that: you put him before a choice and this choice destroyed you” he hissed.

Bruce felt the tied wound in his stomach biting hard.

Al Ghul caressed his face affectionately like he was doing when he was just a fooled little boy who believed him like a savior. Bruce yanked his head away and the older man smiled.

“I like that you care about our child, Bruce: I was afraid that you would hate him due to the circumstances that led to his birth.”

Bruce snapped his head towards him.

“Why would I hate him? Nothing of this is his fault: he’s a child that deserves the best!” Ra’s grinned in his mefistophelic way. “And you’re not that!”

He shrugged.

“Alright, then; you can give him what you consider the best.”

Bruce frowned.

“That includes being away from you and growing up like every other child” he spat.

Ra’s tilted his head.

“But he isn’t like every other child and neither you are. All in all, Bruce, I want him with you; he can learn so much from you” Bruce narrowed his eyes. “Yet I can’t permit that to happen if you are like this: ill minded.”

Bruce’s eyes widened.

“Ill minded?! But I know who you really are.”

Ra’s stood and sat at the mattress beside Bruce which motion made him shudder.

“You see, I can’t permit that…” he said indifferent. “You’ll be with him but in my terms.”

“Never!” Bruce spat but the older man laughed self-confident.

“Oh, Bruce! That’s what fascinates me most about you: your defiance, your stubbornness, your spirit. Dick will be benefited by growing up with his ‘mother’. However you were never able to deprive me of what I wanted, child.”

He leaned over Bruce and he felt his chest being clenched; his eyes widened and his face tensed more when Ra’s pulled the blanket from his body.

“No!” he spat when his former master slipped his hand under Bruce’s shirt and began fondling his chest.

Ra’s smiled and brought his face over Bruce’s; he captured Bruce’s lips which was what Bruce waited to plunge his teeth to Ra’s lips. The older man jerked touching the blood on his lips and began cackling.

“Oh, Bruce! Your resistance works only to fuel my fire and desire...Don’t be like that” he said matter of factly “we have a child together...”
Bruce squinted and spat Ra’s in the face which made the leader of the Shadows pale before he clenched his jaw and with a swift movement straddled the younger man. Bruce just caught Ra’s’ raised hand before it fell hard on his face sending his head to the other side.

“Ungrateful little whore!” he grounded his teeth and turned Bruce on his stomach.

Bruce gritted his teeth knowing what was to follow and that he was unable to do anything to stop it; Al Ghul’s brutal movements as he stripped and spread him was all too familiar to him, as the harsh, swift way he entered him making his body cry in agony; even now that he couldn’t move his limps but feel everything.

Ra’s’ panting filled his world like the nauseating sound of flesh slapping flesh as the older man penetrated him…and then Ra’s’ heavy torso was on his back and his hot lips swallowed Bruce’s ear.

“You’ll do what I want, child…You’ll become what I dreamed for you…” he whispered.

“Never!”

But his eyes bulged seeing Ra’s hand holding a syringe filled with a liquid with a bizarre purple color that boiled inside.

“Don’t!” he shouted but Ra’s lowered the syringe where he couldn’t see or move; he tried to hit Ra’s’ head with his but he was still weak from his injury and his former master pressed his head on the pillow immobilizing him.

The needle stabbed him hard on the forearm and his blood began burning and his eyes watering; his head span crazily.

“Our son needs you, Bruce…and I need you to fulfill your destiny: to become what I want you to be. My dream executioner, the angel-punisher, Superman’s slayer…” Ra’s’ passionate voice echoed distorted in the caves of his head.

The boy’s eyes were filled with awe, widened as he stared at Batman in the middle of the cave. There wasn’t the waterfall at the entrance and the bats hanging from the ceiling were different from those in Gotham. This cave was enormous, with tall endless stalactites forming pillars that fenced a round opening in the middle of which was a bench with several screens; a low humming sound indicated that a massive processor was working.

Ra’s sat on a flat rock with his arms crossed looking at Batman with satisfaction and pride.

“I managed to reclaim your armor from our enemies” he said “and I see that it deserved the effort humiliating our enemies” he shook his head “but most: looking again at the magnificent creature of the night that they failed to kneel.”

Batman eyed himself: the armor was the same but simultaneously there were differences from what he remembered. The armor was the same deep black of the midnight, consisted of several individual parts, distinguishing his abdominal muscles one my one. Yet the bat with the open winds all over his chest was a dazzling red and Bruce had the impression that it should be black.

Ra’s grinned and addressed the boy.

“Our enemies, Superman and Stark, ambushed your father and injured him to the point of death; yet the worst they did to him was to put him under brainwashing that was very effective due to Batman’s damaged health. They persuaded him that Stark was his best, childhood friend and Superman his lover…” he arched his eyebrows “but their most disgusting lie was that the League of Shadows was
an organization of murderers and I had betrayed and abused him. They are plotting to conquer the world and know that the League is the only organization that can stop them; and Batman their greater enemy – the greatest defender of justice.”

Batman eyed him locking their eyes; he could see his irises inside his leader’s gray eyes and that seemed odd to him. Several scared irises flashed through his mind and in none of them his eyes were reflected: criminals were seeing only blinding white light in Batman’s eyes, lenses.

“They made him believe that Batman needed to hide his true eyes from his enemies” he shook his head. “Nonsense! Your father’s eyes are unique and can be the most dangerous weapon: he terrorized criminals only with his glare” he was addressing the impressed raven haired boy but his steel eyes were locked with Bruce’s.

Ra’s made a sharp movement with his head and the boy stood from the bench obviously trained in perfect discipline.

“Dick, please, leave us alone” he asked politely and the boy bowed to both of them and marched the stone corridor leading to the other end of the cave.

Ra’s stayed with his head bowed listening to the boy’s light footsteps till he was sure that he was far. He stood slowly and came to Batman who had walked to the computer bench checking the gadgets.

“Is everything as it should be?” he asked cocking an eyebrow and Bruce still discerned some irony.

Batman nodded.

“Dick is looking at me oddly…disbelieving” he spat.

Ra’s grinned.

“You shouldn’t think badly of him: he saw you the first days after we took you from their hands. You were too aggressive, too insulting to me and even tried to grab Dick and run away, back to them. But now you’re healed” his voice became low and he came closer caressing the cheeks of the cowl “things will become normal again: Dick will find again the trust to his father and I…”

His lips touched passionately Batman’s lips.

“I’ll have again my beloved…the child I raised…the body I worshipped…”

Bruce answered to the challenge of Ra’s’ lips and his mouth began moving along slowly but progressively faster and stronger. Ra’s put his arms around his armored back and brought their bodies to smash, deepening the kiss in a wild battle of tastes and sounds. Bruce could see Ra’s satisfaction, his delight as he sniffed the scent of the armor mixed with the younger man’s perfume. Which intrigued Bruce because something inside was whispering that his armor didn’t permit his body’s scent come out…

Yet Ra’s had said that Stark and Superman had brainwashed him into believing crazy things. He however knew whom to believe: Ra’s – the man who saved him…

Ra’s maneuvered them both bringing Bruce’s waist to touch the bench; the older man was breathing heavily, his eyes fogged with desire.

“Give me your body, child…” he groaned into Bruce’s mouth and began peeling the armor parts from his body, fondling demanding the revealed flesh.
Bruce took off the cowl and it seemed to him that it was way easier than it should be; yet Ra’s was sucking the crook of his neck and his master had a unique way to make him paralyze in pleasure.

“I think that they will try to capture you again” Ra’s whispered in his ear and Bruce frowned.

“That’s preposterous; they don’t know to admit their defeat.”

Ra’s smirked and Bruce felt it on his skin.

“It’s okay, child; this would be their death. Let them come…”

Bruce grinned but something nudged him; something told him that this wasn’t good.

“After all, Superman can’t endure your absence: your body lures him…your body will be the death of him and this rock…”

He continued nibbling Bruce’s ear lobe and pulled out of his pants’ pocket a glowing green rock cracked from black veins that were moving inside the material like liquid. Bruce found Ra’s’ eyes and the older man cackled.

“He is yours, Bruce…You’ll fulfill your destiny.”

The desert was endless…dunes and flat wavy surfaces as far as the eye could reach. Once in a while a small twister upset the sand into a vertical spiral that made Dick’s eyes sparkle with enthusiasm, showing the spectacle to Bruce with his index.

Dick had grown up in this military camp, in the middle of the desert but he behaved as if each time he was strolling the desert was the first he was seeing the sand sea. Bruce suspected that this was because of his presence.

Every afternoon they used to take the small roofless jeep and wander the desert: Bruce was training the already highly skillful boy yet their afternoon escapes were a necessary part. Maybe because they had the chance to discuss many things; maybe because Bruce wanted to come closer to his son without Ra’s’ presence – after all, Ra’s had the boy for 12 years. Bruce wanted to shape the bond that was already there vibrating.

And the boy seemed to have become really fond of him asking things, wanting to hear stories from his battles with criminals – curious enough Bruce had recollection of them -, of how he found the evidents that convicted Falcone, of how he detected the liabilities of his opponents. Bruce relished the glimmering of the boy’s beautiful blue eyes (it was Thomas Wayne’s eyes) and even more the carefree laughter of his when they spotted some small rare animal of the desert. The doubt, the apprehension and even hostility of the first days after his returning had thankfully left.

He had left the car and walked dressed in the white attires of the Arabian Princes. The sun was on his setting and the horizon seemed like bleeding gold, the sea of sand underneath sparkling.

“You know, father” the boy said with his usual sharp voice cracking from some affection “I’m happy you’re back with us” he turned to look at Bruce’s face “at first, I didn’t care when Ra’s told me about you being my father but as the time passes and I learn more about you…I’m happy you’re my father.”

“And I’m happy you’re my son and I found you, Dick: I feel that my life got a deeper meaning… I want to share so many things with you.”

Dick slipped his small hand into Bruce’s and he squeezed it gently smiling. But then the boy’s eyes
widened and his body tensed.

“Father, look!”

It was a dot in the sky at first but then gradually a figure was forming; a figure in red and blue with a cape waving behind him.

Bruce squatted and took both Dick’s hands in his.

“Take the car and return to the camp” he said calmly but determined.

“I won’t leave you alone with him!”

Bruce grinned reassuringly.

“Don’t worry, Dick, he won’t harm me.”

“But he and Stark ambushed and almost killed you; they turned you against us! He’ll take you away from me!”

“He won’t…Go now: you can’t disobey your father…”

The boy grunted but did as he was told and Bruce rose to watch the jeep disappearing; the cloud of sand behind the vehicle tracing its route. The boy was safe: he turned to the upcoming alien who now was descending, rushing to him but not in an aggressive way. There was agony in Superman’s face and relief.

“Bruce!” he exclaimed and immediately he wrapped him in his powerful embrace: Ra’s was right – the alien craved for him. “I was terrified, Bruce; I thought that he would hurt you…”

Bruce didn’t answer though he snorted inside: Ra’s hurt him? Oh, he had a nerve! The man who tortured him blamed his savior of that same thing he did to him. Yet Bruce nestled his head in Superman’s shoulder and heard the alien’s heart beating faster.

“It’s alright, Star: I’ll get you away from here – back to your home, to your people…”

Bruce raised his head and locked their eyes; love was flooding Superman’s eyes: love and joy. Bruce attacked his mouth with his lips, massaging gently but strongly, sucking skillfully the hot flesh; Superman followed deepening the kiss and tightening his hold. He was moaning and his eyes were closed enjoying the senses.

Suddenly, Superman’s eyes snapped open staring shocked at Bruce’s emotionless, cold gaze; the alien’s respiration sounded like an asthmatic fit and he was shaking uncontrollably; his hold on Bruce’s body the only thing that kept him erect.

But Bruce made a small jump away from him and the most powerful being on Earth sank in his knees; bitter surprise sparkling in his sad eyes. Bruce smirked bringing his hands to the fore: in the right hand he held a glowing green rock veined with black lines and in the left he was clenching the Knife of Justice: its diamond, shining blade absorbing fast Superman’s blood.

“Bruce, why…” he whispered weakly.

Bruce spat at his knees.

“Look at you…How pathetic! You brag of being the most powerful being on Earth; you rule humans with an iron fist but in the end it takes only a rock to bring you to your knees…and you wanted to
conquer Earth” he hissed.

Superman gaped but his head slumped because he didn’t have enough strength to hold it up.

“Rule humans?” he asked. “You know that’s not true, Bruce…I only help as I can…”

But Bruce felt enraged from the man’s hypocrisy; he kicked him in the ribs sending him to the sand.

“How could you think that I’d accept your kisses? Your embrace? You believed that my people wouldn’t be able to heal me from your brainwashing?”

Superman had no strength to rise even to his knees; his power was quenching. But he continued looking at Bruce desperately.

“I would never hurt you, Star…I didn’t brainwash you: Ra’s Al Ghul did. He attacked you and Alfred in the Manor and kidnapped you. He brainwashed you because you turned against him and banished him from Gotham…Please, remember…”

Bruce frowned and Superman’s eyes filled with hope. But then Bruce clenched his jaw and kicked him hard in the face rendering him unconscious.

“Liar!” he roared and his voice echoed in the desert’s emptiness.

He felt a second presence approaching and smirked: of course...

“What happened to the fucking UFO?” Stark’s cheery voice addressed him. “He passed out from his joy to see you again?”

The billionaire eyed him from feet to head and deactivated his face plate. A radiant smile cracked his tanned face and he rushed to hug Bruce dissolving his armor in a second.

“Little guy…You can’t imagine the agony when I realized that this motherfucker had taken you: I thought that I lost you again…And then when I finally located you here…I dreaded that I’d find you tortured, weak, abused…” he let go of him only to look him again “but you’re fine: what this scum had in mind?”

Bruce shrugged watching his friend smiling.

“Who knows? Aren’t you happy that he didn’t hurt me?”

Stark smiled broadly and patted his back.

“Of course…Poor Alfred will be so happy: he lost ten years from his life till now…And between us, we must not permit that – we want our old man with us for many years.”

Stark knitted his eyebrows.

“Oh, c’mon…what happened to that dork?” he marched to Superman’s form under Bruce’s cold stare. “C’mon, Supes…I was happy too but I didn’t pass out…” but then his eyes found the blood and the stab wound in Superman’s kidney. “Bruce?”

“He took what he deserved…like you, Stark…” he hissed and the playboy turned his eyes fleetingly grasping the tiny square gun Bruce held but more fixing on Bruce’s dead eyes.

“Bruce, no!”
Bruce had put in his pockets the Kryptonite and the Knife when sensed Ironman’s approach and then as the man hugged him, he pulled out the small gun. He pressed the trigger relishing the shallow sound; Stark jolted as the bullet found his waist paralyzing his body; his eyes still on Bruce’s face.

“You can’t conjure your armor” Bruce said coldly to him approaching and gazing him from above – Stark’s eyes were sorrowful as the man realized the trap. “I have a device on me – you see, we were prepared – and the device blocks your reactor to just maintain your useless life: my master might need you.”

He turned his head to see the jeeps and vans approaching fast: backup. Needless.

“You should have known, Stark, that I wouldn’t let you take me away from my loved ones again… But you’re arrogant: you think that you can get whatever you want: Ra’s told me everything about you.”

The convoy stopped surrounding him and his defeated enemies.

Stark shook his head closing his eyes.

“Little guy, I don’t know what he did to you but this man abused you as a child; you wanted to escape from him. But he brainwashed you” he inhaled deeply to find the strength to continue because the bullet in his waist hurt. “We are your loved ones, Bruce; remember?”

“Don’t listen to him, child” Ra’s came at his side. “He knows that their brainwashing has let remnants and tries to fool you to save his hide.”

“You bastard!” Stark spat through his ground teeth.

Ra’s strut to him slowly and looked him from above smirking.

“You lost, Stark. Bruce is mine” he hissed calmly and delivered him a hard kick on the chest sending him to roll on the ground unconscious.

Ra’s’ men took their enemies and tossed them in the cars; Ra’s moved to the jeep at the head of the convoy but frowned because Bruce didn’t follow.

He remained at the same spot with his arms crossed; his eyes fixed on the bleeding horizon. The atmosphere got chill as the sun was lost; a strong breeze waved Bruce’s loose clothes.

Ra’s approached him and put his arm around his shoulders. Bruce looked at his face.

“You did a great job, child; I never had a doubt – I was sure. Dick waits us in the car…”

Bruce nodded and followed him.

Batman paced in the middle of his cave, before the rectangular cage where Superman and Stark were imprisoned; the cage’s bars was glowing green from the Kryptonite and the energy field that forbade Stark from activating his armor.

Both men were awake; Superman slumped on the floor, his paleness turned into deathly white. However he had dragged himself to the paralyzed Stark and held him in his arms.

Batman was feeling two pairs of sad eyes watching puzzled his pacing.

“Star…” Superman said with steady voice, obviously recruiting his drops of stamina.
Batman’s glare was sharper than blade as focused swiftly at him.

“Don’t call me that!” he growled. “What kind of bullshit is that?”

“You loved me calling you that...” Superman answered locking their eyes; his face was sweaty. “Because your eyes are like star sapphires” he chuckled “remember? I asked and you gave me your permission...smiling.”

Batman snarled.

“Of course not! It’s a lie: it never happened!”

Stark gulped.

“Little guy” he inhaled deeply and his face distorted from pain. “Whatever this monster did to you, you can fight it and defeat him once again.”

Batman snorted.

“Defeat the man who saved me? Shut your mouth, Stark! And cut that bullshit...I’m not a little guy.”

“For me you will always be the little guy, who played with me in the Manor’s grounds; who told me that he was afraid of the bats: remember when I brought you the bat? How velvety it was in your small palm?” Batman’s eyes flickered. “Remember that you were afraid that I’d kill her? You told me that she didn’t deserve to die because you were scared of her? Remember the cave? How the bats were like black butterflies?”

“Bruce, I don’t care about my life but you don’t deserve to be a slave to Ra’s Al Ghul...”

A pang impaled Bruce’s head and some scenes washed everything. He rushed to the cage, touched his thumb in the slot and surged at Superman. He grabbed him with both hands from the suit in his chest and heaved him.

“I'm slave of nobody!” he roared. “Though you and that warm” Tony coughed “tried to turn me into one!” he looked at Superman’s pitiful eyes, the sweat all over his face declared how weak he was.

Batman shook his head.

“I don’t think that we need both of you alive...” he hissed. “As a matter of fact, Ra’s wants only Stark alive and my destiny is to slay you...”

He kept holding him with one hand and jolted upwards his left hand to eject the Blade of Justice from the secret holster under his forearm; he grabbed the hilt and brought the blade to Superman’s neck. He smirked.

“The mighty alien...it must feel humiliating to lose your life to a mere mortal.”

Superman blinked and locked eyes with him.

“You’re anything but mere, Bruce” he replied solemnly and calm.

Stark shook his head.

“Bruce, don’t do that...” he almost pleaded. “It’s a mistake you’ll regret forever.”
Batman snapped his head at him snarling but Superman found Bruce’s eyes.

“No, Tony, let him...I don’t mind being killed by his hands...” he chuckled “actually, it’ll be a sweet death. But before I die, I’ll take the world’s most fabulous impression with me...”

Unknown how but Superman gathered his remaining strength and moved his head capturing Batman’s lips in a passionate kiss that made Bruce’s mind just switch off and the Knife fall from his hand. At first, he was thunder struck, numb but then images from a half made building came to him along with a sign that read “Martha and Thomas Wayne Haven”: Superman had him cornered and was kissing him and it was the most beautiful feeling he ever had; he ever dreamt.

He detached from Superman’s lips despite his own wish and saw disappointment in the alien’s eyes; Batman looked at Tony determined.

“I must get you out of here” he snapped and Tony frowned.

“You can’t Bruce” the billionaire obviously realized that his friend had remembered. “Superman is too weak and I...” he inhaled “I’m unable to do anything. Save yourself, little guy.”

“Nonsense!” He pulled out of a compartment in his belt a Batarang shaped vial.

“What’s this, Star?” Superman asked in a hoarse, spent voice.

“Drink” he ordered breaking the top and bringing the sharp edge to Superman’s lips.

At first, there was wariness in the alien’s eyes and Batman snorted.

“If I wanted to kill you, Clark, I’d prefer to cut your throat.”

“Thank you very much” he chuckled.

“Can you hurry on, kids?” Tony commented.

“Right...” Superman said drinking greedily and feeling instantly his body revitalizing. “What is this?”

Batman twisted his lips; he didn’t believe in the effectiveness of this but he had no choice.

“Water of Immortality and...my tears: Ra’s believes that they have some healing qualities...”

“They do!” Superman looked awestruck at his feet that floated over the floor despite the Kryptonite cage.

Of course the Kryptonite thwarted his full recovery.

“You’ll restore your full powers when you’re out of here” Batman spat lifting Tony. “I’m sorry, Tony” he said to him. “The bullet can be easily dissolved and you’ll recover.”

The billionaire shook his head.

“That’s good news, buddy” he stared at Bruce’s eyes. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Father?”

The two prisoners stared at the raven haired boy who indeed was very similar to Bruce; they looked at Bruce who was looking at the boy biting his lip so hard that it bled.
“What are you doing, father? They made you betray us again? I thought you loved me...” the boy’s voice was arrogant and strong but those last words contained real sadness and hurt.

Bruce shook his head.

“Dick, these men are innocent: they fight the evil and they are my friends...We must help them leave and go with them: the League of Shadows is evil.”

The boy shook his head.

“Not again! They cast some spell on you...”

Batman dragged Tony out of the cage, Superman helping casting curious glances at the boy who enraged rushed to his father.

“You can’t let them slip again! They are sorcerers! They ruined you, father!”

“You know it’s not true...Come with me, Dick...”

“No, if you love me; if you’re my father you’ll stay here with me.”

Batman pressed his lips.

Claps echoed through the huge cave. Bruce didn’t need to see him to know that Ra’s was there...And the sound of hundred firearms loading and swords being drown roared.

“Now, Dick, you know your father loves you and won’t abandon you for the sake of those strangers; especially, since his betrayal will mean the death of everyone” he gestured to hundreds of ninjas that swarmed the rocks of the cave. “Now, Batman: I understand that you fooled these idiots feeding them false hopes – you’re loyal to me and I don’t want to kill you on a false first impression. So cut Superman’s throat and we forget everything. You wouldn’t want all these guns firing with Dick being in the middle unshielded...” he smirked and the boy’s eyes widened; Ra’s, his father couldn’t honestly mean that but his hand was raised ready to give the signal.

Batman looked around him and then at the child in front of him, exposed to those firearms; moreover he knew that his current armor wasn’t so resilient to bullets. He ejected the Knife from the forearm holster and grabbed determined the hilt.

“I’ll do it, Ra’s: I don’t know what happened to me...There’s no need to fire.”

“Kill the alien and no bullet will leave the barrel.”

Bruce nodded and pushed Superman to his knees; thankfully, Clark knew better than resist but followed Bruce’s lead, trust sparkling in his eyes.

“When the Kryptonite quenches, grab Tony and leave...” Bruce whispered without moving his lips so low that only Superman could hear.

“No...” he whispered.

“Do as I say, alien!” he growled for everyone to hear and touched the blade to Superman’s carotid.

Ra’s smile became broader. But then Bruce pressed something in his palm and the Kryptonite bars stopped glowing and Superman fully revitalized grabbed Tony.

“Fire!” Ra’s roared and the bangs of hundred firearms deafened them.
Batman surged at Dick and covered him with his body feeling the pain of the bullets crashing his armor and piercing his flesh.

“Father…” the boy cried feeling Bruce’s blood splattering him.

“It’s alright” he shoved the boy towards Superman covering him with his body “go with Superman – I’ll be fine.”

Superman held with one hand Tony and with the other took the boy who however stretched his hand catching his father’s hand.

“I’m not leaving without you!” Dick was strong and Superman’s recovering state didn’t permit him to overcome the boy’s stubbornness.

Besides, he also didn’t want to leave Bruce injured.

And then the cave began trembling, the surface cracked and from the middle a wide column of fire sprung. A giant of 50 feet height with black thick horns and eyes red like rubies stood shooting fire to the ninjas who yelled panicked. Ra’s stared at him amazed.

“Bagdna! You came for Bruce…” he roared in laughter.

But the creature opened his mouth and washed him with fire and Ra’s cackled even as he was dying; the demon’s body took the form Bruce knew so well and walked to him.

“Come with me, it is the only way to save your life” he offered his hand but Bruce though in horrible pain kept holding Dick’s hand and crawling to them.

But then the cave began dissolving; the floor turning into a whirlpool as Bagdana pulled him down with him at the earth’s guts.

“I won’t allow you to die!” the demon roared with real despair.

Bruce held his son’s hand and Superman clenched his jaw trying to overcome the demon’s power and save both. But Bruce knew that they couldn’t save him and the demon was pulling all of them because Bruce held his son’s hand.

“Don’t let go, father! Please…” the boy’s eyes were teary.

Bruce smiled.

“It’s alright, Dick…” he let the boy’s hand and he was dragged in the whirlpool as everything turned into darkness and tornado and he couldn’t breathe anymore as the frantic beating of his heart filled everything..

Bruce didn’t open his eyes but he snapped wake, his body still rigid from the nightmare. But he was calm: a possible flashback of Ra's taking samples from him (some flashes of images crossed his mind but he wasn't sure) and a nightmare. Dick taking the place of his supposed son – his son in the first nightmare was different than in this one. And then the way he hurt his friends, almost killing them… his subconscious was trying to reaffirm Bruce’s excuses for Clark’s betrayal: Bruce would have done worse things than Superman if someone brainwashed him…

He bit his lip: but even in the dream Bruce recovered and saw the truth just from a kiss while Clark…He shook his head disapproving: it was stupid to think so much of a dream. And Bagdana?
Bruce sighed and suddenly realized that someone was in the room.
Chapter 43

Bruce knew that the presence in his bedroom wasn’t hostile and as if for confirmation two affectionate hands cupped his face.

“Calm down, buddy…it’s only a nightmare” Tony’s low voice told him gently.

“I know, Tony, I know…And you’re alright.”

Tony understood that Bruce’s nightmare had to do with something horrible happening to him and lit the lamp at the nightstand; Bruce discerned in his friend’s face upset and worry – maybe a little anger as well. He looked at the rectangular, wooden watch on the nightstand that read 5 o’clock and made to support himself to the elbows to rise but Tony put him softly back on the mattress.

Bruce looked him in the eyes.

“I have to take Dick to school.”

Tony shook his head.

“The boy hates you; what’s the point of playing the father?” he commented dryly and Bruce frowned for his friend’s bad temper.

“I’m not playing the father, Tony; I just want to be true to what I promised to Dick’s grandmother.”

Tony nodded several times with cocked eyebrows.

“You need more sleep and rest, Bruce” he remarked. “Alfred can take the boy to school.”

“I woke up and I can’t sleep anymore. But you…why are you awake so early?” the older man wore still his pajamas with the robe untied falling around him.

Tony crooked his mouth and then pursed his lips.

“You said that I’m alright…I should be asking you that” Tony was tired of rounding the subject so got to the point. “Bruce, you promised to not do it again.”

Bruce turned his gaze away and huffed: Tony figured that he went out.

“I promised I wouldn’t do it often and I mean that, Tony” Tony crossed his arms and looked grimly at him. “Okay, what do you want me to say? That I’m sorry? Okay, I’m sorry for making you worry but Batman had to get out.”

Tony snapped his eyes closed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“The same thing again and again…”

“Jim lit the signal: he was calling Batman – I couldn’t ignore him again! He’d suspect that something is off though I think he already suspects that.”

“Fine. Maybe he should know the truth: that you can’t offer your physical presence for the time being” he saw Bruce’s eyes bulging and snorted. “Maybe you should tell Jim who are you: you trust him, right?” that way, Tony hoped that Jim would stop summoning Batman and Bruce finally would focus on his recovery.
Yet Bruce felt a storm inside only hearing that.

“No way! Nobody should know who Batman really is. And Batman can’t be sick or disabled.”

Tony’s eyes exploded.

“Why do you want to kill yourself?! Is because of that fucking alien?! Why don’t you understand? Your body is too sensitive: you can’t afford to fly or jump from roof to roof or fight with thugs…”

Bruce jolted his torso upright.

“I didn’t fight anyone, Tony! I just went to meet Jim and speak to him: just that – I didn’t exert myself.”

Tony ruffled his messy hair with both hands.

“And what has Superman to do with this?” Bruce asked stilling his eyes in Tony’s.

Tony brushed his friend’s hair.

“Your outings began simultaneously with his cheating” he said focusing his stare to Bruce’s eyes.

Bruce shook his head and looked at his hands.

“I have to show myself – the real Batman and not a hologram – from time to time” he pressed his lips. “And tonight I couldn’t sleep and I saw that the signal was on and…I had to speak with Jim. He needs me.”

Tony pouted.

“Maybe if you have taken the sedatives Leslie gave you, you’d manage to sleep.”

Bruce chuckled.

“For pity’s sake, Tony! Have you seen how many drugs I’m taking?” his voice was steady and cool yet Tony could discern some fatigued and frustration.

The older man nodded.

“I know, buddy” he patted him on the back. “But they’re necessary for you to stay healthy and regain your strength for the operation. For that you must put Batman in second place for a while: until you walk again.”

Bruce’s eyes got wild.

“No way! Tony, you’re not serious asking that! Fine, I’m fully aware that I cannot be a perfectly operational Batman but I can’t ignore completely Gotham’s needs” he lowered his voice and fixed his eyes on Tony’s stoic eyes. “You were half dead when you forged Ironman and confronted the League of Shadows” thankfully, the Manor was soundproof so nobody could listen to their conversation.

Tony closed his eyes.

“To save my life, buddy…”

Bruce stayed with his mouth slightly agape for a second.
“Yes, but I’m sure that you wouldn’t stay indifferent if Malibu or the planet was in danger” Tony pressed his lips and shook his head exasperated; Bruce rose a bit to get his face closer to Tony’s. “Joker killed another innocent man, Tony” the older man sighed “he sees it as a game with Batman: what do you want me to do?”

“Chasing that lunatic from rooftop to rooftop while your body is ready to completely shatter in the slightest” he stopped registering Bruce biting his lip “isn’t the solution.”

Bruce let his body touch the mattress: the truth was that he felt pangs all over his back but he didn’t want Tony to figure and get another weapon.

“Tony, I know how to protect myself” he said hoarsely “for eighteen year I took care of myself alone: I didn’t have anyone of you to treat me. And I survived despite the fact that I had to face worse hardships without all of you offering nurture. I don’t intend on chasing Joker over Gotham’s rooftops; however at least I can be there when Jim needs my help.”

Tony crossed his arms and regarded him chewing his mouth.

“This is sly, little guy” Bruce narrowed his eyes. “I can be there when Jim needs me? That’s very abstract, buddy: that help can be anything.”

Bruce turned his head on the other side and Tony touched his hair.

“You never talked to me about those years, Bruce” he said softly.

Bruce didn’t look at him.

“I did. Twice.”

“Only because I was there when you had a flashback. You can speak to me, Bruce; I can listen.”

Bruce frowned; he was tired of these years coming to the fore again and again. It was more than enough that he relived them through flashbacks.

“What this has to do with anything, Tony?” he asked tired and slightly irritated.

“I think that the cause of all these lies there: what Falcone and the others did to you made you despise yourself resulting in taking crazy risks.”

Bruce chuckled and turned his gaze to Tony.

“You added psychology to your other specialties?”

“Bruce…”

Bruce stretched his head.

“If I hated myself I wouldn’t have made Batman to defeat Falcone and free myself. If I didn’t care about myself, as you imply, I would have simply stopped fighting and killed myself when Falcone and Chill made death seem better than life” his voice became that emotionless monotone Tony hated and was afraid of. “It’d be so much easier than enduring all these…”

Tony shook his head.

“You didn’t do all these only for yourself: I think your primary concern was to get justice for your parents and save the people of Gotham” Bruce closed his eyes. “Regaining your fortune and your
life was a happy coincidence. And now that that fucking alien betrayed you, your distaste for yourself came back leading your to deeds more reckless.”

Bruce huffed exasperated.

“Don’t…don’t bring Superman into this; he has nothing to do with that! Tony, for pity’s sake, I just went out to speak with Jim” his eyes focused on Tony’s. “I want to walk again as much as all of you and I’m going to focus on my recovery but I just cannot be indifferent.”

Tony sighed and nodded.

“Let’s believe it…Are you in pain?” his voice became warmer in concern. “You used the damned armor twice in two days: that must have exhausted you.”

“I’m fine, Tony: you and Lucius made a brilliant job.”

Yet Tony pursed his lips and frowned.

“Don’t remind me that because I’m on the verge of surging to your cave and destroy the fucking thing…I feel horrible: it’s my fault – I shouldn’t have listened to you or Lucius…” he shook his head. “After all, I knew you!” he widened his eyes cocking his eyebrows.

“Nothing happened, Tony…I’m fine. I use your armor with prudence.”

Tony snorted mumbling “yeah, sure…” and then he pressed his lips thoughtful and breathed.

“Then why you cancelled your training sessions with Matt?” he asked calmly but Bruce felt like suffocating: Matt told everything to Tony.

Tony nodded because he could understand what his friend was thinking: he would have thought the same in his place.

“I didn’t speak with him but I caught a glimpse of him in New York at the time you should be having your session.”

Bruce’s mind was racing.

“There can be other reasons than what you fear…”

Tony leaned closer.

“You really want to lie to me and force Matt to lie in order to cover his patient?”

Bruce widened his eyes affronted.

“Of course not! And yes I called him to cancel our sessions but this” he didn’t want to lie to Tony yet if he learnt that Superman hurt him then nothing could stop him from killing Superman “has nothing to do with my body…I just didn’t have the mood for training; I wanted some days to calm down.”

Tony pursed his lips.

“Okay, little guy, okay but I want you to open up to me; do not hesitate to speak to your Tony…” he grinned and his eyes filled with affection. “Like the days we were kids…I know that lately I’m occupied with other things and maybe…” he ruffled his hair “not maybe…I did neglect you” Bruce shook his head denying that.
“You didn’t, Tony…”

But his friend nodded.

“I’m not spending the time I want with you” he raised his index finger “but I’m still your Tony, remember? You used to tell me everything then and I…” Bruce smiled “I always found a solution” he lolled his head on the side and rolled his eyes “even if that solution most times ended up with us punished…” he chuckled and Bruce did the same. “I love you, kiddo” he took Bruce’s hand and squeezed it. “You can’t do that to me, buddy…” his voice was hoarse “you can’t d…” he couldn’t finish the word and lowered his head.

Bruce supported his torso to the elbow and chased his friend’s eyes; Tony met his gaze.

“I’m not going to die, Tony” Bruce said what Tony couldn’t. “I don’t want to lose you again either.”

Tony hugged him and patted his back.

“I hate this fucking alien for the pain he caused you…”

Bruce’s eyes fixed on the wall.

“You suffer more than me, Tony, believing that I’m hurt. But I’m not: this wasn’t going to last: I knew and I was prepared… He couldn’t continue that even if he wanted.”

Tony clutched his shoulders and looked at him frowned.

“Stop defending him. You’re the most precious being on Earth and only his foul character made him cheat you.”

Bruce shook his head and smiled.

“I’m your friend that you considered dead for eighteen years and found again…so you give me too much value. But the truth is that it’s not easy even for a super powered being to be with someone like me. And do not forget that there’s an effect tampering with him.”

Tony shook his head nodding with disbelief.

“Speaking of which, now that the scumbag did what he did you can give me his wheelchair to make some digging…”

Bruce saw the wicked shine in Tony’s eyes.

“To find secrets of the alien technology, huh?”

Tony raised his hands in surrender.

“You read me like an open book, little guy. However, you can’t deny that with that effect controlling the alien we should have some contingency” he cocked his eyebrows “you love contingencies.”

Bruce smiled.

“I won’t break the trust he saw me” Tony rolled his eyes and huffed exasperated. “Besides the wheelchair is not in my possession anymore” his hand unconsciously clenched the small, velvet pouch that hanged from his neck over his chest.
Superman stared at his Smartphone on the cheap wooden waist table in Clark Kent’s apartment. He had left Diana’s apartment an hour ago saying that he had to attend a very important meeting: he didn’t want to leave her side yet he had a job to maintain; though being Clark Kent had begun to be very boring and tiring to him. However something from inside pushed him to continue being his human persona even if this was completely uninteresting.

He was still dressed as Superman; lately, it was too difficult to part with his powerful self and live like a common human being. Plus, being Clark Kent had so many other complications and that weathered, cheap Smartphone was one of them…not the gadget itself.

Upon returning to his apartment the phone was ringing but he didn’t make an effort to get it: actually, he preferred to miss that call. And his premonition proved right when he looked at the screen: his Ma – so many missed calls that the gadget stopped counting…

He didn’t call her back: he knew what she wanted. His Ma was an avid viewer of the news and several talk shows, so she definitely had seen the video and Superman had no mood to be scolded. It could wait. This annoyed him: he was happy and all the people around him didn’t let him enjoy that; okay, that was to be expected from Bruce’s friends but from his loved ones too? That was unfair! They should be happy with his happiness.

The first light of the day reached his small living room from the drills. In one or two hours he had to go to work and there he’d have Lois’ berating…Give me a break! Like Diana said, he was Superman: to the Hell with the others’ opinion.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps approaching his apartment’s door and hastily changed his attire into Clark Kent’s: his guest dragged along something and from what his vision could say was a wooden box and the man was a delivery man of some company he didn’t know.

He waited for the doorbell and then he opened.

“Good morning. Are you Mr. Clark Kent?”

He mumbled his affirmation.

“I have a package for you” the man gave him a pen to sign to a pile of papers.

“From whom?” Clark asked perplexed and the man shrugged.

“We don’t ask names…” he replied flatly and left leaving the box in front of Clark.

Clark cocked his eyebrows on this and carried the box inside closing the door behind him. He looked at the package: nothing odd there; homemade wrapping. He rubbed his chin thoughtful.

*We don’t ask names… Nor you disclose them…*

Who could be the sender? He could suspect anything: even a kilo of Kryptonite if Stark was the one who sent it. Yet if he wanted to kill him he’d have done so in Diana’s apartment. As for Luthor – another… ‘fan’ of his – he didn’t know his secret identity so no danger from there.

To the heck…He began unwrapping the box only to find a padlock with a receptor that obviously was for retina recognition. Clark’s eyes widened impressed; the one who sent it knew his job. And he could think only one who knew his retina and had the know-how to do that.

He pressed his lips: everyone tried to poison his happiness… For an instance he thought to not open the box but then he changed his mind and put his eye to the receptor hoping that it wouldn’t pop
something to injure his eye.

The padlock made a clack and the lid moved slightly so Clark lifted it. He squatted and began pulling out the items: his clothes that he had taken to the Manor when he was with Bruce: well, that was to be expected.

Under the clothes, folded in its minimum size of a medium cube was the wheelchair he had created for Bruce. He pressed his lips and for some seconds his mind dag and brought to the fore memories from the Fortress; however he crossed them out determined before they formed. Now Clark got why Bruce used the retina recognition system for the box’s security: he couldn’t risk someone opening it and seeing the alien object. Bruce still protected him and his secrets.

He took out the cube and placed it in the floor. Then there was a small, plain square box made of wood.

Clark narrowed his eyes. Bruce sent him Kryptonite? He shook his head snorting: no, not Bruce; besides he’d have felt it immediately since the box was wooden and the content wasn’t Kryptonite.

He took the box and opened the lid; he sighed: it was a metallic frame – round shaped and plain, black platinum from an unknown yet vein in Siberia.

He collapsed to the floor and squeezed the jewel in his palm closing his eyes. He saw again Bruce’s naked chest; broad, soft, toned with a shining charm touching his skin: a big black diamond sparkling inside its black, sleek nest of the platinum frame.

“Damn, Bruce! You should have kept it! It was a gift…” he sighed and then licked his lips and saw inside the box.

The last thing was a folded white, silken handkerchief. Curious he unfolded the fabric and his heart hurt as if a punch was delivered right to the pulsing muscle. A pressed flower like those that people collect putting them in books.

Clark recognized that flower: it was the rose Clark had brought to Bruce from Japan that morning after he had spoken badly to him. Clark wanted to make amends with him and reassured that he still loved him; that nothing had changed because of Diana.

Clark lowered his eyes: he was pretending to Bruce and to himself…No, no, no…he didn’t pretend: he tried to fight that attraction, that passion but in the end it was beyond his powers. Because it was real and his feelings for Bruce proved to be false. Staying with Bruce and desiring Diana would be worse; continuing this would be an insult to Bruce who had realized before he did…

He smiled and brought the almost dried flower to his nose: it had Bruce’s perfume… The human had put Clark’s present into a book to keep it for years; for all his life maybe…For Bruce that flower was very important and more important was Clark’s gesture, Clark’s love…

And now that Clark showed that this love didn’t exist anymore, Bruce sent him back the rose…

He inhaled deeply and stood careful to not clench his fist and squash the flower; he went to the wall shelf and took his favorite book, opened it and stashed the rose inside. He didn’t want this to be lost; he felt as if in its dried petals lay Bruce’s heart: the heart he broke.

He blinked and shook his head to shake off the depressing feeling. It was better this way: Bruce never actually believed in this. Bruce was a lonely man. They didn’t match; they were different – Superman was meant to be with Diana, otherwise he wouldn’t have left Bruce. His feelings would have endured if Bruce was the one…but he wasn’t.
He looked at the cheap, table clock: he had to leave for the office. He’d take the wheelchair back to the Fortress after work.

Entering the foyer of Planet’s building, it struck him immediately. His eyes warmed: the foyer had been decorated in Christmas’ spirit, a huge Christmas tree at the center, covered in red big glimmering balls and white tiny lights between the branches.

Clark always loved Christmas and every year he looked forward for the time he would decorate the tree and the house with his Ma – even in his tiny apartment he always had a Christmas tree: his heart was clenched in the memory of his Ma. She was expecting Bruce for Christmas…Damn! She was very fond of Bruce and Clark was wrong to take him to her. Bruce had warned him…Bruce knew about his cheating before Clark even admitted his own desire to himself.

Under the tree were placed many square shaped boxes wrapped in multicolored glimmering paper. He pressed his lips: one month ago he was planning the Christmas he’d spend with Bruce…He shook his head: Bruce had his people; he wouldn’t miss him and Clark definitely wouldn’t miss him because he had found his true mate and now he was exciting for his first Christmas with Diana.

As the lift halted on his floor he had braced himself for Lois’ scolding but one second before the door opened he heard screams from afar: a bus was ready to fall from the bridge. He pressed instantly the button to the roof. He stepped out already having scanned the area and realizing that nobody was there. Superman took off heading to the bridge.

Lois was writing her new article without any mood; she was pissed, angry, disappointed, disgusted. The scenes from that video with the Princess on the rooftop kept coming to her mind though she chased them away every time. Damn you, Clark!

Suddenly, she heard some ruckus as her colleagues gathered around one of the desks. She really didn’t care yet she was curious so she stood and walked slowly there; Perry almost toppled her as he stormed to the same place.

A school bus was hanging from the main bridge and the poor kids yelled frightened: Ron was there with his cameraman for covering today’s general strike but realizing what was happening rushed there. Police had stopped the traffic from and to the bridge and the fire brigade tried to pull the buss yet it was impossible to approach because the vehicle howled threatening and shook with the slightest wind.

People had gathered behind the police’s line and watched with terror in their faces.

“Superman is the only one who can save the kids…” Jimmy mumbled.

Lois cocked an eyebrow in sarcasm.

“Better put your faith in another hero because he must be very busy with his girlfriend” she spat and her colleagues laughed.

“If we judge from that video…”

Perry coughed.

“Good thing Ron was there for covering the strike” he looked at the exasperated glances his employees cast him. “People deserve to be informed: of course I care for that.”
Lois snorted but then her eyes widened in terror as the bus gently detached from the bridge and began falling to the sea; the children’s yells and the crowd’s that watched unable to do anything blend in one. She noticed that several of her colleagues closed their eyes.

“Look!” she screamed and soon the enthusiastic yells of the kids and the gathered crowd revealed what had happened.

Superman was under the bus and with his arms wide held the vehicle from falling, his perfect muscles bulging under the thin fabric; he lifted the bus above the railing to put it gently down on the asphalt that was empty due to the police’s evacuation.

The crowd was whistling and clapping.

“At least he didn’t forget to wear any of his clothes…” someone at Lois’ right remarked snidely, “Yeah, but he wore his red briefs out…” Clair Davis added and the reporters burst in laughter now that the agony and terror for the kids had vanished.

Back to the wide PC screen, Superman gave a pressed lips smile to the crowd and left the scene.

“Wonder Woman is expecting him with spread legs…” Tim remarked.

“To your works!” Perry ordered. “Where’s that Kent?” he snapped retreating to his office.

Lois sat to her desk chewing her pencil when the humming sound of the lift first and then of the doors opening told her that Clark was there; she knew his secret so seeing Superman leaving the bridge she knew that in a few seconds Clark would make his appearance in the office. Unlike the other mornings she didn’t have the mood to speak to him – not even call him names. He didn’t deserve even that. So she leaned to her screen and began typing.

Clark cast a glance to Lois’ desk only to be met with her back: his friend didn’t even turn to acknowledge. Maybe that was for the best Clark thought and shrugged walking to his desk.

“Kent!” Perry rushed out of his office and Clark bit his lip ready for some reprimanding as his boss stormed at him with pressed lips and clenched jaw.

Lois still didn’t look at him.

“Mr. White, I’m so…so sorry… let me explain…” he mumbled.

But Perry’s face cracked in a big, radiant smile.

“In another case, I’d give you Hell because you’ve taken it too far…” he huffed “anyway, congratulations, Kent!”

Clark frowned and looked stupidly at him not understanding.

“Wh…”

Perry patted his back.

“The Planet got its second Pulitzer! Your name has been announced.”

The pen fell from Clark’s hand and his eyes widened; Perry offered him his hand for a shake but seeing that his employee was too stunned to register that grabbed Clark’s hand and shook it.
“Good job, kid! Continue like this…” he patted his back again and returned to his office rolling his eyes. “That Kent…” he murmured “how he managed the Pulitzer is out of my grasp…”

Clark hadn’t come over from the shock when the hoard of his colleagues surged his desk congratulating him, shaking his hand and even kissing him, like that cute blond newbie, Sara.

Only Lois didn’t move from her desk and that created some murmurs between the people of the office: Clark could hear everything. Some were discussing that she must be jealous because Kent who was always in her shadow managed to take the prize only she had till then.

Yet Clark knew that it wasn’t that… He glanced at her direction in hopes of catching her eye – to no avail, she was absorbed in her PC screen; however, Clark could discern from her vitals that she was pissed and sad at the same time. He closed his eyes and returned to his own screen something nudging him to surf the internet to read the comments for that dreadful video. However he resisted the urge.

At first, Clark was relieved that Lois didn’t even glance at him because he didn’t want to argue with her. Yet as the hours dragged to noon this situation tired him. He wanted to speak with his friend even if she berated him. He began staring at her hoping that she would look back – Lois had a terrific ability to sense other people’s stares. But she continued ignoring him and Clark sighed. He didn’t want to walk to her desk and speak with her because people would listen so he waited.

Lois stretched her body and stood marching towards the lift without turning her head in the slightest towards Clark’s direction: Clark was sure that in the end her neck would get stiff.

He followed her keeping a distance at time having his super hearing tuned with her vitals. She went to Ms. Rose’s bakery for some brunch. He caught her when she was paying her order and as she turned to leave they came face to face; Lois’ face distorted in anger and contempt.

Ms. Rose however smiled broadly to Clark and gave him a paper bag filled with delicacies.

“What’s this, Ms. Roses?” he asked watching Lois snapping away from him and marching out of the little store.

“I just took them out of the oven: it’s the Prince’s donuts” Lois stopped abruptly hearing that. “I know that someone important is very fond of them…” she chuckled and patted Clark’s upper arm.

Lois murmured something and rushed outside while Clark blushed; he couldn’t say to her that they broke up so he hastened to pay in order to catch up with Lois. But Ms. Rose touched his hand smiling.

“No, dear: it is a gift… Enjoy them!”

Clark nodded uncomfortable and gave a pressed grin, mumbled a ‘thanks’ and rushed behind Lois catching up with her in front of the Planet’s building.

“Please, Lois, wait” he said to her and the woman stopped tilting her head on the side clearly frustrated.

“What do you want?” she spat without turning to look at him.

Clark walked in front of her and met her enraged eyes.

“Can we speak?” he said calmly. “I’m your friend, remember?”
Lois moved her foot nervously.

“No, you can’t be my friend Clark Kent; he wouldn’t ever do what you did!” she made to pass him but Clark held her upper arms.

“Lois, I didn’t want to be like this…” he looked around and gestured to her to follow him to the alley next to the building.

She knitted her eyebrows.

“What exactly you didn’t want to be like this? Did you expect to cheat and dump him without breaking his heart? That was horrible of you Clark Kent! Hideous! Gross!”

Clark shook his head.

“I didn’t dump him; it was his decision, Lois.”

Lois rolled her eyes.

“Bruce gets more points in my appreciation! That’s my boy! What? You thought that after you cheated him he’d keep you?” she snorted. “Oh! You’re more rotten than I thought! Did you think that you could have both Bruce and the bitch?”

Clark closed his eyes.

“Don’t speak like this for Diana…”

Lois cocked her eyebrows and looked at him challenging.

“All my life I learnt to tell always the truth; things with their name! Till recently I believed that you were doing the same thing but it seems that your dick destroyed your morals!”

Clark huffed.

“It’s not like that, Lois! I just fell in love with a great woman…It seems…I was wrong about my feelings for Bruce.”

Lois’ eyes flashed and she growled.

“You’re preposterous! A scum! You’re a complete asshole! Few months ago you were melting for Bruce’s love and whined about his refusal to open up to you; you were complaining because he thought that your feelings weren’t true and when he accepted your love you betrayed him with the first chance! Do you realize what you have done to him? He isn’t going to open his heart to anyone again!”

Well, something dark inside Clark told him that this wasn’t that bad…But he saw Lois narrowing her eyes as if she had read his thoughts.

“You like that, don’t you? You enjoy the hurt you caused, you miserable scum! You like the idea of Bruce not finding the happiness with anyone else! Selfish bastard!”

“I don’t! I want Bruce to become happy again; the proof is that I didn’t want to break up with him.”

Lois’ eyes bulged and almost choked in her saliva.

“Clark, you are ridiculous, you get that? What decent person would accept that?” she tilted her head.
“Did you have polygamy in Krypton?”

Clark frowned.

“I… I don’t know.”

“Then you simply are an egotistical pig!” she shook her head appalled and looked at the paper bag with the donuts that Clark held completely mechanic. “They are his favorite donuts, huh? You were bringing him these…”

Clark lowered his eyes on the bag and saw again Bruce eating donuts thrilled like a child; the morning after that night in the greenhouse. His heart filled with light but he erased the images.

“How could you do this to him at his condition?” Lois continued. “He is still recovering; he is confined in a chair, for fuck’s sake! What kind of a man does that?”

“Bruce wouldn’t want me to stay with him from pity…”

Lois’ lips trembled from anger.

“You disgust me!” she turned to leave but looked him again. “Don’t you ever speak to me because I’ll go to Luthor and ask him a chunk of Kryptonite to smash your stupid face! Ah! Luthor got out of jail, did you learn that? I guess you were too busy fucking on rooftops… I bet he plans to make Bruce’s life a hell and now that Superman doesn’t give a shit about him…”

“I care about him, Lois!” but his eidetic memory filled his mind with scenes of the way he used Bruce before he met Diana. “’Mon, Lois: we’re best friends! I want to celebrate with you that Pulitzer.”

“Fuck off, asshole!” she turned on her heels and stormed to the alley’s exit. “Ms. Kent is looking for you from yesterday; she called me to ask about you… you became so coward to avoid speaking to your mother now?” she hissed without turning to look at him.

Clark closed his eyes and breathed calmly: no, he wouldn’t let anything and anyone spoil his new happiness: and he was awarded with a Pulitzer, for Heaven’s sake! And his best friend didn’t even congratulate him… Lois would speak to him again: she was his friend for years. Their friendship wasn’t going to get ruined for Bruce’s sake.

Bruce lay upon the workout chair lifting weights, inhaling and exhaling in calm pace. He took care to wear something long sleeved to cover every possible mark; the marks on his wrists from the energy casts were quite evident. He had cancelled another session with Matt because the damn marks didn’t relent yet he needed some workout to keep his muscles in vigilance and distract his mind. He was careful of course.

He heard footsteps approaching and thought of Alfred.

“I’m glad to see you’re well enough to workout, Bruce.”

Bruce knew how to keep his calmness otherwise the weights would have slipped from his hands. He returned them to their sockets and Matt helped him with that and then to sit.

“Hi, Matt… I thought I told you…”
Matt dragged a stool and sat.

“Absolutely. But I still can come as a friend to see you, right?”

Thankfully, he was red from the effort otherwise Matt would have seen him blushing for being caught on act.

“Definitely…”

Matt placed his hand on his sweaty back.

“I saw that video, Bruce…I’m sorry and I understand how you must feel... But for me it was expectable the way he was treating you…It’s better he is away from you: he hurt you once he could do it again.”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded.

“I never wanted to keep him against his true desires…”

Matt cleared his throat.

“I was wondering…you called off our sessions because you are not in the mood or because he left some marks on you that you didn’t want me to see?”

Bruce’s eyes widened for his physiotherapist’s blatant honesty.

“Matt, don’t…”

Matt took a big fluffy towel and wrapped Bruce because he was all sweaty.

“You knew that if I saw marks I’d have told Tony.”

“There are no marks” Bruce spat his resolution icy and sharp. “He didn’t do anything.”

Matt crooked his mouth.

“But if he did, Bruce, Leslie must examine you: we’re talking about Superman. One of his blows can damage permanently a man in perfect health and you are recovering” he lifted his eyebrows “your body is very sensitive.”

Bruce rubbed his forehead.

“I’m not hurt.”

“Let me see then – I know your stubbornness, your bravery, your sacrificing intention to protect him but let me see in order to help heal any damage. Remember the last time when he caused cramps to your thighs?”

Bruce’s eyes stabbed the physiotherapist.

“I’m fine, Matt” he replied coldly. “There’s no way I’ll let you or anyone else see me: if you want to show me some exercises and eat lunch with us, you’re welcome but I don’t want any discussion about Superman or...hints that he might have hurt me. I’m perfectly fine” he snapped with his eyes completely still and flashing but after a few seconds taking in Matt’s puzzlement blinked. “Thank you for your concern… I appreciate it.”
Matt nodded: after all, it was better than nothing being able to observe his patient’s condition while working out. He would be able to discern the signs of something ominous while he hoped that there wasn’t anything. How much more could Superman fall from grace? He cheated Bruce...beating him as well would be villainous.

Superman positioned the wheelchair on the floor, at the base of the cylindrical blue crystal pillar which hosted Jor El’s hologram. Jor El lifted his eyebrows.

“I’m here to serve you, Kal El but if you ask me to remove the energy casts from Bruce’s body I’ll disobey you.”

Superman frowned and tilted his head: what was that?

“Removing the energy casts? What are you saying, Jor El? How this came to your mind?”

Jor El clenched his jaw and yanked his head proud.

“You brought back Bruce’s wheelchair.”

Superman shook his head.

“I didn’t take it from him...He...he sent it back to me.”

Jor El nodded slowly, his eyes blank. Superman closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“You saw the video?”

Jor El stabbed him with his solemn wise eyes.

“Though I indeed saw the video there was something worse, Kal El.”

“What?” he asked frowning.

“You know that the items of the Fortress sent reports here...The energy casts in Bruce’s body too” he locked eyes with his son who understood. “You used the energy casts to bind Bruce’s hands and you put his body through a horrible ordeal: I never expected that shame from you, Kal El.”

Superman clenched his jaw and pursed his lips.

“Don’t speak to me like that, Jor El!” he growled. “You don’t know the facts” Jor El watched him solemnly and a bit ironic. “Bruce is used to be treated like that during sex: he was grown up like that and this is the way for him to get the maximum pleasure.”

Jor El lifted an eyebrow in complete disbelief.

“Really? Is that so?” his voice was heavy with irony and disapproval. “Even if I do the concession to believe that only to not add the word ‘liar’ to my disappointment list, still this isn’t an excuse, Kal El. Bruce’s body is in a very fragile condition: weren’t the energy casts you’d have caused permanent and irrevocable damage to him” he said sternly but for Superman what counted was that his father’s hologram, the last remnant of his parent was speaking so ill of him.

“He cheated me, Jor El! I lost control!” he was lying again, Clark realized and lowered his eyes. “I was convinced he had cheated me...”
“And then you cheated Bruce in real…” he said simply yet Superman could discern the accusation.
“I don’t regret it, Jor El and you should be happy for your son for finding happiness.”
“You were happy with Bruce. Remember the night you brought here his dead body?”
“Almost dead…” Superman’s voice was hoarse.
“If he was left to the humans’ treatment he’d be dead. Your life depended on Bruce’s survival.”
Clark bit his lips.
“I was wrong: I mistook mercy and sympathy for love. It wasn’t true love: Diana is the one for me.”
Jor El looked him in disbelief.
“In Krypton, people mated once for their entire life.”
Superman clenched his waist with both hands and yanked his head.
“Once they found their true soul mate! And Bruce wasn’t that! Ra’s Al Ghul had mutated him into a body that would be impossible for me to resist: my attraction to him, my feelings was the products of the brews Al Ghul used.”
“But you were inoculated and the tests here showed that you were immune to this effect.”
“We’re wrong! It was too soon and Bruce knew that but didn’t do anything to prevent it.”
“So it was Bruce’s fault?” Jor El asked with cocked eyebrows.
“He attacked me when I went to see him yesterday. In his eyes I saw that he could kill me.”
“I highly doubt that. But for the attack I don’t blame him: you left him really battered” Superman turned his back to the hologram.
“Why are you trying to poison my happiness? Why even you, my real father don’t understand me?”
“Because I doubt it is real happiness: you’ve changed, Kal El – to the worse” Superman tilted his head slightly to the hologram’s direction, his anger distinguishable in the shadows of his eye. “You never came again for your tests…”
“Because I don’t need them: all was Bruce’s scheme to make me feel ill and resist my true feelings for Diana. Yourself said that there was nothing wrong with me.”
“I wanted to make thorough examination but you didn’t come again. Maybe we should do it now.” Superman clenched his jaw and turned to the hologram, his eyes glimmering.
“No!” he snarled. “Nobody is going to ruin my happiness with these nonsense!” the Fortress’ roof opened and he smirked to Jor El. “I know you would like to imprison me here and take millions of exams just to keep me away from her but unfortunately for you the Fortress has only one Master to obey…”
He took off with his fist ripping the air while Jor El didn’t make the motion to watch him; he just pursed his lips.
“I hope you’re right, son and we wrong…”

Tony was pacing nervously before the whole wall window with the spectacular view of New York’s skyline; he waited at the conference room of the Avengers’ Tower huffing at from time to time. Then the door opened and Thor entered.

“Good afternoon, Tony. You called me but I didn’t hear anything about emergencies or something important happening.”

Tony’s face was serious and his eyes sparkled.

“For me Bruce is the most important thing on Earth.”

Thor stiffened hearing the name and nodded.

“Of course.”

“Have a seat” the billionaire gestured to the leather chairs of the meeting table and Thor sat.

“You were in Gotham” Thor said “and I’d expect you’d stay there for much longer due to the circumstances.”

“I’m going to return but first I had to talk to you” Tony sat to the chair right opposite Thor.

“I could have come there.”

“Certainly and you’d have enjoyed being at Gotham but I didn’t want anyone there knowing about our meeting.”

Thor frowned.

“What do you mean, Tony?”

“I saw how you’re looking at Bruce… and you being at the Manor last night…all by chance, I bet” his voice was highly ironic and Thor was annoyed and ready to reply but Tony raised his palm stopping him like a boss. “I’m too experienced in these things, blondie.”

Thor yanked his head proudly.

“My presence at Bruce’s Manor wasn’t by chance: Bruce asked me to have my eyes on Loki and Gotham in case he meets with Joker. And yes, I came to the Manor to see Bruce to make sure he was alright because I learnt about Superman’s adultery and because I feel responsible for the last days’ events.”

Tony frowned.

“Responsible?”

“Loki was pestering Bruce and I intervened but Superman who came after Loki was gone thought that Bruce and I…” he blinked uncomfortable having difficulty to even utter the word. “Anyway when I learnt what Superman did, I knew that Bruce would be heartbroken and I came to speak to him. Tony, you have to understand: I mean no insult for Bruce and I don’t have any expectations from him”
Tony would have rolled his eyes but he was too ill spirited for that. He leaned towards his comrade. “I’m sick and tired of gods eyeing Bruce. Superman, Bagdana, your stupid brother, you…”

Thor blushed. “But I just told you…”

“I know Bruce is fascinating: heavenly beautiful, charming personality, strong like a granite rock with an iron will but vulnerable at the same time that makes all you super humans intrigued.”

“I admit that admire your friend” he replied calmly.

Tony bared his teeth.

“Enough with gods playing with him.”

“I’m not playing!”

“Superman had told me the same thing when I saw through him and confronted him about flirting Bruce; he promised that he’d never hurt him.”

“Tony, you know me too well, I…”

Tony jerked upright, his palms hitting the table.

“Drop it! Enough with promises. Find a god or a goddess of your status like Superman did and stop trying to put Bruce’s heart in another adventure. Superman shattered that heart and I don’t know if it would be ever healed.”

“I’m sorry, Tony…I have no intention to caused any pain to Bruce. I…For me, he is a good friend and a comrade I respect.”

“Give me a break, pal…” Tony chuckled tilting his head but Thor could discern the man’s bitterness. “Leave Bruce alone, Thor: he was kidnapped when he was eight years old, they chopped his toe, he saw his parents being murdered, they shot him and let his arm untreated only to be always in awful pain; they were starving him; they whipped him every day” he coughed to clear his throat “they raped him every day for eighteen years. Can you digest, can you imagine that pain?”

Thor lowered his eyes and Tony shook his head. “No, you don’t: because you’re an invincible god, an invulnerable being like Superman…Maybe if he could have knowledge of the pain he wouldn’t have engaged Bruce in that relationship to break him afterwards…”

Thor stood and walked to him.

“Tony…” he placed his hand on his shoulder.

Tony ran his hands through his locks and pouted.

“I’m human but still I can’t even get a glimpse to what Bruce experienced…To the pain he suffered and the pain he still carries every day deep inside him…because Bruce hides everything to not cause sadness to us” he sighed. “I want Bruce happy; I want to hear him laugh again, as he did when we were children.”
Thor pursed his lips and his eyes filled with emotion: he could understand Tony’s agony for his friend. Tony looked him in the eyes.

“Leave him alone, Thor.”

Thor remembered the moment he gave Eir’s elixir to Bruce and the human’s reaction.

“It’d be a pity if Bruce’s heart remains petrified forever, Tony. He deserves to be loved; to find his soul mate.”

Tony shook his head.

“No! Not that! That’s too risky…He gave his heart to that fucking alien and he took it, ripped it in pieces and trod upon it” he pressed his lips and panted. “I just want him to be calm and happy and for that people should stop playing with his feelings” he stabbed Thor’s eyes with his fervent ones. “We’re friends, Thor: I’m asking you as a friend to not try to win Bruce’s heart.”

Thor patted Tony’s shoulders trying to reassure him.

“I’m a friend of Bruce, Tony and I’ll protect him with all my might: I swear that. As for his precious love…I think that Bruce is from the people who love once in their entire life.”

Martha Kent stood on the porch in front of her house with her arms hugging her ribs and her tired eyes watching the dark, filled with stars sky. She had stopped calling her son: she understood that he didn’t want to speak to her and that meant that her son either knew he was wrong or he got more corrupted than the video showed.

Only the thought of that video made her nauseated; Clark always made her proud even when he failed in something. But since she saw that video and spoke with Bruce hearing the young man’s dignity and effort to defend Clark, she felt ashamed not for Clark but for herself because she failed to raise him right so that he could discern what was worthy and what wasn’t…

But mostly she was afraid for Clark, a heavy rock smashing her chest: if he became able to cheat and abandon his loved one and avoid speaking to his mother then what slippery road he had taken? And that woman…even when Wonder Woman saved people and helped Superman, Martha always thought her creepy.

“Hello, Ma” world’s most beautiful voice greeted her softly but also determined.

Martha turned where a gentle sound said her that Superman had landed. She hugged him though she knew that her son could detect in her vitals how stiff her insides were.

“I was calling you.”

Clark nodded: straight to the point he thought – that was his Ma.

“Yeah, Lois told me but my Smartphone had a problem so I took it for repair and came myself to see you.”

Martha’s sad smile told him that she knew that he was lying and like Jor El she was disappointed; but there was a feeling in her stronger than disappointment: sadness and fear.

“You saw that despicable video, right?” he asked her and she pressed her lips. “Damn!” he growled
“If I find the one who did it...!”

Martha’s eyes bulged in fear.

“You won’t do anything to him, sweetie! My son doesn’t hurt people...Or you’ve changed so much?”

Superman closed his eyes realizing his Ma’s worry and ruffled his hair.

“Because of that scum you’re upset and worried and...and sad; but you shouldn’t, Ma, because I’m happy: I got what I wanted. You and Pa always told me to not care about people’s opinion and do what I felt.”

Martha closed her eyes.

“When that was right. You think that what you did was right? Are you sure you’re happy?”

“Of course! Diana is great and we are perfect together! I love her, Ma.”

“There’s a vast difference between carnal pleasure and love, Clark” she said dryly and tired. “You had love with Bruce and happiness.”

“No! I had only an illusion of happiness! Now that I found Diana I can realize that...You’ll see how great she is once you meet her.”

Martha stiffened.

“I don’t want to meet her!”

Clark laughed.

“The role of the evil mother-in-law doesn’t suit you, Ma, and once you realize how happy she makes me, you’ll forget your hesitation.”

“I doubt that...”

Clark shook his head.

“C’mon, Ma, I know how much you liked Bruce but your sympathy was more for what he went through not because he was with me...I know you always wanted grandchildren” he launched his biggest weapon.

“I always wanted and still want to see you happy with the proper person on your side, Clark; also, I always wanted you to be a good man.”

Superman snapped his head on the side staring at her challengingly.

“And am I not a good man?”

Martha pursed her lips and sighed.

“What kind of a man abandons his loved one while he is in pain, hurting an already shattered heart?”

Clark yanked his head and growled frustrated.

“Bruce is not as vulnerable as you think him.”
“I know: he is very brave; you told me that he saved your life several times. But this doesn’t change that he is a tormented young man, in pain, Clark. And now he needed you, your love the most.”

Clark huffed.

“You’d prefer me to pretend?”

“I’d prefer you to resist to this woman’s advances and not behaving like a horny teen on rooftops, forgetting everything in an instance just because that woman seduced you! We didn’t raise you like that, Clark, to shame yourself and break the heart of someone who loves you so much! Your father and I were forty years together and adultery never upset our love.”

Superman crossed his arms.

“Exactly! Because you were in love! You don’t know if Bruce loves me – he never believed in me!”

Martha shook her head disappointed for her son’s words.

“Trying to defend yourself blaming Bruce? My Clark would never have done that…And you say that this woman makes you good? She corrupts you!”

Superman’s eyes bulged.

“I have no need to defend myself. And stop blaming Diana! You don’t know her!

“I can see her through your deeds, through your behavior. As I could see Bruce before through you…Care to make a comparison yourself?” Superman stretched his body clenching his jaw and Martha huffed. “Of course not…You don’t want to face the truth…You became that coward.”

“Ma!”

Anybody else would have paralyzed from fear hearing Superman raising his voice. But not Ms. Kent.

“Don’t you raise your voice to me, young man! Because that cries your cowardice and I’m not afraid of you! I was changing your diapers; I caressed your hair when you cried. You said that Bruce didn’t believe in you: you’re wrong. He still believes in you…he already forgave you.”

Superman’s eyes glazed.

“I don’t need his forgiveness!”

She smiled.

“That’s what he said.”

“You spoke with him.”

“Since my son avoided me and was hiding like a mischievous child…I felt the need to apologize to that young man for the new pain you delivered him; I wanted to encourage him but he encouraged me. Do you realize that you lost a bright star from your life? A star that showed you the right path in life? Get a grip of yourself, Clark: I don’t like the path you’ve taken.”

“You don’t have to worry, Ma; you’ll see that you were wrong scolding me like this. I’m Superman, damn it!” he gave her a quick peck. “It’s unfair to be hostile to your son for the sake of a stranger! You know me all my life, Ma: you love me and I love you.”
“And that’s why I speak to you like that. I’m afraid for you, Clark!”

Superman bit his lip and took off without greeting his Ma but then he changed his mind and return to her.

“Your son just got the highest award for a reporter, Ma. The Pulitzer! I hoped that you’d be proud of me – that someone would be happy and celebrate with me.”

Martha nodded.

“What about your…true love…You won’t celebrate with her?”

Superman stiffened and Martha didn’t miss that, realizing many things. One of them that her son didn’t admit to the Amazon that he had a human identity and worked like a common human being. And that realization made her worries tenfold.

“I’m proud of you, son… I’m always proud, with or without the Pulitzer. But I’m not proud of what you did to Bruce; of how cruel you were with him” Superman’s eyes bulged in terror fearing for an instance that Bruce had told his Ma about what he did to him but then crossed that: Bruce wouldn’t have done that. “Think, Clark: you won that award for the work you did while Bruce was on your side…His love, his star was guiding you to great feats…”

He leaned and kissed her cheek.

“You’ll see that you don’t have to worry about me, Ma, and that what happened was for the best.”

Martha cupped his face with both hands and looked him in the eyes.

“I know you’ll regret for what you did, sweetie. I know that something affects you because my baby would have never done that. Please, Clark, use the Fortress to see if something’s wrong.”

Superman shook his head.

“There’s nothing wrong, Ma” he kissed her hand. “Good night.”

Martha watched his figure distance between the stars. Her lips were pressed and her heart clenched.
Luthor paced in front of the wall beside the secretary’s desk at the waiting room in front of Mannheim’s office. He was perplexed on the fact that the shady tycoon didn’t have a whole wall window gazing at Metropolis’ impressive skyline – it was the trend in the office design for every esteemed businessman and left the guests impressed. On the other hand, his awkward and dangerous partner didn’t seem to care much about impressions or other people’s opinion; he cared only for his work to be done: Luthor liked that because it fit him too, though Lex’s obsession to manifest his power and status was more than evident.

And lately his status was quivering: having lost the control of LexLabs to Wayne who now also held the 20% of LEXCORP and being imprisoned weren’t the best assets for someone like him. But one of Lex’s biggest traits was his stubbornness and ability to reborn from his ashes like a phoenix. He was free now, just released from Blackgate Prison and back to Metropolis hungry for retaliation and the best addition? Superman’s humiliation: the video showing him like the cheapest, dirtiest porn star banging Wonder Woman on Gotham City Hall’s rooftop.

Oh! The comments…Luthor brought each of them again and again in his mind to chuckle and make his day. People liked Superman – though Lex hated that fact – no, no, those fools just needed Superman to save their asses and they pretended that liked him: who in their right minds would like a powerful and unchecked alien who can conquer the planet in 24 hours? Anyway, their need or sympathy didn’t thwart them from ridiculing him – on the contrary, fuelled the people’s mood to laugh at him.

Alas! Once again he couldn’t enjoy that as he should.

Mercy was standing at the far end of the waiting space, right in front of the lift, in a niche that provided her with the ability to check every direction for possible threats. Her arms crossed on the chest, her face poised and her eyes focused, protecting her boss. They owe their freedom to Mannheim – Luthor knew that but that didn’t make him grateful. He lifted an eyebrow. Actually, his own cunning and foresight saved them through his mysterious partner. He knew how to choose allies and how to control them.

Yet now they had a problem. And it was that problem that brought him here. Lex remembered Mercy’s glance when he told her that they were going to Mannheim’s head office. She turned on the engine and hid her puzzlement yet for Luthor it was clear; at some point his loyal driver and bodyguard didn’t hold back and ask.

“Lex Luthor doesn’t need to run to the office of others” she said casually but a bit disapproving. “Mannheim is too cheap for Lex Luthor to come to him.”

He didn’t answer: Mercy was right. He also wondered why he rushed to his car to run to the gangster. Yet he knew he had to do that though his usual attitude was to call for them to come to him. But Mannheim wasn’t like the others: Luthor sensed that, like he felt obliged to follow his orders – it seemed normal to Luthor to act like the man’s minion and at the same time he realized that was abnormal. However he couldn’t resist the urge.

So not only he had come to Mannheim’s office but also waited his secretary to announce and show him in. Ten minutes had already passed and damn, Luthor hated waiting: waiting to be allowed in always infuriated him but not today, in this office, for this man. He frowned: waiting seemed…fit.

Mannheim’s cute, blond secretary came out and looked at Luthor who stared at her expectantly.
“Mr. Mannheim will see you now, Mr. Luthor.”

He marched to the heavy, carved black door and the secretary opened showing him in and closed behind him leaving them alone.

Mannheim sat in the throne-like leather chair behind his huge, ancient-like wooden desk. Luthor cocked an eyebrow: he didn’t expect from a gangster such love for antic-like furniture. The elegance and solemnity of the furniture was in complete contrast with the man’s tough appearance – even his black mustache cried that he had nothing to do with such elegance.

Luthor walked confident towards the desk which wasn’t a considerable distance since the office - to Luthor’s shock and contempt - was almost small and definitely modest for a man with Mannheim’s power: his partner definitely didn’t care about appearances.

The sturdy guy had his fingers intertwined in front of his face and watched his visitor over them. His eyes were dark, darker than their usual brown color, and at the same time flashing with suspicion; fixed as Mannheim’s eyes were on him, Luthor felt like being X-rayed and read like a book. A shudder run through his spine and Lex hated that.

“To what do I owe your unscheduled visit, Luthor?” he spat almost bored. “It’s not a good sign, is it? I had told you that there was no reason for a meeting: you just ought to deliver what I ordered.”

Luthor expected in vain to be offered a seat, though it’d have felt like sitting in a table with nails. So he remained standing like a pupil in front of his headmaster. Ugh! That was a disgrace! But still it didn’t feel inappropriate.

“I wouldn’t have bothered you, Mannheim, if it wasn’t important” he took in how the gangster’s eyes crystallized as if being turned into ice. “It’s about your order.”

Mannheim just lifted an eyebrow but didn’t make another motion.

“I’m listening.”

“As soon as I put my feet on Metropolis I began working on our project.”

Mannheim made a slow nod.

“That was the reason you’re not still rotting in that prison.”

Luthor licked his lips.

“I know. I contacted my people in the several labs I had stashed the parts of your project – you see, I thought it safer to disperse them to many different places in order to nobody find or connect them…”

Mannheim blinked slowly.

“To the point!”

Luthor bit his lips because he hated being treated like this but he didn’t have another choice.

“When the LexLabs’ control ended up to another person, he put his people to search and register every item in the Labs” Mannheim yanked his head. “Every item containing Kryptonite or that seemed relative to Superman was destroyed.”

Mannheim smirked and snorted.
“The little bitch protected his stallion! How stupid now that Superman chose the Amazon… You had the items of my project well protected, right?” his voice emanated displeasure and threat.

Luthor blinked uncomfortable.

“I did but they found them…”

Mannheim stiffened in his seat, his hands grabbing the edges of the armrests.

“You did camouflage them to not betray that they were for something important. Right?!”

“I did – nobody will figure that they aren’t something trivial and have some other usage.”

Mannheim pursed his lips.

“So should I assume that they left the items in their place?”

Luthor licked his lips.

“Unfortunately not. And this is the reason I can’t gather them to start the construction: Wayne gathered them in some place of his.”

Mannheim growled and jolted to his feet clenching the armrests. Luthor couldn’t help it but feel afraid from the flames in the man’s eyes.

“That means that my project depends on Wayne?!” he roared.

Luthor opened his arms.

“Once the items are in my hands your machine will be ready ASAP; but Wayne gathered every awkward item they found in my Labs so…”

Mannheim glared at the sweaty businessman and nodded.

“I must regain them from him, huh? Humans are waste of space!” he uttered disgusted.

Luthor frowned hearing this but then he attributed the expression to Mannheim’s outrage.

“Leave!” the gangster spat and nailed Luthor with his glare for one last time. “I’ll fix this myself!”

Luthor retreated relieved to be away from this man and once he felt safe inside his white limo, a happy smirk appeared in his face because now Wayne would face Mannheim.

A day after his discussion with Tony who had told him that he didn’t have to ‘play the father’, Bruce was determined to do more about Dick; fine, the boy hated him but Alfred shouldn’t be burdened with everything concerning the boy as well. Also, he wanted to get some impression for the places Dick went daily and especially the people there.

For that reason he drove Dick to the city’s gym for his daily training. He took the red, undistinguishable car in an effort to keep secret from the media that he had the boy’s guardianship. Of course, Dick didn’t like that at all: his face was contorted in distaste, his gaze averted and his arms crossed through the ride. Fortunately, Bruce took Hero with them to not bother Alfred during his chores so Dick had the kitten to pet.
As soon as the car halted in front of the gym, Dick let Hero on the car’s floor and rushed outside taking his backpack on his shoulder; he stormed inside the building.

Bruce pressed his lips and tapped his fingers on the wheel remembering his dream. His son called Dick; the sense of his small, soft hand in his was still intense filling his heart with warmth. The way the boy was looking at him as he was swept away by Bagdana’s force…exactly like that night in the factory when the roof collapsed trapping him to his death. Dick had looked at him exactly like in the dream refusing to abandon him.

He shook his head to dismiss the thoughts: if Ra’s had created his child, he wouldn’t have any similarity with Dick – and of course, not Dick’s name. That however certainly didn’t change Bruce’s feelings about Dick and his sadness about the boy’s behavior. Not that he didn’t understand him…

Bruce looked at the entrance of the gym: they had already decorated for Christmas. And the city was already dressed in her Christmas attire even if Gotham wasn’t like the other cities. It was 17:00 and the night hadn’t fallen; however the evening was too dim and the Christmas lights had begun to sparkle giving a celebrating spirit to the city that Bruce hoped that this year would be real and not just a cover.

No wonder Alfred had hinted on decorating the Manor. But it wasn’t a bit early for decorating?

It was December 10th: it wasn’t early – Bruce remembered that they used to decorate the Manor with the coming of December. Little Bruce couldn’t wait…he was eager to decorate the tree, so his parents obliged; his poor parents couldn’t deny him the favor.

Now Christmas had no value for him: the proof? He hadn’t noticed till now that the entire city had been decorated. He shook his head: the last beautiful Christmas in a long chain of nightmares was the Christmas Selina gifted him in her secret attic.

He cast a last glance at the entrance of the tall building where boys and girls constantly went in and out.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS” multicolored lights read wrapped in green garlands. Two big white angels were positioned at the two sides of the double door, glimmering cheerful to the people.

Bruce chose to not follow him because Dick didn’t want to; he’d go later when he’d come to pick his ward. But he didn’t want to go back to the Manor either: he felt that he should give Alfred a break from worrying and taking care of him. On the other hand he didn’t want to go to a café or whatever to spend his time: he dreaded that people would recognize him and tip some gossip reporter into cornering him with inappropriate questions: about Clark.

So he decided to stop his car into the public parking space opposing the building and stay there: the car’s windows were dark so nobody could see him from outside. He had his Cosmos gadget with him and it was a great opportunity to work without anyone worrying that Bruce was “exerting himself”.

First of all, he wanted to search for the archer in green. These days after their meeting during his patrol Bruce was thinking of him. He was now sure that the man led him to the rooftop where Superman and the supposed Amazon were having sex on purpose, knowing that this would interest Batman. And then the man shot the whole thing and published it – nobody else could have done it.

But why? To ridicule both heroes or to get some fat reward? Maybe both. The fact he was a vigilante and helped him during the attack at the Avengers’ Tower didn’t mean that he didn’t care about the money. As for the ridiculing, from their exchange that night Bruce got the impression that the Arrow
had some contempt for the superheroes: he was more than unwilling to help them. And maybe there was a secret agenda behind Arrow’s behavior – Bruce never took things as they seemed.

He didn’t like that this man had an interest in him. Bruce closed his eyes and breathed in: actually, he didn’t want anyone be interested in him; he thought about Thor and his insides clenched: it couldn’t be happening again! Maybe Bruce should give Thor Eir’s elixir to drink and stop having hopes – if indeed there was such an interest and not just Bruce’s fears.

He run his hands through his hair: he didn’t want Thor to be hurt; why these things were happening all the time to him? Why they couldn’t see how ugly he was? How dirty and unworthy of the trouble? He could think of something…something that Clark had mentioned once: Lilith his ancient grandmother. The seductress demon which allured men to their destruction – her DNA was intact in him doing its job repeating Lilith’s work.

Damn! He hit his palm on the wheel clenching his jaw. His heart began beating fast and he had to breathe slowly to calm the pulse down.

He had to learn more about the Arrow: the man had a strange aura on him and his eyes under the hood flashed like fires among his shadowed features. If he wasn’t disabled he’d comb Gotham every night trying to find him again. However something inside him whispered that the man was probably away now. Arrow wasn’t a Gothamite though the fact he first appeared in New York couldn’t cross out that possibility; he could have known Bruce and followed him there.

Bruce shook his head: Arrow wasn’t a Gothamite. His accent was different and from his experience Bruce couldn’t find an exact match of this accent: for eighteen years, he was listening to every kind of different accents from thugs and clients in Dolcetto; also, when Ra’s decided to exploit Bruce’s appearance Falcone took him along to some of his meetings wanting to show off his toy. Maybe the Arrow changed his true accent…because if he wasn’t from US Bruce would have understood it.

He brought his Cosmos phone out of his black leather jacket’s inner pocket and pressed the indication on the right top corner turning the Smartphone sized gadget into a medium sized tablet. Bruce never used his Cosmos tablet in Dick’s presence because the boy would recognize that he owed the same gadget despite the fact that each Cosmos could have different frame. He didn’t want Dick realize that his tablet was Bruce’s present so he worked on his tablet only where the boy wouldn’t come – not that Dick had any mood to come where Bruce was.

What welcomed him made his breath halt for a second; the wallpaper he had on. A rose in dark ruby color against all black velvet fabric, a big rosebud with some drops of dew: he blinked. He had forgotten that that rose’s image covered his screen. Bruce chewed his lip uncomfortable: he had taken that picture the morning he had found the rosebud over his laptop – Clark had brought it to him after the hard words he told him the previous night; it was his apology.

Bruce had sent the dried rosebud to Clark along with the rest of his stuff and his presents. He wished to keep that rose for ever for that he stashed it between the pages of a book like his mother used to do…

But now there was no reason to keep it anymore: Clark had made his choice. It hurt to place the white handkerchief with the flower on that box and part with it yet Bruce did it because his heart was a piece of rock or it should be and he’d make it be…

Besides he felt shame for himself: he had acted like a teen; it was ridiculous – those things weren’t for him. He brushed the hidden option in the screen and the wallpaper changed into the custom Cosmos theme which was tranquil and majestic: the universe – black with golden stars and purple planets and pink nebulas, spinning slowly and eternally saying to him that his pain was nothing to the
world which continued his perpetual motion careless of what happens to a speck like him…

He gritted his teeth, shook himself and tapped the icons on the screen to enter the program he had created to be able to access the databases of the police across the States: perhaps there was some sighting of the man.

Bruce typed the description of the man and brushed the order. It took a minute to search every police database and the screen filled with a hundred findings. Bruce scrolled down, each entry popping up as he reached each finding.

Most of them were irrelevant about drank people dressed up as Robin Hoods doing some fuss after parties; but there was one that flashed to Bruce. In Chicago, some police officers reported about a gang being found in an alley: at the same alley, police found unconscious their almost victim. The thugs were found pinned on the wall from green arrows that had pierced their shoulders: they were unconscious from terror and blood loss but alive. Some witnesses said that they had caught a glimpse of a guy slipping between the alleys and he was dressed like Robin Hood; they thought that he had come out of some masked party.

Bruce frowned. New York, Gotham, Chicago…A quite big range for a vigilante. Unless there wasn’t only one man but he crossed that thought because the two of the three times it was the same person. So the guy was interested in more than one city? There should have been a connection, something common between the three cities and the high criminality rate was too weak. The two first times Arrow appeared Bruce was the common factor: in New York he appeared only once to save him and Gotham was his city. Now Chicago…

It was as if the Arrow knew that Bruce or Batman was going to research him and tried to mislead him. The sure thing was that Bruce wasn’t in position to fly to Chicago and do his research.

The tune for a new e-mail and a small window in the bottom corner of the screen pushed him out of his thoughts. He brushed the message right away: it was from Lucius. They had a first contact with the president of the gymnastics national federation and he was very positive in the idea of a charity gala in Gotham: the public relations department already began working with the local team’s manager to organize the event.

Bruce smiled and typed his answer:

“Thanks, Lucius; great job as always!”

He’d manage to speak with John Grayson’s trainer and learn everything he knew about Zucco who didn’t show up from that day Bruce took Dick from the social service office. He knew that if Ms. Turner’s fears and suspicions about the man were true then he’d make his move sooner or later so Bruce must be prepared. Ms. Turner told him that Zucco came back because he sniffed the money exactly as he did with John and now Zucco’s assumptions were fortified since the boy was the ward of Bruce Wayne. Zucco would do everything to get Dick – besides he had declared so.

Perusing the general news a headline flashed to him shadowing every other:

“Clark Kent: the winner of this year’s Pulitzer Prize for investigating reporting.”

A big smile stretched his lips without even realizing: Clark deserved that for all the years of hard work…not only in journalism. This prize was an acknowledgement, an appreciation, a reward both for his reporting action and Superman’s offering to the world. Bruce’s heart flew and his hand on its own accord rushed to combine an e-mail to congratulate him.
Upon realizing his fingers stopped midair: maybe it wasn’t the right thing to do after what happened—hell, he didn’t know how to handle this: he had no experience and that indecision made him sweat. Clark should celebrate his success; he should enjoy that…and Bruce could think a hundred things he would have organized to surprise Clark and celebrate.

He pressed his lips till they lost their color and ached from Superman’s rough treatment. Bruce sighed. Clark would celebrate with that woman though he doubted that Superman would admit to her that he maintained a human identity—and Bruce was glad for that because she was dangerous and knowing Clark’s secret could bring disaster to him.

Bruce pressed his hair with both hands: what he was to do? He just couldn’t be indifferent to Clark’s top moment. He growled and Hero looked at him puzzled.

“I must congratulate him, Hero; to the Hell if it’s right or wrong…”

The kitten meowed.

“I’m glad I have your agreement” Bruce smiled and hurried to open the program for mails.

He wrote a few words: congratulations, you totally deserved it. His finger stayed above the send option indecisive; he breathed in and out trying to calm his heart; he glanced at Hero and the kitten’s eyes were sparkling in the semi darkness as if encouraging him. He clenched his jaw and sent the message, his eyes staying fixed on the affirmation message.

A gentle tap on his window startled him: damn! He had lost his vigilance. But then he relaxed: this person had the ability to startle him always. He lowered the glass.

“Hi, handsome! You came to the city and didn’t call me?” Selina said playful. “I should be angry with you…”

“I just brought Dick at the gym and I wait to take him back.”

Selina pouted and raised her eyebrows.

“And Dick’s training ends at…?” she asked dumbfounded.

Bruce looked at his wristwatch as Hero jumped to his lap and then to Selina’s hands.

“In one hour and 35 minutes.”

Selina tilted her head on the side and rolled her eyes.

“And you planning to stay here for two hours? Gosh! Sweetie, I think you wanted to avoid me…”

Bruce widened his eyes.

“Not at all! I know you’d be with Steve and I wanted to let you two alone” Selina shook her head taking Hero from her shoulder where he had climbed. “Besides I have some work on my tablet and…it’s not like I can become stiff from sitting.”

Selina twisted her mouth.

“Nonsense!”

“Hey, Bruce; care to join us?” Steve’s head popped to the window and Bruce huffed to Selina’s chuckle since she understood that her friend couldn’t refuse now.
“Fine” he said and brushed the spot to turn the tablet into a Smartphone.

Steve’s eyes widened impressed.

“I don’t like 21st century’s technology but want one of these!”

Selina snorted.

“Maybe if you first learn what is Google…”

Steve hugged her waist from behind and kissed the little of her neck that wasn’t covered by her black scarf.

“I’m sure you’ll teach me everything…”

Bruce chuckled.

“Don’t count on that, Steve! Sel’s distaste for modern gadgets is greater than yours.”

“Then we have more in common…”

“What did you expect, handsome? I do sleep with an antic, don’t I?”

Steve laughed and Selina gave him Hero. Then she opened the door for Bruce and he took his wheelchair from the backseat and placed it down for him to slip in.

“Don’t worry, sweetie” Selina chirped.”You won’t be far from your boy – there is a beautiful, cozy café near.” She looked at the leather jacket Bruce wore and pouted. “I can’t believe Alfred let you out of the Manor with this jacket! It’s chilly! And no scarf and gloves!”

Bruce settled himself in the chair and lolled his head on the side in disbelief while Selina tucked his legs in the kilt blanket.

“I’m perfectly fine, Sel! And Tony’s chair is heated so you two would be colder than me.”

Steve chuckled.

“No way Tony would leave his best friend unprotected…It’s impressive how affectionate he can get” he commented as they moved towards the café Selina mentioned “I mean, Tony is always a nice guy despite his eccentricity but people would never take him for a protective person.”

Bruce turned his head to him.

“Tony was always like this from our childhood: considerate and protective. But some things made him hide that part of himself from most people.”

Steve smiled and nodded.

“What do you think of Gotham, Steve?” Bruce asked.

Captain America ruffled his hair with his gloved hand.

“From what Selina had showed me…”

“Which isn’t much apart from my bedroom…” she remarked slyly caressing Hero in her hug.
Bruce chuckled as Steve tilted his head.

“Well, that’s true…Gotham is like people describe her: wild and terrifying yet it has a certain charm if you’re willing to grasp it…something that can bond you to her…some odd beauty that attracts…”

Bruce’s eyes became blank and thoughtful but quickly changed that into nodding to Steve.

The café Selina led them was rather small; round shaped with brown glass walls it reminded more of a summer house since it was located in the center of the park opposite the gym. A beautiful park with bushes, trees and flowers that lasted through the year so the café gave its clients a gorgeous view.

The entrance was on ground level so Bruce didn’t need a ramp to enter. Steve held the door open for him and Selina and they sat in a table looking at the small fountain lake that was framed with a short, round tiled wall that emanated white light.

“It’s beautiful here” Bruce said though he felt a bit uncomfortable since some people cast him curious glances. He thought to say that he didn’t remember the place but it was stupid: he was imprisoned for a lifetime and Batman’s outings didn’t include romantic cafes.

Selina smiled.

“It opened lately after they renovated the park; Falcone had fallen then.”

Bruce nodded and his eyes caught Hero in Selina’s lap licking his paw. He took out of his pocket a small bag, ripped it and gave his friend a snack that was really appreciated by the greedy kitten.

When the young waitress came for their order Selina glanced at Bruce.

“Chocolate for you, Bruce” she whispered “Leslie says that coffee is not ideal combination to your drugs.’’

Bruce met Steve’s amused gaze, rolled his eyes and then looked at Selina.

“Thanks, Alfred! A hot chocolate” he said to the waitress who smiled at him and then smiled to the kitten that was staring at her.

“And for the young gentleman?” the girl chirped to take a meow for an answer. “I’ll manage something for you, little one…” she winked and left.

“Hero is a real charmer” Steve chuckled. “I’m used to attract attention but thankfully Bruce and Hero saved me from that” he pursed his lips thoughtfully. “On the other hand, for Gotham only one of our kind matters: Batman: he saved them all” Bruce kept his indifferent face. “I’d like to meet the guy: it was thanks to him that the dirty role of the first S.H.I.E.L.D was revealed and we managed to smash the League of Shadows without casualties.”

Selina didn’t look at Bruce in case Steve read that glance; she kept looking at her boyfriend but still the corner of her eyes exchanged ideas with Bruce’s.

“He is tough to meet” Selina shrugged. “Only criminals have the…privilege to enjoy his company…” she socked her eyebrows. “Still many people believe that he doesn’t exist.”

“I have seen him” Steve commented. “I have spoken to him.”

Bruce licked his lips.

“He saved me when Falcone tried to take me away using me as a shield to stop police from arresting
him. Weren’t for him I don’t know where I would be now…” he shook his head “if I was still alive.”

Selina touched his forearm and their eyes locked.

“Don’t think about it, Bruce.”

He grinned.

“I don’t.”

A lesser or maybe a stupid man would have been jealous of the two youths’ bond but not Steve; actually, it was very heartwarming seeing these two kids free after the terrors they shared: after years of being struggling alone against the world. He swallowed hard imagining the 10 year old Selina wandering the dangerous, dark city to get a glimpse of her tortured friend and the courage that short meeting gave to the poor boy to last another day.

“Steve?” Selina asked perplexed. “Are you alright?”

Steve smiled and nodded.

“Also I have heard a lot about another awkward resident of Gotham’s nights.”

Selina lifted an eyebrow.

“Whom?”

“Catwoman.”

“Mmm…” Selina pouted and caressed Hero’s head. “And what have you heard?” she asked playfully causing Bruce’s amusement.

Steve yanked his head and crossed his arms.

“That she is gorgeous with a perfect flexible body and curves that would seduce even a cleric” Selina cocked an eyebrow thinking that a cleric actually wasn’t difficult to seduce. “She is dressed in skin tight black leather that highlights every detail of her body; oh! And her eyes…though nobody had seen them from up close to know their color, her gaze is mesmerizing. They say that she is a very capable fighter. And…a master jewel thief.”

Selina cleared her throat.

“I think that what intrigues you the most isn’t her fighting skills” she said crossing her arms annoyed. “Careful, mister, because I’ll banish you from my bedroom and send you looking for cats!”

Steve wrapped his arm around her shoulder and kissed her on the lips.

“I prefer women than cats…no offense, Hero.”

Bruce chuckled. Selina touched Steve’s neck and deepened the kiss so Bruce looked around to give them some privacy. As the night fell outside, the café’s staff lit small, round multicolored candles placed in crystal ball candle holders on the tables. Also, the hidden bluish lighting of the walls became dimmer highlighting the Christmas decoration: white Christmas trees with big red balls hanging from the branches.

“Your first Christmas free…” Steve commented catching Bruce’s gaze after his kiss with Selina ended.
Bruce looked back at them and grinned carefree but unable to hide entirely his melancholy.

“Yeah…” he mumbled.

Thankfully, the waitress’ coming broke Bruce’s uneasiness. The girl served them their brews and some cat biscuits for Hero who purred to thank her before storming at the delicacies.

“He is greedy” Bruce chuckled to the waitress and paid for their order giving her a big tip.

“Thank you” she lowered her voice “Mr. Wayne; someone must have tipped Vale about your presence here because she called to confirm it but I denied that” she whispered to him winking. “Enjoy your chocolate, I hope you’ll like it.”

“I will; thank you very much, Dorothy” he said reading the chest label with her name.

“Nothing…I hate those gossipy reporters…” she turned on her heels and left.

“Gotham’s greatest power it’s her people…” Bruce said to Steve who shook his head.

“You love your city so much, Bruce: someone would expect you to hate this city after everything you’ve been through…to move to another city. Your choice to stay in a city filled with painful memories manifests your strength of will.”

Selina looked at her friend who had lowered his eyes.

“Those difficult years taught me that there are people in Gotham who suffer not only from crime but also from poverty” he pressed lips. “Good people even in wrong places” he huffed. “So now that I was lucky enough to come back I want to help them…”

Steve nodded and smiled tenderly seeing Bruce taking with the small spoon the cream over his coffee and devouring it with closed eyes; he met Selina’s happy eyes and his smile became broader.

Their smiles were still on when they felt that someone approached their table; Bruce sweeping the cream mustache from his mouth with the tissue looked at the newcomer surprised.

Superman was flying over Metropolis, a city that fully decorated in Christmas spirit was more joyful and brighter than usual; the cool air contributed in the carefree atmosphere yet Superman’s heart was heavy. Today at the office, his colleagues continued congratulating him and Clark brought them delicacies. It was a cheerful atmosphere yet the one person who mattered the most for Clark didn’t even approach him and left the delicacy he offered her on her desk.

He received many emails with congratulations but what upset him the most was the last one he saw: from Bruce…Clark didn’t expect him to congratulate him; but on the other hand, of course Bruce would do that to gain more sympathy from Clark’s loved ones, showing off his superiority…

Clark hadn’t replied yet – Bruce had attacked him and now the only reason he congratulated him was to embarrass Clark and make him seem an ass so no, he wasn’t going to play Bruce’s game. Enough with his cunning games. The human liked to prove his superior intelligence over Clark’s.

Superman huffed; he was fed off with this, he only wanted to rush to Diana and spending his night with her, having sex with her seemed like a haven; like Eden in the middle of Hell. Even though he wouldn’t share his joy for his win with her; he hadn’t ever told her that he worked as a humble journalist in a human newspaper – he never carried along his Smartphone because the Amazon
Princess would consider it odd and unfit for a god like Superman. But those were trivial in comparison to the happiness, elation and relaxation she gave him.

His hearing caught it one second before it appeared in front of him so he had halted and waited with his arms crossed. Thor with his hammer stashed in his wide brown leather belt, his divine armor and the royal red ruby cape flowing behind him. Superman cocked an eyebrow: the Norwegian must have some spare capes since he had gifted one to Bruce.

“Superman” Thor greeted him coldly.

Superman smirked: of course, one more of Bruce’s admirers-protectors…disgusting.

“Thor…to what do I owe the honor? I see that Earth lately has become very attractive to you…”

Thor’s eyes hadn’t their usual kindness and warmth; they had the coldness and fierce of the times he confronted his enemies.

“Lately you take things less serious than they deserve” he replied and Superman yanked his head clenching his jaw.

“You came to scold me for Bruce?” he asked. “You forgot who I am, Thor, and that what I’m doing it’s my own business.”

“The way you treat humans is not your business. How could you, Superman?”

The Man of Steel rolled his eyes and smirked.

“An Asgardian god must have better things to engage himself than my sexual life” he cocked an eyebrow. “Unless my sexual life affects you…” he hissed.

“Not only you were giving Hell to Bruce but also you cheated him in that gross way” he spat and then chuckled. “It is ridiculous that you made a scene accusing Bruce of having an affair with me when you were the one who was doing that: very evil…” he shook his head in disappointment. “You’re falling from your moral pedestal, Superman.”

Superman fisted his hand.

“Because I ended my relationship with Bruce? Because I found my true love? Your sucking up to Bruce makes you lose your grip, Thor” he hissed “you better stay at Asgard and…” he narrowed his eyes “why not taking Bruce there to devour him?” he grinned. “I know you want it.”

Thor’s lips trembled in anger and disgust.

“Is this what you were planning to do with Bruce?” Superman’s stare fell and Thor nodded. “You didn’t end your relationship as a true man would do realizing that he had feelings for a third person; instead you treated Bruce cruelly” Superman frowned wondering if Thor knew about his abuse but no, there wasn’t any chance. “A man in recovery, vulnerable due to his impairment; you made his life a Hell accusing him of adultery while you were preparing to cheat him…”

“I wasn’t preparing…”

But Thor didn’t let him continue.

“I doubt if you’d have told Bruce about your affair with Wonder Woman if he hadn’t seen you…and you’d have continued fooling him. He is a great man; he didn’t deserve to be treated like this,
Superman. You broke his heart, a heart that was already wounded – that’s a deed of a lesser man.”

The Man of Steel snorted.

“We both know who he really is…and he isn’t exactly the Little Red Riding Hood who needs your protection.”

Thor’s eyes sparkled.

“Exactly because we know who he is and you know better than me what he’s been through, you should have been more careful with the heart he gave you and not ripping it in pieces.”

Superman shook his head and rolled his eyes chuckling.

“You should thank me instead of berating me because what happened suits you perfectly…” Thor frowned puzzled. “I know you desire him: you fell for him since that day in Mt. Marcy, when Bagdana stripped him and you saw his body naked– I bet the way the demon handled his naked body fascinated you and fired your interest in the mortal” Thor was staring at him disgusted. “Well” Superman made a wide gesture “I cleared the path for you: poor Bruce would need your powerful shoulder to cry on and when his head leans on you it won’t be difficult to you to get access to other more tantalizing parts of his body.”

Thor’s punch came to his mouth swift and powerful like a thunder and though Superman was invulnerable that hurt. His eyes flashed red and laser beams launched against the god who brought Mjolnir in front of his face to absorb them. Superman having seen the shielding motion stormed at him sinking his fist in the god’s belly.

Thor gritted his teeth to fight the pain and at the same time downed his hammer on Superman’s head, sparks emanating to every direction. However the pain in his head, Superman clenched his jaw and head butted the Asgardian who answered with an iron punch to Superman’s liver. The Man of Steel blew frozen wind to him carrying the god far from him but Thor pressed his lips and put his palm in front of him halting the air wave and sending it back to Superman who swiftly avoided.

Thor roared and slashed the sky with his hammer sending a thunder to hit Superman’s chest; the alien groaned from the pain and smelt burnt as his suit caught fire but instead of panicking he roared and rushed at the god punching him in the jaw at the same time that Thor punched his guts.

“Oh, damn! I should have brought my camera!” a playful voice filled the sky around them. “This video would have become more viral than the porn one…” the sniggers made both of the god-like beings stop like thunderstruck.

Loki dressed in his dark green attire emerged floating sat with his legs folded. His straight, greasy hair fell in front of him framing his lean face and his bright, sneaky eyes regarded the two gladiators.

“Oh, please” he shook his head innocently “continue” he made an inviting gesture “pretend that I’m not here” he laughed. “Such duel must have at least one viewer!”

“Loki!” Thor roared and a thunder cracked the sky towards the naughty god who grinned at his brother and vanished before the thunder struck him.

Thor turned his head to Superman who felt his aching head; both men had blood running from their mouths.

“The only thing I felt that day at the mountain seeing the demon fondling Bruce was terror for his fate” Thor said calmly his golden locks framing his face “and shame for myself because I failed to
defeat the demon. I was always true when I said that I respected and admired him without any sneaky purpose.”

Superman swept the blood from his mouth with the back of his palm.

“However the current twist is not bad for you…”

Thor narrowed his eyes.

“You don’t realize in the least what have you done, don’t you? You shattered Bruce’s heart and now to save the last remnants of his tender heart he built an impenetrable wall not allowing himself to love again. You never understood the man that gifted you with his love, don’t you?” Thor shook his head with pity. “I know Diana is gorgeous but still…leaving Bruce for her?”

“Is none of your business, Asgardian!” Superman roared.

“You doomed everyone who would truly love Bruce and you took from him the chance to find the happiness life owes to him. How can you be so cruel?”

Superman stormed to him but didn’t attack just brought his face in front of Thor’s, baring his teeth.

“I didn’t want things to end like that but my feelings changed…you don’t know many things, Asgardian, and one of these is that Bruce knew that my love would end soon but he didn’t stop me from falling for him. The fault is his as well…Besides…” he turned his back and took off “it wouldn’t serve anyone if I pretended to be still in love with him.”

“I wish some day you feel the same pain you inflicted to that honorable soul!” the god shouted with gritted teeth and Metropolis’ sky cracked in several places from multicolored thunders.

Superman halted for a second midair but resumed his course immediately.

Thor looked at his hammer and his fingers clenched more its hilt: it was obvious that Superman was ignorant of what he dismissed, what he snubbed.

“Bruce, what a surprise!”

Selina exchanged a glance with Bruce who was looking at the man with an unreadable expression that she decoded as uneasiness and suspicion; she could see that Bruce doubted that the newcomer was surprised to find him here: Bruce wasn’t convinced at all that the stranger’s presence there came randomly.

“Mr. Queen…” Bruce greeted him without sharing the man’s enthusiasm.

Queen shook his head and his smugness flashed.

“It’s Oliver, Bruce. We told these things five days ago but I see that they are already forgotten.”

Bruce nodded absentminded: five days! It seemed like five years since he left New York to take Dick from the social service and Zucco’s hands.

Queen tilted slightly his head crooking his lips.

“Of course, so many things have intervened that it must seem like an eternity has passed.”
Bruce didn’t reply to that.

“Would you join us?” he offered politely.

“If I don’t bother your friends…” Queen replied gently.

“But not all…” Selina answered though her voice was a bit indifferent and deep inside she was annoyed by the man’s presence because it ruined their carelessness.

However Hero’s attitude wasn’t so diplomatic: he hissed at the man who laughed as Selina gathered the kitten in her lap.

“I’m allergic to cats and they sense that” Queen chirped. “So I’m glad that gorgeous young lady holds the cute kitten.”

Bruce cleared his throat.

“Let me introduce you: this is Selina Kyle, my best friend. Selina, Mr. Oliver Queen.”

“I have heard of you, Mr. Queen” she said “I’m not giving you my hand because I hold Hero and I’ll aggravate your allergy.”

Queen waved her concerns off smiling in his self confident way.

“It’s not that bad an allergy to thwart me from shaking the hand of a lovely lady…”

So Selina gave him her hand hiding her reluctance.

“And Mr. Rogers” Bruce continued “whom I think you know already.”

Queen turned to Steve offering his hand.

“Of course! How are you, Steve?”

He sat in the comfy dark blue round armchair crossing his legs with elegance and confidence. He snapped his fingers calling the young waitress who served another table and ordered his black espresso.

“I see that Gotham attracts more and more super heroes” Queen said lighthearted. “The odd is that now the city doesn’t need their help as in the past.”

Steve pursed his lips.

“There might be other reasons for someone to be attracted to Gotham…” the corner of his eye met Selina.

“Oh! I see that…” Queen chuckled. “And sure thing” his eyes pinned Bruce “Gotham has more beauties than any other city in the world.”

Bruce blushed and wished for the earth to swallow him: he hated it when someone made such comments for him. Hero growled.

“Your kitten doesn’t like me at all, Miss Kyle” Queen chuckled.

Selina gave a cold grin because she sensed how uncomfortable Bruce felt and she didn’t like how aggressively this man flirted her friend.
“Actually, it’s Bruce’s kitten and always wants to protect his master.”

Steve realized the odd atmosphere and after the waitress brought Queen’s order and left, turned to him.

“And what brings YOU here, Mr. Queen?”

Queen smiled broadly.

“Please, call me Oliver because otherwise I’ll have to call you captain…” he took a sip from his coffee. “Mmm…very nice” he mumbled. “What brings me here, huh? Dear Steve, I had a very interesting discussion with Bruce in New York but we were forced to interrupt abruptly. I came here to continue that discussion” he lifted his eyebrows looking at Bruce “I hope your offer for a dinner still holds?”

Bruce didn’t answer and Queen nodded smiling smugly with an inner knowledge.

“I understand that after the latest developments you’re not so interested anymore to learn about Themyscyra. But I assure you I have also some business propositions to discuss so I guarantee that our dinner will be still worthwhile.”

Selina looked at Bruce.

“I’m certainly interested in your propositions but also I still want to learn about the island of the Amazons: it’s a fascinating subject” he said nonchalant. “Why I should have stopped caring about that?” of course he knew already what Queen hinted.

Queen lolled his head on the side and grinned with his enigmatic way tapping his fingers on the marble table.

“I saw the same video the entire world has seen, Bruce” he said and though he tried to give some sadness to his voice it came out like he actually was satisfied.

Bruce frowned.

“To which video you refer, Oliver?”

Queen’s face cracked in a wide amused grin.

“The one with Superman and Wonder Woman fucking on the rooftop – it was a rooftop in Gotham, huh? Fancy that…” he lifted his eyebrows and Steve and Selina looked at him pissed. “I’m really sorry, Bruce” his voice’s color changed dramatically “it must be painful…after everything you suffered, the man who promised you love and happiness to betray you like that.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“Strange that you think that Superman had something with me while I had already told you that this story was a lie: I don’t see the reason you continue mentioning that” he shrugged and sipped from his chocolate. “After that, I think it is clear that I still want to learn about the legendary island.”

Queen’s face sobered and his eyes stilled on Bruce’s.

“I’m really glad to hear that you didn’t do the madness to engage with Superman” Steve looked at Selina who pressed her lips brushing Hero. “So our dinner is fixed?”

Bruce nodded though Queen’s attitude bothered him. However he still wanted to solve Diana’s
mystery and learn more about the mysterious billionaire.

“Of course. I’ll see my schedule and I’ll call you to arrange the day and exact hour.”

Queen waved his hand elegantly.

“I don’t want to put you to the fuss to search and dial my number; I’ll call you” his smile was radiant and smug.

Bruce felt the irritation boiling inside him for the man’s persistence but smiled stoically.

“Fine then. Call me one of these days and I’ll send Alfred to bring you to the Manor.”

The older man shook his head dismissingly.

“Pardon me but I’d prefer to dine somewhere else…” Bruce frowned. “I have heard that the roof garden restaurant of Cobblepot’s Imperial Hotel is splendid.”

Bruce looked at him but Selina had had enough.

“Are you always so pushy and demanding, Mr. Queen? Because it is rather annoying!” she spat with gritted teeth and eyes sparkling.

However Queen didn’t seem annoyed at all.

“With matters that really are important to me, yes, Miss Kyle…I wouldn’t have survived otherwise. Bruce understands…” he locked eyes with Bruce. “Our lives have too much in common: he knows that if you want to survive when everyone else tries to kill you, you must be stubborn and pushy to prevail and gain what you want. Right, Bruce?”

Bruce didn’t answer; he looked at his wristwatch.

“I must leave you now” he glanced at Selina and she understood that it was time for him to pick Dick up from the gym; she stood too.

“I’ll come with you, Bruce” she said and tightened her hold to Hero who was rather itchy. “Steve, keep Mr. Queen some company and I’ll catch up with you later” she gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

Steve squeezed her hand.

“Okay, Sel.”

Queen watched the two youths leaving the café with the same mysterious grin on his face and then turned to Steve.

“They are both escape artists, aren’t they?” he chuckled cocking an eyebrow.
Tony was watching the data Lucius fed from his processor to the hologram: items that were found in LexLabs without any information accompanying them or any profound use and relation to the ongoing projects of the various labs.

Lucius were pointing with the stick to certain parts of the items that in his opinion signalized the connection between them.

“Bruce believes that these items are important…” Tony mumbled “despite the fact that they don’t seem to have any significance.”

“And that’s exactly what convinced Mr. Wayne that they might be the most important finding from the LexLabs” Lucius replied smiling. “You know how your friend is thinking: for him the obvious is never the real; and the fact that we’re talking about Luthor makes him more adamant about that. I have to admit that finding such items in every LexLab in the States and aboard, without any other thing in common apart from these symbols that remind hieroglyph flares my curiosity too. What’s your opinion, Mr. Stark?”

Tony shrugged pouting and gesture to him to continue with his presentation.

Yet the clever scientist had already realized that his younger colleague was elsewhere, deep in thought; his eyes might have been on the holographic presentation but his mind elsewhere. So he didn’t continue, turned his wheeled stool to face Tony and let the presentation stick on the desk, taking off his glasses and placing them also on the desk; he looked at Tony.

The billionaire feeling suddenly Lucius’ sharp eyes on him let swiftly his thoughts and straightened his posture on the stool: how on earth he managed to slump on a laboratory stool without falling to the floor was a wonder even for Tony Stark who had perfected the slumping thing. He met Lucius’ searching glance lifting his eyebrows.

“And?” he asked as if he was watching what Lucius was saying till now. “Why you stopped, Lucius? I’m all ears.”

Lucius chuckled amused.

“I see that, Mr. Stark! Your ears are here but your brain elsewhere.”

They were at Lucius’ private lab in Wayne Tower and they had chosen the evening because employees were gone and they could discuss matters without disruptions or the danger of being overheard despite the fact Lucius’ lab was full soundproof.

Lucius blinked, his face getting his most serious expression.

“What is bothering you, Mr. Stark?”

Tony closed his eyes, lolled his head on the side and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“C’mon, Lucius” he opened his eyes “you can call me Tony” he lifted his eyebrows.

Lucius smiled.

“Mr. Wayne had asked me the same thing: to call him just Bruce” he pressed his lips “but I must
insist on calling you as I am now. If I call you Tony, then I should call Mr. Wayne Bruce and I want everyone to pay to both of you the respect you deserve so I’m giving first the example” he smiled. “But for me you two are still the tots that ran in my laboratory twittering questions.”

Tony smiled tenderly on the memory.

“Now” Lucius said determined. “You’re hearing but not paying attention, right? What’s wrong?”

Tony yanked his head backwards and ruffled his messy locks.

“I was listening, Lucius: thankfully, I have the ability to listen and think other things at the same time. But, yes, you’re right: my mind is elsewhere.”

Lucius nodded.

“Well?”

Tony pressed his lips making his lower cheeks swell. He crossed his arms.

“I just don’t share Bruce’s trait to care about other things than himself; for me what matters now more than anything else” he lifted his eyebrows almost to his hairline “and certainly more than these gewgaws, is Bruce.”

Lucius nodded, understanding Tony’s worry.

“I see and I agree that it was certainly a heavy blow” he shook his head. “I mean Mr. Wayne loves him so much and he was happy…But Mr. Wayne is a unique young man; so strong that will get through this.”

Tony covered his eyes with his palm and sighed.

“Unfortunately, what happened has also other implications!” he huffed.

Lucius frowned and Tony leaned towards him.

“Lucius, what troubles me and makes me sweat is Bruce’s surgery.”

Lucius lowered his eyes.

“We’ll arrange everything perfectly.”

Tony hugged his own ribs and shook his head.

“Still it’d be a very difficult, tricky operation, Lucius; you know that” the older man nodded. “I estimate that in the best it’ll last ten hours.”

Lucius tapped his fingers on the desk uncomfortably, understanding what Tony wanted to say.

“It’s too much, Lucius…” he huffed and rubbed his cheeks with his palms. “It’s too much for him.”

Lucius didn’t want to leave his younger colleague in this despair.

“Tony, you shouldn’t be pessimist.”

But the younger man yanked his head and looked him in the eyes.

“Lucius, six months ago he struggled to stay alive: he almost died – he was dead for minutes. And
then he fought for one month to wake from the coma” Lucius blinked thoughtful. “His health is unstable” he gestured chuckling “he is recovering and still climbs on rooftops and works hard. By the way, did I mention that I hate you for persuading me to participate in the making of that armor?” he inhaled deeply “but mostly I hate myself for being persuaded.”

Lucius chuckled.

“I’d be worse, Tony, if he did it on his own…because you know very well that our denial to forge that armor wouldn’t have stopped him from getting it.”

Tony pressed his lips and shook his head because he knew that Lucius was right.

“Yeah…his damn stubbornness! He never thinks himself and his needs” he waved his hand upwards “he doesn’t consider at all his upcoming surgery: he is in recovery, he exhausted his energy in battling for his life and instead of trying to restore that energy by sitting and resting, he…” he growled. “And” he continued “we know that his organism has weak foundations: growing up in Falcone’s clutches, was famished without taking the nutrients he needed; he was tortured; his body is already tired and exhausted despite the fact his willpower covers that” he locked eyes with Lucius whose expression became grim. “All in all, Lucius: I dread that surgery! I don’t know if I want Bruce to be put through that new hardship because I don’t know if he’ll come out alive; if he’ll survive that” he jerked his arms in the air. “How many impossible battles can he give in such short period of time?!"

“You want to cancel the surgery?” Lucius voice was sympathetic and not judgmental at all.

Tony pressed his lips and rubbed his goatee.

“I admit that it has become a very tempting and repeating thought of lately. This way Bruce may remain forever confined in a chair…” he yanked his head closing his head and huffing exasperated “damn me! But he will be alive, Lucius! This organism is not going to make it through such complicated and long, tormenting surgery!” he planted his elbows to his knees and looked at the floor. “And I don’t want to lose him again!”

Lucius was staring at the younger man sad.

“Mr. Wayne will never accept this” he replied calmly. “He wants more than anything to walk again… and he won’t stop till he gets that which means that if he realizes that his best friend sabotages his unique chance of walking not only he’d be hurt but also he’ll search for someone else willing or careless to perform that surgery. Which will be dangerous for his life and his secrets.”

Tony lowered more his head and intertwined his fingers clenching his hands together: Lucius was right yet his rightness couldn’t change Tony’s feelings about this.

“Bruce wants to walk again to be able to fight criminals; we gave him already the way to have this so the surgery isn’t so important to him anymore.”

Lucius widened his eyes to him cocking his eyebrows: Mr. Stark couldn’t possibly believe that.

“Have you discussed that with Mr. Wayne?”

Tony hid his face in his palms and sighed, revealing his face and looking at the older man.

“You know that I haven’t because Bruce obviously wouldn’t agree…Ugh! I wish he had accepted to be enrolled in Princeton… But of course he didn’t…” he shook his head “Gotham would never let him live his life as he deserves…”
Lucius placed his hand on Tony’s shoulders.

“You friend, Tony, has survived all these years against the worst odds” he smiled “that alone should raise our optimism. Also, the fact that the whole project has his best friend on the head which friend happens to be one of the greatest minds of our times increases even more our certainty.”

Tony’s eyes were thoughtful and his lips pursed.

“I was counting on that asshole…” he said emotionless and Lucius frowned. “I mean, that alien… Actually, I was counting on his Fortress to perform the surgery…” he uttered for the first time aloud what was planning from the moment they started preparing the groundbreaking surgery.

Lucius’ frowning became deeper.

“You intended on bringing doctors to Superman’s secret refuge? He surely has things there that he wouldn’t want to expose to strangers.”

“We would have taken all the necessary precautions and for Bruce’s sake he would have done it…” he bit his lip and huffed lifting his eyebrows. “Obviously, I had bought that he loved Bruce… Even I was fooled by his act; even I hadn’t imagined that he’d do what he did.”

Lucius didn’t comment on that so Tony continued.

“Fortress is the ideal environment for such a tricky operation: completely controlled and it already knew Bruce’s organism. The alien had told me that the night Bruce almost died he took the Black Butterfly there and put it on Bruce’s chest – a light was created that engulfed Bruce helping him escape the imminent danger of dying and stabilize” he rolled his eyes. “I don’t believe in magic and mambo-jumbo but I know that some buildings, especially, those pyramid shaped” he united his palms in a pyramid “are centers of great energy and along with the rare, powerful gem something was done that night” he moved his hand “something that I would give my entire fortune to have again during Bruce’s surgery. But” he widened his eyes “we must cross out the Fortress option.”

Lucius was rubbing his chin as Tony elaborated on the Fortress’ assets. He knew that the younger man was right.

“We still can ask Superman: I don’t believe that he’d refuse. He might have chosen another person and broke up with Bruce yet I’m sure he won’t deny him the chance to be healed. He didn’t take away the energy casts.”

Tony’s eyes were grim as he shook his head in the negative pursing his lips.

“That would have been completely gross… But giving the Fortress for Bruce’s operation under this woman’s influence?” he cackled bitterly. “I highly doubt it…” he cocked his eyebrows “I don’t believe that he cares about Bruce – otherwise he wouldn’t have done that now. But even if…” he inhaled deeply “for Bruce’s sake, I was willing to plead with him…” he saw Lucius staring at him “yes, Lucius, no matter how I despise him for Bruce’s sake I would beg him to permit that. However I’m positive that Bruce wouldn’t want to ask anything from the alien. He is too proud and dignified to ask anything from him. Now.”

Lucius nodded.

“I believe the same” he stood and Tony made the same walking to the holographic pillars with the flow of data.

The younger man was watching the flood of information gloomy.
“We can make for him the perfect artificial neurons; the perfect bionic spinal parts to replace those smashed in the accident; I can make him the perfect micro arc reactors to energize the artificial neurons; but these can’t secure that he will last through the procedure” he shook his head appalled. “His body will be opened, the energy casts will be removed which isn’t easy, the dead neurons must be extracted, the new ones planted…” he clutched his head. “It’s way too much, Lucius, even for a person without Bruce’s history.”

Lucius placed both his hands on Tony’s shoulders and the billionaire looked at him.

“Your friend, Mr. Stark, is a born fighter. And winner. And you have the same qualities so as much as I share your concerns I’m sure that you two will make it once again. We’ll have the best doctors and surgeons to perform the operation and the new nano-laser operational system our Research and Development department has perfected. Yes, Mr. Stark, this surgery will be difficult and challenging but we will make the miracle.”

Tony licked his lips.

“I wish Thomas Wayne was alive…” Lucius’ eyes fell on remembering his friend. “He was the best neurosurgeon in the world…he had succeeded miraculous operations that the others wouldn’t have dared to think” he chuckled. “And for his son he’d have done even more” suddenly he remembered the theory of Thomas being the last descendant of Nemesis’ high priest-healer and it made so much sense…

“It would have been too difficult for Thomas to have his son’s life in his hands…” he sighed. “It’d be great if we had him and Martha with us…” he stilled his eyes in Tony’s and held his shoulders. “But we would do the best with what we have and we’ll make it.”

Tony smiled yet he was determined to find ways to enhance his friend’s chances.

The rectangular window that covered the middle of the wall’s entire length was open, the subtle, freezing breeze waving the white, heavy curtain. Diana stood in front of it gazing the dark horizon. She wore a royal red silken robe over her white-gold ancient Greek toga that reached the middle of her thighs; her diadem was still on her raven-blue hair. Her golden lasso was placed on one of the tables beside a pot shaped in ancient Greek style; the impressive sword of the Amazons leaned on the same table.

She smiled satisfied seeing a red and blue dot on the horizon gradually growing up to form Superman’s body. She stepped aside to let him in but seeing him in the plenty light of the apartment frowned: his face was bruised and his attire had burnings; his raven hair had smoke.

Superman put his feet on the fluffy carpet a bit too heavy and looked at Diana’s perplexed face; he smiled but he couldn’t hide that he was a bit shaken so hurried to slump tired on the dark green sofa. Diana narrowed her eyes and followed him fast to sit beside him rubbing his arm.

“What happened? Attack with Kryptonite?” her voice was strong as ever but with a hue of worry.

Superman grinned and caressed her cheek.

“No.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

Superman lifted his eyebrows sarcastic and chuckled.
“I came across Thor…the Asgardian god.”

She nodded.

“I know; and he attacked you? That’s preposterous and crazy! How dare he?”

Superman focused his gaze on one of the pots on the white waist table in front of him.

“He is the newest champion of Bruce…” he replied scoffing. “He clearly fancies him and plays his protector…”

Diana closed her eyes and yanked her head exasperated.

“Just fancies? Maybe he is already fucking him…” she said slyly noticing the uncomfortable twitch in Superman’s eyes. “We’re talking about Wayne here…I cannot understand what you men find in that bitch!” she growled and Superman looked at her in puzzlement; she lifted her eyebrow. “At least you realized your mistake…An Asgardian god is the new inhabitant of that little bitch’s bed.”

Superman narrowed his eyes; he was unable to get angry with Diana yet those words against Bruce felt wrong. On the other hand, he had said the same things to him and…probably they were true. He engaged Diana’s lips in a passionate kiss.

“Now I feel better…” he smiled when they detached and caressed her swan neck.

“Let me see” she ordered him and moved her hand in a gesture of him getting undressed.

It was after he lowered the upper part of his suit that realized that he had forgotten to cover the mark from the Knife of Justice. Diana’s fingers brushed his wide, perfect chiseled chest where a long, superficial burning stood out in the middle.

“It’s nothing” he said. “Just a tiny thunder from Thor’s artillery” he snorted.

Diana touched the irritated skin.

“It is made from an Asgardian weapon: it’ll take time to heal completely” she growled. “That stupid god! Quarrelling with you for a bitch’s sake: it’s ridiculous.”

To Clark’s horror her brilliant blue eyes focused on the scratch Bruce’s Knife left to his upper arm.

“And what’s this?” she caressed the wounded flesh. “I didn’t know that Thor uses blades…” her eyes were suspicious.

Superman chuckled.

“Neither did I; that’s why he got me” he couldn’t admit to her that someone else had managed to get to him: it was alright to be hit by a god but by a mortal? Diana’s respect would be shaken.

“That sneaky bastard!” she spat. “Next time I see him I’ll teach him some things about warrior’s honor! Tell me you made him damage!” she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his ear.

Superman fondled her ribs, the fine silk tickling his senses as much as the view from Diana’s deep cleavage.

“I didn’t stand with crossed arms…He had a taste of Superman’s punches.”

Diana smirked.
“He bled?” she asked gleefully.

Superman chuckled.

“At least as much as I…but screw him, babe…I’m here with you and I already forgot everything concerning the outside world.”

She watched his hands unbinding her robe’s belt and began sucking his neck inviting him to do what he desired.

“I saw you saving that school bus; I was nearby ready to rush to your aid but you didn’t need it: I saw the relief and joy on your face when the kids were safe and since then I was thinking…”

“Mmm…” he mumbled pushing the wide straps of her toga off her shoulders and planting soft kisses to her breasts.

“Humans are ungrateful to you…” she moaned raising her long legs to hug his waist; her toga was now a rumpled, lane around her waist – the upper part lowered and the bottom part lifted leaving her enticing body all naked apart from her waist. “You save them every day; you save their children and they expose you with stupid videos of your personal moments and make fun of you…”

Superman was fondling her hips, rubbing his still dressed groin to her warm genitals; he was sucking her nipples but her words made him lift his head panting and look at her while she ruffled his messy hair.

“Can we just not discuss about humans in this apartment?”

She cocked an eyebrow and smiled.

“No need for you to ask! Humans deserve only our pity – nothing more…” she moaned as Superman lowered to lick her perfect ripped abdominals “I just want to focus on us… Let Thor bang the little human bitch: if he considers himself satisfied with Falcone’s leftovers – it’s laughable” she stabbed her nails to his back as he discarded his suit guiding his erection in her gaping entrance.

However, Clark had difficulties on erasing from his mind the image of Thor touching a naked Bruce on the grey silk of his beddings: the fake images of Thor fucking Bruce under the rainbow bridge in Battery Park returned to him turning his insights into burning knots. His still hot anger being expressed with violent thrusts that made Diana groan satisfied, scratching and biting his neck.

He was with Diana; sex with her was the best; he had cheated Bruce and he kicked him out; however, Clark knew that he didn’t even stand the idea of Bruce being fucked by another man…

Dick hanged his backpack on the shoulder and came out of the showers heading to the main hall and from there to the cafeteria to stall as much as possible the moment he’d have to get inside Wayne’s car – he wanted to be on time outside because he didn’t want Wayne to come inside bragging that he was his guardian. Except than Jason and the principal and social worker of the school nobody had found out yet; and Dick was very happy for this. Who would want to be connected with someone like Wayne?

Suddenly, he was startled when a hand tapped his shoulder from behind.

“Champ?” a familiar voice told him and the boy turned around to acknowledge the man whose identity he already knew.
“Tony!” he rushed to the man and hugged him relieved.

Zucco chuckled and patted the boy’s back.

“Easy, big guy…”

Dick released him and looked his smiling face.

“How did you manage to come near me? Wayne has set his dogs to supposedly protect me but actually to keep you away.”

Zucco shook his head thoughtful.

“Yeah, I have noticed…However there’s nothing that can keep me away from my only nephew. And…I have still some friends in the gym; not to mention that I know this place like the back of my hand including some backside doors” he winked. “Can I buy you a juice?”

The boy smiled.

“Sure, Tony! I missed you so much…Now that granny is missing you’re the only relative I have.”

Zucco wrapped his arm around Dick’s shoulders and walked towards the cafeteria choosing the corridor that avoided the grand training hall: he didn’t want any unpleasant encounter.

They sat on a corner table in the far end of the cafeteria and placed their order.

“You look very upset, Dick” Zucco remarked sipping his coffee after the waiter left.

Dick rolled his eyes.

“Are you kidding me, right? My granny disappeared and suddenly I find myself in the hands of the man who was the reason my whole family was killed; and now he steps in taking me away from my father’s only relative! Ugh!”

Zucco raised an eyebrow.

“At least, you got your tough little friend to make you company.”

Dick shook his head exasperated.

“Jay…He is gaping at Wayne’s filthy riches and I’m sure he likes him – Jay doesn’t understand me: he is a good kid but he just can’t understand me. He lives in his own world…And I’m not blaming him…”

Zucco nodded pursing his lips.

“And little Jason doesn’t like me so…he has another thing in common with Wayne” he remarked snidely. “Hm…At least, you live in a nice environment, with everything a boy would dream.”

Dick crooked his mouth and crossed his arms.

“Bullshit! I can’t stand the place and him driving me around, showing of what a good man he is! I’d prefer living in a barn than in this palace with him!” Zucco’s eyes were sparkling gleeful. “Pff! This situation gets on my nerves, Tony! And…” he sighed “I was a mess in the training…”

Zucco cupped the boy’s hand on the table and looked him in the eyes.
“You must keep your calm, Dick, and not let him ruin more your life: it’s what he wants, don’t you see? Make you collapse... But you must focus on your school and your training. You will become great like your father!”

Dick leaned towards him and widened his eyes.

“I want to run away from him” he pressed his lips and blinked shyly, hesitant in case the man didn’t want what he was ready to say “I want to live with you, Tony... if you want me…”

Zucco inhaled deeply, locked eyes with the boy thoughtful and then smiled.

“You’re not serious saying that, champ…” Dick’s eyes fell disappointed but Zucco chuckled and cupped his cheeks tight “if I didn’t want you, I wouldn’t have come to the Social Service to take you. I don’t want anything more than having my best friend’s boy with me... And since you want it too…” he smirked “soon we’ll manage that, Dick.”

Dick shook his head and jerked his hands upwards.

“How?! Granny gave him my guardianship!”

The adult smiled self-confidently.

“The fact your granny gave him your guardianship doesn’t mean that he is capable of being your guardian…” Dick frowned. “If he appears incapable of exercising his obligations I can contest his guardianship and become your guardian.”

Zucco’s eyes glimmered and Dick’s sparkled joyful.

“Is that possible?” the boy exclaimed loudly his enthusiasm making him mindless of the people around; Zucco showed him with his hand to lower his tone and the boy blushed “I mean he’s filthy rich; he owns half the city.”

The adult shook his head.

“The court will consider other things: Wayne has a very bad past that makes him unreliable” he took in the boy’s puzzled look and fixed his eyes in the boy’s. “People with half his experiences are mentally unstable and thus his incapability of being your guardian will be easy to prove. But I’ll need your cooperation: everything depends on you, Dick.”

Dick rolled his eyes exasperated.

“You don’t have to worry about this, Tony: you know how much I want to escape his clutches.”

The adult grinned satisfied.

“That’s my boy!”

“What I must do?”

Zucco’s eyes sparkled: everything went according to his wishes. He tapped his fingers on the metallic rectangular table.

“At the moment, he is keeping your guardianship under the radar - secret: obviously, to avoid any discussions and doubts for his suitability. So our first priority is to make it known that Wayne is a boy’s ward. You have to inform everyone you know about that: friends, janitors in the school or the gym, parents of your peers. Taking care of pointing out how miserable he makes you.”
Dick cocked his eyebrows and snorted.

“That won’t be any difficult: he really makes me miserable” he chuckled and Zucco looked at him inquiringly. “Till now I wasn’t saying to anyone about him being my guardian because I was ashamed.”

The adult gave a broad wicked grin and nodded.

“And now you’ll let everyone know how uncomfortable, nervous and ashamed this man makes you feel…manifesting it with your behavior at school and the gym - everywhere” he winked.

Dick smiled.

“Wicked!” he exclaimed understanding and Zucco shook his head.

“And then you must take advantage of every chance to show how incompetent he is in taking care of you…how irresponsible. For example, leaving from his side and making him look for you asking help from others: in other words, make his life a Hell and embarrass him in front of everyone. Make others realize how useless he is and that a boy under his guardianship not only is unhappy and depressed but also in physical danger.”

Dick huffed.

“I like that and knowing that I’ll make his life a Hell and him completely miserable and an ass gives me energy… And in the end I’ll be with you” the boy huffed relieved. “Until granny is found and she realizes how wrong was about you and will become a family.”

Zucco smiled benevolently but his eyes sparkled gleefully as he caressed the boy’s hair. He was pitying the boy.

“It’s what uncles do for their favorite nephews, champ: helping and saving them from tight holes. To make them smile again.”

“Thank you, Tony! I’m so lucky you came to my life in this tough moment!”

The adult grinned.

“I can say the same, Dick…”

Selina walked beside Bruce heading to the city’s gym not far from the café. Hero was sitting in his butt on Bruce’s lap like a miniature lion or a king; the kitten was gazing around the multicolored lights that now, as the night fell completely, shone brighter.

“The old Hero was gazing like this the Christmas’ lights…” Selina said casually looking at the city’s decorations.

Bruce nodded and scratched the kitten’s head.

“He managed to see one Christmas…the poor thing…surviving so much and in the end being killed like this” his voice was almost indifferent but Selina knew what lied underneath. “Where did you bury him?” he turned his head to his friend.

Selina rubbed Bruce’s back pressing her lips.
Near Saint Mary’s Park, in a niche with a great view to the rose bushes. I thought that he’d like to sniff them with his pink little nose as he used to do…”

Bruce nodded and looked at the back of Hero’s head because he didn’t want Selina to see his eyes watering.

“I didn’t have the chance to say goodbye to him as I should…” exactly like with my parents, he thought.

Selina bit her lips.

“He knew how much you loved him and that love was enough for him…” she took his hand in her; her gloves was in her short white coat’s pockets. “Your heart was with him…”

Bruce yanked his head backwards to let the chilly night atmosphere clear his eyes and mind. Selina chuckled.

“You know…I’m sure that he is still watching us” she locked eyes with Bruce and showed him two fingers “with two healthy, wicked little eyes and is happy when we are. I think he sent us Hero the second to take care of us because he doesn’t trust us at all…”

Bruce laughed and petted the small animal that purred appreciatively.

“I thought you didn’t believe in these things” he snorted. “You’re a reasonable girl.”

She lifted her eyebrows.

“Not when our Hero is concerned…”

“How convenient!” he teased her and she pulled softly his hair that was cold.

Bruce never believed in afterlife and that one’s loved ones watch from above; he knew that it was nonsense, just wishful thinking…and frankly the idea terrorized him: that his parents might have been watching him all these years being disgustingly, humiliatingly used by so many people. Even now his heart was clenched and his cheeks blushed, thinking of this.

But mostly he was terrorized from the thought that if he fed himself with such fairytales the blow would be devastating when he woke up and realized his illusion. Yet he had seen in that cave his mother holding Hero and wanted so much to be true…as much as he was aware that when he saw them a concussion and Joker’s drug cocktail was affecting him…He gulped.

Selina didn’t like his silence and she was thinking constantly what happened in the café; that Queen guy and his behavior. Bruce realized that and stopped the wheelchair yanking his head to look at her eyes. Selina squatted and cupped his cheeks with both hands.

“Your cheeks are frozen and rosy… Are you cold?”

Bruce smiled.

“No, I’m fine: the chair is very warm and…” he shook his head “you know that I’m used to cold.”

Selina lifted her eyebrows and nodded. Eighteen years Bruce was living in a frozen underground cell without proper clothes, sleeping without even a blanket. Bruce touched her hands.

“What?” he asked.
“Yes, you are” she answered. “And you’re used to other things as well but that doesn’t mean that you should continue tolerate them now.”

Bruce frowned and Selina rolled her eyes huffing.

“Bruce, I know that you tolerated much” she stressed the word without elaborating “from Superman.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side and was ready to retort but Selina touched her fingertips to his lips stopping him.

“Sssss… Your entire life you were forced to tolerate stuff for one reason or another… but now you’re free, Bruce, and there’s no need to stand others’ bad behavior.”

“Selina, I’m not a victim!” he retorted defensively.

She caressed his lips hushing him.

“I know you’re not, sweetie: your personality is stronger than anyone I know; so I can’t see why you tolerated that Queen’s behavior: he was insufferable! The way he talked and demanded things it was insulting… And I sensed that he made you feel uncomfortable and pressed; I was sure that you’d put him in his place but you…”

Bruce smiled.

“Yeah” he nodded “his attitude was preposterous but I tolerated him and I’m not upset I did that. I need to keep this man close, Selina.”

“Why?” she asked puzzled.

“Because I must learn things about the supposed Amazon Princess and only he has inner knowledge. He’ll help me solve the mystery.”

Selina closed her eyes and licked her lips turning her head; she took Hero from the armpits since the kitten was twitching his paw at her.

“Superman” she said exasperated. “You’re doing this for him! Why, Bruce? Screw that asshole!”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Selina, you know that he is sweet and kind and generous but this woman has done something to him and changed all these” Selina wasn’t looking at him, clearly disagreeing. “Well, not entirely: he saved a school bus full with children this very morning…”

Selina snapped her head at him.

“So he is okay to treat you like rubbish?”

Bruce huffed.

“I didn’t say that – I sent him away, didn’t I? But he isn’t entirely responsible for his deeds: if I was mind controlled I might have done worse things than him…”

She frowned and snorted.

“He beat you, Bruce and who knows what else that you don’t admit even to me to save his grace”
Bruce didn’t permit any of his facial muscles twitch because Selina would read him like an open book – not that she hadn’t done it already. “You’d have done worse than this?”

“I saw a nightmare, Sel” she shook his head. “I was mind controlled by Ra’s and hurt badly Tony and…him.”

Selina lolled her head on the side petting Hero.

“Give me a break, sweetie! You’re defending him even in your sleep! You love him so much that… Ugh! I hate him more!”

Bruce brushed her forearm and their eyes were met: he didn’t Selina hate nobody on his sake. That night she shot dead Chill still haunted him.

“I saw again the child, Sel” he said warmly to change the subject and she blinked her eyes filling with sympathy. “I was teaching him things; we were strolling in the desert” Selina laughed and Bruce did the same. “He…he had begun to like me: he held my hand” he didn’t want to speak to her about the gruesome rest of the dream.

“You know, Bruce?” she asked thoughtful.

“Mmm?”

She yanked her head shaking off the thoughts.

“Ugh! Never mind!”

“C’mon, say it…”

She stopped walking and looked at him.

“All these…the guardianship, the possible child…I don’t like them” Bruce narrowed his eyes and she closed her eyes huffing. “I mean, you’re a great guardian and you’ll be a great father but it is too soon…I wish you were given more time to calm, to live with some carelessness – I mean, you’ve got already too many responsibilities that don’t let you take care of yourself and recover smoothly.

Adding children on the mix…I know your self-sacrificing nature and I’m sure that Dick and this kid, if exists, will become your priority but you needed some time to live for yourself…” she caressed his locks and Bruce grinned raising his eyebrows.

“Maybe the only way to live it is through the people I love…” he said kissing her palm “and I can’t imagine it otherwise” he cleared his throat and chose to change the subject. “So, back to Superman: I said before what it is hidden behind this must be disclosed because it could be dangerous for everyone. Why someone wants to make Superman a puppet to a woman’s hands?”

“I think that rather than that it is your love for him the greatest reason…” she retorted not buying it.

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I won’t lie to you…” it was the only thing he told her.

Selina nodded sighing and let Hero on Bruce’s lap since the kitten was looking to him.

“So when all this ends and he comes to his senses, you’d take him back…”

Bruce shook his head and caressed Hero who had sprawled over his chest touching his chin with his paw.
“No” he replied calm but absolute.

“I know” she nodded “you’ll punish and torture him – which I totally approve – but after he knells before you and crawls and begs for your forgiveness, you’ll take him back which I…”

“No, Selina; I don’t want him to kneel and beg me for anything: it’s over” his voice was filled with conviction but Selina knew the pain underneath: the wound was bleeding and her heart ached for Bruce; so she didn’t insist to not scratch more the wound.

“Yeah…you can look around you for a new love…” she blinked innocently to Bruce’s puzzled eyes. “I saw how Thor was staring at you during the dinner…And Tony noticed: he acted indifference but I sniffed the air…”

Bruce shook his head and rubbed his forehead.

“Thor is just…a friend” Selina smirked but for Bruce it was agony. “I don’t want that thing in my life ever again” his friend understood that he meant romantic love, sex. “I don’t want anyone look at me like this…” he bit his bottom lip and moved his hand. “I can’t understand why they looking me like this, are they blind?”

Selina pursed her lips with sympathy.

“You’re beautiful, sweetie; that’s why…and you have that great personality that makes even gods like Thor – he is quite the hot stuff! - fell for you.”

Bruce gasped and his eyes widened.

“Please, don’t say that!” he calmed himself. “Thinking what I have let myself do with…with him fills me disgust and shame” Selina closed her eyes in despair. “Ridiculous…”

“Bruce, there is nothing to be ashamed in what you shared with him” there was nobody near them yet Selina mimicked Bruce in avoiding mentioning names.

Bruce didn’t continue just absorbed in petting Hero.

Selina growled.

“However you tolerate Queen for his sake…”

“Oliver Queen might be the key to that mystery: he is the closest to the supposed Diana.”

Selina frowned.

“But if he knows then he is her partner and then you’ll be in danger…”

“I know how to protect myself, Sel…”

She snorted.

“Yeah, like then with Luthor?” he was ready to reply that this was a plan but she stopped him “okay, okay…”

“And it’s not necessary that he is a partner to this scheme: I just want to find out if he noticed something insignificant to him but crucial to understand what’s going on…”

She stopped walking.
“Bruce” she locked eyes with him “this man wants to devour you” Bruce closed his eyes. “I saw it in his eyes and there’s more in him – I sense it -, not necessary nice. I don’t want you exposed to him!”

Bruce held her hands.

“Don’t be afraid, Sel: I won’t. This man has something…I felt it too. But I can’t lose the chance to riddle this. So his interest in me is useful…”

He froze for a second.

“You were always a whore, child; now you’ll be a useful one…”

“What?” she settled his hair above the ear. “Are you feeling alright?”

“I’d be careful, Sel” he said calmly. “But the curious thing is that despite his mysterious character, I don’t feel threatened by him.”

Selina nodded though she wasn’t persuaded that Queen wasn’t a threat for her friend.

“Sel?” Bruce said as they began walking again, the gym coming closer.

“Mmm…”

“Remember the Arrow guy at the Avengers’ Tower?”

“I remember what you told me about him” she pouted “I didn’t see him myself. Why?”

“I have the feeling that he plays a role in all this. He was the one who shot the video with Superman and Wonder Woman.”

Selina looked at him frowned.

“How do you know that?”

“That night Batman saw them on the rooftop because the Arrow led him there: nobody else could have shot that video.”

“So you believe that he knew the significance of that for Batman and if he really knows then he might be implicated in this. Being in Gotham shows that.”

“He isn’t in Gotham anymore: his last sighting was in Chicago where he stopped some thugs from robbing a man” Bruce’s eyes were lost gazing the night. “It’s like he is playing with me – trying to mislead me.”

“You want me to go to Chicago and search for him?”

“No” he said looking her in the eyes and she frowned.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to run around for my own responsibilities; you did that a lot during Falcone’s era and now you shouldn’t be troubled for me.”

Selina rolled her eyes and crooked her mouth jeering; he was ready to retort something but stopped
because Bruce had already entered the city’s gym. She grinned: the kiddo ran away to avoid the discussion: however, Selina wanted to visit Chicago. She had info from her people that a filthy rich guy smuggled a very beautiful and rare ruby so… it was time to mix business with pleasure and stretch her cat muscles.

Bruce scanned the gargantuan gym with his eyes and found what he was looking for: Dick’s trainer. He gave Hero to Selina who just caught with him and steered his wheelchair to the 35 years old African American.

The man was watching a couple of kids doing their exercises.

“Mr. Laurie, I’m Bruce Wayne” he gave him his hand for a handshake and Jeffrey took it puzzled

“Yes, I know; I mean I have seen you in the news. Glad to meet you.”

“Me too. You must be wondering what I’m doing here…”

The man smiled.

“Obviously…”

“I’m Richard Grayson’s guardian now that his grandmother disappeared.”

Jeffrey at first cocked his eyebrows impressed and surprised by that.

“Well, that explains the donation for the gym’s renovation…”

“That was to show our gratitude for the great performance and the happiness you gave to our children in the Haven during the Thanksgiving party.”

Jeffrey smiled satisfied from the man’s praise but then he remembered the old lady and shook his head sad.

“It’s a shame, the disappearance of Ms. Turner: I really liked her and poor Dick has already lost his entire family too… I can’t understand this injustice…”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded.

“We’ll find her…I mean the police will” Jeffrey shook his head in disbelief. “Mr. Laurie, you’re Dick’s trainer and Ms. Turner had told me that Dick trusts and likes you very much” the man grinned. “So as his guardian, I’d like to ask you to keep me inform about anything that worries you…for example, if someone harassing him.”

Selina was watching grim.

Jeffrey’s eyes sobered, understanding to whom Wayne might be referring to.

“Ms. Turner had also talked to you about Tony Zucco…”

Bruce was watching closely Jeffrey’s reactions.

“Exactly. You must know him, Mr. Laurie.”

The man smiled.

“I do…Call me Jeff, Mr. Wayne.”
“Bruce” he smiled.

“Well, Bruce: Everyone in the gymnastics’ local team knows him. And many people outside our city’s limits” his voice was hinting things.

“You don’t like him…And you don’t like him being close to Dick.”

“He is his uncle.”

“I know that but you still don’t like him being around the boy.”

“Look, Bruce, Zucco is…”

“My uncle and my father’s cousin” Dick spat having come sneakily from the cafeteria. “What are you trying to do, Wayne? Throw mud at him?”

Bruce shook his head.

“Of course not, Richard: I just wanted to learn about the people around you…”

Dick cackled and remembered what they discussed with his uncle.

“Being my guardian” he shouted causing people’s puzzled stares “by accident doesn’t give you the right to sneak on me and plotting against people I love” Bruce felt uncomfortable from people staring at them “You should look to yourself and be ashamed because unfortunately for you and mostly for me people know who you are!”

The boy crossed his arms and headed to the exit; Selina put Hero on Bruce’s lap and followed him blocking his way. She felt Bruce’s uneasiness that was caused by the boy’s insults.

“Watch your mouth, kid! You don’t know anything about Bruce; if you knew and if you were smart enough to appreciate him you’d be ashamed of yourself!”

“I am ashamed, lady! Of having him as my guardian!”

“Because you’re not ‘smart enough’: you’re just a little, self-absorbed brat who thinks that he is better than everyone else! I got news for you, dude: you’re just making fool of yourself!”

Now more people were staring at them and Bruce just caught up with them.

“Selina, please…” he said behind Dick but she didn’t look at him having her flared eyes locked with Dick’s.

But Dick bypassed her and rushed outside toppling some kids on his way.

Bruce sighed and Selina patted him. Jeffrey moved her hands to disperse the people that had gathered to watch and looked at Bruce with sympathy.

“Dick is a good kid, Bruce but he is having a rough time and Zucco fuels his bad attitude. But I believe in Dick, Bruce: he’ll realize his mistake eventually: he just needs patience, understanding and guidance.”

Bruce nodded suddenly feeling the responsibility burdening his shoulders.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

I'd like to thank all of you from the bottom of my heart for reading, letting kudos and commenting. I really appreciate it!

The younger kids that were training and had approached due to Dick’s yells soon forgot the incident and gathered around Bruce playing with Hero who twitched his paw brushing the little fingers that touched him, clearly enjoying the attention more than his human friend. Bruce looked at Selina who shrugged sighing understanding her friend’s hurry to catch Dick but she was also helpless against all these kids.

Jeffrey gave the solution: he clapped once and a dozen small eyes looked at him.

“Back to yours works, boys and girls!” it was the only thing he needed to say for the noisy rabble to disperse.

The trainer winked to the youths.

“You have to get the hang of it…” he smiled.

“I’m sorry…” Selina said after they exited the building having greeted Dick’s trainer.

Bruce smiled.

“No, you’re not…” he answered playfully staring her in the eyes and Selina huffed exasperated.

“You’re right: I’m not sorry for putting that little brat in his place. But I’m sorry I made people stare at us…”

Bruce shook his head.

“Forget it…Besides they were staring before you berated Dick…I understand: it’s difficult for you to listen someone speak to me like that…”

“Unbearable…” she corrected him nonchalant.

“Anyway…But Selina, please, be more patient with him: he has been through a lot and he is in a difficult age.”

Selina put her feet down and stopped crossing her arms.

“In his age, you’ve been through a lot more than him but you didn’t act like that!”

Bruce gave a crooked smile.

“Maybe because I couldn’t.”

Selina growled.
“Stop defending him, sweetie! And don’t stop me from scolding him because you can’t: he deserves it and kids need some discipline.”

Bruce petted Hero who climbed in his chest.

“In his age, you liked to be disciplined?” he raised an eyebrow and grinned.

“I wasn’t like him” she protested and then shook her head defeated “You’re helpless!”

They resumed their route to the car where Dick was waiting with arms crossed and face turned to the opposite direction.

Selina smirked and cocked her eyebrows.

“Now I get why his people call him Dick…And since he is a small dick, he is more pissed!”

Bruce choked in his own saliva and chuckled.

“Oh! Selina!”

She turned and looked at him slyly.

“I’m wrong?”

Bruce shook his head.

“Give him some time: I’m sure he is a good kid…Will you come with us to the Manor for dinner?” he took her hand.

“Sorry, sweetie…I must find Steve – if he survived Queen…” she chuckled. “Unless you’re afraid to be alone in the car with the Antichrist…”

Bruce lolled his head and stared at her disapproving but she laughed.

“Maybe we’ll come later” she squatted and kissed Bruce in the cheek. “I’m off: no mood to see his face again. See ya!”

She waved her hand and Bruce smiled to her before she distanced in her wiggling movements.

“And now we’re alone, Hero” he told to the kitten holding him from the armpits and continued to his car.

“I’m sure you’re happy about that!” Dick spat as soon as Bruce approached.

Yet Bruce didn’t hasten to answer him and went to the driver’s door where he pressed his thump on the print reader socket unlocking the car.

“I think that the only one happy about what happened is you, Dick” he replied almost indifferent without any hue of accusation. “It’s unlocked” he gestured to him to get in.

Dick huffed, unfolded his arms and got in jumping at the seat. Bruce left Hero on the car’s floor and grabbed the armrests, supported his body on his hands and slipped to the driver’s seat – Hero having moved to Dick’s legs; then he folded the wheelchair and placed it at the back seat.

“I know you hate me, Dick” Bruce began as the car was moving to the city’s exit to Palisades.
The boy brushing the kitten on his lap raised his eyebrows and snorted.

“Wow! That’s the conclusion of the year!” he rolled his eyes.

Bruce cast him a glance and then looked at the road in front of him.

“Yeah…I don’t expect you to change your feelings about me…”

“Good for you!”

“Please, let me finish, Dick: I know you’re a boy with manners.”

Dick snorted.

“Don’t call me Dick: only my people call me by my nickname.”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded.

“As you wish…What I was saying is that I’m only trying to make your living with me as bearable as possible and I think that you should try to do the same. I don’t ask you to stop hating me but at least do not express that so…clearly in front of my friends because they will react as Selina just did and I don’t like our current situation to become worse…” he glanced at the boy. “It’d be only temporarily, Richard: police will find your grandmother and you’ll be together again so you won’t have to see me never again.”

Dick licked his lips.

“Why you came in the gym? To sneak on me?”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I wanted to see the place you spent so many hours.”

“You can say these to some stupid – not me. Because I know that you did it to spy my movements and put my trainer do it too. It’s not enough that you isolated me from my uncle: my only remaining relative!”

“I’m just trying to do what your grandmother wanted.”

“Stop playing the father!”

“I’m not, Richard” Bruce replied calmly.

Dick snapped his head to the window grunting but Hero stood to his back legs and licked the boy’s chin forcing him to laugh. Bruce smiled but didn’t stare to not ruin the moment.

“Hero is the only good thing in you…” Dick mumbled snorting knowing that Bruce had heard his carefree laugh.

Bruce didn’t look at him.

“I’m happy you find something good in me…”

Dick gulped and caressed Hero who was staring at him.

“Wrong expression: I meant in the situation not in you!” he spat.
Bruce pressed his lips but didn’t comment and Dick brushed the screen at the car’s control panel turning on the radio, rock songs the only sound in the car throughout the rest of the road.

*Three days later…*

Vale’s beautiful but heavy makeuped face shone with a big, false smile. The audience of her show clapped enthusiastically as she marched on her high heels to her throne-like red armchair in the middle of the elliptic, bluish stage.

She waved to them and sat graciously crossing her legs that their flaws were concealed by the dangerously short leather skirt she wore. Vicky pushed her silken, shiny blond curls behind her ear and looked at the camera.

“Today is a beautiful day for our city, my dear friends – though it’s chilly without any snowflake yet!” she sighed. “Anyways, we can hope everything since finally, our Gotham gets the limelight for something else than record criminality rates or…” she chuckled “supposed huge flying rodents – for something great! Vicky Vale, your devoted friend, will bring you the good news first!”

The audience clapped whistling and Vicky smiled supposedly shy and huffed.

“I love it when I have good news! Especially when that specific person is involved…” she nodded. “Oh! I won’t torture you anymore…Well, who else could bring the national and international spotlights on our city? Mmm… I’m sure my clever friends are already suspecting… Huh! Do not forget our special prize for today: join us and be in the daily ballot for $5,000 cash!”

New claps and whistles but also some questions about the great news. Vale gave a dashing smile showing off her pearly white perfect teeth.

“Oh, okay… Well, in a few hours from now the Person of the Year is going to be announced and our show, ‘Vicky’, has inclusive information which of course we carefully crossed before announcing…”

“How many people youuuuu fucked, dear Vicky, to get your exclusive?” he sneered in his most nasal voice.

He was watching that stupid talk show sat in the working bench in the ground floor of his new hideout: he had moved from the first because he sniffed suspicious movements nearby. Someone hinted the police about where he might be hid and Joker was sure that it was the work of his Brucey-Bat who despite being disabled to chase him personally had still his sharp mind focused on him: uuuu! How romantic! Brucey’s mind devoted to littl’ ol’ Joker...

The new warehouse must have been a workshop of shorts because it had many working benches with rusty tools forgotten there. Joker had found their new home in the docks but not the docks that Police new as the haven for every kind of low life and thus had under surveillance. Thankfully, Gotham had many little harbors and docks: and many of these harbors and docks were from decades abandoned and forgotten.

Joker had turned the dusty, webbed ridden building into a warm nest for himself and his boys. And of course since it was Christmas…almost…Joker for the kids’ sake made his own decoration. He created garlands binding together the rusty tools which the children painted purpled and green – and they were handy lethal weapons, too…One day the kids began fighting – you know how littl’ boys
are... and some skulls were broken... It was hilarious actually.

Joker had even decorated a Christmas tree: he was in the middle of the room. He because the tomb from where Joker took the skeleton had a male name: John Doe but... hay! Nobody was perfect.

He caught himself often during the day staring proudly at his creation: he was great in everything he set to do. He had set the skeleton erect with his arms stretched and his legs glued; he put the kids to paint each part of the skeleton with bright colors: pink, neon blue, neon green, red, neon yellow. And then Joker hung blades from each rib, razors throughout the arms’ length and one knife in each hand. For light he put two small bulbs in the empty eye sockets and one bigger in the mouth with the remaining teeth keeping it in place; for effect, he placed bulbs in John’s pelvis. Result surpassed even Joker’s expectations: the bulbs blinked creating an outstanding spectacle. Not to mention the star Joker had stack in John’s broken skull.

Joker giggled glancing at his pal: good ol’ John would have been very happy to know how beautiful and cheery he was... Bet he was never so sparkling during his life... Joker threw away an imagined teardrop from his eye: he had a knack on giving people their deepest desire.

His legs dangled. Joker hated Vicky’s show – it was sooooo booring! -yet he watched it because his kids did and as a responsible father he had to know what the children watched.

“And?” some people from the audience asked as if they didn’t have other problems in their life than the Person of the Year.

“I’m proud to announce that the Person of the Year for TIME and Forbes is for the first time after...” she frowned “who can remember really? Is no other than our sweet, sad Prince. Bruce Wayne!”

Joker was so surprised that launched from the bench almost falling face first and his goons laughed, six stupid faces turning to Joker who staggered to find his balance. Well, he would have killed one or two...or everyone to teach them manners but now he was more interested to hear.

So he straightened his posture with dignity, dusted his coat and trotted in front of the TV set that stood on a wooden box.

“Ooouut! Nooooo more TV for to--day!” he barked and his goons’ faces fell.

“But boss...”

Joker’s eyes glimmered and he raised his index finger warning.

“Doooooo I have to say it twiceeeeee?” his voice was a menacing screeching so nobody wanted to force the boss to repeat himself...with a blade or two.

They exchanged glances and in a second they were nowhere to be seen.

“Aaaaand now, Vicky darling, youuuuu may proceed...” he said after he sat cross legged in the purple armchair.

The audience burst out in frantic ovation and Vale smiled satisfied.
Our sources say that it was a well deserved award since our Prince went from being…” she suddenly sobered in a totally un-Vale way but she quickly restored her usual expression “Falcone’s servant – and I would say: from dead – to regaining the Wayne fortune, being voted the President of the Enterprises and then with smart movements saving the company from its lurching position” she twitched her eyebrows. “Not to mention, that he managed to disarm such rivals as John Dagget who was claiming the chair of the company and Lex Luthor; the latter not only failed to acquire Wayne Enterprises which, as everyone knows” she lowered her voice speaking to her audience “was Luthor’s Holy Grail, but also dear Lex ended up in prison and lost the control of LexLabs – his lovechild – thanks to…”

She made a gesture for the audience to complete the sentence for her.

Joker shook his head impatiently.

“Bruuuucey Wayne!” he answered and waved his hand for her to continue.

“Bruce Wayne!” the audience said to Vale’s nod of approval.

“And now our Prince holds the 20% of the entire LexCorp” the audience clapped thrilled. “Of course, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that Mr. Wayne from the moment of his …resurrection is always in the center of our attention with his misfortunes and…” she winked “the rumors concerning his love life.”

On that Joker jerked his hands outraged.

“Whaaaaat rumors, youuuu silly bimbooo! He is a married man and that’s not a rumor: pffff! Looooousy reporter!”

“Our sources say that Tony Stark, Bruce Wayne’s best friend and loyal protector, was a favorite for the title which would have his second consequent award but Bruce Wayne won easily” she shrugged. “Sorry, Tony: Ironman is great and all but returning from the dead doesn’t happen every day” she giggled. “So our show prepared a video dedicated to our sad Prince’s life manifesting the landmarks from Falcone’s reception – we took the material from Gotham Globe’s Alex Knox since I wasn’t invited” she didn’t elaborate on that “…up to today. We sincerely hope that this win will lift Bruce’s spirits that must be very down the last days. And we have you a surprise after the video…”

People clapped and the show’s whole wall screen began showing scenes from the Wayne family’s life leading to flashes from the coverage of their murders and the funeral leading to the reception at a ridiculously luxurious Wayne Manor as Falcone had turned the beautiful building.

Joker watched eagerly like a hungry hyena, totally concentrated to the screen: he didn’t like much TV but when Bruce’s life was on, he couldn’t resist.

However when the video ended he lolled his head on the side shocked and angry – a blade launching casually from his coat to sink into the opposite wall.
“Youuuu stupid bitch! Wheeeeere is our marriage?!” he stretched his arms forwards and upturned his palms as if Vale could see them. “What the Heeeeell! You show that fucking video with Suuuuuperbozo carrying him to the clinic aaaand the super pornnnn buuut not eeeeven a tiny mention of Brucey’s husband?!!” he growled and roared someone upstairs dropping his bottle.

Lucius put his eye in front of the wall where an invisible retina recognizer was placed; instantly the wall hissed and several drawers’ edges became visible. The scientist drew the drawers open and Bruce looked eagerly at the items placed in sockets, taking one of them. These cases on the wall were for top secret things and now hosted the mysterious items that were found at LexLabs.

Bruce brushed the hieroglyphic-like characters carved in the bottom side of the item and Lucius watched him.

“Lucius, you and Tony are scientists, perfectly acquainted with the latest developments” he looked up to his top scientist.

“I certainly hope so, Mr. Wayne” Lucius replied with a big smile.

Bruce grinned.

“Both of you told me that these things have nothing to do with anything you know. Have you considered the possibility of these items being of extraterrestrial origin?”

Lucius put his hands in his pants’ pockets.

“Expand your thought, Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce seemed a bit hesitant.

“Sometimes my mind does some connections…hm…more like jolts…between things that might be completely irrelevant but at the same time they might not be as they seem.”

Lucius smiled and nodded.

“And that’s why you’re a great detective, Mr. Wayne: finding connections where no other can find.”

Bruce blushed but shrugged.

“I don’t know if there’s a base…but I was thinking: you said that the specimens we gathered from the attack against me at the island indicated an unknown life form that might be alien. What if the same goes for these items too?” Lucius pursed his lips thoughtful. “And there’s Luthor’s presence and we know that his Labs were the center of shady, highly dangerous experiments concerning extraterrestrial findings.”

Lucius rubbed is chin deep in thought. He cocked his eyebrows.

“Our naughty friend certainly has a tendency of tampering with such things…and we know his dislike for Superman” the older man commented.

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I was thinking the raids in the LexLabs all over the States: they were snatching things but the raids didn’t stop as if they were looking for something specific – something they didn’t find.”
“Go ahead.”

“And then when Luthor had spent every mean for achieving his release from jail in vain, someone intervenes and he comes out despite the fact he was convicted without any doubt. Someone who nobody can name…exactly, like the one who freed several thugs from Metropolis’ prisons.”

Lucius fixed his solemn stare at Bruce frowning.

“No you believe that the…Intergang, - right-?” Bruce nodded “is related with the items?”

There wasn’t any hint of disbelief in Lucius’ voice yet Bruce shrugged.

“Intergang’s crimes have stopped since the attack at Metropolis’ subway station where their supposed leader was killed…”

Lucius cocked his eyebrows, widening his eyes playfully.

“But…you’re not convinced that he was the real leader” he completed Bruce’s phrase smiling.

Bruce grinned nodding.

“Not at all…”

He was ready to continue but knocks on the door stopped him. Lucius took the item Bruce was holding, putted to the sockets of the drawer and pushed it back to be absorbed by the wall without leaving even a mark hinting that the wall wasn’t solid.

The scientist pressed the small screen on the wall and the door opened.

Ms. Philips, Bruce’s secretary, came in; her poised expression still on as she looked at the two men.

“Mr. Wayne, Mr. Fox, I’m sorry to interrupt but I judged that you should be informed.”

“Well?” Bruce prompted her.

“Our Public Relations Department received a phone call from a reporter asking for any statement; and from then on, the phone hasn’t stopped ringing.”

Bruce frowned, a knot forming in his stomach.

“What happened now…” he said exasperated.

But Ms. Philips was calm and Bruce noticed that her eyes glimmered from something like…pride?

“Nothing serious, sir” she hastened to reassure him. “Just Vicky Vale announced that you won the award of the Person of the Year.”

Bruce’s eyes widened from surprise and…terror; he turned his eyes to Lucius who was grinning amused. Bruce took his Cosmos phone out of his pocket and fast opened the site of GTV, Gotham’s second most popular TV station, and touched the play option on the web TV.

Indeed, Vicky Vale was elaborating on her exclusive and Bruce brushed his bottom lip thoughtful. He remembered Ms. Philips waiting for instructions.

“Ms. Philips, please tell Miss Robinson to not comment till the news is official; when it is officially announced I’ll get in touch with her for sketching our statement.”
Ms. Philips nodded.

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne” she said and left the room closing the door.

Lucius stared at Bruce as the youth watched the video with his life Vale had sewed. The older man placed his hand on Bruce’s shoulder and he looked at the scientist.

“It’s not that bad, Mr. Wayne…”

Bruce sighed.

“I don’t want the attention, Lucius.”

“I know but look at the bright side…”

“There is one?”

Lucius smiled benevolently.

“The shares of Wayne Enterprises will go rocket high.”

Bruce smiled and looked back at his Cosmos that now he had turned into tablet size.

“Our reporter, Julie, is in front of Wayne Tower opting for a statement…” a very young blond reporter came to the screen with the 94 storey building behind her, the white platinum ‘W’ capturing the eyes. “Julie, what goodies do you have for us?”

“Hi, Vicky” she was dressed in a huge jacket, muffled in a thick, brown scarf and a woolen hat because the cold was really fierce today. “We asked from the company’s Spoke Person to comment on Bruce Wayne’s win but she told us that they don’t have any official notification so they can’t comment on rumors. They’ll make a statement when the news is confirmed…” her voice and her overall expression were depressed for having failed Vale.

Vicky’s eyes fell for an instant but she was very experienced so it swiftly changed that.

“That was to be expected…Wayne Enterprises is a rather serious company under Bruce Wayne’s presidency. Julie, stay there in case you manage to take a statement from any official or Mr. Wayne” the young reporter nodded and the wall screen was covered again with Bruce’s face.

“Greeeeeat wallpaper, Vick!” Joker exclaimed thrilled and clapped while he struggled with his obsolete cell phone to make a call “now…let’s cor--rect sooooooome things…”

“Waiting for Julie’s reportage, let’s disclose our other news” Vicky chirped “which concerns Bruce as well… We have information that Bruce Wayne has become the legal guardian – yes, you have heard me fine – the legal guardian of a 13 year old boy” she cocked her eyebrows. “A boy that is no other than Richard Grayson the older son of the Phelps family who all of us remember the tragic way they were murdered by Joker.”

She touched the microphone in her ear.
“We have a call…”

Bruce’s face became grim hearing Vale revealing that he got Dick’s guardianship.

“No…” he said and the color of his face went a few shades paler.

Lucius frowned worried.

“Mr. Wayne…”

“I wanted it to be as secret as possible because Dick has been already once targeted by Joker” he bit his lip and huffed. “Joker already believes that I have a soft spot for the boy and used him in the factory – now if he learns that the boy is my ward, things will be worse…I should have expected that: Dick yelled about my guardianship in the gym and I’m sure that Zucco put his hand on this.”

Lucius pursed his lips.

“I understand your fears, Mr. Wayne, but it was going to be known sooner or later.”

“I guess…But now Joker must be busted as soon as possible.”

Lucius’ kind face became stern and solemn as he squatted in front of Bruce.

“Mr. Wayne, I personally vouched for your behavior when I convinced Mr. Stark to cooperate in forging that armor” Bruce was looking him in the eyes. “Pursuing that man in your current condition will only deteriorate things. Please, Mr. Wayne, you need rest and caution till your surgery…” his discussion with Tony three days ago still haunted him.

Bruce nodded.

“As I told Tony, I wore the armor only to speak to Commissionaire Gordon. Since then I haven’t patrolled the city…I just constantly cross data from different satellites and public cameras, and police reports hoping to find leads to Joker’s hideout. I had some clues indicating that Joker was in area 33 of the Chinese docks and I tipped police – however, their yesterday raid was unsuccessful, finding only Joker cards in one of the warehouses” he pressed his lips. “He sensed the danger and left.”

“So what you’re doing instead of patrolling sounds pretty tiresome to me as well…”

Bruce loll’d his head on the side.

“It’s the least I can do, Lucius: he has already killed two people and left a message hinting that he’ll do more…”

Hellooooo, Vick and gooood afternooooon, Goootham! Your belooooved jester is here…” the crowd fell silent, terror in their faces and the host of the show clutched more the tablet she was holding. “C’mon, Vick: why soooo silent? After all, we have a paaast – hehehehehehe! – no, people, don’t let your mind go to the nasty thing… Don’t tell me you’re scared of lil’ ol’ meeeeeeeee?” he asked innocently and affronted at the same time. “I’m not the type who plaaants bombs around after all…HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAA!” he stopped his laughing fit abruptly. “Hm…What I was saying? Aaaaah…Vicky, de—ar, you forgot to mention that Brucey is married with no other thaaaaaan…ME! I hope this wasn’t on purpose be--cause I dare say that myyyyy wife won that title
among other reasons due to…MOI!”

Vicky shook her head in denial.

“I didn’t have any image of your marriage, Mr. Joker…I’m sorry.”

“Ex—cuses…” but he abruptly stopped remembering what she said before the phone call. “Oi! You’re a great reporter, Vick…So Brucey got a child…I’ve got to hang up, my dear-ies…Till neeeeeeext time…Juicy kisses to your cheeks!”

The sudden stopping of Vale’s babbling didn’t settle right with Bruce and when Joker’s voice came from the tablet both Bruce and Lucius looked there.

“No, no, nooooo! Wait! Ah! I for--got to mention that in harmony with the Christmas spirit I decided to decoraaaate my own tree…Mmm…Studio…So in five minutes a few beautifuuuul little bombs will fill Gotham’s sky with fireworks aaaand we will have our own angels…You guys! Vicky’s idioooootic audience…MUHAHAHAHAHAHAH!”

Shrieks filled the studio and one hundred people simultaneously jumped to their feet running towards the two exits; Vale in vain was trying to calm them: Joker’s crazy giggles vibrated all over and filled everyone with panic.

Bruce’s eyes hardened, his body stiffened and he grabbed the chair’s armrests ready to move but Lucius held the younger man’s upper arms determined.

“No, Mr. Wayne” he said with his calm voice but leaving no room for objection “police will handle it.”

“But…” Lucius’ stern eyes were fixed on his till Bruce’s body loosened.

And then Joker’s laughter became crazier and more amused; he was almost choking.

“Dooooon’t tell me you bought that? MUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! C’MON, GOTHAMITES! I had you for smarter…” he stopped abruptly considering this “mmm…nah! C’mon, you duuuuummies! Even I can’t be in two places at once ooor plant boooooms with telepathy… HAAAAAHEEEHEEEHAAAAHAAAAH!” he coughed. “Oh! That was sooooo funny: nobody is left in the studiooooo as if they saw Vicky’s face without makeuuup-up-up… OOOOHOOOOOHEEEHEEEEEHEEEE! Oi! I have to admit that Gothamites are the fastest animals on Earth! MUHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! See ya soon, honies!” his voice dropped several octaves menacingly. “With reeeeeeal fireworks…”

Joker’s creepy laughter echoed through the empty studio and Bruce lowered his eyes breathing calmer for this being a prank but not totally relieved due to Joker’s threat. Lucius patted him.

“You must focus on your recovering, Mr. Wayne; I know it is hard but you do helping Gotham even without donning the cowl” he lifted Bruce’s chin with his finger till their eyes locked. “Your surgery is very difficult, Bruce” he said solemnly “you need to gather strength to cope with this new battle…”

“I know, Lucius” Bruce replied calm “but I can’t be indifferent when this man terrorizes our city and threatens to kill more people…I promise that I won’t use your gift light hearted.”

Lucius nodded.
“I trust you will keep that promise and that you’ll spend this Christmas the best way you can.”

Bruce grinned.

“I’m the Person of the Year, how can I not enjoy the Christmas?” he snorted cocking his eyebrows.

Lucius chuckled and stood accompanying Bruce to the lab’s door.

“You know you’re invited to Alfred’s Christmas’ dinner, right?” Bruce asked his top scientist and Lucius laughed.

“I’ll wait my official invitation…you know how typical our British friend is…” he winked and Bruce smiled.

Tony was in his enormous study at his penthouse in Gotham. He stood between two holographic columns with running data: one with the details about the items found in LexLabs and one with the latest developments concerning Bruce’s surgery.

“Jarvis, give me 4 times zoom of the A4 sector of Bruce’s spine and magnify the 2-4 energy cast…” he ordered his AI pointing his wooden pencil to the hologram.

He shook his head pouting disheartened: when he spoke to Lucius he forgot to mention the collapsed lung that was revived, the missing spleen and the pierced stomach. He sighed, licked his lips and swept with the back of his palm the sweat drops from his forehead.

“It will be difficult but you and Bruce will make it” Pepper said entering the room with a cup of espresso in her hand, her stilettos clinging on the dark blue granite.

She offered the cup to Tony and he sipped moaning, closing his eyes from pleasure.

“I’m scared, Pepper” he looked at her serious “for the first time in my life I’m scared…”

“Bruce is a fighter” she kissed him in the lips. “He just beat you…” she cocked her eyebrows to his puzzled eyes. “Jarvis, display TIME magazine website…”

A third hologram just appeared and Tony watched dumbfounded the flashing news.

“And Forbes.com…” she continued amused, Jarvis obeying.

Pepper wanted to lighten Tony’s mood so that he could appraise the situation more collected.

“TIME and Forbes just announced that Bruce is this years winner of the award” she crossed her arms and pouted supposedly pitying him. “You were easily defeated, Mr. Stark…”

Tony shook his head and left it lolled on the side regarding Bruce’s pictures in both sites.

“That’s fair” he mumbled and pointed at the pictures. “With such pictures!”

“You’re not pissed?” she raised her eyebrows playfully knowing that Tony wouldn’t be annoyed for his friend’s win.

“I’d be pissed if that asshole Luthor had defeated me…but for Bruce…I’m happier than when I got the title. The little guy deserved that and much more especially now that that scumbag took the Pulitzer prize…” he fumed remembering Clark. “He cheated, Peps! He didn’t deserve the Prize…”
Ugh! I’d like to say a word with those who decided that!”

Pepper massaged his tense shoulders.

“Tony, forget him…it’d be better to leave that issue at bay…for Bruce’s sake” she smiled. “The first Christmas you’ll spend together after eighteen years! Nothing should shadow that, Tony…You must forget anything else and help Bruce do the same.”

Tony wrapped her in his arms and kissed her lips.

“You’d help me with that, huh?”

She chuckled.

“Of course! I am already: Alfred called and said to meet him for dinner at the Comet Mall: he’ll bring Bruce.”

Tony snorted.

“Bruce at the Mall?” he lifted his eyebrows. “I always believed that our Alfred is a force to be reckoned… You’ll spend Christmas with me?” he massaged her bottom lip with his.

“Certainly…Everything for the Person of the Year!”

“I’m not the Person of this Year.”

“I wasn’t speaking about you…” she snorted and bit teasingly his nose.

Tony snapped his fingers and the holographs vanished: he’d follow Pepper’s advice.

“I demand to see Bruce Wayne!”

“You need an appointment to do that, sir; and I’d like you to lower your voice.”

Bruce could hear the tempered exchange even behind the closed lift doors. The stranger’s cackle made his spine shudder and he was sure that Ms. Philips felt even worse.

“Only the fact that I’m here is a great honor to your employer” the rough voice was filled with arrogance and malice; a lurking threat.

Bruce get out of the lift and before taking the turn to his office, saw from the corner the square-shouldered, huge man leaning above the desk and looking at Ms. Philips who seemed numb, something very unusual for the dynamic woman. Yet Bruce couldn’t blame her.

“Go tell Wayne that Bruno Mannheim is here to see him!” he straightened his sturdy posture.

Ms. Philips was staring at him shaken.

“Mr. Wayne isn’t in his office right now” she almost stuttered.

“Then find him!” Mannheim barked.

Bruce needed no more: seeing people bullying others always made him furious. He willed his
wheelchair to his office’s waiting room.

“I don’t like people yelling to my secretary” he said calmly but determined and the man turned to him intrigued but still with contempt coloring his face.

Ms. Philips inhaled relieved and stood looking at her employer like seeing her savior.

“Oh!” Mannheim spat sarcastic cocking his eyebrow. “Mr. Wayne I suppose…” it was the first time Darkseid was seeing Wayne from up close and though he detested him as he did every human, he was also curious.

Bruce met the man’s stare without letting the intensity of that stare bent him.

“I think it is obvious, Mr…?” he replied raising his eyebrows.

The dark man glared at him but Bruce’s stare didn’t flatter; despite the man’s irritation Bruce discerned a hesitation to answer his simple question, as if the man weighted his options.

“Mr. Mannheim wanted to see you but I told him that he should have made an appointment” Ms. Philips answered Bruce’s question since the man didn’t seem willing to do so.

Bruce smiled reassuringly to her and the woman’s face regained its color.

“Thank you, Ms. Philips. That’s right, Mr. Mannheim, I don’t see people without an appointment.”

Mannheim cocked his eyebrows sarcastic at the mention of ‘people’: it was obvious that he didn’t consider himself one of the people. He yanked his head proudly and irritated: he wasn’t used to be denied anything especially from humans.

“I came from Metropolis just to see you…”

“I’m honored” Bruce said so indifferent that it was obvious that he didn’t mean it. “But exactly for that you should have made an appointment so that your journey wouldn’t be wasted.”

Mannheim frowned and his eyes narrowed to two flashing slits: if that insolent little human insist on denying he had other means to get what he wanted.

“You mean that you won’t see me now?” his asked outraged.

Bruce looked him in the eyes.

“Only if you apologize to Ms. Philips for your behavior: she is just doing her job and she doesn’t have to be treated like this.”

Ms. Philips looked at her employer astonished and satisfied while Mannheim was fuming: apologize to a human just to see that worm Wayne? That was a deadly insult. He pressed his lips imagining destroying the entire building just with a blink and frying Wayne with his breath. However at the moment getting his machine was the priority so he put his ire at bay.

“I apologize, Ms…”

“Philips” Bruce informed him though the ID label on her chest read her name; Mannheim cast him a glare.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Philips, for yelling at you” his voice didn’t reflect the meaning of his words.
Bruce’s secretary nodded calm but Bruce could discern that she was still shaken and scared of the man – and that was saying something because Ms. Philips was quite brave.

“Apology accepted, Mr. Mannheim” the woman replied.

Bruce approached.

“You see how easily things are done with politeness?” he was sure that his visitor didn’t see at all and in fact was cursing him inside.

“Can we talk now?” Mannheim asked impatient and Bruce nodded.

“Of course; you did the journey from Metropolis after all…” he gestured to his office and placed his palm to the receptor unlocking the door with a hiss.

He could have sent him away or force him to make an appointment and come again but he was curious about this man and the fact he was coming from Metropolis enhanced his interest.

So he pushed the door open and made an inviting gesture to Mannheim who inclined slightly his head in what supposedly was a thank you gesture and walked insight.

Bruce was ready to follow when Ms. Philips having come out of her desk approached him flushed.

“You don’t have to see this man, Mr. Wayne” she whispered. “He has something…dangerous: let me call the security.”

“Calm down, Ms. Philips: I’m curious to hear what he wants” he smiled relaxed. “And I don’t think that he’ll attack me right here…if he was to do that, he’d have done it when I asked him to apologize” he winked.

Ms. Philips didn’t seem quite convinced but nodded and closed the door when her employer got inside, leaving the two men alone.

“Please, do have a seat” Bruce gestured to Mannheim as willed his chair behind the desk. “May I offer you something?”

Mannheim sat at the leather armchair still stiff as a granite rock. He waved Bruce’s offer off.

“No. I prefer to get right to the point.”

Bruce shook his head.

“As you wish. Well? As far as I know Wayne Enterprises have no affairs with you.”

“That was before you gained the control of LexLabs.”

The wheels in Bruce’s mind went on fire but he kept his face expressionless.

“I gather that you had some trading with Lex Luthor?”

Mannheim’s face was carved by a crooked smile; his eyes sparkled.

“I’m glad I have to do with an intelligent man and I hope that we’ll have a nice cooperation as the one I had with Mr. Luthor.”

Bruce grinned and intertwined his fingers on the desk.
“Mr. Luthor was convicted for many illegal deeds so I don’t think that a comparison with him isn’t exactly what Wayne Enterprises and I personally are opting for.”

Mannheim didn’t like that answer and the human’s expression so pursed his lips. Bruce was surprised by the fact that his visitor didn’t make even an attempt to hide his true feelings – probably, he didn’t care doing so.

“Anyway, Mr. Wayne, I had made an order to Mr. Luthor and I was to get what I paid for till you came to the fore.”

Interesting…Bruce thought. He was expecting that the one who was related to the curious items would eventually claim what was his but not so flagrantly.

“I see…Listen, Mr. Mannheim, your case is not the first we dealt with. LexLabs had and still have many contracts in effect and development which projects Wayne Enterprises first re-evaluated and then decided to accomplish” Mannheim gave a satisfied dry grin. “However” Bruce raised slightly his voice for emphasis “your name wasn’t in any contract or archive in LexLabs’ logs.”

Mannheim snorted.

“My contract was made directly with Mr. Luthor and he reassured me that it was in progress the moment you took the control. It was a gentlemen’s deal and I believe that, if you are a real gentleman, you will fulfill that deal as Mr. Luthor would have done.”

Bruce shook his head; he felt on edge all the time as if a mortal danger was threatening him so e couldn’t enjoy what he was waiting for so long.

“That’s the thing, Mr. Mannheim: Lex Luthor is connected with many felonies so I must be careful because I don’t want in the least to be the kind of gentleman he is. So as much as I want to be helpful” well, that wasn’t much honest “I have to follow the legitimate procedure.”

Mannheim frowned clearly dissatisfied.

“Meaning?” he growled.

“Let me explain: LexLabs had the not so good fame of conducting odd experiments and serving deals with shady groups and people: Lex Luthor’s cooperation with terrorist groups and gangsters like Falcone was proved without any doubt. So when Wayne Enterprises gained the control of his Labs, our first priority was to clear the name of LexLabs. You see, we respected the know-how these labs have yet we wanted to give them the prestige and status they deserved.”

Mannheim’s eyeballs were ready to pop out of their sockets from boredom that he didn’t care to hide.

“All in all, Mr. Mannheim, we check very carefully every contract Luthor has signed, report to the official governmental agency as every other company does and if everything is legitimate and non dangerous, we proceed to complete and deliver the order” Mannheim’s frown became deeper and the clouds over his dark eyes thickened. “You say that your agreement with Mr. Luthor was spoken; in that case, you have to give us elaborated details about your order so we can cross that it really was in development and refer to the State’s agency to get approval and proceed.”

Now Darkseid had had enough: this human wanted to order him to disclose his secrets in order so to relay everything to the government for which he didn’t care much but it was more delay. Moreover, how dare he speak to him like that? He jerked to his feet clenching his fists but restraining himself from revealing his true form. Besides he had other ways to achieve what he wanted.
Bruce narrowed his eyes but watched calmly his odd guest.

“I demand you to deliver to me everything related to my order! Luthor knows what it is needed and he’ll guide you” he launched his brain waves to do what he liked more after dismantling humans: invade their minds and control them into fulfilling his wishes – maybe he’d make the favor to Bagdana and once Wayne was his puppet made the human fell for the stupid demon.

Bruce at first felt satisfied because the man’s anger meant that he hit the right spot and that he was close to the mystery’s solution. But then there was something awkward as if a wave of cold air crashed on his very mind causing a mild migraine. For an instance his thoughts seemed to blur as if there was nothing concrete in there but then his confused eyes caught the arrogant smirk on Mannheim’s lips and the flash in his eyes; Bruce felt the flame of his stubbornness burn in his mind and solidify it and clenched his jaw.

“You can’t demand anything from me, Mr. Mannheim!” he retorted and his eyes locked with his guests so steely that Darkseid was buffed. “Your dubious deal was with Lex Luthor but he isn’t running the labs anymore” he steered his chair outside his desk in front of the towering man.

Yet the fact he was confined in a chair and the man emanated the aura of danger didn’t shaken Bruce at all. The young man could feel the Black Butterfly vibrating in the pouch on his chest. He yanked his head stabbing the man’s narrowed eyes.

“Either you follow the legitimate way or you forget your order, Mr. Mannheim. Things have changed.”

Mannheim’s plump lips shook from wrath not only from the youth’s refusal to satisfy his order but also from his failure to control the human’s mind – he never had failed again with any human. He growled and clenched his fists in the air something that could be taken as a sign for an imminent punch.

However Bruce remained poised, his eyes unmovable looking his guest in the face; even though a punch from a man of Mannheim’s sturdiness could damage him gravely. Yet Mannheim didn’t do it.

“You’ll be sorry for that, Wayne!”

Bruce raised an eyebrow.

“I see you like too much threatening people, Mr. Mannheim; so I’m glad that Mr. Luthor was stopped from delivering your order” Mannheim widened his eyes.

“You shall give me what is mine” he barked leaning to Bruce’s face so much that his hot breath hit him.

“Of course: if you give me the proper explanations I’d have no objection on fulfilling the deal.”

Mannheim growled and marched outside the office slapping the door behind him.

Ms. Philips rushed inside pale and out of breath.

“Mr. Wayne, are you alright?”

Well, Mannheim’s departure certainly made the room feel more warm and lighter.

“I am, Ms. Philips, thank you” he brushed the spot where the Black Butterfly lay.
The woman seemed relieved and fixed her stern posture.

“It is late afternoon, Mr. Wayne…I have to remind you that you should return to the Manor; your
day was rather exhausting without that Mr. Mannheim added as the icing of the cake.”

Bruce grinned.

“At times, I feel that your real employer is Alfred and not me, Ms. Philips” the woman blushed.
“Thank you for your interest and you may go to your home and get some rest.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne. Have a lovely rest of the day.”

Bruce nodded.

“You too, Ms. Philips.”

She left the room and Bruce pulled out his Cosmos phone calling Lucius.

“I just got the movement I was expecting…I’ll inform you and Tony soon.”

He brushed the option and the phone became a tablet; then he opened his self made search program
and typed Mannheim’s name, grinning at the results: as he expected, there wasn’t much. He touched
the first result, opening a new window, intending to do the same with the rest.

Yet someone knocked his door and Bruce looked up frowning since he had sent away Ms. Philips.

“Come in.”

He lolled his head exasperated and closed his eyes seeing Alfred marching inside.

“I was ready to leave for the Manor, Alfred.”

Alfred raised his eyebrows in complete disbelief.

“Oh! I’m certain of that, sir” he said nonchalant.

Bruce sighed rubbing his forehead.

“You came to take me home?” he chuckled.

“Hardly, Master Bruce. I drove Master Richard to the gym and I’ll take you to the Mall” he glanced
at his Rolex. “Young Master Richard’s training ends in fifteen minutes; we’ll pick him up and do our
shopping for the Haven.”

What Bruce felt neared panic.

“No, Alfred, no! I told Ms. Evans and the Haven’s staff that they have a blank check to buy
whatever they want…I…This will be exhausting.”

Alfred was staring at him with a no-nonsense expression.

“Then you should stop spending so many hours at the Tower and at the cave, sir. Besides, you need
to get a bit outside: get some air, be among people, feel the spirit of the days.”

Bruce huffed.

“Alfred, you know that all these are not for me…”
“I beg your pardon, sir, but I disagree. You gave an epic battle for eighteen years not only to stay alive but also to defeat your enemies and regain your life and now you have made it you should celebrate your first Christmas.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose closing his eyes and Alfred bit his bottom lip.

“I know that you had imagined your Christmas different, Master Bruce…with the company of someone else you still hold so dear in your heart.”

Bruce looked at him.

“I’ll celebrate, Alfred and I’ll be very happy because all of you will be around me; but I don’t see the reason for going to the stores…I’ll be exhausted, Alfred.”

“Then you might manage to sleep well at last, sir; because this type of fatigue will get your mind away from other things that disturb your sleep.”

Bruce pressed his lips: he didn’t want Alfred to know about his restless sleep: flashbacks that had vanished while he was with Clark had returned worse than before. Nightmares with specks of real events and the bullshit Crane tried to plant to his mind and flashbacks making him relive his past: last night it was Talia’s and Bane’s deeds on his body…He woke up exhausted and feeling disgusted with himself; more ridiculous for letting himself do the things he did with Clark. He had asked from Leslie stronger sleeping pills but they didn’t help much.

The butler nodded.

“You changed your sleeping pills because the previous weren’t effective…”

“Leslie told you?! She is my doctor, there’s confidentiality.”

“No, Leslie didn’t tell me anything but I’m keeping an eye on your medication and the old bottle of sleeping pills didn’t decrease at all while the rest medication did. The flashbacks returned, did they?”

“It’s not that bad, Alfred.”

Alfred didn’t buy that but he didn’t insist to not upset more his young master.

“So off we go? Young Master Jason and his mother will wait us at the Comet Mall and we’ll have dinner at the restaurant there: I’ve made a reservation – I hear great reviews for the food and the wine.”

Bruce shook his head.

“You brought Jason and his mother into the plot?”

“Of course! Ms. Todd works in the Haven so she can help with the picking of the presents; and the two boys will help with the selection of tree and decorations.”

Bruce’s heart fell and then began beating fast.

“Alfred, I…I…I told you that I asked from Ms. Evans to do that…”

Alfred grinned.

“And I told her that you changed your mind and you want to choose the presents yourself” he retorted amused battling to keep his worry hidden.
Bruce gulped.

“Alfred, I don’t believe in Santa Claus…” he said looking at his tablet’s screen as if that explained that he wouldn’t do anything concerning Christmas.

Alfred walked to him and placed his hands on the youth’s shoulders. Their eyes locked.

“But the children in the Haven do believe, sir and I know that you don’t want them to stop believing” he inhaled deeply “as early as you…” an eight year old child in Falcone’s hands certainly stopped believing in Santa. “You’ll make them very happy if you choose their presents personally. And perhaps you’ll get some well deserved joy for yourself…”

Bruce didn’t speak and Alfred clapped his hands once.

“It’s fifteen of December and I won’t tolerate the Manor staying without proper decoration anymore: we should be happy you’re back after all these years…” his voice became soft. “We have two children in the Manor, sir; maybe their joy will cheer you up too.”

“Richard hates me…so he’ll be better without me in the mall and in the decorations…if he is in the mood for that.”

“One reason more to decorate, Master Bruce: I’m sure it will help Master Richard.”

“Selina said that she would help with decoration and stuff but she disappeared five days now and her phone is closed…maybe she’ll spend the holidays with Steve.”

“Then it is our work and I’m sure Master Tony will be happy to help. Come on, Master Bruce.”

“Joker made a threatening call to Vale’s TV show because of me. I feel that wherever I go I endanger people…”

Alfred locked eyes with his boy.

“You can’t make him the favor, sir and get isolated.”

“And reporters will chase us…” he snorted. “I was named the Person of the Year” he slapped his cheek. “As if I didn’t have enough troubles…”

“They won’t think that you’ll be in such a common place like a mall: and even if we come across any of them you’re perfectly able to cope with them” he lifted his eyebrows ”and Master Tony knows everything about paparazzi as for Miss Potts...she is rather experienced in handling them being for years Master Tony's personal assistant." 

Bruce widened his eyes amused.

"You brought the entire gang to this?"

Alfred smiled satisfied.

"I did and you won't like to disappoint them, will you?"

Bruce closed his eyes and chuckled.

“You’re an invincible attorney, Alfred…”

“I’m glad to hear that, sir – it comes very handy sometimes…”
Chapter 47

The TV set on the box became again the center of Joker’s goons who babbled all together creating a disturbing fuss.

Yet Joker didn’t care; he sat on his butt with crossed legs at the feet of his macabre Christmas’ tree. His eyes were blank focused on his bare blade that he stabbed with one hand between the spread fingers of the other. He was huffing and puffing deep in thought.

“So Batsy’s biological clock ticked and he decided to become a bat-mom…” he stabbed the blade between index finger and thumb. “Aaaaand with that boyyyyyy…” he stabbed the blade between index and third finger. “Ugh! I knew he had a soft spoot--y for him.”

He yanked his head and looked at the decorated skeleton used as Christmas tree.

“I mean if heeeeee wanted a kid, he has a legal husband” he pointed to himself with the blade and then scratched his head with that. “I feel insulted, John buddyyyyy…”

But then he lolled his head on the side and touched the flat side of the blade on his chin thoughtful.

“Mmm…” he pursed his lips. “It’s my fault…I didn’t show him how con---siderate I can beeee…Pooooor thing! It’s his first Christmas unchained aaaaand he is confined to that chair! Apart from his reeeal seeeelf” he pushed away a supposed tear.

He jolted to his feet flying the blade to stick to the ceiling along with a dozen others from past times; he frowned.

“I must clean up ‘cause I’m gonna run out of toys…” he mumbled.

But then he remembered what he was thinking and his face radiated; his Cheshire smile was broader than ever.

“Jooooker, boy, you muuust remind Brucey that he is always on your mind…Youuu must make his Christmas beautifuuuul…Mmmm…A present? Whyyyyy not?”

Bagdana landed hard on his feet in the center of Darkseid’s throne hall; around him the slow burning fires in the granite elliptic vessels flared angrily to the tall ceiling mirroring their master’s emotions.

Of course, Bagdana understood immediately that his ally was infuriated: a twirl of fire and wind had engulfed him where he was standing and sucked him underground to the New God’s hall of throne.

He stretched his posture: Bagdana was in his regular form of granite body dressed in his black leather leggings and the fitting vest that let his rock, perfect shaped chest almost naked. His yellow cat like eyes fixed on the throne with the live, twisting hurricanes.

Darkseid was grabbing the edges of the armrests, his face taut with his thick blue eyebrows knitted together. His jaw was set; he looked absorbed in his thoughts and gave the impression that he wasn’t aware of his minion’s arrival. Bagdana was ready to speak but Darkseid’s red eyes stabbed him narrowed to menacing slits.

The New God stretched his arm to Bagdana.
“What is in Wayne that you don’t say?!” he demanded and his words barely distinguished from the cracking sound of a thunder that made the enormous, endless pillars shook.

Bagdana’s square face tensed. He didn’t like this sudden interest for Bruce.

“What have you done?” he replied hardly containing his anger.

Darkseid jolted to his pillar-like legs and flexed his impressive, gigantic body to intimidate his minion who however wasn’t impressed.

“I should have done” he answered descending the three wide steps that led to his throne. “I should have burn him alive and leave only his ashes” he hissed and his face was in front of Bagdana’s sniffing his reactions. “I don’t like not getting answers to my questions.”

“You met him?” Bagdana asked admittedly shaken; he couldn’t foresee the consequences of such a meeting. He had hoped that Darkseid would never meet Bruce before everything was over and the human was his.

Darkseid’s nostrils fumed and he grabbed the demon from the neck lifting him off the floor. Bagdana felt the god’s powerful fingers choking him yet his eyes were still, focused on his ally’s face, unfazed by his cruelty.

“Answer me! Why I wasn’t able even to enter his mind?!”

Bagdana cocked an eyebrow.

“According to your own sayings, because he doesn’t have any brain…” he said calm and a bit sarcastic.

Darkseid growled and released him a faint grin on the ancient demon’s face.

“I get you didn’t achieve what you wanted from this meeting…” he commented slyly to Darkseid’s turned back. “But why you did that? You despise humans – you wouldn’t spare a thought to Bruce…”

“I never had a problem penetrating someone’s mind and controlling him – especially, with humans. I attacked his brain to find out where they keep the parts of my machine and make him surrender them to me. But I didn’t manage to see anything; his mind held me out” his shoulders shook from wrath; he wasn’t used to fail or being denied something.

Bagdana crossed his arms and moved in front of him; Darkseid glanced at him with narrowed eyes and clenched jaw. He remembered what the demon had asked but he didn’t want to answer him.

“You freed Luthor because your people were unable to find them in the Labs and Luthor was the only one who knew their locations. But…” he snorted “he didn’t manage to find the parts of your machine where he had secured them so you went to Bruce to make him give what you needed” the demon said shaking his head.

Darkseid didn’t say anything just ground his teeth causing Bagdana’s smirk.

“Why you didn’t consult me?” the demon asked exasperated: Darkseid’s failure and humiliation was amusing yet he didn’t like that his ally had met Bruce neither his question about the human. “It’s my role, right?”

Darkseid pursed his lips because he could sense the demon’s satisfaction: ire boiled inside him and
something worse – doubt.

“I don’t see the reason why I have to ask you for my actions!”

Bagdana shook his head.

“Because I know Earth and her inhabitants better than you; better than anyone and I can spare you from wrong moves and failures like the current.”

Bruce’s brilliant plan was clear for the demon: his people found the intriguing items, nobody could decipher their use so the clever human decided to take and secure them in order to force the one who had interest in them to reveal himself and maybe his intentions. He wanted to cackle maniac for Darkseid’s misfortune: his arrogance pushed him to Bruce’s trap.

And even worse, the stupid god believed that he could control Bruce’s mind… Bagdana felt his passion for the human burning his insides: those sparkling, determined eyes stabbing him as the Blade of Justice stabbed his back... It shouldn’t however his stabbing aroused him and made his thirst for Bruce tormenting, demanding.

“It wasn’t a failure! That little bitch doesn’t have a clue about me and my plans” he smirked to his minion: he could see Bagdana’s uneasiness on him having met his human. “And I had the opportunity to met with Wayne.”

Bagdana cocked an eyebrow and Darkseid growled.

“What does this human pest have that blocked my attack?” he demanded again.

The ancient demon smirked: so the Nemesis’ wings were still protecting Bruce; her influence was still strong… He hated Nemesis and he didn’t want her influence on Bruce: her strong power in him, her high priest’s DNA, was an obstacle for Bagdana to get his mate. However in this case he was grateful that something hers blocked Darkseid. Even if that intrigued his ally.

“Maybe there was something in the room that interfered with your brain waves” he told the New God because he wanted to disperse his suspicions about Bruce’s significance.

Darkseid wasn’t convinced.

“I could have melt him with just one thought but instead I left his office without taking what I wanted” Bagdana could discern the god’s self-questioning, his tormenting puzzlement.

“I’m glad you didn’t!” the demon said stabbing him with his eyes. “He is mine!”

Darkseid smirked.

“Are you so stupid to threaten me, little demon?” he lolled his huge, square head and regarded Bagdana amused. “I can squash you as easy as I can squash your human: I don’t need you.”

Bagdana snorted unfazed by the threat.

“What happened with Wayne proves otherwise” Darkseid’s lips flared from wrath but it was true. “You didn’t take what you wanted and revealed your interest to him just because you didn’t ask my advice. So I suggest from now on that you let me handle these matters. For my reward of course.”

Darkseid began ascending the steps to his throne until he settled in; he regarded his minion rubbing his chin thoughtful.
“After I’ll punish him you can take him” he chuckled. “I won’t kill or damage him permanently but his insolence and insult will be avenged.”

Bagdana’s fists clenched and he burst towards the throne.

“Nobody is going to touch Bruce, not even you!” he roared and the flames in the vessels bulged; Darkseid’s eyes shone with curiosity and the demon calmed himself. “What happened wasn’t his fault… he didn’t know with whom he was dealing” he added quietly.

Darkseid laughed.

“Oh! Earth demon, you’re so pathetic! So in love with a miserable, mortal being…”

Bagdana didn’t care about his jeering: the only thing that mattered for him was getting Bruce and being united with him forever. He looked his ally through narrowed eyes.

“Just don’t hurt Bruce.”

The bigger entity cackled.

“If my job is done you’ll have your reward” he said touching his fingertips together in front of his face.

“Master!”

A screeching voice echoed through the hall and Bagdana turned to see Granny Goodness rushing to the feet of Darkseid’s throne; he felt disgusted.

“Let me punish that human rat! He is of no importance and you don’t need to indulge that earth demon!” her voice was filled with malice and her white hair flew around her head but Bagdana just watched her bored. “We can get your machine once Wayne is eradicated – nobody deserves to live after he insulted your Majesty!”

Bagdana crossed his arms and snorted even though Darkseid’s smug stare was fixed on him challenging.

“Would be so easy, my faithful soldier” he said to Granny and her eyes were salivating from anticipation to do her things to the human. “Really…But no…I’ll keep him alive to give Bagdana a motive to want my plan to succeed as much as I. After all, that little human is interesting and if something goes awry” a wide grin ripped his blue face “our demon friend would have to enjoy with me his human being tortured to his death…This will be a great punishment for them both if Bagdana fails me.”

He locked eyes with the demon enjoying his irritation and Bagdana nodded before disappearing.

Granny looked at her king frowning.

“Your Majesty is going to spare this human’s life just because one of your servants wants him for his pleasure?”

Darkseid blinked and smirked.

“Maybe I have also plans for Wayne…What took place in his office wasn’t random and I’ll find out. Perhaps what fought me out of his brain can be useful to my plans.”
Hero was curved on the back seat of Alfred’s Rolls Royce but jolted once the door to the passenger’s seat opened. They decided to send Bruce’s car back to the Manor with the auto-pilot. Also, Alfred had already called Matt to cancel their session with Bruce.

“I brought young Master Hero along” Alfred said as he took the wheelchair to placed it in the trunk; Bruce was already seated and the kitten had run to him and now was perched to his chest. “I didn’t want to let him so many hours alone in the Manor.”

Bruce nodded and petted his friend who purred appreciatively.

Dick came out of the gym just when they arrived and got inside with an expression that yelled “let’s get over with it!” Well, Bruce thought amused, they agreed on that…

“Hello, Master Richard” Alfred chirped unfazed by the boy’s grim mood. “How was your afternoon?”

The boy crossed his arms.

“Great!” he spat. “Till now…”

Alfred chuckled and Bruce looked at him puzzled.

“It is going to get fixed, Master Richard, once we reach the Comet Mall. Have you ever visited?”

Dick turned his head towards the window watching the traffic and the lights of the semi-dark city. It was hardly 17:30 but darkness had already settled over Gotham.

“Yeah…” he said in a quiet voice. “We used to go all together every Christmas or on special occasions: we were ice skating with Brian in the rink with the elves and the silver snowflakes… He was pretty good in skating though so young…”

Bruce closed his eyes, the image of the small boy’s disfigured face piercing his brain: Brian’s only fault was that he was eight year old, had some similarities with him and the two first letters of his name were the same with Bruce’s: “Br”…

He felt Alfred’s worried glances and stared back reassuring but certainly not happy.

“I’m sure your little brother would have wanted you to move on, Master Richard” Alfred said touched. “Our loved ones who are gone want us to be happy: our happiness is theirs too…”

Dick didn’t change his head’s position; just crooked his mouth: words…

The Comet Mall was at the center of the Middletown: a huge round area with the buildings that housed over 1,000 stores, were built to shape an ellipsis surrounding a round square. There were ten floors of stores, cinemas, one ice skating rink, bowling, cafes, restaurants. Every day thousands of people went there to buy, eat or have fun.

The right and left wing ended up in front of the square forming a gigantic arch on top of which a sparkling, moving comet was washing with glitter dust the entrance. At both sides, two Santas danced and played music making the young children gather around gaping.

Alfred drove the car to the underground parking lot. Then he took the wheelchair from the trunk and opened the door for Bruce while Dick got out of the car slapping the door to Alfred’s glare of disapproval for his favorite Rolls’ abuse. The boy ran away from them to find Jason and his mother who waited near the Mall’s entrance.
Bruce shrugged to Alfred and chuckled seeing the butler brushing his car and leaving it behind grudgingly.

“I’m glad I managed to lift your spirits, sir” Alfred said lifting his eyebrows with dignity.

“I’m sorry, Alfred” he replied but he couldn’t get rid of his amusement.

The British smiled and leaned to put on Bruce’s head a woolen cap he had in his coat’s inner pocket.

“No not be sorry, sir” he said wrapping a long fluffy scarf around his master’s neck “your laughter is precious even when caused by my own misfortune…” he lolled his head on the side fixing the cap on Bruce’s head “and that will be of some help with avoiding much attention.”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“Mmm…I don’t think that arriving with the Rolls can be concealed with a scarf and a hat…”

Alfred just cast him a glance but didn’t comment and Bruce chuckled. But then as children’s sweet voices echoed closer singing Christmas songs he felt his heart clench and his eyes watering. He remembered that Christmas songs always brought a sweet melancholy to him but now it was like a heavy punch.

His mother’s kind, young face came in front of him; his father watching smiling as Martha were fixing the oversized blue and white hat with the deer’s horns on his head. She kissed the tip of his nose.

“What do you want Santa bring you, Bruce?” she asked cheerful.

She was squatting so they were on the same height; he must have been around 6 years old. Bruce didn’t remember what he had asked, he only remembered that she had laughed with her melodic laughter and his father came and took him in his arms to leave for the city, touching with his index finger playfully his small nose. He remembered the frozen wind brushing his face as they exited the Manor: the grounds around were all white and sparkled in the twilight as the night was coming. He had goggled at the beauty – always goggled at the snow.

This year hadn’t snowed…

“Master Bruce…” Alfred’s voice brought him back in front of the Mall’s wide entrance.

Hero was staring at him and Bruce grinned because Jason and his mother were there holding gold and silver balloons that several elves were giving to the visitors. He greeted them cordially and Jason gave him his golden balloon.

“Take that, dude: I don’t want it; it’s for kids!”

His mother cast him a glare and Jason shrugged.

“Wha’? Everyone knows that Todd isn’t a kid…” he scratched his head above his hoodie.

Bruce chuckled and took the balloon.

“Thanks, Jason!”

The boy caressed Hero’s head and Bruce looked at Ms. Todd.

“I’m sorry we bother you with this” he cast a sideways glance to Alfred who looked ahead as if not
hearing. “It’d be rather tiresome to imagine what every kid wants from Santa.”

The woman that was no older than 30 years old smiled.

“Not mention it, Mr. Wayne.”

“Bruce” he reminded her and she nodded.

“Bruce” she smiled shyly. “Ms. Evans used a system this year: the Haven’s staff gathered the letters the kids wrote to Santa and we put everything in an Excel file: so now we have in a simple catalog all the presents and the number of items.”

Bruce’s eyes shone impressed and he glanced at Alfred who winked.

“Very clever, Ms. Todd.”

She lifted her index finger smiling.

“Kate. And all the credit goes to Ms. Evans: it was her idea…now that she had the necessary amount of money she wanted everything to be perfect.”

“Right! Kate” he mimicked her smile. “I guess Santa Claus must have such a system to manage with millions of children.”

Dick snorted as they began moving towards the huge arch entrance of the Mall.

“There’s no Santa Claus!”

“No kiddin’!” Jason retorted sarcastic and rolled his eyes.

Bruce grinned and looked at Dick.

“But if he did I think that this would have been the best way to work.”

Bruce was happy to see Ms. Todd that healthy. He had seen pictures of her from past years when she was a drug addict and alcoholic: her face was gaunt and her eyes blank and with black bags under. Now her face had regained its natural, rosy color and her eyes shone happy.

The entrance though spacious was a bit crammed since it was late afternoon and most parents were out of work and free to bring their kids. Bruce actually was satisfied because among such crowd it’d be difficult to be distinguished.

The floor was tiled with glittering crème colored tiles and the arch that the two buildings formed was covered with dark green branches of mistletoe where silver snowflakes were perched and shone like diamonds under the Mall’s lights.

Bruce appreciated the fact that there wasn’t a stair and he didn’t need to use a ramp because doing this would force him to leave the coverage of the crowd. He lifted his eyes to see the logo of the Mall: the flying ball with the tail of multicolored stars as he remembered from his childhood.

For a moment he froze. The logo had changed. Now the comet was rapidly moving, ripping the dark sky of a giant screen; but this sky was what Bruce didn’t want to see. It was the polar sky with waves of neon light that changed from green to blue to red to purple…aurora borealis.

Bruce’s heart began beating fast; the frozen, clean air of the arctic brushing again his face as he was flying. Yet he wasn’t cold because the body that was keeping him airborne was hot and filled with
warm love like the eyes – blue topaz eyes – and the smile every time Clark looked at him to make sure that he was comfortable.

“I’m going to show you the aurora borealis every night till you get sick of it!”

He blinked to shake off the memory and felt the still visible marks on his body ache: his pelvis was again dead as ever but the part of his body that was healthy was still stiff where Superman had used his strength; however the worst pain was in his chest… Alfred looked at him frowned.

“Master Bruce, if you’re not feeling well, we can return to the Manor” he said quietly but Jason and his mother looked at them.

“I’m alright, Alfred” he said and it was a wonder how they heard him under all the fuss the kids were making and the Christmas songs.

As people walked through the arch they were washed with sparkling snowflakes – a compensation for the lack of snow this year. Bruce couldn’t help but goggle at the square in the middle of the towering building. It was exactly as he remembered it: a giant Christmas tree decorated only with silver-white glimmering glass balls and a big golden star with countless rays; a star that emanated light.

Two rows of angels in human height formed a wide corridor leading to the tree. White, silver and light blue Angels, dressed with long robes held trumpets and harps that emanated sweet melodies. The rows ended before a real size crèche. The Little Drummer Boy’s melody caressed Bruce’s ears and his eyes watered.

Alfred looked at him and he wiped his eyes hastily.

“It’s exactly as I remember it…” the youth told.

The British nodded.

“The owner changed, many renovations have taken place through the years but this stayed the same.”

Bruce pressed his lips and searched for Alfred’s hand to hold.

“I don’t know if I’m happy or sad about that, Alfred…”

The kind man grinned.

“You don’t have to know, Master Bruce…Our memories are most of the times bittersweet” he whispered and Bruce nodded and scratched Hero under the chin.

The boys had already used the rolling stairs to reach the first floor but Ms. Todd waited in front of the wide glass elevator. She just realized that the two men weren’t with them and craned her head to find them among the crowd of bodies and heads before the twenty feet tree and the flashes as people were photographed using the tree as background.

Alfred waved to her and hurried along with Bruce.

They visited almost every toy store of the mall; it was a blessing that the stores there covered every wish of the Haven’s children. Bruce thought that if he was still a child would have felt like being in a dream; he smiled seeing Jason and Dick getting lost between the abundance of toys. At last, Dick was relaxed interacting with Jason and even smiling gaping at the toys and playing with Hero who
rubbed at their feet. Probably, he let himself free believing that Bruce wasn’t seeing him absorbed in finding the toys the children asked.

They arranged with the Mall’s direction to deliver the gifts in the Haven the Christmas morning with a man dressed as Santa Claus – some members of the Haven staff would come to put labels on them with every child’s name.

Bruce cheered up knowing that these would give happiness to so many children and content as he was he turned to Dick.

“You need some clothes, Dick, and of course, you can choose the things you want for Christmas” he smiled to Jason “and you too, Jason.”

Dick’s relaxed face tensed and his eyes narrowed to Bruce’s disappointment. Every child-like carelessness and innocence was vanished.

“I don’t want anything bought with your money!” he spat and Bruce pressed his lips.

He took his wallet from the inside pocket of his long coat and showed the boy a handful of bills.

“Nice thing then I withdrew some money from your account” of course he didn’t but Dick didn’t need to know.

“Granny gave you access to my account?” he asked frowning. “This money is my father’s savings.”

Jason huffed and rolled his eyes.

“Man…”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’m your guardian, Dick. Your father would want you to use this money for some gifts” that account wasn’t from Dick’s father since the man lost it all due to rot investments Zucco suggested him; it was the fund Bruce had created for the boy and his granny. He would never tell that to Dick nor that the money he was holding wasn’t from his bank account.

“Fuck!” he spat. “Com’, Jay…”

Bruce pressed his lips and watched the boys leaving. Hero came to him, climbed on his lap and licked his chin for Bruce to caress him.

Alfred returned with Ms. Todd carrying some packages with LEGO and Playmobil to show to Bruce.

“The boys are going to the gadgets section” Ms. Todd said and Bruce smiled not wanting them to suspect what took place before.

“Master Bruce, we finally found the exact toys we couldn’t find till now: what do you think?”

He grinned and shrugged.

“I don’t know about new toys, Alfred: you, Ms. Todd and our boys can judge better. Mmm… Alfred…”

“Yes, sir?”
“I think we should make sure that as many children as possible get presents for the Christmas.”

Alfred smiled and his eyes filled with pride that made Bruce uncomfortable; so he looked at Hero to avoid that stare. Ms. Todd was also gaping.

“You’re very considerate, Bruce…But…” she blushed “what I’m saying? Of course you are.”

“Thank you, Kate” he said as Ms. Todd ticked her list with the presents to label that these were covered.

As they moved through the different stores, they came upon a pet shop and Bruce couldn’t resist. He bought some new toys for Hero and some snacks.

Dick seemed to have forgotten his bad mood and was twittering with Jason about the new game consoles they bought and Bruce was relieved that his ward finally managed to feel like a kid should.

Alfred smiled to his master and pointed to a cheerful store that sparkled from Christmas decorations.

“A Manor is desperate to be decorated” he said playful but stern at the same time.

Bruce huffed but grinned as Ms. Todd dragged the boys inside. Alfred stood beside Bruce and looked at him.

“Things seem to smoothen, Master Bruce…” he smiled.

“I hope so, Alfred.”

“Shall we?” he made an inviting gesture towards the store’s entrance.

Alfred arranged so as everything they bought would be delivered to the Manor: they couldn’t cram a seven feet tall Christmas tree, decorations, garments and lamps in the Rolls’ trunk… Perhaps, they could but it’d be a nightmare for Alfred. And as they came out, Bruce chuckled upon seeing the spectacle.

“What?!” Tony demanded looking himself affronted.

“Tony, it’s Christmas not Halloween! You decided to dress up as Hero?” Bruce couldn’t stop laughing and Tony hardly managed to keep his pissed expression.

“I don’t have to dress up as hero, I’m already Ironman…”

Bruce took Hero from the armpits and showed him to Tony.

“That Hero!”

The billionaire from Malibu wore a long, white, fur coat with fluffy lapels and a fitting fur hat.

“I hope that at least is not real fur…” Hero hissed following his Master’s frowning.

Tony rolled his eyes and let his head loll on the side as the boys began giggling too.

“Please, little guy, my environmental worries and charities are legendary” he raised his index. “And I don’t get the jeering…You know that furs are also a man’s cloth?”

Pepper hid her laughter behind her hand.
“And damn!” Tony exclaimed defeated. “It’s freezing cold! Christmas in Malibu are celebrated with surfing!”

Jason winked.

“Gotham has sea as well, ya can dive… oh, man, ya’re like those fat rappers!”

Tony snorted and glared at the boy with narrowed eyes.

“I like that little brat…” he winked.

“How did you find us?” Bruce asked. “That place is a labyrinth and with so many people…”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“And now you insult me, little guy” he pointed his thumbs to his chest. “I’m Tony –fucking-Stark: I’d be ashamed if I couldn’t find my best buddy in a Mall” Bruce smiled and Tony scratched his fur – artificial fur – hat “I’m starving, guys, and I’m sure you, too…”

“I’ve made reservations, Master Anthony and we have finished our list so we can go.”

“You won’t buy your presents, Tony?” Bruce asked his friend who was trotting beside him.

“Hehe!” he chuckled. “I’ve done that already, buddy; in high secrecy.”

The restaurant was at the tenth storey and gave a spectacular view of the city from the whole wall windows. Their table was in a corner right before the big, black tiled fireplace and although the place was warmed with airconditioning the flames inside added the sense of home.

The room was packed with families and couples that after their shopping decided to end their outing with a delicious meal. And Alfred was right: everything was great – food, wine and dessert.

“I wish Selina and Leslie were here” Bruce said.

“Leslie sends her kisses but she had shift at the clinic” Alfred replied. “However, we can repeat that another time with the whole gang.”

“Are you not going to take off your fur coat?” Pepper asked exasperated and amused Tony that was sitting opposite her right beside Bruce.

Tony brushed lustful the white fur of his sleeve.

“Are you kiddin’, babe? I had months to enjoy so much attention from people and being with the Person of the Year demands all my resourcefulness to not get obliterated.”

Bruce chuckled but Pepper snorted sipping her red wine.

“I think they are activists wondering whether it’s a real fur to throw you eggs…”

Tony lolled his head on the side and pouted arching his eyebrows smugly.

“I think you’re jealous, Peps: activists can discern immediately when a fur is artificial. Oh! I think babes admire the beast inside the fur…”

Pepper choked with her wine and Alfred offered her a handkerchief before he glanced at Tony.
“Definitely, Master Anthony! You’re right: you must remind people of a polar bear” Tony frowned. “Actually, as we entered the restaurant I noticed a young lady trying to comfort her toddler who was crying believing that a white bear wandered the Mall…”

Tony widened his eyes.

“Ouch!”

“Of course, I reassured the child that the bear was actually a human dressed in a funny looking coat.”

Everyone at the table burst in laughter, even Dick forgot his pissed expression and laughed carefree which Bruce noticed relieved. Hero who was eating from a bowl on the floor turned and looked at Tony and when his eyes met with the human’s they seemed so jeering to Tony that he hastened to take off his coat.

He popped his tongue to the kitten.

“You can be in your fur and be cute and get all the petting, huh?”

The kitten meowed under Bruce’s amused stare and returned to his food. Tony met Bruce’s eyes and lifted an eyebrow shaking his head.

“I think he pities me…”

Bruce pouted.

“He is a very compassionate kitten…”

Tony returned to his food and looked at the wall screen on the bar’s right, on the far opposite wall: they were showing the latest Victoria’s Secret Show and Tony slumped on his elbow resting his chin in his palm.

“I was there” he sighed “but they don’t show me” he lifted his eyes reminiscently and huffed. “I remember two years ago when Gisele’s turn had come and we were so busy…talking” he licked his lips looking at Pepper’s sparkling eyes “that the babe appeared in the Catwalk with my arms on…” he glanced at the boys “her shoulders, kids!” he rolled his eyes mock outraged “for who you’re taking me?”

Pepper cleared her throat and Ms. Todd laughed.

“Anyway” Tony inhaled deeply “that happening was the best and we draw all the cameras…”

“I dare to say, Master Anthony, that if you had worn this coat you’d have drawn all the cameras this year too…” Alfred chirped cocking an eyebrow.

A new round of laughter made Tony slap his cheeks and roll his eyes. Bruce leaned to his friend’s ear and Tony became absolutely solemn.

“We had a development concerning our mysterious items from LexLabs” he whispered.

Tony frowned and sipped from his wine.

“What happened?”

“Someone came to my office demanding his order without wanting to reveal anything about it.”
“Who was he?”

“A Brunno Mannheim.”

“Mmm…” Tony mumbled because he knew the name and readied to relay what he knew.

But then the show on the screen was stopped abruptly and the sign for the breaking news covered the screen along with the overwhelming music. The eyes of everyone in the restaurant fixed on the screen where a shaken newscaster greeted the viewers.

“We’re sorry to interrupt our current program but there’s an emergency in Chicago…After the joy for the returning of the stolen jewel named Ring of Flame, unfortunately this city deals with tragedy.”

Bruce now knew where Selina was… However, he frowned because Chicago was in his thoughts a lot lately because of the Arrow mystery and didn’t like this ‘coincidence’. Tony on the other hand was already half standing: Avengers should have been informed.

On the screen, people saw the shaking image of a building ready to collapse; the crowd in the street was screaming and yelling for help. In the central floor, almost a quarter of the floor was missing: shreds of glass were all over the place as well as metal and debris; smoke filled the sky and didn’t let the rescue teams approach from the helicopter that flew desperate to get access.

The howling of sirens from ambulances and patrol cars was nightmarish. There were trapped people inside and the few fire fighters who had managed to enter the space tried to help them: they had already brought some to the paramedics but another explosion trapped worse the rest and thwarted them from getting closer.

Bruce’s eyes became wild and Tony was ready to activate his armor and take off. But then cheers of relief stopped him and Bruce’s eyes sparkled from the same joy as always.

Superman rushed in the building and using his super speed and strength demolished the debris; fire fighters surged to take those inside and Superman was helping getting people down to the paramedics. Bruce watched without breathing as Superman said something to the fire fighters and they left: obviously the upper building was ready to collapse on the ‘wounded’ floor.

The Man of Steel turned to fly away as the last fire fighter was safe far from the building when something caught his attention and returned to the collapsing site – Bruce’s eyes widened and the restaurant fell silent. Superman returned to the edge of the gaping building with a small kid perched in his chest; people in the street clapped but a terrible howling made everyone gasp.

The building collapsed over Superman who held with one hand the ceiling since with the other hand he was grasping the crying girl who panicked was jolting her legs and hands to escape.

Bruce’s hands clenched into fists and his heart stopped beating; Tony was goggling and the entire hall was silent as Superman seemed unable to hold anymore.

“No…” Bruce whispered.

Suddenly, the collapsing ceiling was steady, in its right position and Superman had the chance to take the little girl down and return to stabilize the building, placing debris to fill the void.

The camera zoomed to the one who had saved Superman: Diana’s face was clenched in determination as she held the ceiling till Superman secured the building. When the rescue teams came back, Superman flew to reach Wonder Woman. They were both dust covered and tired but the hero
cupped her cheeks and kissed her passionately – the camera made a very close zoom and the people at the street wolf whistled.

Bruce gulped and he was happy that everyone in the restaurant was occupied staring at the screen and clapping as well because he felt all the blood leaving his face.

Superman turned to the people underneath and gifted them with his dazzling smile; his blue topaz eyes sparkled from happiness.

“She is my Star!” he said loudly for everyone to hear and Diana wrapped her arms around his neck and resumed their kiss.

Bruce’s eyes stayed frozen on the screen, expressionless, dead; his heart beating so slow as if sobbing – it felt like blood drops slithered inside his chest.

“May I call you Star? Your eyes are like star sapphires” a melodic voice said shyly but it echoed from so far that it hardly was heard.

Tony, Alfred and Pepper stared at him; Pepper biting her bottom lip. Everyone knew that Superman used to call Bruce ‘his Star’.

“At least, he was lucky to get away from Wayne!” Dick spat growling and Tony glared at him as people turned and looked at Bruce.

But the boy simply stood and ran out of the restaurant, Jason following him. Bruce turned his chair to go after them and Hero climbed from the chair to his lap; however upon reaching the exit flashes of cameras blinded him on a full onslaught.

“How do you feel being the Person of the Year?”

“A comment, Bruce!”

“You feel triumphant now?”

Bruce clenched his jaw and held Hero protectively because the kitten got wild with so many flashes and yells. He stared at the mass of reporters eager to pass them and find the boys.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please” Pepper’s voice came from behind him calm and confident as Tony took the handles and led the chair back inside. “Mr. Wayne, never denied you of any briefing so I believe that you owe him some privacy. And he, as always will thank you for your discretion and kindness with a detailed press release” she smiled. “For the time being, I appeal to your understanding to let him and the customers of this fine restaurant enjoy their meal.” She cocked her eyebrows. “Thank you” she chuckled as the Mall’s security showed them out.

“Master Bruce, I think you should better stay here” Alfred had come to Bruce and sat at the chair beside him. “Let’s continue our dinner and I’m sure the boys will come back.”

Ms. Todd looked uncomfortable.

“Jay is with him: he will take care of Dick; Jay always took care of me.”

Bruce nodded and smiled to her.

“Jason is a great kid, Kate; you should be proud of him…”

Then he pretended to be interested in his meal but as the time went on and the boys didn’t return he
every now and then stared at the entrance ready to rush out.

“Calm down, little guy…”

“Joker knows that Dick is my ward…” he whispered to Tony’s ear and closed his eyes. “I should have followed them right away.”

Tony could feel the agony of his friend; he stood.

“I’ll find them. Brats!” he mumbled furious crossing the door.

“What are ya tryin’ to do, man?” Jason asked exasperated lolling his head on the side.

He had caught up with Dick at the building’s rooftop, the part that was formatted like storage with carton boxes and broken chairs.

“It’s fuckin’ freezin’ up her’!”

Dick had his arms crossed and looked at the city; he turned to his friend.

“So go away!” he cocked his eyebrows challenging. “You’re buddies with him after all!” he spat.

Jason widened his eyes angry.

“I’m yar buddy, ya fool! But Wayne didna do anything wrong!”

“To you!” he gritted his teeth. “But to me has done too much! I lost my family because of him!”

“Man! He didna kill them! Joker did!”

“Because of Wayne! And now my granny disappeared and he keeps my uncle away, stopping him from seeing me.”

Jason closed his eyes and huffed.

“That Zucco guy is bad news, pal…I think you shoulda avoid him.”

Dick growled and turned his back to Jason, facing the city.

“I didn’t expect anything different…Mind your own business, Todd! If you want to be friends with him, do it! But don’t come to me playing the buddy” he snapped his head to him clenching his jaw. “Either you’re with me or him!”

Jason spat on the floor enraged.

“Ya can’t boss me around! I stay with ya because I care, ya dick!”

Dick blinked and shook his head.

“He brought me here to impress me with his money and his” he rolled his eyes “charities and dragged me to a fancy restaurant to play the family; to brag that he became the father of a poor orphan!”

Jason pouted.
“Bullshit, pal! He’s too young to be yar father…yar older brotha maybe; and I don’t think he planned all these…So what are ya tryin’ to do?”

Dick remembered his talk with Tony Zucco: he wasn’t sure he could trust Jay with this: with everything else yes, but not with this, because Jay didn’t like Dick’s uncle and he could tell everything to Wayne.

“Nothing! I just wanted to escape; to breathe some clean air without him polluting everything.”

Jason shook his head not totally convinced.

“Then let’s go inside; they’d be worried.”

Dick cocked his eyebrows.

“I doubt…and since when you care about the others’ worries?”

The younger boy frowned pissed but he didn’t say anything because they both saw Tony Stark marching towards them. His face was tense from anger but Dick looked at him challenging.

“He just wants to drive my buddy suffer from worry and expose him as an irresponsible guardian” Tony said to Jason and then looked at Dick who had crossed his arms “right?” he snarled.

The boy’s eyes were sparkling unfazed and Tony saw a faint smirk on his young face.

“Worry?” Dick snorted. “No way! He knows to fool even you, Stark! He didn’t give a shit about me: he just took my guardianship to advertize how good he are and to torture me!”

Tony was fuming and Jason was shaking his head: he loved Dick but his pal couldn’t honestly believe these, or could he?

“Listen, brat” Tony retorted. “My friend has just come out of an injury that almost took his life but his health is still really sensitive; he has a tough path of recovery ahead and he needs tranquility and rest: physical and emotional. And I won’t let a spoiled brat risk all these with his stupid and unreasonable hatred!”

Dick clenched his jaw.

“Then convince your buddy to quit from my guardianship for me to live with my uncle, my only relative!”

Tony’s mouth curved in honest puzzlement and detest: how could this boy hate so much?

“Bruce never quits even for his own good” he replied. “He promised to your grandmother to be your guardian and protect you and he won’t betray that promise. So you’d better accept the situation and behave yourself till your granny is back” he cocked his eyebrows for emphasis. “Cause if anything happens to Bruce because of you, you’ll have to do with me, comprendo?”

“Tony?”

Jason whistled uncomfortable seeing Bruce approaching and Tony closed his eyes sighing. He turned to his friend.

“You should have stayed there, Bruce; it’s freezing!”

“I’m fine, Tony; I just followed you…” he looked at the boys. “Are you alright, boys?”
Dick rushed to him.

“As you see…Maybe you should put a chain around my neck and drag me around with you” Bruce’s eyes narrowed “or put me in a cage in your basement as Falcone did to you” Bruce’s breath became pressed. “Because you’re like him!” he snapped and ran away.

Tony was clenching his fists but squatted seeing his friend’s eyes lowered and his breath still shallow. He rubbed his upper arms and Bruce looked him in the eyes like when he was a child and Tony was his savior.

“‘He doesn’t mean all these, Bruce…”

His smile was trembling but he nodded. Jason scratching his raven hair approached hesitantly.

“Sorry, dude” he mumbled. “He is unfair…”

“He feels alone, Jason and…being with the one he feels responsible for that it is too hard for him…I wish…” but Bruce didn’t continue under Tony’s worried stare. “Jason, please stay with him: Dick loves and needs you – he must not lose you, too…”

The boy nodded licking his lips and ran behind his friend.

Tony patted him.

“He’ll realize his mistake and the things you did for him and he’ll be sorry…”

Bruce shook his head and took his friend’s hand.

“I don’t want him to realize nor to be sorry – I want him safe and happy, Tony; he has already been through enough.” He rubbed his forehead “I understand how difficult it is for you to hear him talk like that but it’s okay, Tony: I know he is suffering so his words don’t affect me…”

Tony crooked his mouth.

“Yeah, sure…Let’s go to the others…I want to taste that Black Forest cake” he licked his lips. “Tell me: how you escaped Alfred to follow me?”

When Alfred entered the Manor with Dick nobody was at the salon.

They had decided that Alfred would take Jason and his mother to the apartment building they lived – well, two blocks before to not gain unwanted attention –; Dick with them. While Pepper and Tony would bring Bruce and Hero to the Manor.

Alfred’s joy for the evening and Master Bruce’s smiles became a heavy rock in his guts. As soon as they entered the Manor, Dick said goodnight and went to his room; Alfred collapsed in an armchair.

Tony came across Dick at the stairs but didn’t say anything and headed to Alfred who looked at him.

“Is Master Bruce alright?”

Tony smiled and nodded.

“Of course. He was exhausted, went immediately to his bedroom, had a shower and now he is sleeping like a baby.”
“Are you sure, Master Anthony? That he is at the Master’s bedroom?”

Tony lolled his head on the side.

“I was there; I scanned his vitals. He is sleeping like a baby after I supervised him taking his pills. Hero with him.”

Alfred huffed.

“I believed that an outing like this would do him some good but I’ve made things worse…”

Tony frowned and jumped to the sofa right beside the older man. He leaned to him.

“What are you talking about, Al? He might be exhausted but he loved everything: you saw how he was smiling. And that shine in his eyes… I tell you, Al: Bruce had a great time despite the… happenings that would have happened even in the Manor. I think that overall the evening was… okay. Your idea was excellent!” he rubbed the butler’s upper arms.

The British grinned.

“Thank you, Master Anthony. Did he say anything for…Superman?”

Tony growled and yanked his head backwards.

“That asshole alien! Ugh!” he slapped his cheeks but then calmed down. “You know, Bruce: he was speaking about anything else but this…He is tough, our boy.”

Alfred nodded and pressed his lips.

“After those horrible eighteen years, I want Master Bruce’s first Christmas to be special and happy but” he sighed “I dread that people won’t leave him alone.”

Tony licked his lips.

“We won’t let them, Al: I swear. And despite what bad people say for me, when swearing something it’s better than signing a contract.”

Alfred smiled.

“Thank you, Master Anthony; with your help I know that everything will be fine.”

Bruce’s sleep was deep and restful though filled with Superman kissing Vivian, star sapphires, a boy’s hand holding his calling him ‘father’, hundreds of kids opening their gifts with smiles on their faces, icebergs in the polar landscape, aurora borealis and the glazing pyramid of the Fortress piercing the sky. Bitterness and joy were rapidly replacing each other but his body felt relaxed.

As Bruce felt the first light penetrating the heavy curtains of his room he knew that someone was there and opened his eyes eager.

“Selina?!” he exclaimed and hugged the young woman who was sitting on the mattress.

She kissed his cheeks and smirked.

“It was about time, sweetie; I know it’s Saturday but I’m starving and I didn’t want to eat breakfast
without you. Mmm…I hope you don’t mind I came through your window? It’s more romantic!”

The Manor had a top security system but this was Selina.

“How?” he asked but then shook his head. “Never mind…I missed you, Sel – I thought you had gone for holidays somewhere with Steve.”

She frowned and tapped his nose.

“And lose my boy’s first free Christmas?”

Bruce smirked.

“And then I heard that the stolen Ring of Flame was returned to Chicago’s police by someone unknown and I figured where you were…”

She pouted.

“Yeah…it was quite obvious, huh?” she said playfully.

“I’m glad to see you in high spirits though last night Chicago had troubles…”

Selina understood: not only troubles…She had seen Superman kissing Wonder Bitch in public and from Bruce’s eyes, her friend had seen them too. And that made her joy for what she did greater.

Selina jolted to her feet and show Bruce two huge bags with which Hero was playing.

“What are these?”

“I promised to help decorate and from what I saw you can’t manage without the Cat. Great! I’m in the mood to create artistic!” she took Hero and held him dancing in the room.

Bruce laughed.

“So Chicago was that good?”

She hugged the kitten and jump to the bed.

“Uhu! Let me begin…”
Chapter 48

Catwoman was standing on a rooftop overlooking Chicago that spread underneath glorious with its thousands different sparkling lights and noisy – vibrant since this was the night's prime time.

Her arms were crossed over the chest and her legs spread as she stood firmly on the cement. She was watching the foreign city and her mind was racing: she was satisfied and angry at the same time – sad and angry so much so that her fists clenched unconsciously and her emerald eyes sparkled.

Stealing the stolen jewel was easier than she had expected...okay, it was challenging – otherwise, Selina would be disappointed – but Gotham always provided with far more entertaining tasks. Her ‘acquaintances’ had informed her about the big deal: a filthy rich guy from those who pose as charitable and dignified in social events; he had the habit to hire people to steal for him legendary jewels he admired in museums and private collections. Something like Falcone.

His latest pray was the Ring of Flame: a gorgeous ring with the rarest ruby in the world. Well, Catwoman could confirm that this ruby was indeed unique...She sighed and her breath formed a small cloud into the chilly sky. The Ring belonged to the National Museum of Delhi and the legend had it that Price Gautama, more known as the Buddha, was wearing it on his pinky...

All in all, the filthy rich guy hired some experts to do the job and paid them handsomely to wear it in his own pinky. She cocked an eyebrow: too bad she was informed about that...And too bad she was with the good guys because she returned the Ring to the police...

The guy had a huge penthouse in the Downtown and his security system was tricky – not to mention, the gorillas that guarded the place: guarded because in his bedroom was placed the treasure dove with his fabulous collection.

She smirked: after her raid he’d be much poorer because she emptied that treasury that was – how authentic! – hidden behind a Picasso painting on the wall opposite the king size bed. Catwoman had watched the penthouse some days using the wondrous glasses Bruce had given her back in the summer to watch Luthor’s suit; and of course the macho guy believing that nobody could see through the special glass of the windows felt free to open the treasury to fondle his gems as if expecting a genie to pop out.

The Police announced that they had the Ring in their hands and other missing treasures as well which they would disclose later.

It was easy for her to pass the thugs once she knew their movements and even easier to empty a ‘high security’ treasury when you watched the owner open it using his thumb’s fingertip.

All in all, she slipped in and out easy like a cat and she would have liked to see the man’s face when hearing on the news that the Ring ‘flew’ along with the other caged birds.

“The guy is really arrogant” she rolled her eyes exasperated. “Who uses thumb’s fingertip to his treasury?” she pouted. “It’s outdated and stupid...especially, when you have a special pounder that once applied to the receptor reforms the fingertip and then you use a special tape…” she looked at Bruce’s intrigued eyes and frowned.

She shook her index finger.

“No more…These are professional secrets that shouldn’t be disclosed to the uninitiated” she said
mocking the solemn way of cults’ priests.

Bruce chuckled and put his robe waiting the continuation; Hero left the bags and climbed on the mattress purring.

Selina yanked her head and huffed closing her eyes.

“Ugh! You can’t imagine how tempting was to keep those beautiful, unique jewels…and how difficult was to give them to the cops!” she looked mock insulted at Bruce who was grinning. “Not breaking and entering to the Police Headquarters, please! But place them on the Captain’s office” she closed her eyes and shook her head. “My hand was trembling and didn’t want to obey! Thinking the ungentle hands of the cops holding these masterpieces…Pfff!”

Now Bruce was laughing and Selina sighed.

“But…I finally won myself and left my hard earned treasure…”

Bruce snorted.

“Not so ‘hard earned’ by your sayings…” he cocked an eyebrow and Selina crooked her mouth and rolled her eyes.

“Yeah…” she pouted but then smiled because she had made Bruce laugh.

“Well?” Bruce urged her widening his eyes and Hero did the same making Selina brush his head.

She heard a soft sound and she knew that someone landed behind her; someone she loathed…Catwoman clenched her jaw but didn’t turn: in her mind’s eyes she saw again Bruce’s sad eyes the day she founded him in the greenhouse after the betrayal; his brave effort to make his fake smile seem real to not sadden her and his loved ones.

Soft footsteps like feet that barely touched the cement approached her.

“A person whom I didn’t expect to find in Chicago…” that voice was so unbearable to hear…“Of course, you would come to…” a slight amusement “avenge your friend’s ‘betrayal’…”

She turned swiftly to face him; her eyes more frozen than the weather, her teeth bare.

“Don’t flatter yourself, handsome” she snorted. ‘I didn’t come here for you…” her eyes flashed like thunders.

Superman crossed his arms and walked closer.

“You are telling me that you don’t want to make me suffer for dumping Bruce?”

She smirked and her pearly white teeth flashed.

“Dumping him?” she sniggered. “Bruce dumped you, not the other way around…” she said slyly.

His face darkened; clearly he didn’t like to be reminded of that. However, realizing Selina’s satisfied smirk he smiled.

“So you’re not carrying a Kryptonite dagger like Stark to stab me?”

Catwoman shook her head and then stabbed him with something green that wasn’t Kryptonite but was more acid: her emerald eyes.
“I could…and it’d be a small punishment for you” her eyes were lost for a moment and then she gritted her teeth. “But you don’t worth it…” she said curling her lips in disgust.

Superman frowned; his eidetic memory played before his mind’s eyes that night in Gotham that Selina shot Chill killing him.

“Chill was worthy and I’m not?” he demanded chuckling but he felt insulted being considered lower than that monster.

Catwoman yanked her head rolling her eyes.

“You wonder? Are you that stupid? You’re worse than Chill, Superman!” she saw him being shocked from that. “He was torturing Bruce for all his life but unlike you he didn’t make him open his heart only to butcher that precious heart!” she narrowed her wild eyes. “You’re more cruel than Chill because he never gave Bruce happiness only to push him to the abyss afterwards!”

Superman’s face became pale and his eyebrows knitted together.

“How is he?” he asked in a throaty voice.

Catwoman snorted.

“You ask if the wounds you inflicted him after he trusted you with his body have healed?”

Superman’s eyelids seemed unable to stay still: he remembered that night…the violent way he had fucked Bruce – mercilessly…But he didn’t believe that Bruce would have told to anyone, even to someone like Selina who was more than a sister to him.

She regarded him appalled and pursed her lips.

“No, he didn’t tell me anything – yeah, it’s that easy to figure what you’re thinking; he’s still protecting you…But I know when Bruce is in pain: I can read his eyes, his face, even though he knows how to pretend. You should be ashamed of yourself!” she lolled her head on the side and pointed her hand to him cocking an eyebrow. “Look whom people consider their protector!” she let her arm fall and slapped her thigh “I don’t want to waste even my saliva to spit your face!”

“Superman, how do you allow her to speak to you like this?!” another pair of feet landed and marched to Superman’s side.

Catwoman regarded her with narrowed still eyes like a cat that lurks the mouse; her mouth curved in a smirk that made Wonder Woman fume.

“Who is she?” she demanded searching Superman’s expressionless eyes. “She definitely is a scum: a burglar or…whatever” she turned her malicious eyes to Catwoman “a crazy bitch judging by her outfit!” she spat.

But she had to swallow her poison.

“Aaargh!” the Amazon didn’t manage to muffle her scream of shock and pain causing Selina’s radiant, broad grin.

While Diana was demanding answers from Superman about Catwoman’s identity and he was looking at her, Selina had prepared herself and when Wonder Woman turned to sneer at her, Catwoman’s whip lashed the Amazon’s face.
Selina with a swift movement twitched her whip ripping the air and hooked it at the opposite fire escape, launching herself away from the rooftop. She was no fool: she knew that Superman’s bimbo surpassed her in strength and with the alien’s help, she might had to put much of a fight to escape… and she was bored of those two: she already felt dirty only by being in the same space.

The Amazon clenched her jaw, ground her teeth and let the blood flow from her wounded cheek, Superman shocked held her shoulders.

As she gathered her whip in a circle, Catwoman couldn’t hold back – and why not? She sniggered loudly knowing that both would hear her. So she rooted her legs on the opposite rooftop and gazed at the ridiculous sight of those two.

“Catwoman, you Wonder Bitch! When someone asks you who bitch-whipped, this is the name you’d say!” she shrugged. “After all it suits you, perfectly! So long, suckers! Oh! Make another porn: it’s a nice rooftop!”

She jolted to the air and with somersaults that even Superman’s eyes hardly caught she distanced herself. The Amazon’s growl of frustration the last thing she heard of them.

Bruce placed his hands on her shoulders; his eyes were solemn despite the fact Selina was chuckling recounting the incident. Of course, she didn’t relay every part of the dialogue that had to do with Bruce’s suffering.

“What?” she asked. “Why aren’t you laughing?”

“It was dangerous, Sel” she rolled her eyes – of course, it was but that made it more fun. “I’m almost sure that she is an impostor and we don’t know what she is capable of. And Superman is under her influence so although he remains good” now Selina huffed exasperated “we can’t be sure how he will react” he caressed her cheek. “You shouldn’t have picked up a fight with both of them…”

She smiled.

“You don’t have to worry about your girl, sweetie…The Cat is tougher than both of them together and…it wasn’t my fault” she pouted like a school kid being reprimanded and Bruce chuckled “she started first and you know me: I can’t say no to a challenge, especially from that bitch!”

“At least, we learnt one thing: she isn’t invulnerable and there’s no need something a la Kryptonite to fight her.”

Selina frowned.

“You still want to save him? After what he did last night…after what he said?!?” she shook her head. “I say: let her do whatever she wants with the Super-asshole!”

Bruce lowered his eyes.

“We need to be prepared for everything, Sel: we don’t know what is hiding behind her and the pattern that began forming isn’t good at all…Wait…” he frowned “how do you know…” he grinned and cocked his eyebrows “you spoke with Alfred.”

Selina brushed her nose uncomfortable and scratched Hero’s head.

“I suppose…Well, of course, your bedroom’s security is Catwoman proof – we worked with Tony for that and I wouldn’t leave any holes for cats or ‘mice’…So, yes…” she sucked her lips “I knocked the door and our good Alfred opened and…he told me…I’m sorry, Bruce.”
Bruce curved his mouth to pretend indifference but Selina’s eyes that bore into his left him no doubt that she saw through him.

“Don’t be sad for me, Sel; it’s okay” he smiled. “To tell you the truth, every time I heard him calling me that way…, I mean ‘Star’…” he even now blushed and Selina caressed the pink over his cheeks “I felt that it didn’t fit me” he chuckled. “It was too bright for me, you know?” he patted the back of her palms.

“Nothing is too bright for you, Bruce” she said serious. “You shadow every star” he grinned. “You’re the only one I know that deserves to be called ‘star’.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Then you’re the moon: you know, like the evening star that accompanies the moon? We belong together” he winked. “Don’t tell me Captain America was in Chicago with you?” he decided to change the subject.

Selina rolled her eyes.

“No, he had some work with the US army – I didn’t follow exactly what – and he went to Washington. So I had some days off to manage my affairs. But he’ll return for the holidays.”

Bruce shook his head.

“You won’t tell him that you are the Catwoman?” he asked serious and Selina licked her lips.

“I’m not ready to do that, sweetie…” she leaned to his ear. “I love my secrets!” she whispered.

Hero rubbed his head to her upper arm causing her smile.

“I think that he’ll be impressed learning what you have done: how you helped in Falcone’s downfall – your bravery” Bruce remarked. “How you’re taking the stolen jewels and return them to their rightful owners…He’ll be proud of you as much as I am, Sel…”

She touched her forehead to Bruce’s.

“When I hear your voice, sweetie, I’m so relaxed; the world seems a better place. Even in those dark years, being with you made me feel…safe” she chuckled and jolted from the bed Hero following her.

“During my staying at Chicago I made my investigation on that Arrow guy.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side grinning.

“I was sure…” Selina would have searched what troubled her friend even while he told her there was no need.

Selina clutched her hips with both hands.

“What? You know I like mixing business with pleasure… Well, my friends, the little rats of Chicago…”

Bruce snorted.

“A cat having friendship with rats?” he cocked his eyebrows.

Selina answered lifting her eyebrows as well.
“See Garfield…Anyway, they knew about the incident you read in Police’s reports but nothing more: there’s no Arrow vigilante in Chicago.”

Bruce nodded crooking his mouth in a smirk.

“I knew it! He is playing with me, Sel.”

“With Bruce Wayne or Batman? And why?”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“I think with both…As for the reason…” he inhaled. “I don’t know but I generally don’t believe in coincidences.”

Selina frowned.

“Meaning?”

Bruce pressed his lips and shook his head.

“We’ll see…Now, I need to have a shower and get downstairs for breakfast: you and Hero are starving, right?”

Selina took Hero from the floor.

“And Alfred can’t wait for us to start decorating the Manor!”

Bruce lolled his head on the side sighing.

“Jason is already here – the little rascal came with his bike; and” she said teasingly “we will decorate the garden too…” she shook her index finger to him warningly. “This Manor is happy to have its rightful owner back and we will help her show it!”

She pranced all way to the door, opened and turned again to her friend; her ponytail lashing the air.

“Don’t be late!”

Superman was flying. But he felt it too difficult to stay airborne and it shouldn’t be like this: flying was the easiest thing for him. There was a dread in him, a dread so unfamiliar to the Man of Steel; a dread that he knew it didn’t have to do with falling from the sky. Besides, where was he to fall?

Finally, what was around him registered: darkness, the sky was dark without any cloud or star or the moon or…anything. He frowned because he gradually realized that he wasn’t floating in the sky: there was no air, no smell, no…no…anything. He used his long distance sight to see underneath hoping to see the familiar landscape of human cities or country side but as the lack of any sound already had told him there was nothing…

And this, this darkness that surrounded him wasn’t the sky, wasn’t even the universe…His dread became pure terror when he realized the truth: he was floating into nothingness. And the nothingness was gripping his insides like invisible Kryptonite pinchers…He felt hopeless, desperate, weak, helpless, lost, in agony…His face was drenched in sweat and all over his body the same sweat had frozen not only from the coldness of his surroundings but also from the coldness of his own heart that now beat fast and loud making his breaths pants…
He knew that he wasn’t to die but what the use of being alive? Floating in an endless…nothing? He wondered where his loved ones were: his mother, Diana, Lois, Jimmy… Suddenly, in his mind an old nightmare emerged: he was floating in the universe holding someone in his arms. Someone dead – someone for whom now he didn’t care but months ago was his entire life…and his death was enough to choke him into the nothingness.

Superman for the first time in his life felt panic; he was all alone in the darkness, in nothingness and he could feel that nothingness slowly crawled inside him freezing his insides; freezing his feelings, eliminating them. He was lost; he was the sole existence in non-existence and nothingness was swallowing him like it probably swallowed all his loved ones, the entire world.

He didn’t know what to do; he didn’t know if it was worthy to do anything or just let the coldness conquer him and turn him into nothing. The agony hurt him – the panic, the doubt, the ignorance… Superman closed his face in his palms and screamed but his voice wasn’t heard because around him was nothing and his voice was nothing too. His heart was beating frantically and he could hear it drumming inside his skull; he was slowly put out like a fire… And the worst was that he didn’t feel any mood to fight, like he was already dry, drenched: a speck of nothing in the infinity of nothingness…

“No!!” he cried inside his palms and he couldn’t understand why he did that since no sound was created.

And then suddenly something slipped through his fingers; something…warm in all this cold. He frowned and opened his eyes still keeping his palms over his face as if he was scared…and he was scared. There was light playing with his fingers and his eyes which now began regaining their life.

There was light, warmth…there was still hope! He jerked his hands away and looked around him to find the source. His eyes bulged with awe.

It was a star far away…so far that it seemed small, tiny but its warmth and light reached him even through such a distance. A beautiful star: he knew that because its light was warming his cold face and restoring the life inside him; his heart was beating fast but it was pleasant because it was the heartbeat of joy, of hope.

He felt that this faraway star had pitied him and reached him to show the path; and Superman felt trust, faith to that star, his hope for living again…

His fist clenched and ripped the nothingness without him even realizing as if the star drew his body, his every molecule; he was flying though it was the most difficult thing in his life. The nothingness felt like sprouting branches that wrapped around his legs and arms to thwart him from reaching his beautiful star. But he clenched his jaw and gritted his teeth because now he found it nothing would keep him apart from that star – even nothingness itself.

The light became even brighter as he approached and the warmth numbed his body pleasantly – oh! So pleasantly…- his entire existence; hope was reborn inside him, despair dissolved; a big smile brightened his face.

He was now washed by the light; his body refreshed, recharged. A thought crossed his mind warning him to not approach more because he’d reach the core and perhaps that was dangerous. But he didn’t care: he wanted to dive in that light, in that warmth, in that safety – he was peaceful there, he was safe there…Nothingness, darkness couldn’t reach him – couldn’t get him.

Superman slowed down because he didn’t want to hurt the star and walked carefully, shyly to the
core...to the source of the light, to his salvation.

He brought his palm over his eyes because the light was blinding but he didn’t mind even if he felt as if the star didn’t want him to get closer. Superman’s eyes widened.

There was a human form in the core of all this light, of all this warmth, of all this hope and safety; he walked closer without breathing to not startle the human-like star and ran away from him.

It had its back turned to him and its head was slightly bent. Superman’s heart jerked wanting to leave his chest because he knew that back, that hair, that perfume so well...

The star heard his footsteps although it must already have known his presence. It slowly began turning to him and Superman stopped breathing: the light all of a sudden blinded him but he still could see sapphire blue and two sparkling emerald stars in the middle...there were so sad but at the same time there was so much love in there...Two eyes: the most beautiful eyes he ever saw.

"Every Kryptonian had a lucky crystal...Yours was a Kryptonite, the rarest kind: sapphire blue with emerald light in the core..." Jor El’s solemn voice echoed.

"My lucky Kryptonites..." he whispered awed and the star became a human. A bruised human whose lips were swollen and bit hard...And Superman was the one who did that damage and more...But Bruce was there staring at him with dignity and...love...

Superman took off towards him because he couldn’t wait and walking was too slow: he needed to apologize. Now that he had found again the light – his star – he wouldn’t lose it again – he wouldn’t lose him again.

But then Bruce looked him sad and Superman felt shaking and being taken away...

"Kal! Kal!"

He opened his eyes and saw Diana’s worried face over him; her cheek had still the lash Selina did to her last night.

"A nightmare, my dear..." he muttered breathing heavily wanting to chase away the fastest what he saw.

Diana frowned.

"I didn’t know you see nightmares too?" she asked cocking an eyebrow.

He chuckled.

"Sometimes..." he caressed carefully the lash covering half her cheek. "Does it hurt? It doesn’t seem to heal fast."

She snorted, her raven hair brushing his naked chest.

"I don’t mind pain!" she said smugly. "And I might be a goddess but I heal at normal speed..." she dragged her finger to the scar the Blade of Justice had left on his upper arm "but it seems that some times that happens to you too."

"Yeah..." he mumbled.

Bruce had done him that scar. Bruce...He remembered the dream, Bruce being the bright, warm star that saved him from the nothingness. The feelings he experienced when he saw him... He snapped
his head to dissolve everything the dream left behind; how sad and full of love those eyes were… And that Bruce was the star that showed him the way…

He growled inside. No, Bruce kicked him out; he stabbed him. Superman didn’t need him: he was happy with Diana, she was his real love.

“Kal, what’s the matter?” she asked touching her rich lips to his chest causing goosebumps to his spine.

No, the incident with Selina was to be blamed. Superman caressed Diana’s naked back and she raised her head looking him with sparkling eyes. He cupped her face with both hands and sucked her lips in a passionate kiss that she followed with all her strength.

“Nothing, Diana…Nonsense of a sleeping mind. Last night’s incident must have affected me.”

“You should have not stopped me following her…” she growled. “But I’ll find her…”

Superman wrapped his arms around her and yanked his head.

“I don’t want to waste even my saliva to spit your face!” Selina’s voice echoed from last night. But as Diana was sucking his neck and her fingers aroused his groin Superman couldn’t find anything that he should be ashamed of.

Bruce was watching with the corner of his eyes the boys placing the strings of tiny white light bulbs to the bushes that were planted symmetrically to the grounds. They were plants that didn’t drop their leaves during the winter and would give a spectacular sight the night.

Selina was perched on the pine tree at the right side of the Manor’s front wrapping light strings to the branches and Bruce was giving her new strings. They had already decorated the bush-sized firs that were fencing both sides of the drive line. Hero was running around excited to be outside and sniffed the bushes.

Tony and Pepper had some urgent meeting but they promised to be back for the inside decoration. Alfred was walking around giving instructions; of course, he had taken care to have the youths dress warmly because it was another cold day. His eyes every now and then travelled to his young master sucking every smile Bruce sent to Selina and Hero.

Bruce glanced at the sky that was the milky white color that preluded snow but no snowflake fell… Bruce shrugged: what’s the difference? He might have engaged in decorations and was smiling yet he only did that for his loved ones; he didn’t feel anything and as a matter of fact he’d prefer to be in the cave searching for Mannheim; he couldn’t stop thinking about the strange man and what his mysterious collaboration with Luthor might mean.

They managed to finish with the decorations around eleven o’clock which was just right since Dick’s training for the Saturday was scheduled for the morning. So Alfred drove the boys to the city; also, he had some groceries to buy.

Bruce and Selina with Tony who in the mean time had returned to the Manor settled in the study where Bruce opened his Cosmos tablet searching information about Mannheim.

Tony stood above him with disapproval all over his face.
“You should be having fun and resting; I’ll tell everything to Alfred when he comes back.”

Selina who was sitting on the shining desk snorted and Bruce looked sideways at Tony.

“You won’t do that, Tony… You always protected me in my mischief…”

Tony smiled tenderly and then ruffled his hair.

“They weren’t that many… Mine were more…”

“I have to do some work before Alfred returns with the boys and Ms. Todd. And I have to solve Mannheim’s mystery…”

Tony sat at the sofa next to him.

“The man is a riddle. I have heard his name some times in business circuits but I saw him only a couple of times and that for a couple of minutes as if he did it just to show that he really exists. Nobody knows much about his activities but he is very rich and he has a grandiose Mansion outside Metropolis.”

Bruce was reading from his screen.

“And now we know that he has deals with Luthor – the shadiest field of LexCorp: LexLabs. Also, he is desperate to take what he ordered to Luthor” he cocked his eyebrows. “Our peculiar items must have something to do with that…”

Tony frowned.

“Then he is also related with the raids at the LexLabs?”

Bruce raised his head and looked at him.

“That remains to be seen…” he frowned regarding Tony’s clothes that were his usual perfect stylistic choices. “Hm… I see you got over your dressing crisis?” he asked teasingly and Selina chuckled to Tony’s glare. “Or it’s the hunting time of the year?”

Tony snapped his head at Bruce.

“You’re jealous I stole the show from the Person of the Year last night” he cocked his eyebrows and Bruce smiled.

“I know you did it to cheer me up, Tony” he patted his friend’s back. “Thank you…” he said touched but then choked from a laughing fit. “But next time choose something that won’t scare toddlers…”

Selina giggled and unable to resist to Hero who was rolling on the floor she kneeled by him and caressed his belly making him twitch his paws and grab her wrist mock biting her.

The ring of the incoming call startled everyone; the number was unknown but in a couple of seconds the tablet’s system discovered the ID: Oliver Queen.

Bruce huffed: he had neglected the matter of their meeting; Tony crooked his mouth.

“Don’t answer it” he could discern Bruce’s upset.

“He is right” Selina agreed; she had experienced how pressing this man was.
Bruce shook his head.

“I must gather the information I want and Queen might be useful” he touched the choice for answering. “Hello, Mr….” but then he remembered the man’s request “Oliver, how are you?”

“You saved it, Bruce…” the man said smugly a slight chuckle in his voice. “And now I hear you, I’m fine.”

The call was in the dialer so Selina hearing that rolled her eyes while Tony pouted.

“And you, my young friend?”

“Fine, thanks. Um…, Oliver, about the dinner, I’m sorry…”

The man’s sadness was in a strange way discernible even through the distance.

“You’re cancelling?”

“No just” he huffed. “My days were too busy and I…I neglected to make reservations…So if you can’t wait I understand.”

Now Queen laughed in his smug way but his relief was clear.

“C’mon, Bruce! That was all? Do not worry about that. I came to love Gotham and my staying here so I can wait; I wouldn’t miss the chance to have a dinner with you and discuss many interesting things…For a moment, I dreaded that you lost your interest in my friendship.”

“Not at all, Oliver. However, maybe it’d be better if we have that dinner at the Manor because I don’t know if I’ll be able to make reservation soon…it’s the season, you see…”

Queen chuckled.

“Do not worry, my young friend. I bet that Mr. Cobblepot wouldn’t want to lose the perfect advertising of having the Person of the Year at his roof garden restaurant.”

Bruce stared at his friends who widened their eyes in unison.

“Okay, Oliver. I’ll try and I’ll get in touch to inform you.”

“I’ll be anxiously waiting, Bruce.”

Tony shook his head after Bruce ended the call.

“Wow! He is something and that comes from me who knows about pressure…” he took in Selina’s amused stare and cleared his throat. “Being pressed of course not pressing…Oh! You don’t know how pressing those super models can get to have by body…”

Selina grabbed a pillow from the armchair and threw it to him. Bruce smiled but deep inside he was wondering what this mysterious man really wanted from him.

Zucco was waiting for his nephew hidden behind the corner that led to the main training hall. When he saw the boy coming out of the showers and heading to the hall, he whistled to catch his attention.

Dick, his backpack on the shoulder, frowned and hesitated to go there but when his uncle showed
himself the boy ran to him happy.

“Why are you hiding, Tony?” the boy asked exasperated after he hugged his uncle. “We can go to the cafeteria.”

“Better we do not…”

Dick’s eyes widened.

“Wayne made a fuss? He dared to threaten you?”

Zucco smiled.

“No, champ” he shook his head. “I don’t think he’d dare that; I just don’t want people seeing us talking: Wayne has his spies everywhere. And we don’t want him to suspect our plan, do we?”

Dick nodded.

“You’re right. Wayne and his lady friend were talking to Jeffrey a few days ago.”

Zucco pressed his lips.

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t expect anything better from Jeff” he sighed. “You see, it’d be a shame if our plan was revealed now that things started rolling.”

“Really?” Dick’s eyes widened excited.

Zucco smiled, his eyes glimmering gleefully.

“He took you to the Mall yesterday, huh? And you said some things to him, right?”

Dick nodded.

“How do you know?”

“I wouldn’t let my nephew out of my sight, would I? I couldn’t approach much but I heard some gossip about the incident…that you rushed out of the restaurant and they looked for you.”

“You think it worked?”

“It was a good start, champ: it certainly did an impression. Keep up the good work and we’ll get what we want. Don’t tell me he punished you…” he said frowning holding the boy’s shoulders.

Dick smirked.

“Nah! He wants to play the good, understanding guy…Today we decorated the garden of the Manor and the great salon…can you believe that granny gave him access to the account with my father’s savings?”

Zucco smirked.

“I had a hunch…”

“Anyway…Alfred will come to get me back to decorate the Christmas tree” he rolled his eyes. “I wish I could do this with granny or you!”

Zucco patted his shoulder.
“Patience, Dick: we’ll be together in the end. Rebecca can’t wait to meet you.”

“Rebecca?”

“My wife.”

“You’re married?”

Zucco laughed.

“Of course and when I’ll get your guardianship we’ll be like a family.”

Dick sighed.

“This is the only thought that gives me strength to bear all this…The only good thing about this year’s Christmas is that at 27th of December the national team will be here for a charity gala.”

Zucco frowned; obviously, he didn’t know.

“I haven’t heard anything” he said hiding his puzzlement.

“Jeffrey told me: it’ll be officially announced soon but the preparations have started days ago: isn’t every day that the US national team comes to Gotham! And we would have the chance to perform side by side!”

The older man didn’t seem to share the boy’s enthusiasm.

“Breizic will come too, huh?” he asked darkened and Dick noticed.

“My father’s ex trainer?”

“Yeah…he works now in the National Federation…”

The boy shrugged.

“Then I guess he’ll come too…Oh! That’ll be great! I want to meet people that knew my father…and you two will have so many things to talk about…Remember the good old days!”

Zucco pursed his lips thoughtful.

“Yeah…I suppose…”

Dick looked at his wristwatch and gave a peck to his uncle’s cheek.

“Don’t stop coming to see me, Tony” he pleaded. “Now I have to go: the butler must be here and I don’t want him come inside to look for me. See ya!”

“I can’t wait, champ!” he smiled to the boy but his smile vanished as soon as Dick turned the corner.

He didn’t like that Breizic was returning to Gotham even for a gala. And he didn’t like that sudden gala…Could someone be pulling the strings and if so: who could suspect his plans?

The van of the Mall stopped outside the Manor and the driver with another employee brought the tree and the boxes with the ornaments inside. Alfred gave them a generous tip thanking them and
after they left, Jason dragged Dick to unwrap the stuff, Hero at their heels.

“Young Masters, I appreciate your eagerness to help me carry all these things to the salon” Alfred said poised and gestured to the boys to grab the things and go.

Tony was sprawled on the high backed armchair and Bruce was reading from Tony’s StarkStell tablet because he didn’t want Dick to see the Cosmos tablet and realize that it was Bruce’s present the tablet the boy had. Eventually, Dick would find out but Bruce wanted to postpone it.

Selina was eating the fresh cooked cinnamon biscuits and Pepper was pacing the salon speaking through her Bluetooth to some obstinate associate who needed some effort to understand simple things. She was rolling her eyes glancing furious to Tony because the associate was Tony’s job that as always she had to take. Tony winked to her and she showed him her teeth.

Alfred entered the room and clapped once.

“Leave whatever you are doing, ladies and gentlemen: the tree and the ornaments are here so time to start work.”

Bruce glanced at Tony and he patted his back smiling.

“Master Anthony, can you bring the tree?” Alfred asked showing the boys where to place the boxes with the ornaments.

Tony stood and saluted the butler military style.

“Aye, aye, captain!”

Selina left the plate on the small table between the sofa and the armchair and rushed to the boxes where Hero was putting his head to see. She grabbed the kitten from behind and looked him in the eyes.

“Don’t you know that curiosity killed the cat?”

Bruce chewed a biscuit enjoying the taste that was tied with so many sweet memories. His parents and he decorating the huge tree – huge, because he was tiny – and Alfred bringing cinnamon biscuits still warm from the oven and hot chocolate…

“I made some cinnamon biscuits, sir…”

“No, Alfred; I can’t: they’ll smell the cinnamon and will figure out.”

That memory he didn’t want: it was when he was visiting the Manor from the tunnels to see his loyal Alfred… still under Falcone’s and Ra’s’ ruin.

And now he was free to be with all the people he loved, free to enjoy his parents; home. He sensed Alfred’s eyes on him; the Englishman had approached seeing him absent minded and rubbed his back smiling.

“Are you alright, Master Bruce?” he asked politely.

“Yes, Alfred; thank you. The biscuits are delicious.”

“I know” the butler cocked an eyebrow. “I had to prepare twice the usual because everyone seems to love them and the first plate was empty in the first ten minutes. Good thing Ms. Todd helped me because these fine ladies left me on my own: they know only to eat…”
Bruce chuckled and Alfred gestured for him to join the others.

Ms. Todd entered the room with a second plate filled with steaming biscuits.

“I didn’t do much: it was Alfred’s doing” she commented.

Tony entered the room huffing and puffing dragging a tree of six feet.

“Are you sure there wasn’t any bigger tree to buy?” he said with sarcastic.

“In some things, the bigger the better” Pepper commented.

“Oh, babe! You know about that, huh?” Tony winked and Pepper rolled her eyes. “Now, let us make that monster stand…”

It was a big tree not only by its size but also its width. Jason stared at it impressed.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed and his mother cast him a sideways glare.

“Jay…”

Jason leaned to Dick’s ear.

“She used to swear worse but now she berates me…Moms…”

Dick looked at the tree and although he loved it he didn’t want to show: besides he’d prefer it if he was in his parents’ apartment with Brian – and Jason now – and they decorated their moderate sized tree. He remembered last year’s Christmas, his last happy Christmas, when Brian and he were placing the balls to their tree listening to Christmas songs.

He felt a compassionate hand on his back; he turned and saw Wayne. Bruce looked at the boy knowing how he felt.

“I’m sorry, Richard…I wish they were here with you…”

Dick didn’t want to make a fuss but pushed Bruce’s hand off of him and went to Jason to decorate the tree. Bruce lowered his eyes and sighed but Selina squatted in front of him.

“Smile, sweetie…” her eyes sparkled with love and Bruce couldn’t deny her.

He smiled and she took his hand and dragged him closer to the tree where Hero was playing soccer with the beautiful, sparkling balls and the way he was kicking them they rolled to Tony who hang them to the branches.

“Thank you, furry buddy! We are a great team!” he chuckled and petted the kitten’s head.

Pepper was kneeled on the floor and was taking off the ornaments from the boxes.

“You didn’t buy a star for the top of the tree?” she asked still looking inside the last box and raised her head to look at Alfred.

But he wasn’t there and she looked at Bruce instead; he shrugged.

“Alfred was in charge.”

Selina pouted.
“You can’t have a Christmas tree without a top…”

“But we have our top” Alfred exclaimed entering the room holding a box in his hands so reverently that everyone was puzzled.

He approached and everyone gathered around him, Bruce a little away. It was an old box that Bruce knew…

Alfred took off the top of the flat box and revealed what was inside but Bruce already knew.

“You must put the tree’s top” a teenage Tony said chuckling.

Bruce who was at his eight years tilted his head.

“But our tree has already its star…”

Tony smirked wickedly.

“I’m talkin’ about somethin’ unique and fantastic” he stood and gestured with both index fingers to himself “I made for OUR tree!”

Bruce watched anxiously as Tony revealed a box wrapped in red and gold paper and tossed it to him making the smaller boy jump to catch. The older boy quirked cockily his eyebrows.

“Well?” Tony inquired scratching his nape uncomfortable.

“Wow!”

Martha curious approached her son and Thomas watched amused as Bruce held cautiously the object and threw carelessly the box. It was a transparent angel made of material that little Bruce didn’t know and from Tony’s wicked smile probably not even his dad knew.

The angel was very beautiful: five inches tall, with the features of a boy – a beautiful boy - he was naked except from a golden, glimmering strap that began from his shoulder and covered his hip. He held a golden sparkling drum that startled Bruce when all of a sudden began playing the melody of Bruce’s favorite Christmas song: the Little Drummer Boy. The angel was transparent, made of something that resembled crystal but emanated multicolored sparkles and his beautiful, delicate wings were silver.

Lost inside the salon of his past Bruce didn’t sense Alfred looking at him and then everyone.

“I thought that everything was lost” he said staring at Alfred avoiding looking at the angel.

“I managed to save that to safe keep” Alfred replied touched. “I thought that we would need it…”

Bruce gulped and nodded stretching his hand to touch the angel inside the box but hesitated.

“Take it, little guy” Tony said wrapping Pepper’s shoulders with his arm. “Make it fly again…”

Bruce glanced at his friend and took the beautiful angel who sensing his hand began slowly twitching his sparkling wings and the melody of Little Drummer filled the hall.

Everyone jolted startled impressed by the sight, Tony cocking his eyebrows smugly.

“Fuck!” Jason exclaimed awed and his mother cleared her throat disapprovingly.
Even Dick gaped at the flying angel; only Hero began chasing the flying thing jumping to catch it causing everyone’s laughter.

“I had no doubt it’d work even after all these years” Tony bragged. “It was made by Tony-fucking-Stark…everything these hands and this brain built lasts forever.”

Jason cast a smartass sideways glance to his mother.

“He said the F word too…” he remarked snidely.

Bruce was staring at the flying angel under Alfred’s wet eyes and Selina wrapped her arm around his shoulders kissing his cheek.

“I haven’t seen anything more beautiful, sweetie…”

Tony took his arm from Pepper’s shoulders and walked to Bruce.

“You will place it on the top” he glanced at Hero who was still attacking the angel without the boys being able to hold him still “and fast before your kitten swallows it…”

He took Bruce in his arms noticing with a slight frown that his friend had lost some weight and Selina gave him the angel; Bruce stretched his hand and left the angel float on the tree’s top; his eyes sparkled and his body felt numb in Tony’s arms.

When the tree was ready they settled at the sofa and the armchairs staring at it as the tiny lights flickered with different color each time and eating the biscuits and drinking hot chocolate that Selina and Pepper prepared.

“See, Alfred? We made the chocolate: we’re not completely useless in cooking” Selina said smugly.

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“You two made the chocolate? That explains a lot…” he said crooking his mouth.

“Next time you should do it” Pepper told him “without the machine.”

“Yeah, right…”

Dick staring at the flames in the marble fireplace noticed for the first time the small painting on it and walked there. He took it and looked: the Waynes and their kid together and over them bat wings spread – the bat signal without a doubt. He frowned.

“It is a gift” Bruce said softly having approached unnoticed. “Billy from the Haven painted it and gave it to me.”

“What’s this bat is doing here?” he asked forgetting his hatred.

Bruce shrugged and smiled.

“I don’t know” he said looking at the painting. “You’d have to ask Billy.”

“Master Bruce…” Alfred’s voice emanated puzzlement as he entered the room; he had gone to the foyer to take the last bag with the socks for the fireplace yet he had a strange box. “This box is extra and has your name on…”

Bruce steered his chair there but Selina put her hand on his shoulder to stop him and then Tony
stepped forward.

‘Wait, Bruce. Jarvis, do you scan anything dangerous inside?’ he said to his wristwatch frowning.

“There are no indications of dangerous items in it, sir.”

Bruce moved forward and took the box from the floor. It wasn’t very big: it was a medium size card box, wrapped hastily with purple shining paper. He ripped the paper and then the duck tape that held together the folds; there was no sound in the salon as everyone’s eyes were on Bruce.

Bruce clenched his jaw as he was able to discern the content, while nobody else couldn’t.

“What is it, Master Bruce?”

“Some garbage” he replied and moved out of the salon to the lift and then his study with the box on his lap.

Tony, Selina and Alfred followed while Pepper stayed with the others to soften the mood.

Entering the study they saw Bruce staring at what stood on the waist table in front of the study’s leather couch. A tree without any leaves on it, only bare branches but something else captured their eyes. From every branch instead of balls or bells a small bat dangled – a real dead bat. And on the trunk of the tree was perched a Joker card.

“I CAN’T stand any other bat flying in Gotham – I knoooow you suffer missing the skies soooooo Joker will take care of his caged bat…”
“My littl’ ol’ heart is dry like that treeee with dead bats hanging...Come to MEEE3EE an’ gimme life...OR I'll come to youuuuu.”

Bruce’s eyes were blank fixed on the macabre tree; his hands clenched into fists. Tony squatted in front of him and held his shoulders till Bruce locked eyes with him.

“Don’t let him get to you, littl’ guy…”

Bruce looked around to Selina and Alfred who watched appalled and nodded.

“There are people close to me exposed to his madness” he said calm but serious.

His mind’s eyes went to the cave, in the niche of the rock where he kept his personal treasures. He had stashed there a vial with the Immortality Water – for emergencies; perhaps, that was the solution: no operation, no waiting, no physiotherapies, no agony. Some gulps and he’d be able – as Batman – to fly around and face his enemies protecting the innocent and his loved ones. Maybe there was no need for Bruce Wayne to walk again…it’d be the perfect cover: a disabled Bruce Wayne would be never connected with Batman.

But then he remembered Ra’s Al Ghul: his arrogance, his madness, his lack of moral values; the abuse of the Immortality Water for himself eroded him… Bruce didn’t want to become like him: he was a human and didn’t want to use the elixir to fool his mortality. He must wait.

“Bruce?” Selina asked cautiously having approached.

He looked at her.

“I’m fine, Sel.”

Tony had stood and was ruffling his hair furious.

“He wants to drag you out to face him in this vulnerable state but the lunatic won’t gonna get it! Let me have a word with those fools in the Mall!” he grabbed his StarkStell. “Jarvis get me the Comet Mall’s direction.”

Yet Bruce raised his palm stopping him.

“No, Tony: this matter shouldn’t be discussed with strangers” Tony frowned and open his mouth to retort. “Do you really want to tell people that Joker sent me a tree with dead bats?”

Tony threw his phone on the sofa and yanked his head huffing.

“Damn, your secrecy!”

Bruce lolled his head on the side and pressed his lips.

“It’s my decision, Tony. We’ll contact the Mall but without disclosing any details or the seriousness of the issue – besides, we know Joker: I doubt the Mall noticed anything.”

“Fine” Tony said clutching his waist swallowing his irritation; he looked at Bruce serious. “Don’t you even think to go out there for this lunatic’s whims! I’m here, Bruce: I’ll take care of your city till you’re in perfect shape again.”
Bruce nodded but his eyes were expressionless: he didn’t feel nice burdening others with his responsibilities. Suddenly, his back began aching, as his disability became more torturing to bear…

Steve opened his eyes puzzled. The bedroom was in complete darkness save for the flickering lights that came in from the grilles of the balcony door: he saw at the clock on his nightstand that it was almost seven in the morning. He had arrived at Gotham hours ago: as soon as his work in Washington ended, he could wait to see Selina again. They had dinner together at her apartment and then they start from the leaving room showing each other how much they missed each other.

Now he was sleeping holding the young woman on his body. She wore her white nightdress – the one with the Ducess, his favorite – and he was naked above the waist. Their night was terrific and Selina was so hot and enthusiastic on his return that he was glad he had super stamina… But now the young woman was writhing in his arms and her face was clenched in fear and despair: it was dark however he could feel liquid falling from her cheeks to his chest - tears.

He frowned and caressed her hair that was falling free on her back. He leaned and kissed her forehead.

“It’s alright, Selina; you’re safe…” he tried to console her.

And as if she had heard him, Selina opened her eyes still confused; Steve took softly her chin and kissed her on the lips while with the other hand he switched on the light to the lower intensity to not hurt her eyes.

“I’m here, sweetheart…”

She blinked a couple of times to chase away what she had experienced in what now knew that it was just a nightmare; however it was so alive that her guts were still painfully clenched. She yawned and stretched her body wanting to reassure Steve who was looking at her worried. She touched her index to his lips.

“Don’t look me, like that, handsome: you need to make breakfast” she winked “I like to be spoiled by super heroes.”

He crooked his mouth and rubbed her back.

“I will after you tell me what you saw…” Selina’s eyes got shadowed; she didn’t want to remember. “You’ll feel better, darling” he said with the voice that Selina couldn’t resist and sucked her earlobe causing her goose bumps.

“It was just a nightmare, Steve; don’t you prefer to do some quality stuff?” she asked sensually caressing his bulging deltoids.

Steve chuckled and looked at her.

“Always but I want you to be okay…you can speak to me about what you saw: you’ll feel better” he placed his palm over her heart. “Your heartbeat is still racing…”

She sighed and sat on the mattress cross legged.

“It’s an old nightmare I had often when I was younger. I thought that I wouldn’t see that again but…” she chuckled. “I was wrong.”
Steve rose and placed his arm around her shoulders; his eyes were full of honest interest and concern so Selina yanked her head sighing.

“When Bruce and I were very young and Falcone held him captive I often saw the same nightmare” she cocked her eyebrows “which was also my deepest fear. I was going to Dolcetto” she rubbed her temple and raised her eyes to him. “I went there every night to see Bruce; they had him working hard and every midnight after the store was closed he was bringing the garbage outside; it was a big garbage bin at the back of the store and we took cover behind it; I was bringing him a sandwich to eat because Falcone gave him just a piece of bread – sometimes moldy…”

Steve pressed his lips.

“Sometimes I had the same nightmare again and again: going there and waiting but Bruce doesn’t come out…This happened many times in real life too: Falcone sometimes was so furious that punished Bruce hard and then locked him in his cell…The night I saw Bruce and realized that the Wayne boy was alive I saw Falcone whipping him hard…” she gulped choking her emotions. “The bastard did that a lot” Steve closed his eyes. “Many nights even in the dim light the far street lamp cast, I could feel the lashes on Bruce’s back and my hands were drenched in blood. In the dream, I go there and wait and he doesn’t come but I know that Falcone is torturing him…but the next night he doesn’t come, nor the next…And then the other night, I go there with terror clenching my entire body; I wait and I see some thugs coming out carrying his skinny body; his eyes are closed and his face calm without any pain – dead pale but filled with bruises and dry blood; his dead arm hanging loose, leaving behind a dark red trail…Sometimes I hear them snigger that he died while Falcone ‘played’ with him and other times they say that he killed himself in his cell ripping his wrist veins by grazing his skin on the rocks…”

She choked a sob because she relived the scene; she rubbed her forehead and looked Steve determined but her eyes were red with hot liquid gathered at the corners: liquid that she fought to stop from springing but failed – Bruce always did that to her...

“Bruce is dead and they toss his body on the trunk to drop him to the sewers…and I can’t do anything: I’m frozen behind the bin watching unable to follow them to hug my friend, speak to him – console him for a last time…” now the ‘faucet’ of her eyes opened flooding her cheeks and Selina hid her face in her palms.

Steve lolled his head on the side his eyes watering too. He hugged Selina and rubbed soothing circles on her back feeling her hot tears on his bare shoulder and her lithe body shaking from silent sobs that some time broke her stubbornness into the silence of the room.

“Calm down, Sel…Everything is alright…” he caressed her hair “Bruce is safe and sound and ready to celebrate Christmas with all his loved ones…You’ll see him soon…Ssssss, babe…Look at me” he cupped her face with both hands and caressed her drenched cheeks.

“I always dreaded that Falcone will eventually overdo it and kill Bruce while…” she couldn’t utter it and swallowed a sob growling frustrated for crying “or that Bruce couldn’t take it anymore and would kill himself to escape from the pain and be again with his parents…”

Steve kissed her cheek.

“But he didn’t: you two are the bravest people I ever met. He endured because he knew that every night you’ll be there for him; that he will see you; will talk with you – and that gave him strength to live another day.”

She shook her head.
“All of you give me more credit than I deserve: I didn’t do so much…Bruce…”

“Your love helped him, Sel…Your bond is something amazing, unique: what you two have is rare even between real brothers. I honestly admire what you two achieved…” he pushed softly a rebellious lock behind Selina’s ear. “And now Bruce is among his loved ones safe and secure, warm and happy.”

Selina berated herself for having cried in front of Steve though she knew that he would never think badly of her. On the other side, she felt some relief saying out loud her worst nightmare.

“I’m still afraid for Bruce…” she said in a throaty voice “that someone would hurt him even now.”

Steve held her shoulders and locked eyes with her.

“We won’t let anyone touch Bruce ever again: You first of all” he shook his head smiling “I wouldn’t want to be in the place of the one who would dare to threaten Bruce… And then Tony has always his eyes open and makes everything to keep him secure. And what about me? You don’t count me?” Selina smiled. “And” Steve licked his lips “Thor…”

Selina forgot her upset and narrowed her eyes.

“Thor what?” she asked in her sly tone.

Steve laughed lighthearted seeing her better.

“He is much interested in Bruce…If you know what I mean…”

Selina lolled her head.

“Is he in love with Bruce?” she asked crossing her arms.

Steve shrugged.

“The Asgardian is an introvert and we don’t see him much anyways but…” he arched his eyebrows.

Selina caressed his chest with her index finger.

“Bruce still loves Superman…I’d want Bruce find happiness with someone else but your blond friend should not have many hopes.”

Steve pressed his lips.

“Thor respects and honors Bruce’s friendship: I think that he is satisfied with that…Not that he’d have an objection for something more…” he winked.

Selina kissed him on the lips.

“What about my breakfast, Captain?”

He chuckled.

“Are you so hungry or it can wait?”

Selina frowned.

“It depends on what you have in mind…”
He wrapped his arms around her and placed her on her back; he nibbled her bottom lip straddling her carefully. He fondled her body under the nightdress.

“Have I told you how much I love this nightdress?”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“More than what is underneath?” she asked slyly.

“You really have a doubt?” he answered and pushed the nightdress softly to reveal her body.

Selina purred like a cat and fondled Steve’s muscle bound back wishing for Bruce to find the same happiness as she…

The white car slithered to the back side of the children’s hospital: not many cars were entering the space from there, mainly the hospital’s staff and the suppliers. Alfred respected his young master’s worries so he went to the Wayne Tower with a cab and there they took one of the company’s cars for their outing; his young master didn’t want to risk Joker following them.

Alfred cast a discreet glance to the passenger seat to see Bruce despite their precautions, still looking around nervously scanning the space: agony still clenched his insides – not for himself but the innocents around. Joker’s note was branded in his mind, haunting his thoughts.

“Sir?”

Bruce scolded himself because he didn’t want to transmit his nervousness to the others. It was his decision to proceed with that, to not concede to Joker’s shadow, and do the things he wanted. Besides, everything was ready: the gifts in the car’s trunk, the hospital’s direction had been informed and the children were waiting. He opened the door and slipped in his wheelchair that Alfred had brought.

Well, facing all those suffering kids was the hardest part for him and also he didn’t want anyone to learn about this – he didn’t want anyone say that he was good or all this stuff… He just wanted to give a little joy to these kids…

He gazed at the hospital’s building and gulped.

“Let’s go, Alfred” he looked at the Englishman and steered his wheelchair to the hospital’s ramp.

Though the car was discreet not revealing its owner, some members of the staff were already there to help them with the presents carrying them inside. And they, men and women, were all smiling, clearly happy that someone had thought the kids.

Alfred opened the trunk and distributed the packs to the men and women that came to help and then walked with his young master inside. Bruce had asked Alfred whether it’d be rude to not be there himself because the idea of people praising him for that made him cringe. However his loyal butler encouraged him to do what he wanted and be with the children without thinking what the others might say.

The director of the hospital caught with them just the moment they were ready to enter the lift. They shook hands with the beaming Dr. Brownfeld.

“I’d like to thank you from up close, Mr. Wayne; your donation and the presents for the children are
going to give much happiness…”

“I hope so, Dr. Brownfeld but honestly you don’t have to thank me…I didn’t do anything.”

Alfred smiled.

“You are going to give yourself the presents to the kids?” the doctor asked gesturing to the lift.

Bruce grinned and looked at him.

“No” he took in Alfred’s baffled expression; his butler also didn’t know. “I think that there’s a more suitable person than me…” he turned his head towards the entrance and the doctor laughed.

Santa Claus himself was approaching them with his empty bag over his shoulder waiting to be filled with the toys Alfred and Bruce brought.

“Good morning!” Santa Claus greeted. “I’m ready, Mr. Wayne!”

Bruce stretched his hand for a handshake and smiled.

“Good morning, Santa! I’m glad you’re ready because your little friends are waiting for you. Hm… Dr. Brownfeld, I hope it’s alright?”

The doctor shook his head smiling.

“I guess, the part “I don’t want anyone to know” is very strict, right, Mr. Wayne? There is no problem: it is entirely up to you! We are just grateful!”

However, Alfred wasn’t so condescending and Bruce could see on his face the man’s dwelling disapproval and pride.

Bruce felt uncomfortable to distribute the presents himself but he couldn’t resist the chance to watch from afar the children’s happiness as the actor he hired gave them presents so he and Alfred stood to the corridor leading to the hospital’s events’ hall. This cheerful ruckus was the only way to divert his mind from thinking painful and agonizing things.

Alfred who was standing next to him cleared his throat and Bruce lifted his eyes to him.

“You omitted disclosing that small detail to me, sir: that was your sly plan in order to not have me voicing my disagreement…” his voice was stern but Bruce could see the shine in his eyes.

He shrugged.

“What’s the meaning in giving the present myself, Alfred? The kids are happier having Santa amongst them. Besides it is the result that counts and you were the one who told me to do what I feel without thinking the others’ opinion.”

Alfred shook his head but smiled.

“Master Bruce, you are still the same mischievous little rascal…”

Bruce chuckled.

“Thank you, Alfred” he answered and his gaze wandered to the hall where Nick, the Santa Claus, was in the middle of a child flood; a ‘flood’ that was laughing happily. “Besides, the least I appear the safest with Joker on the loose.”
Alfred knew that his young master had in his mind the image of the tree Joker had sent him: a grotesque caricature of a Christmas tree with dead bats hanging from the branches and a note declaring the madman’s obsession with the youth and his knowledge of his secret identity.

Master Anthony even after their discussion with Master Bruce was still furious with the Mall security and insisted on suing them so Master Bruce had to point out once again that he didn’t want anyone know about the tree and the bats because even if they hid Joker’s note someone could make the connection.

Master Anthony once again gulped his impulsive nature and did the thing that they agreed with Bruce: he made inquiries with the Mall’s direction and asked for the names of the employees who made the delivery. Both driver and worker, as well as the people in the packing service, were working for years for the Mall and had no criminal record or shady activities – Bruce had made his own investigation.

So the most probable scenario was that Joker heard about Bruce’s excursion to the Mall and managed to slip his little box among the others; of course a homemade wrap should have alerted the stuff yet the placement must have happened at some stage that nobody took notice.

Anyway, Master Bruce didn’t want to let the incident be widely known.

Alfred feared that Joker’s movement would make his young master rush out, donning the cape and cowl every night; but thankfully, for the time being Master Bruce restraint himself even though Alfred and his friends could breathe the youth’s despair to do something – Alfred guessed that it was a good will gesture to his loved ones. But Master Bruce at times was drowning believing that he wasn’t doing what he should – Alfred could tell that his impairment at those times hit Bruce the hardest to the point of weak, slow burning anger.

And this anger could harm the youth’s health…Alfred was worried but chose not to burden more his Master with his fears because it’d harm him more.

And anyway the important thing was that Master Bruce didn’t drawback from his intentions for these holidays: the youth was determined to help as many people as possible to have a merry Christmas even though throughout the year he had done already many things to help the less fortunate people of Gotham.

Bruce’s parents would be proud of their boy… Alfred knew that being with people in pain pained Bruce more than his own wounds but when these people smiled Master Bruce’s pains went away. All kinds of pain: physical and emotional…The Englishman sensed that his young Master at times travelled away to the Christmas Mr. Kent promised him.

Jason came out of the room puzzled, pissed and cursing; Dick was waiting for him outside leaning his back on the wall. Normally they should be at school but Dick followed his friend to the hospital.

“I thought you’d stay more?” Dick asked the younger boy.

Jason scratched his messy hair pushing the hood off his head.

“That was the goal but that rat isn’t her’…Sonov…”

Dick frowned.

“You said he broke his leg; how can he not be in his room?” he asked a bit indifferent: he was there
not because he had any interest to visit Jay’s friend whom he didn’t know but it suit his purpose.

Jason arched his thick eyebrows.

“He broke his leg but that wouldn’ stop ‘im from walkin’ around and the nurse in the room told me that every kid in the hospital went to Santa for their presents .”

Dick rolled his eyes and Jason shrugged.

“Care to go ther’ an’ have fun with those idiots? We’ll find Boots there: he plays the tough guy but for a toy he’s willin’ to jump to the air…” he sniggered.

Dick pouted: honestly, he had no mood to see all those brats flooding a fake Santa Claus nor he had any interest to find Boots; on the other hand, he didn’t want to return to the school so soon – he wanted his absence to be noticed and make an impression.

“Boots? What kind of a name is that?” he asked as they strolled through the hospital’s corridors.

“Oh, man!” the younger boy rolled his eyes. “It’s not his real name: only ‘is parents call him by ‘is Christian name. It’s ‘is nick but…” he turned frowned to the older boy. “How come an’ ya came with me? Since when ya skive off?”

Dick pursed his lips and arched his eyebrows smugly.

“From now!”

Jason crooked his mouth.

“Ha! Ha!” he mock cackled . “Very funny…but I’m the punk, dude: yar the good boy.”

Dick rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, sure…”

Jason narrowed his eyes.

“Yar doing it to make Wayne’s life difficult…that’s it!”

The older boy stopped at his trunks and turned to his friend.

“So what?” he spat. “Are you going to defend your new buddy?” he asked challenging and Jason clenched his jaw to retort but then he saw from the corner Bruce and Alfred.

“Then ya need to hide ‘cause yar ‘daddy’ is here” he chuckled with Dick’s dumbstruck expression. “It seems that fate wants ya together!” he cackled but the older boy pulled him from the lapels to the wall to not be seen.

“How stands your list, Master Bruce?” Alfred asked amused.

Bruce took his eyes from the kids and looked at his butler.

“My list?”

Alfred grinned.
“Of things to do for making Gotham’s people happy.”

Bruce ruffled his hair.

“I…” he pursed his lips. “Do you thing that Wayne Enterprises can’t afford the amount of money? I am overdoing it?”

Alfred chuckled.

“You know better than me the finances of your company…but it is my impression that you spend money from your personal account.”

Bruce nodded.

“Which is my mother’s money and she would like to be spent like this.”

Alfred grinned.

“As for your other inquiry, that is if you’re overdoing it: that has to do with how you feel, Master Bruce” he smiled. “You are free, Master Bruce, to finally do what you feel, what you want. And if I’m allowed to say it, I’m proud and happy that this” he gestured to the joyful commotion “is what you want and what makes you happy.”

Bruce lowered his eyes and stared at his hands.

“And it would have made my parents happy too…” he mumbled and Alfred pressed his lips.

“And very proud, sir…” he knew that it wasn’t too butler-ish but he patted his master’s back.

While Bruce was smiling to Alfred someone detached from the kids and approached. Both men looked at a girl sat in a wheelchair: she was hardly eleven years old with blond short hair and light blue eyes. She looked at Bruce shyly.

“I’m Lucy” she said and Bruce smiled.

“Hi, Lucy; I’m…”

“Bruce Wayne” she cut him. “I saw you on TV – I spend many hours with TV all these months staying on bed.”

Bruce nodded.

“I know how that is, Lucy…”

The girl smiled and nodded, she was hugging a doll from the gifts that Santa had given them.

“My mother says that some people hurt you so much that you almost died; and that the wounds they made you…confined you to a wheelchair like me” she said shyly, her pale cheeks becoming pink.

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded; the girl stretched her hand to Bruce and he took it.

“What happened to you, Lucy?” he asked quietly.

“I was crossing the street and a car hit me: it didn’t hurt much because everything darkened at once…Mom told me when I woke up that I was sleeping for a month…the driver was drunk and didn’t stop on the red light.”
Bruce closed his eyes.

“You are a very brave girl, Lucy…Your parents must be proud.”

Lucy touched his cheek; her eyes were filled with compassion.

“They tortured you, right? I heard that they were hurting you when you were a kid…for years…and now other bad people hurt you more…you must have suffered so much…”

Alfred’s eyes watered: the girl’s voice had something that made those simple words have a major impact in him; maybe because that voice brought again in his mind’s eyes little Bruce mopping the floor in Dolcetto murmuring his mother’s lullaby…he still felt the boy’s trembling in his hug…the poor boy’s despair and terror and the butler’s weakness to take him away and save him.

Bruce smiled to the girl.

“They did…but thanks to my friends I’m here now – I was saved.”

The girl looked at him conspiratorial.

“You bought the presents, right?”

Bruce looked up at Alfred and then back at the girl pouting.

“Let’s say that I reminded Santa that there’s a children hospital in Gotham; he has so many things to do that sometimes he needs some reminding. A friend told me that when I was almost at your age.”

The girl laughed and Alfred remembered Master Anthony reassuring a very young Master Bruce that Santa Claus was real but he had some associates around the world to help him with his job.

Dick was watching the scene with his mouth agape; the way the little girl was interacting with Wayne, the honest love in the man’s eyes.

“I told ya, man: he isn’t as bad as ya believe…”

The older boy shook his head.

“Is this why you brought me here? To see him in charity action?” he demanded pissed.

Jason yanked his head exasperated and clenched his friend’s lapels.

“Get a grip, pal! Yar getting crazy!” he lowered his voice. “I didna know anythin’ an’ I don’t remember invitin’ ya her’ – it was yar decision!”

Dick shook his head and sighed.

“Okay…but he’s acting, Jay…He doesn’t mean anything; he is doing everything to promote himself so that everyone says what kind man he is.”

Jason leaned on the wall crossing his arms.

“I don’t see any cameras around” he said smugly cocking an eyebrow. “An’ I haven’t heard anythin’ about that in TV…”
Dick gulped and wanted to leave but he couldn’t take his eyes from Wayne and the girl.

“Doctors say that it’d be too difficult to walk again…and” she licked her lips lowering her eyes. “I know that I won’t walk ever again but they just try to encourage me…”

Bruce inhaled carefully to not let the girl know his sadness. But her little eyes that shone like gems as she looked back at him made his heart melt.

“I know that I won’t dance ever again…”

“You dance, Miss Lucy?” Alfred asked warmly.

She smiled to him.

“I was leaving the ballet school to my father’s car on the other side of the road when the car hit me…” she grinned and hugged tighter her new doll. “I know that I won’t dance but I don’t tell mom and dad because I want them to believe that I believe them.”

“You are a very brave girl, Lucy…” Bruce said in a throaty voice.

She smiled and touched his cheek with the spontaneity of the children.

“Sometimes I get sad but then I think everything I heard about you; how much you suffered but you never gave up and…and I feel that everything will be alright even if I don’t walk again ever … because I have my mommy and daddy with me and doctors who love me…and…and I’d never be alone while you…you were just a kid in pain and you were all alone but you never stopped fighting…”

Bruce didn’t know if that was right but he hugged the little girl caressing her soft hair.

Dick’s eyes widened seeing Wayne hugging the little girl causing her smile.

Jason crooked his mouth and shrugged.

“Not everyone agrees with ya, pal…”

The older boy pressed his lips and turned his head away from the scene.

“We’re leaving! he spat to his friend and both marched to the opposite direction.

“You’ll walk again, Lucy: I’ll do everything in my power for you to walk again” Bruce told her keeping his eyes closed. “I’m not supposed to walk ever again too but my friends are working hard to find the way to help me walk again…It’d be hard, Lucy, but I’ll do it because you…your bravery would give me strength and courage and inspiration to walk again so that you would be the next. And I promise you that in your first performance I’ll be there in the theatre to applaud and get your autograph…If you remember me till then in the crowd of your fans” he chuckled.

The girl’s cheeks were drenched in tears when she looked at Bruce but a wide, happy smile
brightened her round, sweet face.

“I know you’ll make it, Bruce…” she said and leaned to place a kiss to his cheek.

Hurried footsteps made Alfred detach his eyes from the heartwarming scene: it was a young woman coming from the cafeteria; her face was shadowed by worry but upon seeing the little girl she closed her eyes in relief.

“Here you are, Lucy!” she exclaimed. “And with Mr. Wayne…” disbelief colored her voice.

Lucy turned to her smiling.

“I’m sorry, mom; I didn’t want to make you worry.”

She squatted.

“It’s okay, honey” she said and smiled to Bruce and Alfred. “Time to eat…and don’t tell me again you’re not hungry: you need to be strong in order to walk again soon…She doesn’t eat enough” she said to both men.

Alfred cast a sideways glance to his young master because it was a scene he experienced so many times.

“I do know what you mean, madam!”

The girl wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck.

“Yes, mom: I’m starving!”

The woman widened her eyes from surprise looking at the two men.

“Mr. Wayne, you certainly have a charm…” she said and stood. “Thank you” she mouthed to them as she distanced to the opposite direction with Lucy.

Bruce was looking at them leaving, his lips pressed and Alfred felt that it was time for them to go too.

“Shall we, sir? You need to get some food in your stomach as well” he said softly but slightly scolding and Bruce looked at him.

He nodded but they had done barely two steps when his phone rang. Bruce frowned seeing the caller’s ID and Alfred’s eyes narrowed gradually more as his young Master became paler the more he spoke on the phone.

“Thank you, Ms. Stuart…We’ll do everything to find him” he ended the call and touched the screen in haste to make a new call.

“Master Bruce, what happened?”

“Dick is missing from his school” he brought the phone to his ear. “What you mean ‘you lost him’? He is a boy and Joker is out there!” Alfred squeezed his shoulders to calm him and Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay…Just take as many people as possible and find him: the longer he stays out there unguarded the worse…”

He ended the call and looked at Alfred who noticed that his young master wasn’t even breathing normally in his agony to find his ward.
“I’ll call Jim…”

“No, sir: I think you should not do that for a truancy: please, Master Bruce, do calm down. The security will handle it.”

Bruce closed his eyes shaking his head: how could he calm down? Joker had his eyes on him and he knew that Dick was his ward: he already had used the boy once. What if it was Joker that abducted the boy from school? What if Dick was in Joker’s hands right now? His heart began beating fast leading his breaths to become rasps; his eyes blurred and everything around began spinning.

Alfred frowned realizing and squatted; he cupped Bruce’s head with both hands trying to get his attention.

“Sir, sir, please, look at me.”

Bruce could hear Alfred’s panicked voice but he couldn’t make his heart calm or his head stop hurting and spinning.

“It’s…it’s nothing, Alfred; don’t worry…it’s just…” he tried to reassure the older man feeling his wrinkled hands shaking on his cheeks.

Alfred looked frantically around for a doctor or a nurse and he was ready to call for help but then a voice drew his attention.

“Bruce! Alfred! What a…” the man’s voice dropped taking in the scene and ran to them.

Alfred saw Thomas Elliot hurrying to them and kneeling down; he pushed Alfred’s hands to take Bruce’s hand and peruse his irises.

“Don’t worry, Bruce” he said “I’m here now” he said touching his fingers on his jugular to assess his pulse.

Thomas didn’t call anyone supposedly to ensure privacy to Bruce – he was sure that Alfred and Bruce himself would appreciate that – but in reality he wanted to handle it exclusively hoping that this way he’d manage to pass the man’s defenses.

He took them to an examination room nearby and with Alfred’s help placed Bruce on the examination table; then he put an inhalator mask to Bruce’s mouth to normalize his breath and made him an injection bringing his heartbeat to normal level. Under Alfred’s vigilant eyes, Thomas took the blood pressure gadget and raised Bruce’s sleeve.

“How do you feel?” he asked after he ended the procedure.

Bruce pulled off the inhalator and hurried to sit though Alfred had to support him because he still was dizzy and unstable. He didn’t like having Thomas Eliot examine him and his entire body – well, only half his body – was upset and aggravated.

“I’m fine!” he said in haste looking for his wheelchair. “Thank you for everything, Dr. Elliot.”

“Thomas, Bruce” he replied grinning “and I didn’t do anything” he looked at Alfred. “What happened?”

Alfred shook his head.

“Oh, Dr. Elliot! You know how these days are: Master Bruce was tired and then some emotional
turbulence came and made things worse. Also, he didn’t eat much in the morning…”

Bruce cast him a sideways glare and Thomas chuckled. **Of course, the spoiled brat does everything to have all the attention to him – especially, now.**

“We were lucky you were there” Alfred continued. “Are you working in the children’s hospital?”

“I am a volunteer: the hospital’s staff needs every possible help” he looked at Bruce. “You need to be careful, Bruce. Your health is still too fragile: you have to listen to those who love you…” he looked him in the eyes. “We want the best for you.”

Bruce grinned.

“I’m sure, Thomas…Alfred, can you bring the wheelchair? I must return to the Tower” he sat at the chair and wore his coat that Alfred held for him. “If I don’t see you till then, Merry Christmas, Thomas.”

Thomas narrowed his eyes and watched them leaving with a smirk over his face.

“Merry Christmas to you too!” he said hardly holding his snort.

Alfred had gone to take Dick from the gym: it was afternoon and the dark grey of the sky declared the arrival of the night. They suffered some hours of deep worry from the moment Dick’s teacher informed them that the boy had skipped class.

After his almost fainting at the hospital, Bruce wanted to search himself but Alfred didn’t let him so he had to wait in the Manor. Bruce called Jason but the boy didn’t answer and he understood: he had asked from the boy to keep Dick’s trust at any cost – except, of course, if he was in danger. And the fact that Jason didn’t answer made Bruce hope that Dick was with him and they were safe…It wasn’t difficult for Bruce to see what the boy tried to do: Dick wanted to make Bruce’s life difficult letting his anger and stubbornness carry him away and ruin his good record in school.

His security men located the two boys soon but Bruce asked them to not intervene but watch them discreetly.

It was an hour ago that Jeffrey, Dick’s trainer, called to say that the boy was there with him – it was the time of his training and Dick wouldn’t lose his training even to torment Bruce. Knowing that, Bruce asked from Jeffrey to call him when Dick arrived so that Alfred would be there after the training and bring the boy home.

Before leaving to pick the boy from the gym, Alfred asked him how he was going to punish the boy. Bruce paled only hearing the word ‘punish’ and Alfred pressed his lips turning to leave. Bruce lowered his eyes to Hero who was sprawled on the carpet right by his feet. He knew that Alfred berated himself for mentioning punishment to Bruce that had suffered so many unfair, cruel punishments.

“Alfred, please…” the man stopped and turned to his master. “I’m not going to punish the boy: Dick in distress and suffers and I’m not going to make it worse…If his hatred for me helps him cope with everything” he nodded “I’ll take it, Alfred.”

Alfred pressed his lips.

“You care so much for the boy, Master Bruce; I just wish you cared for yourself as much…” he
smiled and cleared his throat making his voice strict. “However, he needs discipline or else you’re going to spoil him” he lifted his eyebrows and lolled his head on the side “but…it is Christmas so I guess we can pardon him, huh?”

Bruce smiled and Alfred breathed easier: that incident at the hospital had shaken him and he called Leslie to inform her.

“Thank you, Alfred.”

“You’re welcome, sir” he said nonchalant “but if he does such bullshit again, I’ll take care it myself.”

Alone in his study Bruce opened his Cosmos tablet and began investigating, Hero rolling over on the thick carpet trying to get his attention. Bruce every now and then looked at the kitten tickling his belly; anyways, being over his tablet and investigating was frustrating – he felt useless and this chair felt like a cage. He needed to be out, to search; to spy; to help people; to fly… He remembered the sense of the cool, chilly air of Gotham when he was patrolling during winter…

He closed his eyes trying to bring back the feeling of the air to his body even under the armor: every season had a different feeling…

The door’s bell brought him back to the study and he left the ground floor study to open knowing already who it was; the grounds’ gates opened automatically for few people.

“Leslie!” he exclaimed seeing her smiling once he opened the door.

She squatted to close him in her hug.

“I missed you, Leslie!”

She cupped Bruce’s face and studied him and Bruce knew that she was examining him.

“You see me only as a patient…” he complained playfully. “Alfred told you what happened at the children’s hospital and you decide to visit; you wouldn’t have come if I was healthy…”

Leslie shook her head and bit softly her bottom lip.

“I’m unforgivable if I gave you that impression…but that’s not true: you’re my angel – you’re always on my mind even if I can’t be with you. It’s freezing outside…”

She closed the door and followed Bruce and Hero inside.

“The garden is spectacular! Well done!”

Bruce shrugged.

“The boys did it and Selina: I was just watching.”

Leslie’s eyes widened seeing the grand salon.

“Oh! You have decorated the salon as well!” she said her eyes on the huge Christmas tree sparkling in the rhythm of the tiny lamps and the angel floating at the top. “It was about time!”

Bruce frowned.

“Leslie, why you stopped coming by?”
Leslie grinned and took off her thick long coat. She sat at one of the armchairs near the lit fireplace gazing at the socks that hung there.

“Don’t say it like that, young man, and I missed you too. But you know how these days are: around Christmas work in the hospital culminates” she brushed Bruce’s cheek.

“Don’t tell me you won’t be here for the Christmas dinner?” he asked calm but his complaint was obvious.

“No, I wouldn’t miss that, Bruce” she looked around. “They left you alone?” her voice was disapproving.

Bruce chuckled.

“Hero is here” he pointed to the kitten that rubbed to his legs.

Leslie cocked an eyebrow.

“Anyone two-legged?”

“Alfred went to bring home Dick from the gym and the others have things to do but I guess they’ll come for dinner; besides I’m not a baby needing babysitter…”

“I don’t know… if being alone means that you’d spend time in the humidity and cold of the cave, then yes, we need a babysitter.”

Bruce shook his head.

“I’m not. You see, I follow my doctor’s orders even if she forgets me…”

Leslie smiled and leaned to kiss Bruce’s cheek.

“I didn’t forget you, sweetheart: you were always on my mind and I was calling every day, wasn’t I?”

“It’s not the same…” he smiled. “Mmm…how about I make some hot chocolate? Alfred has cooked cupcakes.”

Leslie stood.

“Leave it to me: the fact I didn’t come for some days didn’t make me a stranger, right?”

“Of course not” Bruce smiled.

When Leslie left the room he took again his Cosmos and parted the screen in two: on the right he perused the archives of GCPD in hopes of finding any lead to Joker’s whereabouts and on the left he opened the *Gotham Gazzette* site. As he was scanning the police’s reports, the previous feeling of frustration flooded him again: he needed to get outside and then his eyes turned to the arch-shaped big window that gave a spectacular view of the garden. Spectacular exactly as Leslie told him.

The tiny light bulbs flickered slowly in a light blue hue making the bushes and the trees sparkle as if sprayed with stardust; the fact that the sky was filled with stars and there was barely any artificial light made the landscape seem taken from a fairytale.

But Bruce’s eyes travelled…
Clark was leaning on his elbow at his pillow, his eyes watching Bruce with adoration. It was only a month since Clark brought him back from the Fortress and they decided to leave the States for the quiet island of Thassos where Tony had his villa.

Bruce had just woken from his midday nap and looked with narrowed eyes at Clark who was smiling.

“What are you thinking?”

Clark chuckled.

“It’ll sound ridiculous…it’s still too early.”

Bruce raised his torso and kissed him on the lips.

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

Clark twitched his eyebrows.

“Very funny!” he retorted.

Bruce grinned.

“Well?”

“After my father died I believed that I’d never be anxious for Christmas to come…I always loved Christmas but since father died…” he pressed his lips “it was never the same.”

“I know what you mean” Bruce brushed his upper arms.

“But this year I can’t wait for Christmas to come!” Bruce’s expression became grim. “It’d be the most beautiful Christmas in years…because I’ll have you in my arms” he said and cupped Bruce’s face kissing him passionately. “You’re alive and we are together! I don’t know what more I could ask…”

He noticed Bruce’s blank eyes and brushed his cheekbones.

“What?” the Man of Steel asked perplexed.

“I dread Christmas” he said in a throaty voice and Clark gulped. “I don’t want this season to come…throughout the year is difficult but I feel that around Christmas would be horrible…The memories, the Christmas Carols, the images…”

Clark wrapped him in his arms and lifted him to touch the younger man to his bare chest; he hugged him softly because Bruce’s bones were like shreds stuck together with glue. He rubbed his back.

“I’ll be all the time with you, Bruce, I promise…I’ll chase away the pain and I’ll give you again the happiness you deserve. They’ll be the most beautiful Christmas, Bruce: a new beginning in a new happy life. I promise…” he cupped his face and looked him in the eyes. “You believe me, don’t you? In my boy scouts’ honor! And I’ll have my Star lighting my days!”

Bruce nodded smiling.

“Remember when you last called me Star?” he asked Clark who was laid beside him on the Manor’s bed.
“It’s so important?” Clark had replied bored.

And then Superman was kissing Wonder Woman.

“She is my star!”

“Eh! Young man!” Leslie said having squatted beside him; Hero was on his lap without Bruce having sensed him. “What is it?”

Bruce shook his head.

“Nothing, Leslie – I’m just a bit sleepy.”

Cheerful people were heard from the screen as they had gathered in the square in front of the City Hall for the happenings the city had prepared. He took the tablet ready to close it when gun shots towered the music and the ruckus turning the laughter into screams; he frowned and Leslie stood to see.

“Hiiiii, people! I know you miss--ed me” Joker emerged behind Santa Claus sleigh dressed in a brand new suit that Bruce knew that was made by the poor tailor police found dead. “Nooooow… now…ssssss, people or my boys” he gestured to clowns that had surrounded the crowd with firearms ready to open fire “will loooose it and kill someone.”

He shook his head pouting disappointed.

“Dress a stuuuuuupid, fat actor as Santa, make him come oooooout of the sleigh and everyone will laugh and be happy; make Joker come out of the sleigh aaaaand eveee--ryone panics” he tskd but then his eyes found the kids' dumbstruck faces and he fixed his hair sighing. “You didn’t know that this isn’t the real Santa?” he rolled his eyes. “Nooooo wonder Japan’s average IQ is twice ours…”

Bruce’s eyes hardened and his hands clenched around the armrests.

“Well, I might nooooot be the Santa and wear purple buuuuuut I brought all of you gifts! Tadaaaaaa!” two of his goons dragged two sacks which content wasn’t visible. “Gifts to make youuuuuu smile!”

He rubbed his nose.

“It’s freezing, huh?” he asked someone who looked at him petrified. “And NO SNOW! That’s unacceptable!” he looked around as if he had forgotten where he was. “Um, yes! What I meaaaant to say was…” he rolled his eyes “well, the usual: if Baaaaatsy doesn’t come to play I’ll give you my presents”

His goons revealed the sacks’ content: some bottles with smiles painted on them.

“Oh! I give hiiiiim and youuuuu fifteen minutes and then the fun will start without him – ah! Ah! Ah! If someone is soooooo stupid to attack me and ruin the holiday spirit” he took out of his inner pocket a remote “I’ll set ooooff the bombs I have planted around the square…” he cocked his eyebrows pouting. “That’s the drawbacks of planning and announc-ing: someone always ruins every--thing.”

Bruce made to steer the wheelchair but Leslie stood in front of him holding his upper arms.

“No way, Bruce!”
“He is going to kill them if I don’t go! I have the armor – I can do it, Leslie!”

“No, Bruce: I won’t let you sacrifice yourself for anyone. Others will handle that!”

Bruce clenched his jaw frustrated but then a new uproar was heard from the tablet.

A whip wrapped around Joker’s remote and the gadget flew from his hand causing his laughter.

“Whoooooo is our guest? Coooomme out, coooomme out, kinky thing…” he sang. “Find him!” he barked to his goons.

“**Her,** you stupid sexist!” a sensual voice answered him and instantly his goons’ cries filled the air.

Bruce saw Catwoman kicking and punching Joker’s goons with such ease and grace that made the youth smile proud.

Joker fixed his hair.

“I liiiiiike girls in leather, high-heeled boots and whips! Grrrrrrr! Haaaaave we ever met again, pretty?” he looked at Catwoman’s stiletto heels. “In a caaaaabaret, me on the beeeed ready to do nasty things and you hitting me on the head to…stick your heels on my…”

Catwoman made a twirl and kicked Joker in the face sending him to crash on his laughing bombs.

“You wish, clown!”

“Mmm…” Joker used his hand to straightened his jaw “I thiiiiiiink the night has become gloomy soooo…it’s time to bring some laughter!”

He lifted to his mouth the scarf that revealed to be a mask and hurried to free the gas when a shield ripped the air and hit Joker on the guts carrying him away: the people just jumping far to not have him on them.

The crowd watched awestruck Captain America landing before Joker.

“OoooooooH!” Joker exclaimed rubbing his belly “Caaaan I have an autograph?” he batted his eyelashes cutely “Last time I hanged with your suuuuper pals you were absent…” he made his voice honest “You were sorely missed.”

Captain walked to him, his eyes focused on him but with the corner he followed Catwoman’s fight with the minions.

“Yes, we have some unsettled businesses…”

“Na…na…na” Joker said and pulled out of his jacket another remote. “Juuuuust in case: I always have a second…It’s like coocoondoms, you know?” he said conspiratorially. “You do know about condoms, huh? Good ol’ Tony up-dated you? Well, if you dooooon’t be a good boy, I’ll set off aaaall my bombs. I WANT MY BATSY!” he sighed. “I’m a boy; I can’t hold on much…”

“You have nothing, whacko” Ironman’s robotic voice came to be added and Joker cocked his eyebrows cackling. “Your bombs are useless!”

Steve lolled his head smiling, Catwoman having come to his side.

“Time to go back to Arkham” she was ready to say ‘handsome’ but Steve knew that Selina used that word.
Joker cackled.

“Threeeee against one? No fair play here: laaaady and gentlemen…What has a little jester to do gainst such super powers?” he frowned. “This is Goootham, you know: diiiid you get a license from our big bad bat?”

Bruce frowned. He knew that Joker was up to something.

Something popped and thick smoke covered Joker. Steve felt his eyes blur and monsters appeared suddenly ready to attack him; one of them was covered in black leather, it had a lean body and fangs protruding from its red lips. He thought the innocents around and surged against the black monster.

Selina saw Chill having popped from his grave coming to her smirking: his clothes were worm eaten as his face. He attacked her and she dodge his punch kicking him in the guts.

Bruce narrowed his eyes biting his lips from agony, sweat drops covering his brow: fear gas – Joker of course used Crane’s resources.

Tony knew it was fear toxin but his armor’s air filter made him immune to that so he ran to his friends to administer the antidote to before anyone got hurt.

Joker giggled and mounted a bike that he had beforehand left there for any case.

“Ooops!” Joker said. “Sorry for leaving you…” he stopped and turned to the crowd that watched puzzled at the superheroes.

“Dooooo you happen to know why our Batsy relied ooon these buffoons and didn’t come himself?” he started again the engine.

But his bike hit on something solid and he crashed on the street; he looked up and saw Thor glaring at him with his hammer spiting bluish sparkles.

“OoooooH! The blond gooood…Did you bring soooome ice with you? You dooooo cooome from Norge, huh?”

Thor clenched his jaw.

“Enough! You won’t threaten Bruce ever again!’

Joker raised his index finger.

“Tonight I threatened Batman” he lolled his head puzzled “it was a threaaat? Mmmm…I dooon’t think sooo – more like an invi—tation…” then he thought something. “Ugh! I’m sick of god-like things claiming myyy Bruceyyyy!”

He threw one of his fear gas balls in front of the god’s feet and smoke covered him causing Joker’s laughter. But then with one sharp motion Mjolnir ripped the smoke and absorbed the gas. The imposing blond marching towards Joker gritting his teeth.

Joker smiled.

“Uuuuu…Tough guy…Can we taaaalk this out like civilized meeeeen? Gods? Peeeople?”
Thor rushed to punch him but was met with air, the Joker just vanished. The god closed his eyes growling frustrated: his hammer emanating little thunders.

“Loki!” he mumbled knowing that his brother was responsible for Joker’s escape.

When Tony’s dart with the antidote stabbed Steve’s arm and his vision became clear again, Catwoman was already at the other side of the square, safe from the toxin.

“Wait!” Steve yelled and followed her running in full speed.

She stopped sighing silently but when he was near enough she made some swift somersaults and disappeared in the forest of alleys. Steve stayed agape watching her.

“Sorry for attacking you…” he said.

Tony came to him, his helmet on hand. He smirked seeing his comrade’s stare.

“What a woman, huh?”

“I prefer Selina but I wanted to apologize and thank her…” he took in Tony’s cocked eyebrows.

“Alright, she is impressive…” he frowned. Where was Batman?

Tony lolled his head on the side.

“He doesn’t like team work…I suppose he saw us and chose to go elsewhere…”
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

If you'd like to read the whole story about Bruce's last Christmas with his parents and the Christmas Eve he spent in Selina's attic, you can go to 'Snowflakes', part 4 of the series.

Merry Christmas!

Superman stood on his favorite rooftop in Metropolis: the one of the Daily Planet building with the giant globe. He didn't expect Lois to come there to find him like the good old days; if she wanted to speak to him she'd have done so during their working hours. But she was still angry with him. Lois acted as if Bruce was her friend from years and not Clark Kent; and that pissed him creating a slow burning feeling of betrayal.

His ears caught screams of terror in Gotham’s City Hall square and his heart skipped some beats like the old times. He cocked an eyebrow: it seemed that his hearing still followed the old habits…As his heart that immediately convulsed in fear for…

He pressed his lips because he didn’t want even to think of his name because he didn’t want the scenes of that dream being replayed – a dream that had shaken him up: Bruce a bright star leading him out of the darkness and despair? So stupid. For once, Bruce always said that Clark was the light in his life and if someone was in darkness this was Bruce not him.

Anyway he should fly to Gotham because obviously people were in danger…and now he caught the reason: Joker. An old rage was ignited inside him and he clenched his fist ready to take off.

“Kal? There you are!”

Strong feet landed on the rooftop and Superman turned to see Diana coming to him.

“I was waiting for you and I got worried so I flew around to find you. What?” she asked brushing his cheek.

“Joker attacked in Gotham – I must go.”

She smiled and her blue eyes sparkled.

“Why? I know he is dangerous and all and I would have rushed there along with you but Gotham has Batman and Ironman is there guarding his little friend. So now that you don’t have a special interest on the city why going there? In a city that has her protectors?”

Superman’s brow creased: indeed, Ironman was there and Thor (he cocked an eyebrow, the old grudge blasting) so people wouldn’t be in danger. Besides Batman demanded that he never come to Gotham again so why bothering?

He caressed Diana’s hair and engaged her lips in a tender kiss that soon became almost wild as they hugged each other. No, there was no reason for him to return to Gotham: as a matter of fact, now he felt normally about that city, that is to say appalled. He preferred to be in places with light and cheer
like Metropolis; being with bright people like Diana.

Diana’s eyes sparkled as they locked with his.

“To my apartment?”

Superman smiled.

“Where else, my Star?” Diana smiled satisfied on that but Superman felt something inside him stabbing aggressively on that small word.

“Tony, first of all, our gratitude for the perfect intervention of the Avengers: many innocent lives were saved thanks to you even if Joker escaped”

Bruce had turned on the 50” plasma TV in the sitting room and watched the live connection with the City Hall Square; Leslie stood at his side with her arms crossed her eyes to the screen but on the same time regarding Bruce’s reaction; she knew that being forced to not help as Batman had its toll to him and wanted to prevent any unpleasant consequences to his health. What happened at the children’s hospital rang the alarm about how his emotions could threaten his recovery.

Mayor Garcia had just thanked Tony with a warm handshake; S.H.I.E.L.D.’s director had stayed behind while Steve and Thor made a quick escape from the cameras and the enthusiastic crowd. Now GCTV’s reporter had approached Tony, still in Ironman’s armor minus the face plate.

Tony had his usual smug expression that Bruce found so cute and funny.

“We just did our duty” he squinted to read the reporter’s ID on his lapel “Alex” he waved, kissing his palm and sending kisses at the cheering crowd around that gradually found again his mood as the singers moved on the stage and started the celebration that Joker almost destroyed.

“Yes and we are thankful but…” the reporter’s eyes glimmered wickedly “Gotham has her local protector” Tony scratched his hair and Bruce understood that he felt uncomfortable. “In fact people wonder why Batman didn’t show up to stop Joker…”

Bruce bit his bottom lip and Leslie fumed; even Hero on the carpet was unusually quiet.

Tony laughed and cocked his eyebrows.

“People wonder or Joker? Because Joker said that, my friend.”

The reporter fell silent for a second but immediately continued.

“I think it’s the same, Tony.”

Tony now got serious.

“No, Alex, it’s not. Batman is not obliged to succumb to every crazy whim that clown has…” the reporter was ready to retort but Tony caught him to this. “I’m sure that Batman was ready to intervene but seeing us handling the situation he stayed away watching just in case because having succumbed to Joker’s demands he would have fed the lunatic’s belief that he can attack innocent people to get what he wants.”

The reporter smirked.
“Is this a manifestation of Avengers taking charge of Gotham?”

Now Tony lolled his head on the side, stabbing the reporter with two completely still sparkling eyes.

“I think, my friend, that you only talk and don’t listen! There’s no manifestation: Avengers respect
Batman and are proud of being able to assist him in his job…”

Tony turned to leave, his irritation evident to Bruce but then he halted and looked at the camera.

“We are happy that for once we could offer something to that city that Batman saved all alone.
Batman fought for this city when nobody else dared – even Superman didn’t mess with Gotham…
and Batman is still protecting Gotham.”

“Close” Bruce said and the TV obeyed.

It was what he expected: those holograms were useless. His absence from the streets would become
clearer and then it was a matter of time before criminality re-organized. Not to mention that rumors
would begin to spread about something thwarting Batman from being out there: being dead or
seriously injured or disabled…

Bruce clenched his jaw: that was Joker’s plan. To drag him outside making Bruce use the means that
the clown suspected that he had enabling him to appear scarce. He doubted that the clown wanted to
disclose his identity – or what Joker believed was Batman’s identity – yet he enjoyed making Bruce
feel desperate. The man just wanted to get him back in the streets to indulge his crazy desires.

Anyway, Bruce felt terrible: he was of course happy and relieved that Joker was stopped with no
casualties and he was grateful to the Avengers yet there was a very bitter taste in his mouth and a
clenching in his insides. He wasn’t so selfish to demand that Batman made all the savings in Gotham
yet what just happened didn’t feel right. And Bruce could admit that he was disappointed with
himself: investigating and planning from the Manor was so lame!

Leslie placed her hand on his shoulder and Bruce looked up at her.

“You put too much weight on those shoulders… Don’t think it too much: it’s over, Bruce: nobody
got hurt and people will forget that Batman wasn’t there.”

Bruce shook his head; he didn’t want Leslie to understand his empty feeling and of course neither
Tony nor Steve nor Thor; and of course his Selina.

“I’m fine, Leslie.”

Hero was staring at him and climbed on his lap to get Bruce’s petting.

“Forget Joker and his shenanigans” Leslie said sternly not letting her sadness derived from Bruce’s
dispirited eyes defeat her “we have to appoint some exams. I don’t like at all what happened at the
children’s hospital.”

Bruce made a big nod.

“So…that was the reason you remembered me, huh?” he teased her. “Okay, okay… Tell me, Leslie,
apart from Alfred, Elliot did tell you as well, right? Great confidentiality…”

Leslie’s eyes became serious.

“Dr. Elliot did the right thing, Bruce” Bruce crooked his mouth. “I am your doctor and I should
know everything that concerns your health.”

Bruce nodded.

“Fine but let Christmas pass…I don’t want my body being scrutinized again as the icing of the cake…”

Leslie squatted and hugged his shoulders.

“You feel awful…” she pressed her lips “about Christmas and all. I understand, Bruce; but we are here: we won’t let you alone. Ever again.”

He smiled and patted her hand, Hero pawing at it playfully.

“I know, Leslie” he inhaled “and it’s not that bad with all of you around” he hurried to reassure her.

Leslie shook her head not persuaded at all but she didn’t manage to say anything because the Manor’s cable phone rang.

“Hellll—looooo, honey.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose hearing that familiar nasal voice and let Hero on the floor.

“Are you there?” Joker asked worried.

“What do you want, Joker?”

“You are sooooo aggressive, babe. OHOHOHO! I hope youuuuu out this in bed” Bruce closed his eyes. “I was expecting youuuuu in the square under the tree…beside the sleigh…I aaaaasked you…What happened and you stooood me uuup? You hired assistants to do your job?” he made his voice complaining. “It’s nooooot kind at aaaall: weeeee have something special!”

Leslie looked at Bruce frowning but he gestured to her to not speak.

“In the square, you called Batman, not me.”

“What’s the difference? HEHEHEHE...Don’t tell me your disorder turned into...mmm...how the shrink...Identity disorder with amnesia?”

“What are you babbling about?”

Joker’s voice became serious.

“I know the truth, okay, honey? I know who you truly are, babe…” his voice was more nasal than usually. “How doooo you feel having others do the job? I know your heart ripped your rib cage to fly there: why you didn’t, darling? I know you have found a way: this is why people say that are seeing you in action. Gothamites will start wonder if you don’t show up when I ask for you...Aaaand I intent to do that a looooot, honey... My wettest kisses to your...mmm...everything...I can’t wait to complete our marriage” he sighed longingly and ended the call.

“What did he want?” Leslie asked outraged.

“To tell that he knows who I am and laugh at me watching useless…”

Leslie’s eyes sparkled.
“You’re not useless!”

“Not completely…” he answered and took his Cosmos touching the screen and selecting the right program.

Leslie approached intrigued, watching frowned.

“What are you doing?”

“The central processor in the cave has a system of locating calls from to the cable phones of the Manor.”

“The time he stayed on the phone was enough?”

“It doesn’t need much time…If I manage to locate him, then Jim and the police will catch him” he was speaking and giving the specific orders with rapid touches on the screen; he waited for a few seconds and then a window popped up that made Bruce curse. “Something stops the locating… damn!”

Leslie had leaned above the screen so she immediately saw that there was no finding. Bruce huffed and closed his eyes; Leslie patted his back.

“It’s alright, son: just do not be sad: you’ll find him. Some transference must have blocked your system.”

Bruce nodded, his mind on Loki: he was sure that the naughty god was helping his minion to stay out of any locating system. He was thinking that he wasn’t going to find Joker by sitting there, inside the Manor which made him feel his heartbeat unbearable to calm but he didn’t want to worry Leslie. So he nodded.

“I’ll find him.”

Tony sat on the stool in front of the bar made from shining dark brown wood; he was sipping slowly his ginger ale; he was thoughtful but he wouldn’t betray his promise to Pepper, to Bruce, to Alfred, to himself to not slip again to heavy drinking. And most of all, now he had Bruce back and there was every reason for him to be optimist even though many thoughts wanted to spoil that: the coming operation, Joker, Superman’s cruel behavior and Bruce’s well hidden sorrow…

“Tony! Fancy that!”

The billionaire left his thoughts and returned to his surroundings to see Thomas Elliot along with his cute girlfriend whose name Tony couldn’t remember.

“Thomas, Miss…Kelly” he greeted them finally being able to remember her name. “I’d have invited you to join me but I’m sitting at the bar.”

Thomas smiled and waved that off.

“I’ve already made reservations so if you want you can join us.”

Tony shook his head.

“I won’t stay much; I wait for Pepper to finish some works.”
Thomas lolled his head on the side.

“Come on, Tony, it’ll be an honor for us” he arched his eyebrows “having a drink with Ironman…I saw you and Captain America stopping Joker. On TV, of course, but there was a thick crowd around you cheering” Thomas snorted inside with the billionaire’s need for attention. “How do you manage to escape your fans?”

Tony chuckled.

“I like drawing the attention but when I want I can get away…” he hopped from the stool and followed them to their table.

Thomas ordered their aperitif and Tony noticed that he didn’t gave the chance to the young lady to order for herself – of course, she didn’t seem annoyed. Dr. Elliot noticed Tony’s thoughtfulness and asked him if he wanted something to drink but the billionaire shook his head in denial.

“I admire your determination to stay away from alcohol” Thomas said when the maitre left.

Tony lolled his head on the side cocking an eyebrow.

“Booze isn’t stronger than me, Tommy” he smiled.

Thomas nodded.

“And Bruce’s return from the dead must be a strong motive to keep you away though…” he shook his head “now with his paraplegia must be difficult.”

Kelly was looking the doctor like hypnotized. Tony frowned.

“Bruce is always his beautiful self even in this chair…”

“I’m not saying otherwise but still seeing your best friend in this state, especially when his health must be still fragile…” Tony was looking the doctor straight in the eye but he was rimming his glass nervously. “I know because my mother…well…has her own disability.”

Tony was happy for the chance to change the subject.

“What’s your mother doing? Has been ages since I last heard of her…”

Thomas shook his head.

“Her disability became worse and I had to trust her to a fine institution since I couldn’t offer her the treatment she deserved. But Bruce confined in a chair…I can imagine how you and Alfred feel…”

Tony felt irritation fueling inside him.

“Bruce is alive, back to us, we have him with us: his presence is a gift. But how can you claim that you know how we’re feeling?”

Thomas blinked and licked his lips tapping his finger once in the linen white tablecloth.

“I spent a lot of time with people with severe spinal injuries and their families” Tony narrowed his eyes interested which was what Thomas wanted. “I have developed a breakthrough system for the remediation of such impairments – very special cases, complex and severe. We have great – miraculous I dare say results” now Tony’s frown became deeper. “Superman had the kindness to help us: his laser vision is more precise and sensitive than our robots.”
Tony shook his head pursing his lips.

“I wouldn’t trust him…”

Thomas chuckled.

“I should assume that the rumors were true then? I mean about Bruce and him? And now that Superman is with Wonder Woman you don’t want him near Bruce? Their split must have hurt Bruce so much” Thomas would have given one of his doctorates to have witnessed Bruce’s heart breaking.

Tony yanked his head backwards and laughed.

“Not at all, Tommy… Bruce with Superman! For fuck’s sake… I just don’t trust Superman’s good intentions, that’s all.”

Thomas leaned towards him.

“Superman or not, our program have a success rate almost perfect” inside he was cheering because Tony’s eyes sparkled with fervent interest. “I don’t want to brag that my experience with severe and complex spinal injuries surpasses any other doctor on the field…And I know that you will do everything to help Bruce walk again…”

“What do you want to say?”

Thomas leaned back to his chair – he was sure that he could take the airhead billionaire to his side.

“I can help, Tony…I was bad with Bruce during our childhood but I’m not a brat anymore. I can and I want to offer my assistance to your effort. Because we both know that it is a huge effort with many dangers despite your genius – I’m sure” he arched his eyebrows for emphasis “inventions to restore his mobility. You’re creating new wonders to help him – I know you do; but Bruce is still very fragile and the operation will be challenging…” Thomas was cheering inside knowing that he was hitting the right buttons but all the time kept his serious expression.

Tony raised his glass and gulped the liquid: he knew Bruce’s sentiments about the man but he would want every help that he could get.

“Think about it, Tony: I know that Bruce after the Hell he’s been through is very cautious with people like me that once hurt him” he pressed his lips sorry. “But, you, Tony, can see clearer: why not giving Bruce extra chances?”

Tony looked at him.

“I don’t know, Tommy: it’s too early…”

Thomas nodded.

“I understand. Look, give me your email and I’ll send you everything about our project and the success’ rates so you can think about it and decide.”

“I appreciate that, Tommy.”

The waiter came back with their aperitif.

“Are you sure you don’t want some?” Thomas asked.

Tony shook his head and saw Pepper entering the restaurant.
“My date…” he said rising. “Thanks for the company, guys! Have a great night!”

“Thank you, Mr. Stark” Kelly replied and Tony kissed her hand.

Thomas arched his eyebrows.

“Your e-mail, Tony…”

Tony seemed thoughtful for a second but then pulled out of his jacket’s inside pocket one of his cards and gave it to him.

“Good night, Tony” he said eyeing the card. “Give my best regards to Bruce.”

“I will” Tony answered and marched towards Pepper.

*I'm sure he'll be very happy to hear…* Thomas thought and chuckled. He had been tempted to disclose to that asshole Bruce’s collapse at the hospital just to see the airhead panicked but he wanted to prove to Bruce that he was trustworthy. The best way to hurt someone was by gaining his trust, even if that was as difficult and cringe worthy as with the Wayne brat.

Loki paced in front of Joker’s awful ‘Christmas tree’, keeping his hands behind his back and his head stooped. Every now and then cast a glance to the tree shaking his head.

“And he called me a pervert…”

He was sideways looking at the door to one of the warehouse’s apartments where Joker had isolated himself. Finally, the clown made his appearance, clearly happy, hopping in his way towards Loki. Joker watched him amused, and jumped to the pink armchair next to the box with the TV set, putting his legs over the armrest dangling them.

“I’m going to say my great line now” the jester said pompously. “Why sooooo serious?” he giggled. “Don’t tell me you didn’t got along with John?” he gestured to the skeleton. “Whyyyyy? I know he isn’t a great talker buuuut he’s the perfect listener…Hehe” he stopped laughing and shook his index finger. “I knooooow: it’s about the square… Whyyyyy? It was soooooo fun! Of course, I’d prefer it if Batsy honored us buuuuuut a humble clown can’t have everything, right? Even if he’s meeeeee! HEHE!”

Loki stopped abruptly and glared at Joker, his eyes sparkling. Joker giggled.

“Why you had to do that?” the god asked him.

Joker shook his head nervously and pouted.

“I never ‘have to do anything’…” he opened wide his arms. “I just do it!”

Loki narrowed his eyes.

“Yes, I know your stupid tactic” Joker mouthed ‘stupid’ as if he was hurt. “But now you’re not alone: you’re with me.”

Joker completely unfazed cocked an eyebrow.

“When you say ‘with you’ I hope you don’t mean…” he lowered his voice “sexually. I’m a married man in loooove with his wife…my wife not his…wait…you got the meaning…”
Loki rolled his eyes.

“I’m not *that* pervert and I have taste” Joker pouted. “We have a goal to achieve.”

Joker brought his legs down and leaned towards Loki.

“We? Goal? Like in soccer?”

“Cut the crap, clown! Do you forget that I freed you? Do you forget who I am?”

Joker stood and rolled his finger.

“If you’re going to throw me again a bucket of water, don’t: I bathed a week ago. Buuuuuut you said that I’m a freelancer soooo I don’t have to ask you for everything.”

“Not when you decide to act so openly and draw the Avengers on you! I thought you wanted the same thing!”

Joker smirked which highlighted his left scar.

“Whi--ch is?”

“Ridiculing the Avengers and establishing our power…”

“Nah…nah…nah. Myyyyy power is aaaaalready established and I have aaaaalready ridiculed every superhero except Bats who can’t be ridiculed. So youuuuu’re talking about youuuuuourself; why should I listen to your rant?”

Loki brought his face in front of Joker’s clenching his jaw.

“Because you want Bruce Wayne and with what you did the Avengers will guard him more closely. Also you exposed me! I had to intervene to save you from Thor and he might be blond but he isn’t stupid!”

Joker lolled his head on the side and giggled.

“Thaaaat joke is sexist aaaaaand outdated – you need to renew your repertoire.”

Loki rolled his eyes.

“I will laugh with Thor but once and for all!”

Joker nodded.

“Establishing youuuuuur power aaaaand giving me Brucey? Because I noticed an increased interest of the blondie for my wife…”

“Exactly! So stop your nonsense if you want to get what you want!”

With a pop the god vanished and Joker’s Cheshire smile curved his face.

“I will get what I want buuuuuut who told yooooo that I’ll work for your stupid plans?” he rampaged his jacket’s inner pocket mumbling “plaaaaans…everyone knows that plans are made to be ruined…” he found his oldfashioned cell phone and dialed a number. “Oh! Dear Lo--Loki, you should have known…Hello, my dear, Scarrrrrescrow! Have you chased away maaaaany crows? HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA! Oh! C’mon, don’t be soooouuu gloooom…” his voice became sharp.
“Let’s talk about business: I know you dooooon’t like what I don’t like…taking orders…”

Bruce was gazing at Gotham’s sparkling skyline; the view was breathtaking as the lights from Christmas decorations were visible even from that height. The Imperial hotel was one of the tallest buildings in Gotham so the view from the roof garden was one of the best in the city.

He had made reservations for the 23rd of December; not that he couldn’t choose a date sooner – as soon as Copplebot informed about Bruce’s interest he called him himself to reassure him that for him there was always a table in the Imperial roof garden. However Bruce wanted first to finish all his jobs.

As Bruce was waiting for Oliver Quinn in the table near the edge he couldn’t help but feel like flying again in the sky… The roof garden restaurant remained open throughout the year – even during the winter: the whole space was from a dome made with lightweight glass giving it the look of an atrium. The glass of the walls was so fine that gave the impression of not being there so if you sat near the edge it was like you were on the air.

So Bruce’s mind inadvertently went back, few months ago when he was flying with Clark’s borrowed wings and felt as if those wings were his…but they were borrowed and in the end had to be taken from him. He knew it from the start…He was just fooling himself all this time. He never should have relied and loved those wings; he should have kept using his own artificial wings which enabled him soar the sky.

Bruce wanted to sigh as the nostalgia filled his insides; his dead legs an unbearable burden even though he couldn’t feel them at all.

The space was elegantly decorated in Christmas spirit without exertion: only some gold colored bows on the walls and artificial snow on the pyramid like bar at the center that looked like made of crystal in the changing colors of aurora borealis – Bruce smirked on the irony.

The arctic impression was completed by an oval pond with crystal blue water that didn’t have walls and seemed like its water run to the road underneath: in the middle, mounted a Christmas tree from transparent ice with crystal penguins around which was something that Bruce hadn’t seen again.

However for Bruce only Gotham’s skyline was eye catching.

He heard footsteps but didn’t turn to not show that; he looked at his guest only when he was there. Oliver Quinn was dressed in an expensive handmade dark blue suit with silver colored tie and light gray shirt. He smiled to Bruce without being able to outcast his smugness but Bruce could admit that he was a very charming man.

“Oliver, hi” he gave his hand for a handshake “I wish I could stand to welcome you. Have a seat” he showed him the armchair opposite.

However Quinn didn’t sit immediately but regarded Bruce appreciatively.

“You’re gorgeous in every color but black is your color” he said arching his eyebrows admiring the tailored two piece black suit Bruce was wearing with a white silken shirt and black pinstriped tie. “I didn’t have to ask to find you” he smiled seeing Bruce blushing “I just followed the stares of women and men…”

“I think that they admire the view; it is breathtaking” Bruce retorted.
Quinn sat and looked around at the filled with people space.

“I had something more private in mind…” he said smirking, his eyes glimmering amused.

Bruce shrugged.

“I don’t see the reason…After all you told me that you didn’t want us to have dinner in the Manor so I assumed that you didn’t care about privacy.”

Quinn smiled and crossed his legs elegantly.

“Oh, Bruce…You’re so clever but I think that the real reason is that you just don’t trust anyone to be alone with – especially, after what happened with Luthor.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side.

“This is a business dinner, right?”

Quinn nodded.

“For starts…” the older man said mysteriously.

The maitre came and took their order; Bruce waited till they served them wine for Quinn and just mineral water for him before speaking.

“In New York we had started a conversation about Princess Diana.”

Quinn sipped from his wine and smiled wickedly behind his glass; his fervent eyes fixed on Bruce’s face.

“Right to the point, eh, Bruce? I hope you’re not in a haste to dispose of me?”

Bruce blushed and drank from his mineral water.

“Of course not! How is your staying in Gotham?”

“Splendid! This city has tremendous interest and I admire its unique beauty. Only a few people can see that beauty, right Bruce?”

Bruce nodded.

“Have you visited many places?”

“Only a few…I’m a man with peculiar tastes. But I know you’re anxious to hear about the Princess and if I remember correctly you had some suspicions that she is not real?”

“I never said that…” he didn’t want to reveal his suspicions to him. “Is there something that make you think that about her?”

Quinn smiled and Bruce understood that the man figured his attempt to get his answer.

“Not at all: she is real, Bruce, without any doubt. Believe me.”

“I’d have understood if you had doubts though: during your stay with the Amazons you were seriously injured and the fever, the pain could have distorted your judgement” his guest was shaking his head.
“No, Bruce; I stayed there some time after my complete healing and I was able to see things clear: everything we know from legends was before my eyes: the amazons, the locations, the temples, Quinn Hippolyta, Princess Diana.”

“It must have been difficult to communicate…” Bruce chose to investigate discreetly the details in hope to find the truth there.

Quinn smiled.

“Indeed; at first, all seemed Greek to me” he laughed “literally Greek…However, the Princess has the gift of picking up languages so it took her only a couple of days before being able to communicate with me in English.”

Bruce nodded.

“I’ve read that the Amazon’s island had no communication with the rest of the world: is that true or there were also other people?”

Quinn shook his head in denial.

“No: while I was there I didn’t see anyone apart from Amazons.”

“Would you be able to return in Themyscyrra?” Quinn’s eyes widened. “I mean would you be able to find again the location?”

The man laughed.

“You want to go there for vacations? Oh, Bruce…That would be difficult even for a professional sailor…and I don’t find the reason to go back. Okay, it's a beautiful place, a paradise on earth and the Amazon are gorgeous but what I want is in our world” he leaned towards Bruce startling the younger man.

Quinn smiled.

“Bruce, you’re still a child…the way you react to someone’s interest” he got serious. “Listen, I know why you’re so interested in the island: you hope to prove that the Princess is an impostor and get Superman back.”

Bruce frowned.

“I told you: I had nothing with him.”

“Indeed. Otherwise he wouldn’t be with Diana right now: I can’t believe that someone blessed with your love would choose to be with someone else. So forget everything about Themyscirrha and look ahead.”

Thankfully, their order came so eating could stop Quinn’s flirt.

Suddenly, a man around Quinn’s age approached their table.

“Is that Oliver Quinn? Fancy that! I couldn’t imagine that I’d find you in Gotham.”

Oliver eyed the man almost hostile which didn’t escape Bruce’s attention but then he stood and shook hands with the man.

“It’s been ages, Martin” he said. “How are you doing?”
“Fine, Oliver. I was sad when I heard about your shipwreck but something was telling me that you’d manage to make it.”

The man turned to Bruce and gave his hand for a handshake.

“Martin Hatch, delighted for meeting you, Mr. Wayne.”

“Me too, Mr. Hatch.”

“This man” Martin said gesturing to Oliver “Mr. Wayne, was definite going to survive: during our years in Yale he was great in every sport: the University’s champion.”

Quinn laughed.

“You exaggerate, Martin.”

“Not at all. Only in archery he was helpless…once he almost planted his arrow to the trainer’s arm” he laughed but Oliver’s face was serious.

“Yeah, archery wasn’t my thing – not a big deal…”

“Of course: one can be perfect in everything…Oh! I’m so happy I saw you, Ollie: we can arrange to meet some day – here’s my card: call me” Quinn took the card smiling cordially but Bruce was sure that he wouldn’t call his old classmate. “Have a great evening and I’m sorry for the interruption.”

“Not at all” Bruce answered smiling but Quinn just made a goodbye gesture to Martin and sat back.

“University acquaintances” he said grinning.

“He looked happy to see you again.”

“Who can tell?” he shrugged. “Now, Bruce, I think that collaboration between our companies will be very prosperous.”

Bruce was happy that discussion moved to less personal things.

“What do you have in mind?”

“First of all, Wayne Enterprises has a great fleet with deals in every important harbor in the world; my company needs a trusted distributor. Then I have heard that your company prepares some breakthrough things in the health field and, if you want, I’d like to invest on that: Quinn Corporation has developed some health projects and with your alliance we can make miracles.”

Bruce nodded.

“We can discuss details with the directors of each department and Mr. Fox; for starts, I agree that our companies’ collaboration will be for the best. We can arrange a meeting after Christmas and after my return from Metropolis.”

Quinn’s eyes darkened on the mention of Metropolis.

“Metropolis?” he shook his head. “The city of Superman? Bruce” he grinned “I know it’s none of my business but following Superman like a puppy doesn’t suit you. I admit that I had felt something for Princess Diana when she saved me but soon I realized that this was just gratitude and attachment – nothing more. Besides those superheroes, those god-like creatures are not for us.”
Bruce watched him keeping his patience and smirking inside on his remark about the so-called Amazon: who could stay in love with her anyways? Except for Superman of course…That bit hard his insides.

When Quinn ended his ‘speech’ Bruce shook his head.

“First, you’re right: is none of yours business. Second, Metropolis is not just Superman’s city; it is also the headquarters of LexCorp of which I’m a shareholder AND I must attend the annually meeting.”

The older man shook his head laughing and waved his hand.

“I’m hopeless in hiding my true feelings, huh?”

Bruce looked at him serious: he doubted that this man couldn’t hide his feelings or anything he wanted. As a matter of fact Bruce was sure that this man let to be shown only what he wanted.

“Mr. Quinn, I think that you should stop this game with me.”

The older man narrowed his eyes almost hurt.

“Bruce, I…”

“Mr.Quinn…”

“Come on, Bruce, do not do this: call me Oliver.”

Bruce’s stare was sharp.

“There’s no reason to call you Oliver: it seems that doing this makes you think that you have the right to press me and do inappropriate remarks about my life.”

The older man widened his eyes.

“For pity’s sake, Bruce, I didn’t mean to become annoying; my sympathy for you – I admit it – made me a bit more uninhibited with my remarks but this isn’t a reason for you to be mad.”

“Then stop doing it.”

Quinn pursed his lips and nodded.

“I apologize: I admit that I was insensitive…not thinking about your sensitivities…” he locked eyes with Bruce and put his hand on the table ready to touch Bruce’s hand; he stopped the last moment. “I’m sorry but you’re too important for me.”

Bruce shook his head exasperated.

“You don’t even know me!”

Quinn smirked.

“Some people don’t have to know each other much: it’s like being together for an eternity. I know the darkness you live in and nobody else could understand…”

Bruce inhaled deeply: suddenly, he felt exhausted; his eyes were blinking unstoppable and he couldn’t stop them from snapping closed as much as he tried. He was aware that he shouldn’t sleep
there but he was falling rapidly: he managed to catch the worried stare of Quinn and Bruce would have believed that he drugged him but he would have sensed it if something was in his food or drink.

Quinn stood and leaned over him.

“Bruce?”

“I…” he didn’t manage to say anything more because his eyes closed and his head would fall on the table if Quinn didn’t hold him.

The older man made a gesture with his head and the maitre rushed to their table. The poised man became panicked seeing their prominent client unconscious but Quinn looked him reassuringly.

“Mr. Wayne just fell asleep: he is under heavy medication and he just exhausted these days…and he wouldn’t want people to be upset nor the journalists around the hotel make headlines about this” he put a bill into the man’s chest pocket and the man nodded. “I’d appreciate if you take us to a suite.”

When Bruce woke, sleep was still heavy on his eyelids and head; yet he had learnt from Ra’s to master his body needs. So before opening his eyes he knew that he was in a room he didn’t know and that someone was with him: so close that he could sense the hot air of his breath – someone was staring at him, inhaling deeply as if sniffing him.

He remembered what happened at the restaurant.

And now he was laid on a bed, muffled in warm, soft blankets and dressed in his clothes minus the tie and the shoes. At least, he hadn’t been stripped: Bruce shuddered because even now waking up in a strange bed made him froze in a panic that any kind of training was unable to eliminate.

Oliver Quinn was sitting in the velvet stool at the side of the bed and was watching him with adoration.

Bruce snapped his eyes open and put his hands on the mattress jolting on the mattress in sitting position. He acted the panicked although he could master his dread; he looked frenzied around and when two tender hands held his shoulders reassuringly Bruce convulsed worse.

“No, let me go!”

Oliver switched on the nightstand’s lamp and hushed Bruce.

“It’s alright, Bruce; you’re safe.”

Bruce registered his surroundings: he was in a vast bedroom, luxuriously decorated with modern furniture and rich velvet carpet. The transparent silver curtains were drawn to keep away most of the external lights.

“What have you done?” Bruce demanded. “How dare you bringing me here after everything we talked about?” he pretended the outraged, terrorized which suited the traumatized Bruce Wayne but in fact he mostly was angry.

“I didn’t touch you, Bruce” he answered calmly. “You fell asleep and I brought you in one of the hotel’s suites.”

“You drugged me” he said with a slight tremor in his voice to indicate terror though he knew that the
man hadn’t done that – though the fact that he dropped asleep like that troubled him and he didn’t want even to imagine Leslie’s reaction upon hearing it.

“Bruce, I swear I didn’t.”

“Okay, let’s say that you didn’t; why did you bring me here? My people will be worried…”

“Please, calm down, Bruce: I already informed Alfred.”

“No, you didn’t; if you had he’d have come and take me to the Manor.”

Quinn shook his head.

“I would have taken you there myself, Bruce but the hotel was full with reporters for the Hollywood star who lives here and I thought that you wouldn’t want them to chase you or make a fuss about your supposed collapse. Alfred thought the same and agreed to come and get you after the reporters leave the building.”

Bruce lowered his eyes somewhat calmer.

“How do you feel?” Quinn asked concerned. “You must be exhausted to fell asleep like that in a place with music and noise.”

But Bruce shook his head and rubbed his forehead.

“Why you were staring at me like that?” he asked calmer.

Quinn stretched back smiling.

“I think that is obvious” he licked his lips “because you’re the most beautiful person I have ever seen” Bruce closed his eyes exasperated. “And that beauty becomes irresistible when you’re in sleep’s embrace…Your body’s perfume drew me and I couldn’t nor I wanted to resist.”

Bruce widened his eyes and looked around furious for his wheelchair.

“Where’s my chair?”

“Are you so hasty to leave?”

Bruce yanked his head backwards and then locked eyes with the older man.

“You must forget all about this, Oliver! Nothing can happen between you and me: I’m not made for these things.”

Quinn smiled with his smug way.

“On the contrary you are made only for these things: to be loved and worshiped by someone who can appreciate what you are.”

Bruce moved his body to the edge of the king size bed determined to crawl if he must to his wheelchair. But Quinn stopped him.

“I’ll bring it” and when the wheelchair was there and Bruce sat “I’d never hurt you, Bruce: I just did what I thought you’d want. If I upset you, I honestly apologize.”

He gave him his Cosmos phone and stood.
“Here: Alfred waits a call: it’s better to not drive yourself” he walked to the other end of the room to the armchair where Bruce’s jacket and coat were neatly placed.

“I’ll be just fine” Bruce snapped at him and put on the jacket Quinn held for him; he put the phone into his jacket’s inner pocket and made to move towards the salon.

But Quinn stopped him showing his feet that were without shoes. The older man took Bruce’s black leather shoes, knelt and almost reverently took each foot and put it inside. Bruce felt goose bumps and that infuriated him so he wheeled his chair towards the exit.

Quinn stood, taking Bruce’s long coat and followed him with confident strides.

“Reporters have left the building” he said and approached the younger man holding his long coat.

He helped Bruce wear it and their eyes met - Quinn’s eyes for the first time were almost begging.

“Do not be angry with me, Bruce: I cherish your friendship if I can’t have anything more…”

Bruce huffed.

“You must understand…”

Quinn shook his head and grinned.

“I do…Can I hope to your friendship?”

Bruce lowered his eyes thoughtful, then looked again at the older man and nodded before moving to the door that Quinn opened for him.

The older man escorted him till the underground parking just in case but they stayed silent parting with a simple ‘Goodnight’.

Quinn watched the black, sleek wonder of a car taking Bruce away with an enigmatic smile on his lips and infinite adoration in his eyes.

“You can’t imagine, Bruce how difficult it was to be so close to you; seeing you sleeping, being so beautiful; and resisting the urge to claim your velvet lips…”

Bruce had found the chance to isolate himself in front of the big arch shaped window of the grand salon as Alfred, Leslie, Pepper and Ms. Todd were preparing the dinner and Tony was talking with Steve and Selina. The boys were watching some animated movie since Alfred punished Dick for his truancy by confiscating his tablet, smartphone and video games for the Christmas holidays. Hero was sprawled half asleep in front of the fully burning fireplace.

It was Christmas Eve and darkness had fallen all over making the grounds seem taken out of a fairytale under the light blue hue the tiny lights emanated hidden between the branches and the leaves.

Bruce wanted to stop his mind from thinking. What happened with Quinn; the fact that the man had an odd aura on him; the fact that he had been watching him while sleeping…

When he returned to the Manor that night it was past midnight; Alfred was waiting and once he heard the car rushed to help him.
“You should have called me, sir, to drive you home.”

“No need, Alfred” he waved that off but looked at him. “Why you let me in Quinn’s suite?”

“I thought that you wouldn’t like all these reporters making a fuss about the butler taking you back home unconscious… I didn’t want to let you to someone else’s attention but Mr. Quinn isn’t a criminal and Master Anthony was watching the suite all the time – just in case. Are you alright, sir?”

He nodded not wanting to drag more on the matter.

The knot in Bruce’s stomach and throat had grown more…despite the fact he had completed his checklist calling Cassandra and Ms. Kent It was Christmas’ Eve. He didn’t want to think of the one who was away; who had promised him that he’d be here with him – how things would have been if Clark was there.

He pressed his lips: he shouldn’t even think about Clark because his loved ones didn’t deserve to see him miserable while they were doing everything to cheer him up. He just hoped that Clark would have a Merry Christmas wherever he was; that he would be with his mother because Bruce doubted that Vivian would care to celebrate Christmas and even if she did it wouldn’t be the same. With his mother Clark would be closer to his human side and would give happiness to Martha. Did Kansas have snow?

And then his mind travelled back to a rooftop of an abandoned building filled with snow; a small, warm attic decorated simply but beautiful by a little girl. A little girl that provided him turkey and dessert; and a kitten who played at his feet; and then two orphan children playing snow fighting and making snow angels on the snow; the blackout that made all the stars in the sky visible… His Christmas miracle.

A gentle hand on his shoulder brought him back. He turned smiling to see Selina who squatted by his side.

“I know you have imagined this Christmas different…with him here…” she said softly.

Bruce shook his head.

“No, Sel: I’m happy I’m among all of you – here, in my parents’ home” he took her hand and intertwined their fingers kissing the back of her palm. “But there’s no snow…” he mumbled.

Selina shrugged.

“Who knows? It might start snowing…it’s freezing outside and the sky has that milky color. Maybe it does us the favor” she winked “but even if it doesn’t snow we still have a great time, right?”

Bruce’s smile was wide and reached his eyes giving them shine.

“Absolutely! Though…hm…” Selina narrowed her eyes smiling “you know what I’d want, Sel? To visit our rooftop, remember?” he locked eyes with her and she pressed her lips.

“How could I forget, sweetie?”

“You gave me the greatest gift, Selina, that night: a miracle…”

She lolled her head to the side.
“The blackout did help a lot…”

Bruce gazed at the grounds and the sweet melody of Tony’s angel on the tree’s top melt his heart.

“So we can go there, Sel?” he chuckled “I’d like to make snow angels even if they would have only hands…it seems that the snow angels of that rooftop are meant to be disabled…”

Selina chuckled.

“They demolished that building, sweetie, a couple of years ago…I’m sorry.”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“We must look only ahead, huh? Everything we love is deep in our hearts…alive…”

Selina’s eyes watered though Bruce had spoken completely calm.

“What?” he asked and caressed the liquid on her cheeks.

“Nothing…just that we are together in a warm place, with people we love, safe…without worrying about the time or if anyone is watching.”

“Who could imagine, huh?”

The bell of the front door rang and Tony went to open, Bruce leaning to see their visitor though he already knew that it must be Lucius.

“What smells so deliciously?” the scientist asked. “That’s embarrassing: my mouth already salivates…I feel like Pavlov’s dogs!”

Tony lolled his head on the side.

“Hm…You do bare some resemblance, Lucius…and I was always wonder what do you remind me of?”

Lucius chuckled.

“While Tony is like a polar bear” Bruce commented having moved towards them to welcome his loyal scientist. “Some days ago he caused panic in the Mall with his white fur…”

Bruce shook hands with a beaming Lucius while Selina chuckled and Tony lolled his head on the side scratching his hair.

“Few people can appreciate art…” he huffed.

“What art has to do with pure kitsch?” Selina teased him.

“As you see, Lucius, I’m between friendly fire…What can a genius do?”

Lucius cocked an eyebrow.

“Relax and enjoy it?” he winked.

Tony nodded.

“As always you’re right, my friend!”
They led Lucius to salon where Alfred came to serve some of his homemade liquor with orange flavor.

Clark approached the farm house hesitantly: the last time he was here he exchanged bitter words with his Ma and they hadn’t spoken since then. But it was Christmas Eve and Clark just couldn’t bear the thought of his Ma being completely alone to a house full of happy memories…And maybe he couldn’t bear to spend that night far from her.

Beside Diana wasn’t giving much credit to Christmas and she was invited to a reception at Washington. Superman was invited too but he said that there was something too important that he couldn’t leave.

The blinking tiny lights of the old Christmas tree that he was seeing as he was approaching became even clearer; from the small window of the living room. How many times he slept there hoping that he’d catch Santa Claus? But Jonathan always found a way to slip the presents without the Kryptonian with the super senses being able to catch him on act.

He remembered the evenings after the school closed for the holidays that he and his friends ran around in the decorated town and the winter countryside…Clark inhaled deeply the glorious scent of grass, icy air and burnt pine wood along with the smells from the delicacies his mother was cooking with Jonathan’s help.

The same smells hit his nose again: he had come flying yet he was in Clark Kent clothes. Still he hesitated to ascend the wooden steps because Ma would certainly hear him and he didn’t know if he deserved to be with her – even though he felt good about his choices.

Suddenly, the door opened and Martha came out. She halted for a moment looked at him and rush to hug him: *he is your son…you must never stop being there for him…*Bruce’s words echoed in her ears. The young man had called her to give her his wishes and urged her to spend the holidays with Clark: Martha could discern Bruce’s concern, Bruce’s agony to not spend Clark the Christmas alone.

She cupped her son’s face and kissed his cheeks.

“I knew you’d come, baby…” she said in a throaty voice.

“I couldn’t be away from you that day, Ma…”

“The dinner will be served in a few minutes” Alfred announced “so the young Masters and the very young Masters” he looked sternly at Dick and Jason “should get ready.”

However Bruce noticed the same blur in the air that told him that someone was out there so he took advantage of the fact that everyone rushed to the dining room and got out. Upon descending the ramp he felt like being somewhere else: quiet, relaxing, beautiful as the artificial little lights and the nature hugged him.

“You shouldn’t have come out without a coat” the blur took the form of Thor.

Bruce shook his head.

“I’m fine – besides we’ll go inside. Come!”
Thor smiled with Bruce’s kindness; his baby blues sparkling.

“No, I just dropped by to ask your pardon.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“Pardon?”

“I failed you” the god said touching his fist to his heart. “I had Joker and let him get away: it was
Loki – I know – who took him. I was searching for Loki all these days but he knows how to hide
himself and his palace.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Thor, you didn’t fail me in any way. Joker knows how to escape and with Loki’s help is even easier
for him. Yet I think it’s better you didn’t find your brother because this way we’ll be able to find out
if he has any connection to…” he halted thinking.

“To what, Bruce?”

“To the bigger scheme I sense…” Bruce said dead serious meeting the god’s stare.

“Master Bruce, come inside immediately” it was Alfred on the door already rushing there with a coat
stretched that immediately put on his young master. “Oh, master Thor…” he pressed his lips
uncertain “I’m not sure how a butler must address a god…”

Bruce couldn’t halt himself and started laughing. Thor laughed too.

“You can call me whatever you want, Alfred.”

“You certainly will join us” Alfred said in a voice that couldn’t take no for an answer.

Bruce smiled and shrugged.

“Now you can’t refuse…” he said playfully and the god smiled which smile became broader and
Bruce’s eyes bulged in a kid’s way when one snowflake sat softly on Thor’s chest. “It’s snowing!”

More snowflakes began falling increasingly thicker and Alfred patted his young master’s shoulder.

“Master Thor brought snow with him…” Bruce looked at the blond who blushed. “Now please do
come inside because the turkey is going to get cold and you, Master Bruce, as well.”

The dinner consisted of every delicacy that was a tradition for Alfred – especially, the famous
Pennyworth cake made everyone get two pieces. And the view of the snow falling heavily from the
wall length unframed window made everything more beautiful.

When the dinner ended, Dick took Jason to a corner.

“I can’t be with them anymore…” he mumbled.

Leslie stood and looked at Alfred.

“I can’t wait till tomorrow, Alfred!”

Alfred shook his head like saying I know and waved to her to go ahead.
She went to the tree and took a small present wrapped in silver paper with a light blue ribbon and gave it to Bruce.

“This is why I was absent all this time: to prepare this…” he kissed his cheek and Bruce untied the ribbon opening the present.

It was a leather case for a DVD. He looked puzzled at both Alfred and Leslie but everyone was doing the same.

“Well?” Leslie asked anxious.

Bruce put it inside the DVD player and it started.

Martha Wayne stood by the Christmas tree: she was like Bruce remembered her with the difference that she had a baby bump really huge. It must have been difficult for her to move around with that burden but she was laughing, her face radiating as she made gestures to Thomas who was holding the camera.

“Next year it won’t be so easy for you, Tommy” she said playfully. “We’ll have a tiny rascal messing with everything…”

“Maybe he’ll be a quiet kid.”

“Nah…he is kicking me all the time: he is active and strong and he is in a hurry to see the world…” she caressed her belly. “Easy, Bruce: are you so hasty to part with mommy?”

Thomas giggled.

“You are already calling him by name?”

“Why? You agreed to that name…”

The camera was left on the table and Thomas’ legs appeared as he rushed to his wife who laughed.

“Not in front of Bruce…” she teased him.

Then the font changed to a screen in black and white with a fetus almost fully grown sucking his thumb inside his mother’s womb – the sound of his heart beating the only sound in the silent room.

“You see him?” Leslie several years younger asked happily.

“Yes…” Martha and Thomas who held the same camera answered in unison.

“He is healthy and strong” Leslie said as the image changed slightly with her soft ministrations on Martha’s belly.

“He is…My little angel is strong…he is perched in his mommy’s belly and won’t let go…” her voice was choked in tears both happy and sad.

Thomas hugged her shoulders.

“This time everything will go alright, honey…”

Martha dressed in a red, fluffy night robe was sat in a high backed armchair in front of the fireplace, the fire the only light in the dark salon; she wasn’t aware of Thomas with the camera because she was singing with her sweet voice a lullaby – Bruce’s favorite lullaby. The camera zoomed and
showed what she was holding.

A really small baby, hardly one month old was nestled in her chest watching her fascinated mirroring her stare. She tapped his tiny nose.

“He is so cute…” Pepper said sighing.

“She says that to me all the time” Tony bragged thought his eyes were a bit watered.

“Sleep, my little star…Mommy is here and won’t let anyone ruin your dreams…Mommy won’t let anyone hurt you…”

A baby around a year old was scrawling on the thick carpet of the grand salon so fast as if he was competing in a race.

“Alfred, are you sure that we got every dangerous thing out of his reach?” Martha asked worried.

“Certainly, Ms. Wayne.”

“No…, no…Bruce, don’t grab the lights of the tree…”

Thomas chuckled.

“And you worried about the pregnancy pounds, darling…Our son is putting you under the best training program…”

“Stop laughing and come help…I don’t know if the tree will hold.”

Thomas laughed again.

“It’s a huge tree, Martha: a toddler can’t topple it…”

“I don’t wanna find out” she finally reached Bruce and nestled him in her chest. “Not so fast, Mr. Wayne…”

“Oh my God…” Bruce mumbled unable to stop his eyes from dripping.

“Ya wanna go an’ see?” Jason asked Dick who glanced there.

“No, I have no interest about their nonsense!”

A boy no more than five was hanging glittering balls to the tree staring with widened fascinated eyes.

“He is like a kitten!” Selina chuckled unable to hide her emotions and Steve kissed her cheek.

Tony snorted.

“When we met for the first time I told him that same thing and got a kick on the shin…And he had a strong kick for his age.”

“You want to put the star on the top?” Martha asked.

“I do it every year!” he said and looked at the camera asking from his father help.

“Alfred, please take the camera” Thomas said and soon he was in front of the camera taking Bruce from the armpits and placing him on his shoulders.
Bruce took the star from Martha’s hands and placed it on the top. When Thomas placed him down he made some steps backwards and lolled his head on the side regarding his work.

“Well?” Martha asked serious. “Do you approve?”

“It’s the most beautiful tree!” he exclaimed “but I can do better…”

“And what do you want from Santa?” Thomas’ voice was heard behind the camera.

“To bring gifts to every child in Gotham…” he said dead serious but in the end he pouted.

“I’m sure he’ll do his best, Bruce…”

The little boy looked smartly at his dad.

“You mean you will wear again the Santa Claus’ suit like you did for me last Christmas and go to every house in Gotham?”

Martha giggled and caressed Bruce’s shiny locks.

“Well, Mr. Thomas Wayne?” Martha asked towards the camera challenging.

“Mmm…Bruce, it was the real Santa…I’m too thin to be him, right?”

Martha turned to the little boy.

“He is indeed too thin to be Santa, sweetie; but lately he sports a little beer belly” she shook her head affirming but the boy was smiling wickedly.

“No, I’m not!” Thomas protested.

The next scenes were from Bruce’s last Christmas with his parents and it was exactly as he remembered it: the Cinderella fairytale, Tony’s explanation about Santa Claus, the angel Tony manufactured for their tree.

Pepper laughed.

“Tony, you were a very funny teen…”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“The girl of my class would beg to differ…” he said smugly.

Without anyone noticing Dick with Jason had approached and watched silently: Dick’s curiosity won his detest. Jason at some point elbowed him and gestured towards the screen.

“He looks very much like yar little brother” he whispered and Dick clenched his jaw.

The older boy didn’t answer and left before anyone from the adults noticed him.

Bruce registering for the first time Hero that have climbed on his lap, looked at Leslie and Alfred not bothering to wipe his eyes or his drenched cheeks.

“Thank you – both of you…This…this was great: I couldn’t imagine that…” his voice was choked and Leslie rushed to him and hid him to her chest.

“I’m sure they are smiling happy right now seeing how great their son is…”
Bruce knew that everyone was looking at him and didn’t want to ruin that so he chuckled.

“One thing is sure: my father had an unfulfilled wish to be a director…”

Everyone laughed and Bruce’s mind eyes travelled to two lonely gravestones under the heavy snow falling; in the chill and the loneliness of the night they looked like being cuddled.

The other morning the snow had covered everything and Bruce couldn’t help but stare outside all the time till the Haven. He wanted to be with the orphan children that morning. Those children had shown how much they loved him and he had promised them a party for the Christmas.

So they had organized the party for the Christmas morning where the star would be Santa Claus giving presents to the children.

When the Santa arrived carrying the red sack with the presents Bruce had bought the children gathered around their favorite grandpa cheering and Bruce from the other end of the room with Alfred on his side, once again those days felt recharging from their happiness… He stared at the Santa who was tall and round as he should with a big fluffy white beard and hair.

However all of a sudden, as Santa was giving a boy his present he lolled his head to the side and stared at Bruce who immediately recognized those eyes – the broad smile in Santa’s face revealing the edge of a mark that went under the fake beard.

Bruce’s spine froze and he clenched the armrests ready to order his legs to support his body. He didn’t want to panic Alfred or the children and the staff; but he was terrorized because Joker was there, disguised as Santa and he certainly had prepared something.

Joker was still staring at him smirking and Bruce widened his eyes as a frightened Bruce Wayne would have done. He watched with the corner of his eyes for the moment the Santa would make a movement to draw a blade and hurt the children – some sweat drops popped up on his forehead.

But as the Joker-Santa gave the last present and stood to leave taking advantage of the kids being engaged with their presents no weapon appeared. He just turned his head towards Bruce and winked.

“HOHOHO! Merry Christmas, kids!” Bruce watched relieved and puzzled as the jester slipped out of the building.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!

Bruce was relieved that after the incident with the dead bats’ tree that Joker had slipped into the Manor, they had scanned carefully the packages with the presents for the Haven’s children before giving them to the Santa. Unfortunately, they didn’t manage to scan also Joker who found a way to get inside… Damn! His guts formed a knot as he thought Paul, the actor who was to play the Santa.

Alfred felt his young master’s upset and leaned to him worried.

“What is it, Master Bruce?”

Bruce was ready to rush out of the hall and search for Paul and make sure that Joker hadn’t planted any bombs in the building when Ironman entered the hall from the main entrance flying: a red and gold angel that made the children goggle and cheer excited. Yet Bruce couldn’t share their excitement because his priority was getting his friend’s help.

He tapped his watch to speak with Ironman.

“Tony, can you discreetly scan the building?” he asked calmly to not draw any attention from the members of the staff that was scattered in the room.

“For what?” Tony chuckled. “Sleigh’s bells and reindeers?”

“Bombs and toxins…” Bruce answered dryly and heard a sharp inhale of breath from Tony and Alfred.

“What happened?” Tony asked doing impressive twirls to entertain the kids.

“Master Bruce…”

“Our clown was here” Bruce said quietly avoiding using Joker’s name just in case someone was overhearing.

“Damn!” Tony spat floating over the children’s heads watching at the same time the indicators inside his helmet that displayed the buildings’ blueprint. “No, Bruce, there’s no bomb…neither toxin” relief was clear in his voice.

Bruce clenched his temple; he was relieved but the previous worry was still heavy on him. His mild movement made Alfred rush to the long table to bring some water to his master.

“But there’s a tied up man inside the Mall’s truck” Tony mumbled.

Alfred gave Bruce the glass of water and he sipped looking at his butler with gratitude.

“Is he alright?” he asked Tony calmly.

“Yes, just unconscious.”
Bruce closed his eyes in relief.

“Thank you, Tony!”

“Jarvis tells me that there’s no trace of the clown in the area so we can say that it is safe. Also, the security staff is informed about Paul and they rush there.”

“Yes, safe…” Bruce whispered and Alfred patted his shoulder.

When the children left the building to play with the snow followed by their teachers Tony found the chance to come to Bruce; the billionaire from Malibu had dissolved Ironman’s suit and stayed with his casual, jeans, blouse and jacket attire. He looked at Alfred’s pale face: only this color betrayed the man’s worry since otherwise the butler was completely poised.

“Are you alright?” he asked Bruce.

Bruce nodded.

“He came with no intention to harm anyone including me” it was the answer to Tony.

Tony widened his eyes in disbelief.

“Anyone noticed him?”

“No. Joker was dressed and disguised as Santa” Tony pursed his lips baffled. “He gave the presents to the kids; he winked to me and just left. I recognized him before he left but I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to panic anyone; besides if cornered, joker would definitely have reacted in a way that would endanger the children and the staff; I just watched him dreading that at any moment he’d pull out some blade or…” he shook his head “anything. It’s not that I could do much, couldn’t I?”

Tony rubbed soothing cycles to his friend’s back.

“I know it is difficult, little guy, but you must think your recuperation” he searched with his eyes Bruce’s face and it wasn’t difficult to discern his friend’s emotional exhaustion from this continuous state: Tony’s hatred for the Joker was boiling more because his stupid game upset Bruce and tempted him to do something detrimental for his health. “You did the right thing, buddy, for you and the others” he said warmly wanting to encourage his friend since he understood how difficult this constant fight was.

Tony looked at Alfred and understood that he was thinking the same things.

“What did he want?” he asked mostly to bring Bruce out of his thoughts.

“To play with me…” the younger man shook his head. “Show me that it’s easy for him to get near breeching my security and that he could make horrible things if he wanted…But he didn’t. For him it’s just a game so he does whatever comes to his head.”

Tony squatted in front of him and held his shoulders.

“Also, that this is just a truce and after that he’ll be near…” Bruce said gritting his teeth, without looking at Tony’s eyes.

But the billionaire from Malibu took gently Bruce’s chin and made him meet his caring gaze.

“We’re here to stop him; we’ll catch him, Bruce and he won’t hurt anyone.”
Bruce nodded and Alfred pressed his lips: this was the last thing his young master needed; that crazy man haunting him even with Master Anthony’s and the Avengers’ protection.

Bruce smiled and patted his friend’s shoulder.

“When I have you on my side I’m not afraid of anything, Tony.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows but shook his head in disbelief.

“You’re fearless either I’m here or not…Otherwise you wouldn’t insist on going alone to Metropolis. Bruce, I don’t think that you should go alone there.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Oh, Tony, I can’t drag you wherever I’m going…I’m a big boy now, you know!”

“You don’t drag me everywhere, buddy…But we’re talking about Metropolis…”

Bruce laughed.

“You forget that you’re talking with someone born and raised in Gotham? I think that even with a decreased criminality rate Gotham is still more dangerous than Metropolis” Tony closed his eyes and Bruce got serious. “What is worrying you about Metropolis? Luthor or Superman?”

Tony looked Bruce in the eyes.

“Both, the later one more” Bruce crooked his mouth. “If he is under the influence of that woman as you believe then he can be manipulated into hurting you. You can’t be alone, Bruce.”

“I can manage, Tony; I don’t think that he will try anything but even if he does I can protect myself…” his mind’s eyes saw again the Blade of Justice grazing Superman’s upper arm spilling blood.

“I know you are perfect able, Bruce but still I don’t want you to be forced to defend yourself; to exert yourself and maybe get hurt…”

“I won’t, Tony…” he said calm but confident causing Tony’s sigh.

The US national gymnastics team was staying at the Hilton hotel in Gotham’s Midtown. Athletes and trainers had come few days ago to make some training in the city’s sports’ arena – Gotham’s jewel since it was one of the few public buildings that were built during Falcone’s era (of course, the corruption committee found that the mayor had defalcated a large part of the money for the project).

It wasn’t much time since Trevor Breizic returned from the team’s last training before the gala and he had just changed clothes when the receptionist called informing him that Bruce Wayne was waiting for him at the hotel’s conference hall.

The man was puzzled, intrigued: of course everyone knew Bruce Wayne’s story and Breizic’s place in the national federation permitted him to know that this charity gala was proposed and organized by the Wayne Foundation.

But still if there was some matter concerning the gala’s preparation the old trainer doubted that Mr. Wayne would discuss it himself and with someone like him; he was a Scouter and a trainer so he had very little to do with organizing such events.
Upon pushing the door, Breizic saw the young man waiting for him sat in his wheelchair, deep in thought but as soon as the door opened and closed, Bruce steered his chair to meet the trainer. It was obvious to Bruce that Breizic was puzzled about Bruce’s visit yet shook politely the hand that he was offered.

“Mr. Breizic, I’m honored to meet you – I’m Bruce Wayne.”

The man smiled.

“I know who you are, Mr. Wayne: it is a pleasure meeting you’’ his Slavic accent was distinct despite his decades of living in US.

Breizic sat at one of the dark red velvet conference chairs and looked at Bruce.

“I know you’re wondering about the reason I wanted to meet you” Bruce said.

“As a matter of fact…yes. I thought that someone with your status would meet with the president of the federation or someone related with the management. I’m just a trainer.”

Bruce decided to get immediately to the point.

“Do you know Richard Grayson?”

Breizic pursed his lips and crossed his arms.

“John Grayson’s son…” he nodded. “Yes, I have seen him at the gym those days but we didn’t meet.”

“I see…Mr. Breizic, I’m Richard’s legal guardian.”

The older man nodded with understanding.

“So that’s the reason this charity gala is going to happen…” he said. “Till now nobody in Gotham seemed to care or dare to propose something like this… not that the Federation would have agreed with Gotham’s reputation… But now that someone as great as you proposed it things changed” he lolled slightly his head on the side. “And of course you got the idea because your ward is a gymnast: this is your Christmas present to the boy.”

Bruce’s eyes were too serious and Breizic was puzzled.

“Richard doesn’t know anything about my involvement and I’d like to remain like this. I admit that I did it for Richard but it is another good opportunity for Gotham to reclaim her position between the other US cities.”

The older man nodded pressing his lips.

“I know that this was one of the reasons that also urged the Federation to accept the invitation” he cocked his eyebrows “to encourage the youth of Gotham to consider sports more than delinquency.”

Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind and the old trainer frowned slightly.

“I know that Richard lost his family last year but he had a grandmother…”

Bruce nodded.

“She disappeared some days ago; however Ms. Turner had trust me with Richard’s guardianship.”
“I see… Losing his grandmother must have been another blow to the poor kid – nevertheless, it is a good thing he has a guardian as considerate as you.”

“The reason I wanted to talk to you, Mr. Breizic is that Ms. Turner was worried about Tony Zucco’s sudden appearance in Richard’s life” Bruce noticed Breizic’s nervousness hearing Zucco’s name; the man had a cold demeanor but the mentioning of Zucco caused the slightest of twitch which for someone like him was much.

“So…he came back…” he mumbled.

“You don’t like this man either…” Bruce searched the man’s icy gray eyes.

A bitter smile curved the man’s face.

“Like?” he shook his head. “The man is a scum. I hoped that he’d stay away from that family once he made so much money from John.”

“But he didn’t. Mr. Breizic; Ms. Turner told me that John Grayson was ready to fire him from his training team; that Tony Zucco had made him lose all his money and probably was responsible for John’s doping scandal.”

Breizic yanked his head and huffed.

“That’s true. John loved and trusted him but Zucco made him lose all his money and then the doping scandal was the final blow: John was sure that Zucco had slipped forbidden drugs in his water and asked me to become again his head trainer.”

“And you accepted though John had pushed you away because of Zucco.”

Breizic folded his arms and smiled shaking his head.

“John was my favorite athlete… I was very disappointed when he chose Zucco over me because I could see through that man and I was sure that he would destroy John…I admit I was bit pissed that he crossed me out like this” he met Bruce’s eyes “John’s move wasn’t good for my career…” he yanked his head thinking “but when he came back to me having realized the truth and his mistake, I couldn’t refuse his call.”

“And then the accident claimed his life…”

Breizic rubbed his temple.

“Accident…” he said in a mysterious tone.

“You don’t believe it was an accident?”

He shook his head.

“Nothing was proved…not that there was any chance for that… It was Falcone’s era and the police didn’t give a damn about the death of an athlete: they tagged the case as an accident and closed the file.”

It was true that there wasn’t much in the case’s file as Bruce had found out searching GCPD’s archive.

“This is the reason you never came back in Gotham?”
Breizic closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

“John was excited about the coming of his baby…and he died without having the chance to meet his son…he died prematurely and in a way…”

Bruce found the man’s eyes.

“It wasn’t an accident, right?”

“I can’t say that, Mr. Wayne…But John had confided in me that he was going to sue his cousin for fraud for the money he lost – you see, Zucco made real profit from the same investment that John lost his money.”

“You suspect that Zucco staged the accident?”

“He was the one who suggested the company that renovated the organs of the gym: he always managed to have good relationships and influence with the directors…The…accident happened one day after the new equipment arrived. I found screw cork from the bar: John was rehearsing his performance on the Horizontal bar” Bruce nodded “he was doing the most difficult of the time, giant swing and it seemed that he failed to grasp the bar again and fell badly on the ground…”

“Breaking his neck…” Bruce added and the older man nodded.

“It was tragic: everyone in the team was devastated” he snorted “Zucco of course overacted as always… People believed that it was a usual miscalculation that led to this but I was sure that John performed it perfectly as always: I knew every movement’s ankle, degree, second and these dimensions of John’s performance didn’t justify the missing of the bar…otherwise I would have run to catch him. And then I found the screw and it was filed so that with every bump the bar was moved the slightest bit…and in such difficult performances even the milimetres count…in the end, the bar had moved so that John’s fingers didn’t reach…” he stood. “Of course, after all these years who can prove anything?”

“Mr. Breizic, why didn’t you take the screw to the police?”

He smiled bitterly.

“I did but they laughed at me…”

“You have this screw?”

Breizic frowned.

“Are you hoping of reopening the case and proving…what?”

Bruce pressed his lips determined.

“I won’t let Zucco harm Dick as he did with John.”

“Zucco has woven his net around the boy?”

Bruce nodded and locked eyes with him.

“Mr. Breizic, what would you say if I ask you to become an advisor to Richard’s training? Of course, you’ll remain to your post in the Federation and you’ll be paid for your services.”

Breizic raised his palm smiling and Bruce was afraid that he had said something wrong.
“I don’t want any money, Mr. Wayne: let’s say that I owe it to John…yet I don’t know if I’ll manage to minimize the influence Zucco has to the boy.”

Bruce smiled relieved.

“It’d be much reassuring for me if you’re close to Richard: he’ll be so happy meeting his father’s trainer: he is thirsty to know things about his father…everything.”

Breizic smiled and his icy eyes became much warmer seeing the concern in the younger man’s eyes.

“You care too much for the boy…Richard is lucky…I’ll consider your proposition, Mr. Wayne.”

He turned to leave but Bruce halted him.

“Mr. Breizic” the old trainer turned “please, don’t say anything to Richard about my involvement.”

The older man grinned and nodded.

“You can rest assured, Mr. Wayne.”

On the night of 27th of December, Gotham’s Sports’ Arena was filled to capacity from enthusiastic people who cheered and applauded for their idols. It was the first time ever that the US national gymnastics’ team performed in the city and the fact the event was for charity reinforced people’s interest. The interior was decorated plainly to the holidays’ spirit.

The stadium was vibrating from the music that dressed the athletes’ performances and from the exclamations of agony and admiration every time a breathtaking exercise was taking place.

However, for Bruce watching Dick performing on the Horizontal Bar was the most agonizing. For each athlete of the national team, a local talent followed, and now it was Dick’s turn.

“It is difficult every time…” Alfred said smirking. “Maybe now you’d be more sympathetic to my worries?”

Bruce lolled his head on the side.

“It’s not the same, Alfred.”

They were a bit easier to talk because Jason and his mother had sat at the bleachers along with Selina and Steve while he and Alfred stood in a corner near the performance space.

“Yes, with all due respect, sir, with you it is worse!”

Bruce rolled his eyes and Alfred chuckled.

As Dick’s performance reached the end with the boy landing strongly on his feet, Bruce steered his chair towards the isle the athletes crossed after their performance to the shower rooms; he had noticed Breizic on the other corner of the terrain watching Dick rubbing his chin thoughtful – maybe the man had taken his decision.

The audience burst out in a deafening applause Bruce looked at Dick’s beaming, radiant face as he waved to the spectators; his heart beat faster.

“That’s pride, Master Bruce” Alfred winked.
Dick descended from the terrain to the isle with Jeffrey’s arm around his shoulders: the boy’s eyes were sparkling from joy and Bruce standing there to congratulate him felt happy too.

Dick upon seeing him, detached from Jeffrey and ran passing Bruce with an almost hostile glance to nestle into Zucco’s hug who was waiting. Bruce knew the man was there watching but he chose not make a scene and kick him out first because it was a public place and then because Dick was going to find out and things would get worse.

However watching the boy’s love and joy in his uncle’s hug made Bruce’s chest clench because he knew that the boy was up for a big disappointment once the truth was revealed.

Alfred leaned to Bruce’s ear.

“I’m sorry, Master Bruce” he said hiding his irritation because that boy was constantly causing pain to his master.

“It’s okay, Alfred…”

Zucco was staring at Bruce with a gleeful shine when suddenly his face contorted in surprise. Breizic with Jeffrey marched towards Dick.

Bruce looked at Alfred and then at the scene. Breizic under Zucco’s frown congratulated Dick and patted his back.

“I’m Trevor Breizic, Richard, your father’s trainer.”

Dick’s eyes were widened.

“I know, sir…I mean…you’re a legend!”

Zucco’s mouth was crooked in disgust.

“Like your father” the old man said. “And believe me when I say: he would be very proud of his son – your talent, Richard, parallels that of John’s.”

“Of course…” Zucco tried to gain Dick’s attention back but the boy had eyes only for the old man who didn’t waste even a glance to Zucco.

“I talked to Jeffrey, Richard, and if you want, I’ll gladly participate to your training from a advisory position.”

Dick’s eyes bulged and his mouth stayed agape.

“Wow! I mean…of course…I mean…it is an honor, sir. Thank you…I…I’ll do my best!”

Breizic smiled and patted the boy’s back.

“I know you will. Now go change before you get a cold.”

The boy galloped to the showers soon joined by Jason who caught him: the older boy hugged the younger and twirled him. He had forgotten in his excitement to greet Zucco who glared at Breizic and Jeffrey but didn’t say anything. He marched to the other direction and passed by Bruce who was watching calm. Zucco glared at him panting from his rage and was ready to say something but Alfred looked at him cocking an eyebrow.

“Is everything alright, sir? Do you need something?”
Zucco spat on the floor and rushed outside.

“Some people need to learn some manners” Alfred commented to Bruce who nodded.

Breizic cast a meaningful glance at Bruce but didn’t approach respecting Bruce’s wish for discretion. Alfred caught that glance and turned to his master raising his eyebrows.

“Things came as you wanted them, sir…” Bruce smiled. “Can your humble butler ask you something?”

The youth looked him puzzled.

“Alfred, do you need to ask?”

Alfred bowed slightly his head.

“Let me come with you to Metropolis, sir…” Bruce lolled his head on the side pressing his lips. “After your collapse at the hospital and your rapid sleeping I don’t feel alright leaving you alone.”

Bruce took Alfred’s hand in his.

“I’ll be fine, Alfred; besides, I don’t want Dick staying alone.”

Alfred wasn’t satisfied but he didn’t want to insist; Bruce felt bad for his butler’s worry but he really wanted to go by himself in Metropolis. He patted the back of Alfred’s palm.

“You will call me every fifteen minutes, after all… I know you will” he smiled “and I’ll stay only two days.”

Alfred raised his index finger sternly.

“I hope you don’t have anything naughty in that stubborn mind of yours…”

Bruce chuckled.

“Alfred…How can you say this? You know me…”

His butler shook his head and sighed.

“Exactly, sir…”

The LexCorp building stood impressive in the middle of Metropolis’ center; it was made entirely with glistening titanium glass so it sparkled like a gem under the Metropolis sun.

Metropolis didn’t have any snow and despite the heavy cold the sun was still shining.

Bruce gazed at the building from his car’s inside before turning towards the entrance of the underground parking. He had travelled to the city with his car; it was the safest way to bring along his peculiar luggage: nobody could open the doors or the trunk of this car.

The white-red bar descended blocking his path and the security guy raised his palm in a stop gesture; however when Bruce lowered the dark window to show his ID the man cleared immediately the way for him.
Bruce was prepared for the option of someone posing objections on letting him.

He parked the car having already seen Mercy Graves with her arms folded waiting for him in front of the steel colored wide lift. Bruce opened, placed his chair on the floor and sat; before he made a move towards the lift, Graves marched to him almost aggressively.

“Good morning, Mr. Wayne” she said coldly but politely; completely unfazed by the fact that she was part of his kidnapping by Luthor. “I’m here to guide you to the conference room: Mr. Luthor didn’t want you to be lost inside the building.”

Bruce smiled confidently, mirroring her mask.

“Thank you but there wasn’t any need for that…I can find my way.”

Mercy cocked her eyebrows.

“Oh! I’m sure…Shall we?” she made an inviting gesture and Bruce grinned moving ahead to the lift.

He hadn’t the chance to see the other floors but the Christmas decorations were scarce in the top floor where Luthor’s office and the conference room were. It seemed that Luthor wasn’t in celebrating mood…

The conference room was really gargantuan with nothing more than a long rectangular table made of glass and steel and the chairs for the members. The whole wall windows gave a spectacular view of the Metropolis’ skyline.

The table wasn’t full yet as the shareholders kept coming but Luthor was there sitting at the chair in the table’s head with all his arrogance radiating. His time in jail may have had an impact in his pride but he hid it too well.

Mercy made an inviting gesture with lot of irony in her face to Bruce and he keeping his poised face slithered calmly inside. He noticed with the corner of his eye Luthor jumping to his feet hasty to meet him; Bruce smirked inside: of course, Luthor was going to try to harass him. Well, he really looked forward to it: facing an opponent always raised Bruce’s mood.

Luthor stood in front of him grinning smugly.

“Mr. Wayne! How nice of you to come! I was sure that you wouldn’t grace us with your presence now that your local protector ‘protects’ someone else” he raised an eyebrow. “Or IronStark is floating over my building?”

Bruce smiled calmly.

“Is that so?” he answered sarcastic. “I don’t see something that I must be afraid of or you think otherwise? As for protectors, I don’t understand what do you mean but I’m certain you know better about protectors…especially, those who move the strings so that convicts are released.”

Some of the present shareholders were looking at them listening with interest.

“No handshake?” Bruce asked mock perplexed. “I know that in front of people you use to act politely…Even if that changes inside your suite.”

Luthor narrowed his eyes and offered his hand which Bruce shook.

“I see the L has vanished from your cheek…” he hissed. “Too bad… it suit you…Plastic surgery?”
Bruce chuckled.

“There was no need for that… It fainted too fast: you see, Mr. Luthor, you’re not as strong as you brag. May I?” he asked gesturing to the conference table.

Luthor fumed but made space for him.

“We’re not finished, Wayne…” he said from his clenched teeth.

Bruce smiled confidently.

“Of course not! I’m the owner of the 20% of LexCorp.”

Bruce steered his chair to the table and one shareholder that Bruce knew was Mr. Scales took the metallic chair away to make space for Bruce’s chair. The youth smiled and thanked him.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen” Bruce addressed the shareholders who were present. “I’m honored to meet you.”

They weren’t very warm but typically kind so they greeted Bruce accordingly much to Luthor’s wrath. And maybe that was the reason the shareholders spoke nice to Bruce: their distaste for Luthor was more than evident.

Which came out immediately after the board table were full and the doors closed.

“LexCorp is in the worst place in its history!” a young shareholder shouted at Luthor.

“We have lost loads of money and our shares are now junks!”

Luthor’s eyes were completely still, piercing the wall opposite him, his breath held.

“Because of him” he hissed showing with his head at Bruce.

However the younger man shook his head completely calm.

“Hardly. It was the company’s president’s actions that led to the rapid fall of the shares; on the contrary, LexLabs of which I have the control show healthy numbers and lately they began increasing their shares’ value in the markets.”

An elder shareholder who was watching carefully Bruce speaking shook his head.

“Yes, Mr. Wayne, but LaxLabs can’t be considered LexCorp anymore…”

Bruce smirked inside seeing with the corner of his eye Luthor’s brow crease: LexLabs was his baby and the lost had cost him more so when people rubbed it in his face.

“I just want to point out, Mr. Peabody” that was the name of the elder shareholder who seemed impressed by Bruce’s knowledge “that attributing LexCorp’s crisis to me is ridiculous.”

Peabody smiled.

“Of course, Mr. Wayne: the fate of a company is and mirrors its president’s responsibility.”

Luthor locked eyes with Bruce.

“Don’t you dare change the name of LexLabs!”
A whisper crossed the seats of the meeting table: everyone remembered the video showing Luthor abusing Bruce and now their president manifested again his aggressiveness like a common thug. However Bruce was completely calm.

“Oh! I assure you, Lex, that I don’t have such intention: you see, I want people to remember LexLabs’ past and compare it with the present and the future” he knitted his brows. “However I think that a change of name would be a blessing for you because that way you wouldn’t be reminded all the time about the way your powerful allies led you to losing your jewel.”

Luthor clenched his fist.

“Soon LexLabs will be mine again!”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“If you rely on another powerful ally for that I’d suggest you remember what happened just a few months ago…” he lolled his head “besides why you’d want to take the labs back? To return them to shady business?”

Many of the shareholders murmured their agreement infuriating Luthor.

“LexCorp will regain its previous grandiose – it’s a matter of time and then any parasite will be banished once and for all!” Luthor slapped his hand on the table.

Bruce locked eyes with him completely serious.

“Arrogance never helped anyone, Mr. Luthor: you should have learnt your lesson by now…”

When the meeting ended with Luthor reaffirming his presidency Bruce returned to his hotel. Bruce didn’t expect that Luthor would lose his rule in the company but he was satisfied because he had seen the building from inside making sure that there were no changes to the blueprints he had hacked.

He moved his chair through the vast foyer of the hotel: the temptation was pushing him towards the reception hall in the ground floor though he wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to do. It was his fault he faced that dilemma because when he asked Alfred to make reservations there he knew the ceremony would take place there.

It seems that he wanted to be there even from afar to witness Clark’s awarding… His heart was pounding as he was approaching and the battle inside him was roaring; something ordered him to turn his back and not even cast a glimpse. But he desired to see him…

The event was like a party and the joyful fuss flooded the entire roof. Bruce reached the open door and looked with his breath having stopped.

The always bad dressed Clark Kent had tried to look more elegant without reaching the point of being recognized; his jacket was still a bit oversized to look as if it was borrowed by a friend and his square huge glasses a bit askew to hide his beautiful blue topaz eyes. Bruce felt his chest clenched painfully watching Clark clutching the frame with his prize making the photographers frenzied to take his pictures.

Bruce noticed that despite the fact he was in full Clark Kent mode the blushing over his cheeks wasn’t real like in the past – he could discern what was real and fake in Clark and he was sure that
Lois who leaned on a corner watching with crossed arms noticed too.

In the hall all of Clark’s colleagues from Planet were present and of course Perry who was radiating from pride since this was the second Pulitzer for the Planet. The only one absent was Diana… Vivian… Bruce shook his head: of course, Clark wouldn’t have told her the truth about his daily profession afraid of losing her respect since he knew her opinions about humans. Bruce felt bad for Clark because he couldn’t share his victory with his loved one…

But above all Bruce felt so proud seeing everyone applauding for Clark; he was so happy himself that his face muscles formed a radiant smile without even noticing.

The other winners took their prizes before Clark and now the ceremony became a party with people storming to the buffets and forming companies. Clark was welcomed to every company and was never left alone.

At least, he still didn’t lose his connection with humans… Bruce thought and turned his chair to leave unnoticed as he had come.

He was almost at the lift when he heard footsteps behind him… footsteps he knew so well. Bruce closed his eyes and his heart dropped: he saw Superman floating again before his bedroom’s window with red angry eyes.

“Bruce” he didn’t turn and continued his course to the lift.

But Clark easily caught up and stood before him. Their eyes met.

“I didn’t expect to see you here…”

Bruce lolled his head.

“It is a hotel and I had to stay somewhere to attend the LexCorp’s annual board meeting.”

Clark nodded: as a journalist he knew all about that.

“I saw you watching when I received the prize…”

Bruce wanted to bite his lips: Clark of course could identify his vitals but he wasn’t sure that he still would be interested in doing so.

“I heard the fuss and approached…”

Clark smiled and Bruce’s heartbeat elevated before he ordered it to calm in order for Clark not noticing.

“So… you want to tell me that it was random?” he asked smugly.

“Of course not” Bruce wasn’t going to lie.

And Clark realizing became serious.

“Mmm… yes… I… I took your email congratulating me… By the way congratulations on the Person of the Year award.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m sure you celebrated with all your friends as I’m going to do with Diana…” he smirked.
“Well, I must be going” Bruce said but Clark thwarted him.

“I saw your smile before…You need to smile more, Bruce…”

“Mind your own business” he spat.

But Clark clutched his upper arm. Bruce cast him a glare and Clark remembering the bruises he had made to the human released him.

“Why are you here, Bruce?” he asked suspiciously. “If you wanted you could have remained unnoticed even by my senses but you didn’t. You came on purpose to create a breach between me and Diana.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes that flashed like thunders.

“No, I just came to applause for you because you deserved that prize. But I don’t want you back: I was the one that kicked you out, remember? Happy New Year, Clark!” he maneuvered his chair bypassing him to the lift.

Clark was ready to follow but the lift’s doors opened and people came out so it’d be awkward if Clark Kent chased Bruce Wayne. What for after all? His mind travelled to Diana and his body shivered from anticipation: he turned his back and returned to the party.

Batman had easily breeched the security system of the LexCorp building; he had entered the space at the building where the secret archives were safely stashed: he hoped to find something explaining the usage of the odd items they had found at the labs and anything concerning the creation of embryos from DNA. The idea of his children somewhere in the world was always in the back of his mind. Of course, he had the option of interrogating Luthor, however that would reveal that someone was suspecting them and Batman didn’t want that.

LexCorp building was the second place he visited that night. First, he broke and entered the building of Mannheim’s enterprises.

Now he was gazing at the sparkling city of Metropolis from the rooftop of LexCorp’s building. His work there was finished and he breathed the clean, cool air of the winter sky – some distance away at Metropolis’ central square sounds of music, songs and laughter filled the air.

It was the annual party for bidding farewell to the year: Metropolis’ tradition was to hold two parties – one at December 29th for the year that was leaving and one in 31st to welcome the New Year. Batman had not the luxury of sharing people’s joy not that Bruce Wayne had…

He missed the thick snow of Gotham yet here away from his friends he was free to don the cowl and settle some businesses without having people worried. Of course, he knew that Alfred was suspicious yet his loyal butler couldn’t insist on coming along.

He heard the movement of the air and Batman didn’t need more to understand; he made to leave but a force gentle but unyielding carried him him to the wall.

Batman’s lenses locked with Superman’s blue eyes.

“You banned Superman from Gotham but you act in Metropolis – my city. Double standards?”

Batman yanked his head.
“It’s Gotham’s business” he growled.

Bruce felt the urge to push to escape remembering that night that Superman used him in the most brutal way… however this time Superman’s body glued to him without any aggressiveness and frankly Bruce would prefer it if there was aggressiveness in this body because then his own body would focus on that last night and not on the moments of pleasure this body gave him.

“You know that you shouldn’t wonder like this…” Superman whispered to his artificial ears “it is too dangerous – you may get injured again.”

“Mind your own business” Batman retorted through gritted teeth.

Superman however leaned closer to his face and his lips almost touched Batman’s exposed skin inhaling deeply.

“I hate that this armor doesn’t let your body’s perfume off…” his lips came even closer and Batman almost closed his eyes because his body shivered remembering the times Superman had kissed him. “I missed you…and I know you missed me too…otherwise you wouldn’t have come to the ceremony…”

Superman almost captured Batman’s lips which craved to be kissed yet Bruce won himself and the Man of Steel twitched a bit looking perplexed into the emotionless lenses and then at his left ribs. He smiled: the Blade of Justice was touching his skin ready to cut. He looked again at Batman’s clenched jaw.

“I still have the mark on my upper arm…” he smirked but then turned to Bruce’s face. “We still can be together…Diana won’t object.”

“But I will! Back off!” Batman growled determined and Superman feeling the peak of the dagger pricking his rib relented a bit. “Look elsewhere for a mistress!”

He slipped away from him but Superman flew in front of him. Batman showed him the dagger warningly causing his smirk.

“I can find you, Batman: you can’t hide from me…”

Batman didn’t show anything just walked to the edge of the rooftop and jumped stretching his arms turning his cape into wings. Superman’s eyes shone gleefully and he took off with a smirk brushing his face.

“If you want to play hide and seek…You can’t hide from Superman…”

But suddenly he realized that he couldn’t locate the man even by using his 100 different kinds of vision and his super senses. He sighed.

“Oh you can?” he shook his head: Bruce’s ninja training didn’t lose anything due to his disability.

He cocked an eyebrow and looked at the festivities in the square above him; a slight melancholy and nostalgia filled him with a dim thought floating to his mind: celebrating with Bruce and his friends– Diana wasn’t in the mood for Christmas celebrations: they were too…mortal-ish…However with her he still could celebrate his prize…She knew how to make him forget everything else.

He changed his course towards her apartment where he knew she was waiting always for him to show him her love.
Batman landed on the rooftop behind Green Arrow who still held his bow stretched, the cord trembling from the arrow that had just launched. Arrow turned and smirked noticing in Batman’s clenched hand the arrow he had used; the one with the glowing green head.

“I see you caught my arrow…” the man told Batman who walked towards him. “Impressive! Nobody can’t do that.”

Batman yanked his head scowling.

“Wrong assumption” he growled and Arrow smirked.

Bruce was intrigued by the man’s eyes; they were under the hood’s shadow but they sparkled like fires. However what counted for him was the Kryptonite arrow: he grabbed it with both hands and broke it in two, stashing the Kryptonite head into his belt while threw the rest to Arrow’s feet. The Robin Hood look alike shook his head.

“Don’t be pissed…I saw Supes following you and I thought you needed help. You know, being alone in a strange city.”

“Wrong assumption again – I didn’t need your help” Arrow smiled broader. “Metropolis is the newest addition to your collection of cities?”

Arrow locked his fervent eyes with Batman’s lenses and made a deep bow.

“Deeply honored that Batman investigated me.”

“I investigate anyone that acts in Gotham.”

Arrow cocked his eyebrows though they weren’t visible.

“I didn’t act in Gotham: I was just visiting and happened to be in the right place the right moment.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“It happened…” he snorted. “I don’t believe in coincidences, Arrow; not that you are a…nomad vigilante.”

Arrow loll’d his head.

“Am I officially in your list of suspects for…” he pursed his lips perplexed “whatever? Oh! The thrill to be under Batman’s close inspection!”

Batman regarded him.

“This was what you wanted from the beginning, right?”

Arrow snorted.

“If you consider me a bad guy then you must know that bad guys don’t want Batman at their trails so why would I want to draw your attention?”

“I never said that you’re necessary a bad guy but your role is still misty…”

“I’m challenging to you then? How flattering!”
Suddenly, multicolored sparkles filled the sky in different shapes as the party at the square was at its heat. Arrow turned to see the spectacle.

“Do bats like fireworks?” he asked and turned his head to take his answer but Batman wasn’t there.

Arrow shook his head laughing amused.

“I should have known…”

Harleen Quinzel unlocked her apartment’s door. Though December 31st’s night – New Year’s Eve – she didn’t have any mood to be part of the celebrations for the New Year’s coming. She had spent the Christmas with her parents away from Gotham but for the New Year’s Eve she stayed in the city. Actually, her shift at the Asylum had just ended and she cared only for a good bath and a couple hours of nice sleep.

But upon walking the corridor to her living room, the pink shade of her lamps’ light told her that someone was inside. She frowned and hanged her coat and purse to the shelf. She wasn’t afraid of burglars; she took the pistol from her coat’s inner pocket and walked inside.

“Fiinnallly, the working girl is baaaaaaack!”

Joker was sprawled on her pink sofa with crossed legs. Harleen placed her gun on the dark brown small trunk.

“Youuuuu have a guuuun!” Joker’s eyes bulged. “Wow! Buuuut knives aare better, sugar” he took in Harleen’s frown and got serious. “You’re a lonely person like me, huh?” he asked gesturing to the room. “I was gooooooing to spend the Eve aloooone but then I remembered my kiiiiind doc…”he looked at her “I was sure that you’d be alone toooooo…” he gestured to her to come closer. “C’mon, make yourself at home…Hehe…”

She marched with confident strides closer.

“It is my home” she said cocking an eyebrow and Joker scratched his hair.

“Wееееell, that’s true…buuuuut loooook what I brought youuuuu!”

He left his sprawled position and leaned to the waist table showing with both hands a bottle of expensive champagne wrapped in golden paper.

Harleen raised her eyebrows.

“What for?” she asked and sat at the pink armchair next to the sofa.

Joker pouted and shrugged.

“To humor the New Year aaaaand thank a woman who reeeeaaaally cares for me…”

Harleen was satisfied by this yet she kept her defenses up.

“Aafter what happened at the square you didn’t threaten people again…”

“Yeah…” he shook his head licking his lips.

“This is very good Jack; I’m certain that you can reform completely and amaze everyone!”
Joker smiled making his scars more prominent.

“With youuuuuur help…Remember what we said about Bru--cey?”

She nodded.

“Are you still iiiiiin?”

“Of course.”

“That’s myyyyy girl! Go, go fetch some flutes: we have things to celebrate…”

She did as he said but while she was in the kitchen she heard music and the balcony door opening. Her apartment had a really big balcony overlooking half the city and especially those nights of the year the view was majestic.

She filled the flutes and went to the balcony where Joker was leaning his waist against the railing staring at her. Harleen offered him the flute and he hit it softly to hers before drinking.

“Toooooo us” he proposed and Harleen couldn’t stop the smile that trembled on her lips. “I’m sure we’ll make a spec--taclar duo!”

The melodies of Harleen’s favorite waltz filled the chilly air and Joker locked eyes with her completely serious.

“You’re a really gorgeous woman, aren’t you?” he said in a suave voice completely unrecognizable and offered her his hand.

She took it and he hugged her beginning to move her to the melody; Harleen felt goose bumps: Jack was a really talented dancer she realized and his green acid eyes on hers were so serious, almost sad that made Harleen forget everything she knew about his crimes.

“Oh…Baaaatsy-Bruuucey, how I miiiiiiss our daaaaances…Well, this waltz thing is niuice buuuut our dance has better moves…It’s all about authenticity aaaaand choreography…” he thought smiling at his former doctor.

And then tires were heard from the street above. Joker looked down and Harleen did the same: patrol cars swarmed the street around the building and officers jumped out with guns.

“Oooops! They are foooor me…”

Harleen was frustrated and annoyed.

“Some neighbor must have seen you…”

“In oooother case I’d have killed all youuuuur neighbors – I haaate neighbors who stick theeeeer nose everywhere - but…for your sake I wooooon’t” he bowed, took her hand gently and kissed its back burning her skin. “I’ve got to go now…”

He jumped from the balcony and Harleen rushed there with bulged from terror eyes; only to see the jester been lifted to the air by a strange thing attached to his jacket – it was like a helicopter with a big Cheshire smile painted on the bar.

Joker waved to her as the officers stormed her apartment.

“Haaaappyp New Year, Harlequin!” he exclaimed and vanished to an alley just before the officers
reached the balcony.

It was almost midnight but at the Wayne Manor the garden was filled with life; food and beverages had been placed on the rectangular marble table while the champagne waited to be opened at the changing of the year. The night wasn’t very cold and the snow had started to fall again softly.

At first, Alfred and Leslie were afraid to let Bruce be outside but then didn’t want to ruin the mood and agreed. They didn’t regret it: everyone was happier in the garden, livelier; the night atmosphere and the decoration carrying away every concern.

Dick and Jason were playing snow fight and Bruce was breathing easier seeing his charge being careless; hearing that Breizic would be watching him had excited him. Hero wearing a small Santa Claus’ beanie was trying to catch every snowball running from one boy to another.

Selina with Steve were behind a large bush.

“Have you told Bruce that his present engage you 24/7?” Steve asked her playfully.

Selina frowned.

“I admit that this professional painting set was taken from my dreams…but 24/7? I’m still sleeping with you.”

Steve shook his head.

“Only because your bed is big enough to fit me and not the set…”

Selina tapped his bottom lip.

“You’re not that petit, Captain…”

Tony and Pepper were vanished too and Bruce was sure that his friend was taking advantage of the darkness.

Leslie and Alfred stood at the table and Bruce was sure that they were plotting against him… Ms. Todd was talking with Matt and Lily. Lucius would have been there too but he was spending the New Year’s Eve with his nephew’s family.

Bruce looked at everyone with love: nobody said anything about Metropolis. Bruce caressed his lips: he still felt Superman’s breath there…the sense of his hot flesh approaching to claim his lips.

“She is my star!” Bruce showed Superman again kissing her floating over Chicago.

He wished Clark was there too…Or at least be happy where he was.

An hour ago the surveillance system he had installed in Quinzel’s apartment sent a signal about a presence there and Bruce knew it was Joker. So Batman alarmed Jim.

However from the police’s frequency he heard that the jester got away…Everything pointed out that only Batman could do the job…

“Ladies and gentlemen” Tony trotted at the center of the garden where the table was trying to rub off
the marks from Pepper’s lipstick. “She framed me up!” he said to the eyes that focused on the marks. Pepper passed him patting him in the buttock and he cleared his throat.

“Well” the billionaire said after everyone gathered “I have inside information that the New Year arrives sooooo…”

He waved his hand like a magician and above their heads appeared a hologram showing a cloud with sparkling stars.

“And… ten…”

A star detached from the cloud and crossed the sky falling over the distant forest.

“I’m not gonna do all the work alone…” Tony cocked his eyebrows and everyone joined him.

“Nine…” for every number a star crossed the sky and vanished “…four, three, two, one…”

A loud bang was heard and then other bangs and the sky over the Manor was filled with multicolored sparkles that formed angels, waterfalls, mountains, famous sights and…Ironman.

“I hope we don’t have to call the fire brigade…” Alfred mumbled snidely to Tony’s ear offering him a flute with champagne.

“Please, Alfred…You insult me now…”

Selina was kissing Bruce’s cheeks and Hero had run to his lap. Tony kissed Pepper and moved there too.

“My turn now, missy…Go to your Captain…”

“Happy New Year, Master Bruce” Alfred said after his friends detached a bit to exchange wishes with the others.

“Happy New Year, Alfred” he replied and gazed at his people exchanging wishes and kisses; he felt so warm, so content…and so weak. “Alfred…I’m tired…” he whispered.

“Of course you are, sir” Alfred said scolding but also fearful.

Bruce didn’t understand how but Leslie came to him immediately.

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Of course, I’m just drowsy.”

Tony squatted in front of him.

“Your vitals are normal but…”

“Of course they are, Tony…I just…Please continue the party.”

“I’ll take you to your bedroom” Tony said determined and stood his Ironman boots forming around his legs.

When Bruce closed his eyes in the warmth of his bed sleep came immediately.

“I can understand the darkness inside you, Bruce, that separates you from the others. Only a man
like me, with the same experiences can understand you…” he heard again Oliver Queen whispering.
The night was perfectly silent as if everything went completely still or there was nobody on the planet: only the cold was piercing through the bone and Batman despite the fact his armor didn’t let the cold reach him, could tell because his breath left a small cloud every time he chose to breathe that way. Such silence wasn’t normal, he thought; it was Metropolis, one of the largest cities in US and fuss was always present.

The deafening silence made it even easier to hear it: and before hearing, sensing… He descended gracefully on the rooftop; Batman could have left swiftly yet his body didn’t want to obey…neither his heart. He had missed him despite the fact he would never admit to anyone…he missed him and he hated himself for that.

Suddenly, a powerful wave hit him and Superman carried him along to pin him to the wall—carefully, not like the last time he had used him with all the crude the Man of Steel could conjure. He felt goose bumps as Superman glued his body on his; Bruce still remembered the feeling on his lips from all the times the alien had kissed him with all the love that resided to his heart.

“I missed you and I know you missed me too…” Superman whispered.

Superman’s lips wanted to claim his; they were very close and their breaths collided to hug and become one; Bruce had to fight with himself.

Batman’s lenses locked with those extraordinarily blue topaz eyes and the first time he laid eyes on the Man of Steel came back to him: there, in Dolcetto’s filthy kitchen with Signora Bruna’s menace lurking. His angel… Bruce had loved the man since then and though he had buried his thirst deep inside, he was counting the days to their destined meeting: not that he believed that a being like Superman would ever be interested in him yet…he knew that they’d meet some day. And that day, despite Bruce was aware that he didn’t deserve that man’s love, had been such a fool to raise his eyes to look at him.

Like a memory from another lifetime he saw himself in the same rooftop, in the same situation threatening Superman with the Knife of Justice pushing him off of him.

But that was in another lifetime because in this lifetime Batman yanked his head forward and captured Superman’s lips with all the lust and despair of his need. He kissed him giving everything he got; careless of his air supplies ending; of the burning in his healing lug. The only thing that mattered was that he had again the same sensation of those hot lips brushing his own thirsty lips; the salty and sweet flavor that made his mind go numb and his body melt…

And then he was again placed on the floor upon the old blanket wrapped in Superman’s red cape; the interior of the greenhouse seemed so warm under the light of the oil lamp and the heater Clark had just lit. But his eyes were locked with the man’s he loved all his life: scared and curious, eager and hesitant.

Superman took his hand and brought it to the clutches of his blue outfit on his shoulders allowing to strip him…Bruce touched the perfect, unmarred skin and it was like he had imagined it: the electric current running his spine; the fire in his groin, the trembling all over his feet, the sweet impatience. The dread for his own body’s reactions; the terror of losing control; of letting go; of being sneered; of all the demons who lurked…

“And then I’ll worship your body…” the angel with the blue topaz eyes whispered and began kissing
But his kind face suddenly changed: his features were distorted in rage and Bruce was lying on his bed staring at him without fear but sadness…

“I didn’t see Loki but even if that it is true then I see” he smirked and Bruce’s chest clenched painfully for what was coming “that Bane and Talia taught you the pleasures of threesome so what better than two gods fucking you?” Bruce’s eyes bulged and his heart stopped beating. “Maybe if I told you that Diana and I would both fuck you, there wouldn’t be a problem…But since I didn’t, you took the first opportunity you found: Thor and Loki: Who got your ass and who your mouth? Or they changed positions? You’re doing the same with Rogers and Selina in the Tower? I imagine you prefer to fuck your friend than…”

Bruce couldn’t stand it anymore; nausea was burning his stomach and every word from Clark’s mouth was acid. He raised his hand and brought it with all his speed and force at Clark’s face…

But an unbeatable force stopped his hand midair and the Man of Steel pinned his arm on the mattress above his head clenching Bruce’s wrist. Immediately a violent slap made Bruce’s head roll on the side and the familiar taste of iron choked him as blood sprung from his nostril and lip slithering slowly to his cheek. A deafening thunder worsened the buzz in Bruce’s ear but he looked through his narrowed eyes at Clark who was smirking smugly.

“I owed you that, Bruce, remember?”

And then the horrible, familiar sound of foreign flesh punishing his insides burning, grazing, hurting…He was clenching his jaw and biting his lip to not moan. And it was so difficult hearing Clark’s roars and sneers…

Bruce stirred at his bed under the soft blankets and opened his eyes. At first, he was panting but quickly forced himself to calm: a dream…his two encounters with Clark in Metropolis had woken up everything he chose not think. He pressed his lips; bitterness filled his insides like a corrosive acid…

It was all his fault: he should have never succumbed to Clark’s love…to his own feelings. He knew who he was; he knew that there should be no place for such things in his life…that he didn’t deserve to be loved; much more by someone like Clark.

He was a fool for allowing that…The result was that his love wasn’t enough to save Clark from Vivian’s trap.

Bruce closed his eyes and his heart began pounding from agony for Clark: he had let him go; he had let him at her mercy. His face filled with sweat drops and willed his breath to become slow: there was no other option…

He pushed his hair on his head with both hands: keeping him would have led to worse things: Clark might have done something that when he got back his senses would regret for ever. Bruce’s pelvis screamed aching exactly like that night; a gasp escaped from his mouth; he rubbed his eyes. No, what happened that night wasn’t one of the things Clark needed to regret…Bruce closed his eyes and bit his lip: he was used to that…

He glanced at the clock on the bedside table: it was a quarter to 4. Too early. The heavy curtains were drawn but Bruce clapped his hands and they withdrew revealing a spectacular view of the snow covered grounds that sparkling under the sparkling light blue light of the tiny lamps mesmerized Bruce’s eyes; during his stay at the Fortress Clark was taking him out almost every night - always very attentive and careful to Bruce’s temperature. His eyes travelled miles and miles of
sparking snow under the different colors of aurora borealis.

They discussed many times about how they would cherish the snow in Gotham…

Bruce covered his face in his palms: he shouldn’t think about these; there were more crucial things. Joker, Mannheim, Vivian and who might be hiding behind her… And then Zucco, Dick, Ms. Turner… Queen and then Arrow… Thomas Elliot. Thor’s baby blues sweet and compassionate… He huffed: he had messed things up! He had to take action immediately… to save Dick from this man; to save Superman from Vivian and whatever was hiding behind her. To find a meaning to all these…

And then?

He looked outside. If Superman got his senses back he might want to approach him again… To come back. Bruce’s heart clenched: this option almost panicked him because it’d be a temptation, a new struggle to do the right thing. And the right thing was never allowing to repeat the same mistake: Clark should make his life with someone appropriate… Not him.

But he almost made the same mistake at Metropolis: he let his feelings carry him away and went to his awarding ceremony to see him again… And then on the rooftop he almost bent…

No… no… never again.

He felt exhaustion flooding his body and rubbed his temple. There were slight pinches of pain throughout his back… He remembered the energy casts holding together his patched body: Superman didn’t take them from him; he didn’t doom him to being stuck in a bed. Even under this influence Superman kept his kindness…

His eyelids grew heavier: he really wanted to sleep; to have a small escape from the real world.

Alfred looked at the four white lilies’ bouquets on the marble dresser at the Manor’s foyer: a delivery boy had brought them first thing in the morning. Master Bruce had ordered them and before half an hour there were two bouquets more, with white roses. Now were gone which meant only one thing. The Englishman raised his eyes to the place where Martha and Thomas Wayne had their last residence. And sighed.

Bruce had followed the path Tony had made for him to the top of the hill that was covered with fresh, unspoiled snow. Before he left the Manor Bruce saw Richard and Jason making a snowman with Hero running from one to another; so he decided to come out from the back door to not be seen.

He placed tenderly the bouquets at the base of the tombstones; they were covered with snow but the white cheerfulness didn’t do anything to loosen the knot in his guts… He brushed the tombstones and lowered his eyes.

“I feel that I don’t do what I must… That I should have done more but I’m not good enough…” his sparkling eyes fixed on the grey marble “I wish you were here to guide me, mom, dad…” he bit his bottom lip. “Not only to guide me… just be here” he inhaled deeply “spend the days with you…” Bruce chuckled bitterly. “I… although I knew that it was impossible… however I had deep under my conscious mind the feeling that things would be like then…” he nodded “for Christmas… that somehow things would change: I’d woke up from a nightmare and you would be there…”

He rubbed his eyes and then huffed desperately.
“I miss you so much…” his eyes went blank, fixed on their names; on feelings and scenes of his past.

Suddenly, a purring startled him and pushed him out of his comfortable but phony world; a purring he knew so well. He looked to his chair base and Hero was there staring at him.

“Hero, what are you doing here? Come, buddy!” he took him to his lap and began rubbing his frozen paws to warm them.

With the corner of his eye he saw Dick and Jason halting abruptly, the call for Hero still in their mouths. They were chasing the kitten and seeing Bruce were both dumbfounded.

Bruce hadn’t wanted Dick to see him there more so with his eyes watered and some tear drops glistening frozen on his cheeks; he didn’t want the boy think that he tried to…to anything. Their eyes met: the boy’s eyes were narrowed; he had followed Hero.

“In the Manor’s foyer, fours bouquets wait” Bruce said quiet. “They are for you…I ordered them along with…” he showed with the head the bouquets on the snow “mine. I thought that you might want to visit your family and take them something…”

Dick lowered his eyes; yes, all these days, his family’s absence weighted more but he didn’t want to show weakness. Yet Wayne had seen into him. He pressed his lips and nodded; he was ready to say something but Wayne caught him.

“I know you don’t want me near them so I gave instructions to Alfred and he will take you there…” he turned towards his parents’ graves and placed his hand on the tombstone. “I never had the chance to bid them a proper farewell…” his voice was steady. “Only once I placed a flower to the place they were murdered…but it was a withered white rose from the garbage…They deserved better…”

Dick frowned: he felt the hidden pain in Wayne though the man hid it probably because he didn’t want him to think that he tried to gain his sympathy. But that was nonsense: he couldn’t feel sympathy for that man – Wayne was the reason his family was murdered. He hated the man.

Jason brushed his nose with the back of his palm, feeling uncomfortable and exchanged fleeting glances with Dick.

The older boy just nodded and Bruce let Hero down.

“Go to your friend, buddy!” he urged the kitten and Jason took the animal to his hands following Dick in descending the hill.

Bruce lowered his head: he wished no child would ever feel what he did…And Dick’s pain just made his own even worse. He waited there till the unidentifiable car left the grounds.

When he guided the chair towards the Manor’s entrance another car halted; Leslie came out of her car rubbing her hands.

“Good morning, Bruce; I came to take you” she said determined.

Bruce smiled.

“You sound like the Angel of Death” he chuckled and Leslie pressed her lips.

“Sorry but I came to take you to the clinic” she cocked her eyebrows “remember, right?”
Bruce lolled his head to the side and huffed.

“Your exams” Leslie went on “I waited too much, young man. And I don’t like at all your last collapses.”

Bruce shook his head exasperated.

“Collapses! You exaggerate, Leslie: I just fell asleep…” Leslie crooked her mouth in complete disbelief. “And I have too many things to do!”

Leslie crossed her arms.

“You’ve already have done too much” Bruce closed his eyes pushing his hair back. “In ten days you have done so many things that not even a man in full health wouldn’t have done! And don’t let me start about Metropolis…” she said twitching her eyebrows meaningfully. “I might not know what happened there but I know you, young man.”

Bruce yanked his head and Leslie approached more and placed her hand on his shoulder.

“I just want to make sure that everything is alright and change your medication accordingly: please, Bruce, think all of us who are in agony…”

Bruce inhaled deeply lowering his eyes and Leslie pressed her lips: she really wished that there was no need for these unpleasant for Bruce examinations.

“It’d be only your doctors, those you trust and we won’t make any scanning; I think that Tony has this part covered.”

Bruce closed his eyes and waved his hand in defeat.

“Fine…Leslie: you’re so stubborn.”

She smiled.

“Look who’s talking!” she snorted and then sobered. “How else do you think I’d have survived in the Narrows?”

Alfred had driven the boys to the city, to the cemetery where Dick’s family rest. Jason had come along because his friend asked him if he wanted to. The Englishman stayed outside with the nondistinguishable car, giving some privacy to them.

Dick holding the three of the four bouquets in his arms while Jason carried the fourth strode among the rows of graves silent with his feet sinking to the fresh snow. He knew the place by heart: they were coming often with his granny – every Sunday. Dick grinned bitterly inside: he didn’t want his family to feel neglected – that he had forgotten them.

Jason was following some footsteps behind, nervous of being in such a place. It was awkward for him and difficult to handle. He stopped when Dick stopped and saw the gravestones pressing his lips.

Dick squatted and placed the flowers gently to the base of every tombstone; he stayed like this staring at the cold rock as if waiting to be greeted and Jason watched pouting, his blue eyes sad and ready to water; for that he swept them with the back of his palm: he was a tough man after all…
“I miss them, Jay…so much…Sometimes I pretend that Brian is still with me in the room and we’re talking about comics or playing…”

Jason nodded.

“I’m sorry, man…”

Dick shook his head.

“I know you are, Jay…”

“Do ya want me to leave ya alone?”

The older boy shook his head.

“No, stay” he turned to him and smiled weakly. “I think you’d have become good friends with Brian: he could be a real rascal sometimes but even then he was so cute…he loved me so much.”

Jason pursed his lips.

“I’m not cute…”

Dick chuckled and touched his fingertips to Brian’s name.

“He didn’t deserve to die like this…He didn’t deserve to die so soon: he had so many things to live – we had so many things to do: we had scheduled things...” his voice broke and Jason patted his back. “None of them deserved to die like this: mom was so kind, so sweet and understanding… and Peter was the best step father anyone could have…I was very lucky…Until…” he growled and jolted to his feet fisting his hands. “I hated, Jay! Why they had to die because that bastard Wayne returned from the dead?”

Jason hugged his friend and rubbed his back.

“I’m sorry, pal…” he was ready to mention once again that it wasn’t Wayne’s fault yet he didn’t want to make his friend more distraught.

Dick looked at him.

“Come…we’ll go to dad now…my entire life lies in this graveyard…”

Thankfully, the fourth bouquet had survived their hug, Jason thought and followed the older boy to another tomb which looked older and had curved the name John Grayson. Jason gave the flowers to Dick and the boy placed them on the soil.

“Dad, I know we never had the chance to meet but I feel like knowing you…I mean it’s not the same as if we played together, watched football and rugby and gymnastics, of course but…I met people that knew you and they speak to me about you and it is as if…I mean…I imagine you…it is like you’re alive again! First, your cousin, Tony: he loves me very much, dad and cares…”

Jason rolled his eyes and crooked his mouth.

“And now Mr. Breizic, your trainer, dad…He is going to be an advisor to my training! And maybe someday he’ll train me, like you…” he got serious. “He says that you’d be proud of me…Are you?” he shook his head. “I never forget you, dad, even though I never met you…it’s like you were always there…” he chuckled. “Like an angel….”
The boy stayed silent for a couple of minutes and Jason although he didn’t want to intrude felt that it was time for them to leave. He placed his hand to his friend’s shoulder and Dick turned his head.

“Yeah, I know, Jay. Time to go, dad, but I’ll come again…”

Alfred sat to the driver’s seat saw the boys coming and came out of the car; Hero was lying on the back seat. He opened the back door for them and Dick rolled his eyes: the butler was supposedly his servant and acted like this but on the same time he was punishing him… Ugh! Well, despite Alfred was firm with him, Dick kind of liked the man… but still he wished that soon he’d be with Tony away from Wayne.

“May I suggest a stop at the bowling center, young masters?” Alfred asked glancing at the mirror over the steer wheel; he thought that they needed something to lift their spirits.

The boys looked at each other.

“I don’t have any mood” Dick said morose “but since Jason is here…”

Jason rolled his head.

“Yeah… he is doing me a favor…”

Alfred grinned and turned the wheel towards the boys’ favorite bowling place. Hero who climbed on Dick’s lap and the boy petted him.

“That means that he wants to come along” Jason commented smartly.

And indeed Hero had a great time at the bowling following the ball on the isle making Jason and Dick exchange amused glances before bursting into laughter. Thankfully, the kitten was smart enough to not approach the pins and ran back to his friends hearing the bang of the hit. However his fear last till the next effort of one of the boys.

When the boys sat at a table to drink some refreshment Dick bought a hot dog and fed the kitten who really appreciated it. Jason was looking at the animal chuckling.

“We played - he is exhausted… chasing the ball like this…”

“Sure he is.”

“Have ya ever thought how yar similar to Wayne?” Jason said twisting his straw in his soda.

Dick snorted and scratched Hero behind the ears.

“Wrong! I have nothing in common with that brat!”

Jason cocked an eyebrow.

“Really? Let me remind ya that we found him in front of his parents’ graves placin’ flowers an’ some hours later ya’re doin’ the same thing with the flowers he bought for ya?” Dick frowned and crossed his arms. “Also, his family was murdered like yars; the difference is that he was taken by his parents’ murderers an’ was tortured for years…”

Dick’s eyes flashed stabbing Jason’s.

“I’m a prisoner of my parents’ murderer too!”
Jason lolled his head to the side.

“Ya’re a real asshole, ya know that? He didn’t murder yar parents an’ ya’re not his prisoner: yar granny made him yar guardian ‘cause she knew he is a nice guy an’ he’d do everything for your good…”

“Nope! He’s trying to play the nice guy as he did in the hospital: if he was good he’d resign from my guardianship since it’s obvious that I don’t want to live with him. But he didn’t! Cause he’s selfish and he likes to see me suffer!”

Jason shook his head pursing his lips.

“Ya’re stupid, man, and blind! I hope ya woke up soon…”

Dick rolled his eyes.

“You’re too young to know…”

“An’ ya too pig headed… The man is not as bad as ya think…” suddenly he remembered something “an’ he has a great body” he said frowning. “Like an Olympic athlete.”

Dick cocked his eyebrows and sniggered.

“What this has to do with anything?” he snapped and Jason shrugged “Todd you began to show signs of being gay? As if we don’t have enough men drooling at him…”

“Cut it!” the younger boy retorted. “I don’t know why but it came to me - He does have a great body – I saw him the day I swam with him in the pool.”

Dick shrugged.

“Falcone wanted him like this…he wanted to…” he remembered how young his friend was and stopped but Jason cocked his eyebrows snorting.

“I know what Falcone was doing to him but I was thinking…and that Selina, his friend…”

But Dick thought something else.

“You know I think that Superman really dumped him – well done for him! But now new boyfriends filled the Manor” he spat disgusted.

Hero licked Dick’s chin and the boy laughed forgetting his poison.

“Hero…” Jason frowned “ya think is a Chinese word?” Jason asked.

“No, it’s not” a female sensual voice answered and both boys looked at Selina who had approached them unnoticed.

She sat at the free chair between them and crossed her legs. She caressed Hero’s head.

“Hero means hero: it’s not Chinese.”

“What are you doing here?” Dick asked frowned and Selina loll’d her head to the side rolling her eyes.

“Not watching you, pal: get a grip…I just happen to like bowling too: we were playing with Steve
but he had something to do and I found new company in you. I hope I’m not bothering…” she said in a way that revealed that she didn’t care at all about that.

Jason smiled smugly.

“’Course not, babe!”

Selina chuckled.

“Ya sneaky, naughty brat! Is Stark tutoring you?” she said playfully but then she got serious. “You want to know about Hero’s name?”

“Yes!” Jason caught up with Dick before he managed to refuse.

Selina lowered a bit her eyes.

“Hero’s name is taken from another kitten…A kitten that I had found when I was approximately at your age: he was very small, a white fur ball with a horizontal black V at his back, hardly one month old: I found him in a garbage bin. The little kitten was battered, dirty and his one eye was a dead mass while the other was badly contaminated. I took the kitten to Bruce: we met every night behind a large garbage bin in the alley at the backside of Falcone’s cabaret. He fell in love with the kitten immediately: Hero needed to be operated and Bruce gathered the money stealing money from Falcone’s thugs.”

Jason’s eyes widened impressed on the mention of stealing from the thugs and Selina nodded.

“Yes, if they caught him he was in for much trouble – I had told him so – but he answered that either way he was always in trouble.”

Dick shook his head in disbelief.

“How could he steal from the thugs? That’s impossible!” he snorted.

Selina stabbed him with her glare.

“Believe it or not Bruce gathered the money and the kitten survived the surgery but his damaged eye was removed: the kitten had only one eye half-blind but Hero was a very happy and brave kitten, for that we gave him that name. He loved us very much” the new Hero jumped to her lap and rubbed to her. “I took Hero every night with me and he played with Bruce who shared the sandwich I was bringing to him with the kitten: they were so bonded…”

She licked her lips and inhaled: even now after all these years still it was difficult to remember.

“One night we were carried away playing and Bruce stayed a bit too long outside – Chill, Falcone’s right hand, came out barking, calling for him. Bruce hurried to him in order to keep him away from me and Hero but the kitten sensed Bruce’s terror and followed him…” Jason’s eyes were bulged and she cleared her throat. “Chill grabbed the poor thing from the neck and sneered Bruce reminding him that it was forbidden to have a pet – Bruce was the pet. Bruce begged him crying but the bastard threw poor Hero to the opposite wall killing him…”

“No, man…” Jason said half angry and half sorrowful; even Dick’s eyes looked sad.

Selina caressed Hero’s little head and pressed her lips.

“Bruce convulsed in Chill’s grasp crying, screaming to let him go to the kitten but the Vulture
dragged him inside…They definitely punished Bruce: they always did that without him giving any reason not now…But the worst was that Bruce heart broke once again when he had began having some pecks of happiness…He still blames himself for Hero’s death…” she shook her head and cleared her throat to steady her voice. “Anyway, a friend who knew the story and saw the sketch of Hero I made found a dumped kitten which was exactly like the old one and brought it to Bruce…”

She took Hero from the armpits, lifted him and kissed his pink nose.

Dick seemed thoughtful and Jason stared at him; however Selina didn’t want to say more: maybe it was wrong she told so much. She stood taking Hero.

“Bye, boys – I’m going down to say hi to Alfred and meet Steve.”

Dick didn’t speak even after Selina was gone and Jason brought his chair next to his friend.

“Ya see now that ya’re not the only one who suffered in this life?”

Dr. Evangeline Martinez took the stethoscope headphones from her ears and let the stethoscope hanging loose to her chest. She had heard Bruce’s heartbeat and lungs after she had measured his temperature: Bruce was obviously edgy lying half naked on the examination table and the young doctor smiled.

“We’re almost finished, Bruce” she said taking in his uneasiness – besides, she now got to know Bruce quite well.

That was the reason she was chosen by Leslie who was watching from the chair next to the table: she knew Bruce’s distaste for doctors – Leslie honestly couldn’t blame him – so she brought him to Evangeline one of the doctors who had established a relationship of trust with him. Leslie was examining Bruce almost second day often but on regular times she wanted a second, unbiased opinion, from a colleague who might find something that slipped from her attention.

“I’ll see your glucose levels now and your blood pressure and you’re free. You can rise.”

Bruce rose into a sitting position looking forward to be outside the clinic and back to work. Dr. Martinez measured his blood pressure and then Bruce watched the doctor readying the gadget and then piercing his fingertip to draw a drop of blood to the gadget.

“Your glucose levels are below normal” Dr. Martinez said looking at Leslie who was staring at the gadget’s small screen “and your blood pressure is low. And your temperature is slightly lower than the normal. Either you don’t eat well or you are exhausted or we have some mild virus. Well, I’ll take a blood sample for further exams.”

She ripped the syringe’s case and extracted the blood sample she needed; after the sample was transferred to a tiny phial, she patted Bruce’s upper arm.

“Thank you for your patience, Bruce.”

Bruce grinned.

“I should tell that to you, Dr. Martinez” Bruce remembered their first unpleasant meeting – not the doctor’s fault – but he still glared at the gynecologist’s chair being hidden in a corner.

When Dr. Martinez left the room Leslie helped Bruce wear his shirt and sit at his wheelchair. Then
she looked him in the eyes.

“Low blood pressure, low glucose levels, low temperature, loss of several pounds…”

Bruce shook his head.

“That last one is impossible: I’m sat in this chair all day except from the hours of the sessions with Matt.”

Leslie coughed and glanced smartly to him.

“Do not sell these to me, boy…You exhausted yourself, Bruce: that’s why you collapsed like this; it’s a miracle you’re not bed sick. You can’t continue like this, Bruce.”

Bruce shook his head and looked again to her caring eyes.

“Life can’t wait for me to walk again, Leslie. There are things that have to be done and I don’t have the luxury of neglecting them – I have already neglected things too much…”

Leslie held his upper arms and locked eyes with him; then left his one arm and pushed back the locks that had fallen to his brow.

“If your health deteriorates things would be worse, Bruce; you wouldn’t be able to help anyone and your friends will be devastated because you considered them incompetent to cover for you: they will hold themselves responsible if you get sick.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, it’s not like this, Leslie: some things are my responsibility not Tony’s, not Selina’s.”

“You’d say the same thing if Tony or Selina were in your place?”

Bruce bit his bottom lip.

“They will never be in my place! They will be always perfectly fine!”

Leslie seeing him distressed caressed his cheeks.

“Okay, okay, calm down…Can you promise me that you won’t exert yourself again?”

Bruce’s eyes flashed in hers.

“I won’t lie to you, Leslie.”

She nodded closing her eyes.

“I know you’d never lie, I just hoped that you would mean it.”

Bruce took her hand and kissed the back of her palm.

“I promise that I’ll be extra careful, Leslie…”

“As you were the night you went to save the children from Joker?” she asked with her always steady voice cracked. “And you were almost killed?”

“You know that there’s no other way for me, Leslie…as there was no other way for you than staying at Narrows and giving your fight every day even though Falcone could kill you every moment.”
Leslie shook her head and laughed.

“Oh! You’re such a clever brat…”

“I’ll be alright, Leslie: all of you are watching me and really I’m not doing anything dangerous… Please, understand me, Leslie…”

“And you understand us, Bruce?”

“I do” he shook his head. “You don’t know how I feel sensing your agony and…being unable to ease it…”

Leslie wrapped him in her arms rubbing his back.

“You’re so precious, Bruce…never forget that…”

When they left the examination room and headed towards the exit they came upon none other than Thomas Elliot. Bruce immediately felt his healthy body stiffen because he couldn’t accept that this was a coincidence and Leslie by his side was also puzzled.

“Tommy, it’s not your shift, right?”

“I dropped by to see Kelly but…” he eyed Bruce. “Bruce, are you alright?” he gasped “What happened? Another incident?”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I’m fine” he answered politely but coldly.

“A routine checkup” Leslie added and Thomas sighed in relief which after his gasp seemed too dramatic to both Bruce and Leslie.

“Thank God! I was thinking of you constantly after that incident at the children’s hospital…”

“Everything is fine, Tommy” Leslie gave a forced smile sensing Bruce’s irritation and dreading that this would affect his pulse.

“As you see I’m returning to my work now. Thanks for the interest, Thomas; good day.”

“I’ll see you later, Tommy” Leslie told him following Bruce towards the exit.

Thomas turned his head to look at the two departing figures and smirked.

“Leslie fears for your health, little angel…Nice…And there must be your blood sample somewhere around… Good thing Kelly is here…”

Lucius and Tony were perusing the newest analyses on the peculiar objects that were shown from different angles in a holographic presentation in Lucius’ lab.

“Those figures engraved on the plates are definitely of no known language…” Lucius mumbled pointing his presentation pen light to the symbols.

“And though we can’t figure out their use it’s certain that they are menacing…I can assure you that nobody has anything like this” Tony added.
Lucius rubbed his chin.

“I thought of attempting to assemble them but this could be very dangerous since we ignore crucial aspects and we can’t rely on Luthor’s help…”

Tony sniggered.

“Especially, after what happened to the LexCorp’s board meeting…That Lois Lane is truly wicked! How she managed to get inside information…” he sneered. “I wish I was there to see Lex’s shitface when Bruce told them the positive numbers of LexLabs: ugh! It must hurt like Hell that ol’ Lex was outshined by littl’ guy in his own fortress!”

Lucius chuckled.

“Yes, Mr. Luthor apart from his release doesn’t have many good things to celebrate this Christmas. Now, back to our subject” he huffed.

The door to his lab opened with a hiss and Bruce slithered inside.

“We simply let them assemble the thing…” he said calmly but definite and both men looked at him flabbergasted.

Tony walked to him.

“Bruce, you realize that this can be dangerous? A machine or a massive killing gun or anything?” Tony asked. “I cannot believe that you’re willing to hand these things back to them.”

Bruce smiled and nodded meeting Lucius’ stare that all of a sudden filled with understanding.

“We want to know what this is to manage to thwart their plans…so we’ll give them back the pieces…” now Tony got the point and smiled. “Having our trackers inside to intervene the right moment.”

Tony rubbed his goatee thoughtful.

“Yeah, but they might find out the trackers…”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Remember the trackers that take the synthesis of the material you put it in?”

“Of course I do!” Tony spread his arms. “I manufactured those babies.”

Lucius lolled his head to the side.

“We use them.”

“However they will suspect if you give them the items just like this…” Tony remarked.

Bruce nodded. He was constantly thinking of the possible pattern that might connect things: he didn’t believe in coincidences and these bizarre items in LexLabs, Luthor’s forced release, the attack on him with the supposed Amazon’s life-saving intervention that led to Superman’s taming didn’t seem to him random.

“I’ll remind Mannheim of the fact he isn’t getting what he so desperately wants…” Tony frowned and cut him midsentence.
“That’s extremely dangerous, littl’ guy! I don’t approve…”

Bruce nodded.

“You told me that with you on my side I have nothing to fear – not that I’m afraid…” he grinned. “You see, some “leak” will reveal to them where the items are hidden for them to steal… and then you, Tony, will be able to track their movements and with Lucius you will understand what Mannheim and Luthor are creating.”

Lucius smirked.

“And we will be able to control things from a distance so that whatever it is that won’t be used for damage.”

Thomas Elliot stood leaned on the wall of the wide corridor in the professors’ offices’ storey. This time of the year few people wandered the university yet Thomas knew that the person he was interested in was there.

A grin cracked his face eyeing a lonely figure approaching the newly opened office and walked toward the man who was carrying a black leather briefcase. He knew the new professor; Thomas had met him in some conferences.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Strange. Welcome to Gotham.”

The man with the lamp-like eyes regarded him curious and a bit smugly.

“Ah…Dr. Thomas Elliot…To what do I owe your welcome?” he asked straightforward and Thomas smiled.

“I’m flattered: I didn’t expect that you’d remember me.”

“Is that so?” the doctor answered with a knowing expression as if saying to Thomas that he was so arrogant that surely believed that everyone remembered him.

“Would you like a cup of coffee in my office?”

The older man shrugged.

“Why not?” he answered indifferent but as a matter of fact he was intrigued.

Thomas made him an inviting gesture and led him to his office at the other end of the storey. Strange regarded discreetly but sneering at the luxury of the office.

“Why did you leave your teaching position at St. George’s College to come in Gotham?” Thomas asked him directly handing him a cup of coffee from his espresso machine.

Strange frowned.

“I don’t have to give explanations to you, Dr. Elliot…”

Thomas smiled.

“I think that it’s more than a mere wish to return home…”
Strange smirked and sipped indifferently from his cup. He didn’t have to answer and honestly he liked to let smug people like Elliot to speak revealing their secrets.

“I think you return now because Gotham gained new interest…”

The older man shook his head cocking his eyebrows.

“For a scientist of human behavior Gotham always has interest.”

“But now even more.”

Strange snorted.

“And why is that?”

Elliot got serious and leaned towards him.

“Bruce Wayne, the boy who lived.”

Dr. Strange began cackling.

“I thought that was Harry Potter’s trademark?”

Thomas swallowed the sneering.

“Don’t tell me you’re not intrigued by his case?”

Strange sobered and his eyes darkened.

“I wouldn’t be a top psychiatrist if I wasn’t. And you?”

“I care about Bruce and I fear that it isn’t prudent for him to be left without proper treatment; you know better that after the traumatic experiences he had he is a time bomb for himself and the others.”

Dr. Strange tapped his overlarge nose amused.

“But he manages rather impressively: he was just named the Person of the Year – his cope ability is extraordinary.”

“And that is that intrigues you so much that you left your enviable position in one of world’s finest educational institutes to accept the teaching position to Gotham’s University…like me. Leslie Thompkins, Bruce’s personal doctor, travelled to London a couple of months ago and I’m sure she visited you for advice but of course” he waved his hands elegantly “she didn’t permit you to get near him. But you wanted to be close to him looking for the chance to explore him so...” he showed the university. “Here you are in Gotham.”

Strange cocked an eyebrow.

“Like you?”

Thomas grinned and nodded.

“You want to observe and if you manage, to study him professionally” Elliot continued.

“And you, Dr. Elliot?”

“I believe that Bruce would be better in a controlled professional environment like Arkham Asylum;
handled with scientific knowledge and care.”

Strange widened his eyes impressed by the man’s honesty and malice.

“I don’t agree with that: Mr. Wayne is better adjusted to our world than many people without a past like his. By the way” he narrowed his eyes “you aren’t afraid that I might reveal him your intentions? It would be a nice way to gain his trust…”

Thomas leaned back to his desk chair and laughed.

“Not at all. Because as much as you don’t agree with the Asylum solution still this option would allow you to study him in scrutiny: imagine, Dr. Strange, having him in a solitary room in the Asylum unable to avoid your studies. We can cooperate, Dr. Strange, each for his own purpose.”

The newcomer snorted but didn’t answer. He took his briefcase from the floor and stood.

“Thank you for the coffee, Dr. Elliot, I missed Gotham’s dark, bitter coffee; so long…”

He turned to leave and Elliot frowned: would the odd doctor speak to Wayne?

Strange upon reaching the heavy oaken door halted and turned his head to him grinning.

“Don’t worry, Dr. Elliot: I’m a psychiatrist and under the confidentiality code so I won’t betray your pathological, obsessive jealousy for Mr. Wayne” he nodded and left the office.

Thomas narrowed his eyes staring at the door.
Chapter 53

“You tripped me on purpose to fall!”

Bruce rolled his eyes and caressed the wet hair in Clark’s chest causing goose bumps to his spine more so when the Man of Steel focused on the feeling of Bruce’s pelvis on his groin.

“Of course” he answered nonchalant “I think you forget that I’m Batman.”

Clark stretched his neck and sighed.

“I’m under a human so this human can only be Batman but…”

“No more buts” he retorted sharply and Clark felt with dread the thing he was most afraid of: Bruce’s body slithering on his driving each of his cells crazy; his bodily perfume enhanced by the fresh aroma of shampoo and cream mesmerizing his brain into ordering full surrender.

And what was that? Bruce’s fingertips touching feathery and moving on his ribs slowly finding his abdomens and brushing skillfully each layer which pushed his hips to move upwards; motion that became a violent writhing when Bruce’s hot, velvet lips touched his navel and then nibbled and sucked his rippled flesh. He gasped and raised his torso though his head was heavy with flooding stimulation.

“Wh…what you doing?!” Clark gasped almost panicked as much as his lungs.

It was obvious that Bruce was happy to see his agitation because he knew that unsettling the ‘opponent’ was the first step for the victory. He detached his eyes from Superman’s abdomens and locked eyes with him completely calm and determined.

Clark shuddered from arousal under this stare and his face became all hot which became even worse upon realization. And Bruce’s tranquility was so irritating.

“You’re afraid that you will shatter my paralyzed lower body…however my upper body functions perfectly…” the human said slyly and Clark was reminded of Selina: those two could easily have been real siblings, he thought fleetingly.

“I doubt it!” Clark snapped. “Especially your brain!”

Bruce narrowed his eyes and – damn! - that look was a turn on…

“You’ve been suppressing your needs too long…and mine…” for the first time Bruce’s sharp cheekbones were colored pink.

“You don’t have to do this…” he almost pleaded. “I know how horrid this was…”

Bruce’s eyes flashed angrily as he realized what Clark wanted to say: his past.

“Exactly: I don’t have to do it – I want to do it. So: shut up…” he pressed his palms on Clark’s oversensitive breasts and pushed him down brushing his nipples that traitorously had erected; the most powerful being on Earth unable to stay up. “Let control to me!”

You always had it, Star… he thought and sighed. But immediately his eyes protruded feeling feathery fingers trailing slowly and gently his pelvis’ V downwards to open slightly his thighs. Bruce’s fingers caressed the soft flesh at Clark’s inner thighs ascending to his hipbones sending electric currents to
his spine.

A surprised moan burst out of Clark’s mouth before he could think about it and then his torso arched: his own body rebelled against him... He grunted and his heart gave a thud... Oh, my God! The softest sensation he ever had: lips made of velvet, hot lips were planting small kisses following the V of his pelvis making his groin twitch in hungry anticipation as the tender kisses approached his length only to continue with his pelvis’ other side.

“B...Bruce...” Clark really didn’t know what he wanted to say and those lips that now kissed sucking tenderly his flesh cast his mind in a fog of pleasure and his length in derangement throbbing more madly every time Bruce let a puff of hot air from his lungs caress Clark’s hot flesh, denying the contact.

His loud whine wasn’t flattering for the Man of Steel but Bruce’s magic fingers – as if his lips working his pelvis weren’t enough – brushed not very softly, not very hard his testicles and then nibbles causing Clark’s eyes roll inwards and his fists clench. He was already huffing and puffing without Bruce having touched his impatient length; his slightly open legs trembled uncontrollably – causing vibrations to the tub - and he was afraid of hitting the younger man.

“Oh...Bruce...Please...” his voice was too husky, too weak and he meant to ask Bruce to stop so to not get hurt by his unchecked boiling body. But those rosy, soft lips began trailing with pecks his throbbing length and new waves of hot sweat ran his face, body and especially the inner of his thighs. “Ppplease, Star, MORE!”

Clark huffed and puffed supported in his forearms, his torso semi raised: how much more Bruce was going to torture his hurting member by just making small sucks and strolls throughout his throbbing length; he felt the big vein there ready to explode when Bruce’s slightly rough tongue licked the entire length.

“Star...you’re killing me...” he whimpered; the fact that Bruce’s breaths were calm as they burned his hot flesh pissed him.

Clark felt a smile on the soft flesh that tortured him and then his already hard member was welcomed in Bruce’s hot mouth and the Man of Steel just slumped on the hot porcelain, surrendering to his tormentor. His head lolled backwards and his eyes were closed, he sighed satisfied.

But then he jerked upwards, his back making an arch as Bruce’s lips were massaging in a steady rhythm strongly and then softly his sensitive member, the beating vein there bombed as his heart and lungs. Bruce’s tongue took action only rarely just to enhance the effect of his lips’ massaging moves; slowly upwards causing new streaks of sweat in every pore of Clark’s body – his face was stressed and his neck arched with its veins bulged giving loud rasps and sobs that became cries when Bruce’s nails brushed a bit rough his swollen testicles. Fire was breaking his bones...

Bruce’s heart was beating heavily – Clark could discern its beating coloring the beating of his own heart; he sensed that listening to Clark’s moans and cries was the only satisfaction Bruce needed because he knew that he was making that man happy. He was hard trained to do this even without looking so he glimpsed at Superman’s sweaty, red face that gave the impression of letting out steam; his mouth was agape unable to close due to the waves of moans, sobs and saliva breaking his defenses; his eyes were closed but Bruce could see them moving under the eyelids; soaked locks had stuck on his face making him look even more beautiful. Clark’s fisted hands had relaxed in abandonment as his member became rock hard in his mouth.

Bruce continued pumping with his lips the flaming flesh that boosted from the powerful hips thrust
faster and more frantically almost desperate. Clark understood that Bruce’s experience told him that soon his lover would reach his climax and felt the younger man bracing himself for what was to come into his mouth. But then Clark’s gentle hands caressed his locks and cupped his face drawing him upwards to nestle in his safe chest just before Clark’s torso arched more and the Man of Steel cried his explosion.

Clark smiled satisfied and opened his eyes groaning with pleasure to see a dark haired head over his pelvis; the black-blue long hair was flooding naked, velvet shoulders made of porcelain – wide shoulders but not male as also the smoother edges told him. Two soft lips and a greedy mouth were swallowing his liquid from his throbbing length with moans of pleasure.

Clark caressed Diana’s locks and she raised her head with her dark blue eyes shining; some drops of his semen on her lips, her tongue taking them in gently.

“You’re so precious that not even a drop should go wasted” she said almost sternly and smiled which always made Clark’s heart beat faster. “You were thinking of him, Kal El?” her voice was filled with resentment and her eyebrow was cocked, the previous pleasure giving its place to suspicion.

Clark didn’t like lies but in Diana’s presence they felt alright.

“No.”

The Princess smiled and raised a bit her entirely naked body which made Clark’s breath stop: those round, rich, erect breasts; the perfect shaped muscles leading to her abdominals and then the steep descend to her vagina… that rubbed to his spent penis sending new thunders to his spine.

Diana swallowed his lips massaging brutally.

“Did he give you what I do?” she asked with her eyes stabbing his and her hands massaging his ribs.

Clark wrapped his arm around her back and smiled.

“He was…trying hard…”

She snorted and nestled her body to his torso.

“Trying?” she sneered. “He was a whore his entire life with a demanding master; he should be a perfect professional.”

Clark frowned.

“How do you know?”

She caressed his curly chest hair.

“Everyone knows that, Kal…Everyone who read Wayne’s story or watched the news…” she raised her eyes to meet his. “I wouldn’t have bothered to do that but…I did it because he had captured your interest.”

That seemed right to Clark: it was true that everyone knew what Bruce’s use was all these years…A whore…He felt nausea but there was something else nudging his insides that he just ignored.

Diana gave a crooked grin and kissed Clark’s lips.

“You deserve the best, Kal El, not just mortal efforts…” she mumbled staring at his eyes.
He nodded and held her in a one arm hug rising to a sitting position.

“I found the best in you, Diana…”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“No more…trial and error?” she asked sternly and playfully at the same time.

Clark feeling his annoying lock falling to his brow smiled and shook his head.

“No more!” he sighed. “With him every time was almost as if conducting some kind of abuse…” he chuckled and Diana looked at him amused. “Dreading that one wrong move and I’d hurt him, physically or emotionally. Feeling guilty as if I became one of his abusers – it was disturbing…”

Diana nodded.

“I see…He wasn’t good enough for you; he was inadequate for a great god like you…” but Clark’s eyes were cast inside which didn’t evade her. “But you’re still thinking of him!” she clenched her fist.

Clark took her fist gently and kissed the knuckles.

“I was just thinking how idiot I was…But thankfully now I have you…”

He captured her lips cupping the back of her head: her body’s natural perfume of every flower in the world mixed perfectly with the perfume of the flowers in the room’s small pots that were spread in every small table and dresser.

His hands travelled to her taut but soft breasts and fondled with want making Diana open her legs to engulf his pelvis. Yet Clark didn’t have the time: it was half past seven and he was going to be late for work. So he reluctantly let go of her wet nipples and vagina to lay her on the mattress.

She was expecting him to cuddle her but when he stood and walked towards the bathroom that was attached to the bedroom, she frowned and raised herself supporting on her elbows.

“Where are you going, Kal?” she demanded.

The heavy dark green curtains were drown but it was obvious that the day was still young as the light remained dim.

He stood still sighing and turned to look at her after a few seconds.

“You know I have matters to attend to…”

She narrowed her eyes.

“You’re a god: the protector of these people; I have this obligation too but…” her face changed into contempt “you’re acting like a miserable human being that has to maintain a 9-5 job.”

Clark smiled: well, more than 9-5 actually depending on emergencies. But he couldn’t admit that to Diana: she wouldn’t understand and he didn’t want to lose anything of her admiration and respect. He knew how she felt about anything mortal-related and a job wasn’t excluded. Superman working as a journalist? Ridiculous!

“Of course not!” he said hiding the defensive tone because Superman didn’t have to defend himself to anyone…except for Diana…obviously but she didn’t have to know. “Superman has more
obligations than just saving the day: humans need my guidance and consultation and I can’t deny them.”

Diana nodded and stood graciously strutting to him completely at ease with her nakedness so much unlike Bruce. She was a miracle of beauty and he had to fight with himself to not stay there devoring the pleasures she had to offer.

The Amazon cupped his face and looked him in the eyes.

“You’re doing many sacrifices for them…But we must be like this since humans are so inferior…” Superman replied with an uncomfortable smile.

She didn’t kiss him though Clark’s lips moved to meet hers; she walked graciously to her robe and put it on. Clark sighed watching the tantalizing way her naked, protruding buttocks swayed and got inside the bathroom wondering if it’d be better to drop his job and that Clark Kent persona.

“Our focus should have been on your surgery” Tony said to Bruce under Lucius’ gaze; the scientist didn’t reveal his opinion “and not diverting to every single other matter. I want to work only in this and let the rest be: we have to set some priorities, Bruce!”

They had left Lucius’ lab to Bruce’s office and now Tony was spilling out what was eating him all this time. Bruce was watching his friend pacing the corridor gazing at the space with blank eyes, thoughtful: Tony loved him so much that his disability was torturing him as much as it tortured Bruce – sometimes Bruce could see in his puppy, black eyes a dim terror when looking at him but then his childhood friend managed to hide it.

Tony was afraid for him and Bruce understood that the prospect of the surgery almost panicked him despite the fact he was a genius and he had Lucius in the team – another genius – and Bruce knew that those two chose the best people for the project.

He looked at Tony who had stopped walking and leaned his back on the wall right next to the lift they intended to take to the upper floor.

“Tony, there are priorities indeed” he said calmly and Tony shook his head. “There are things that come before me. You know that. You’re already doing too much for me and I feel that it is unfair to you: you’re S.H.I.E.L.D.’s director and the president of a great company and I’m keeping you away from them and busy with my problems while there are so many things that want your attention.”

Lucius had crossed his arms and looked at Tony who was ruffling his locks before meeting his friend’s eyes.

“You’re not keeping me away from any of that, Bruce…I’m handling perfectly everything and I’d still manage perfectly even if I was in a lab working exclusively for your operation. Because for me your health, your recovery is the most important thing and not chasing those…items which we can just destroy and get over with the matter.”

Bruce licked his lips.

“And never realizing what they are scheming? What kind of a menace lurks in the shadows? I know you, Tony, thus I’m certain that you don’t want to leave that uncovered.”

Tony huffed and shook his head.
“I never said that we should let that matter uncovered but we can buy some time till you have the operation and be healthy enough…”

“But we have an entire team working for that surgery and you with Lucius exert yourselves for the same goal. But we can manage other things at the same time.”

Tony leaned to him.

“But we can’t do these at the same time: YOU can’t do all things at the same time” Bruce frowned and Tony held his shoulders meeting his eyes. “You’re weakening yourself, little guy…” he huffed. “You’re acting as if you don’t realize how important this operation is – and difficult -, it demands your full focus but you run everywhere to manage things: you must set other things at bay, Bruce…”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“This is what is eating you, Tony?”

The older man sighed.

“Yes.”

Bruce pressed his lips and took Tony’s hand in his.

“I’ll be alright, Tony. I’ll manage” he smiled. “I’ll have you, Lucius, Leslie and the best doctors around: I’m not afraid of anything when I have all of you by my side.”

He patted Tony’s upper arms.

“We won’t perform the operation before everything is perfect” Lucius said arching his eyebrows to Tony. “And that includes Mr. Wayne’s physical and overall condition” he looked at his employer. “Which means that Mr. Wayne is responsible for the speed of his own recovery.”

Tony smirked to Lucius thanking him for reminding Bruce of that and Bruce just nodded.

The indicator on the brown glass screen in the lift’s door showed that they had reached the floor to Bruce’s office. When the lift’s doors opened and the three men began walking Bruce found himself before a surprise. Oliver Queen was strolling with his smug expression in all its might having just left Ms. Philips’ desk.

Queen saw him too and immediately approached. Tony watched with cocked eyebrows the man’s beaming face.

“Bruce!” Queen exclaimed and stretched his hand to the younger man for a handshake.

“Mr. Queen…” Bruce answered coldly and saw Queen’s face losing its color on that welcome.

“Tony, how are you?” he mumbled to the billionaire from Malibu. “And this must be Mr. Fox; delighted to meet you!”

Lucius shook his stretched hand.

“I knew your late father, Mr. Queen.”

Queen sighed.

“Yes, he had mentioned you several times…”
Tony sensed Bruce’s uneasiness from Queen’s presence.

“Oliver, I see you have become almost a Gothamite…” Tony smiled. “To what do we owe the honor of your visit?”

The man chuckled.

“Honor? You’re flattering me, Tony, but I don’t think that Bruce agree with that. Right?” the younger man didn’t answer just eyed him with his sparkling eyes. “Well, I wanted to see Bruce in his Fortress…”

Bruce met his eyes. He still remembered the feeling of waking up in Queen’s bedroom, having the man’s hot breath brushing his face and realize that this man was staring at him while he was sleeping. Although there was nothing in his food or drink Bruce didn’t like the way he suddenly fell asleep in a place full of people. And then the way Queen had kneeled to put the shoes on Bruce’s feet…Bruce had the feeling that the man was struggling to not kiss his feet… He shivered on the memory.

“It’s not my Fortress: it is my father’s company.”

Queen smiled smugly as if he read Bruce’s thoughts.

“That you took back from the man who killed your parents and stole your fortune keeping you as his slave. Also, you managed to make that company thriving and respectful once again.”

Bruce’s eyes were completely still locked with Queen’s sensing how much the man was thrilled from that.

“I wouldn’t have managed anything weren’t for Tony and Lucius…”

Queen inclined slightly his head.

“Of course…” he turned to Lucius. “We have talked with Bruce about potential cooperation between our corporations.”

Lucius nodded.

“Yes, Mr. Wayne has informed me and we agree that there are good potentials in that.”

“I’m glad to hear because your entrepreneur genius is highly respected; I wonder if I could have some tour to Wayne Tower?” his eyes were focused on Bruce suggesting that he was expecting Bruce to guide him.

“Of course…Mr. Fox will be delighted to guide you to our facilities” Bruce said and Lucius smiled amused with his eyes sparkling. “He knows better than anyone Wayne Enterprises.”

“I’m sure but I was hoping to have the President’s attention?” Queen replied both displeased and amused from Bruce’s dodge.

The younger man smiled.

“I apologize but my physiotherapist is waiting for my session and I can’t miss any…I’m sure you understand…”

Tony hardly swallowed his chuckle for Queen’s blank expression: the man’s disappointment was clear. But Queen eventually nodded.
“Of course…”

“Thank you for your understanding” Bruce’s smile became broader. “Have a good time in your tour…Mr. Queen, Lucius…”

He turned to leave, Tony with him but Queen stopped him.

“Bruce, can I have a word…”

Bruce turned his head.

“I’m afraid you can’t, Mr. Queen: it is rude to let people waiting. It is a pity you didn’t make an appointment before coming…”

Tony cocked his eyebrows to Queen pouting and left with Bruce. The billionaire from Malibu had to fly to New York to attend to Avengers’ businesses in the Tower. Happy was waiting with the jet’s engines on.

Queen looked at Lucius.

“Your employee is really something, huh?”

Lucius chuckled.

“You bet…Shall we?” he made an inviting gesture though he knew that the man had lost completely his appetite now that Bruce was gone.

“I’d like to speak to Mr. Mannheim, please. Bruce Wayne.”

It was easy to find the telephone numbers of Mannheim’s headquarters unlike finding any information about the type of his business and deals. Batman managed to enter to the company’s building – it was relatively easy – as if the man didn’t have any intention to hide something or being afraid of espionage. Which was actually the case because there was nothing for the intruder to find except for mundane things custom to a company. And this was the reason that Bruce decided to nudge Mannheim and let him take the objects.

It was the only way to find the truth about the objects’ use and their owner. More so since Batman’s investigation in LexCorp’s building wasn’t of much help. Bruce had hoped that Luthor would have some information hidden in his personal archive built under the building’s basement since there was nothing in the LexLabs’ logs. He had hoped that he would find information not only about Mannheim but also for the cloning program and what Luthor did for Ra’s Al Ghul; maybe there were some answers.

But no: even in Luthor’s personal archives there wasn’t anything of help. So Bruce had to rely on Ubu’s efforts for the potential child and to his own plan for finding the truth.

He had taken advantage of Alfred’s absence to pick up Dick from the gym to get in the cave and do some more demanding investigation through the cave’s stronger processor: not that his Cosmos wasn’t efficient but being in the cave offered him…inspiration; it reminded him of who he was and glancing at the armor inside the transparent case fortified that; like reasserting that he was indeed Batman and he hadn’t lost that.

At the moment the processor was searching information about the company “Build & Fit” that Mr.
Breizic told him that had been assigned with the renovation of Gotham’s gym when John Grayson died. The remarkable thing was that in the gym’s archive there wasn’t much about a company that was assigned with such a large project.

He caught with the corner of his eye Hero climbing to the Tumbler sneakily with his narrowed eyes watching the bats which still hadn’t left the cave. The kitten stayed completely still for several seconds and then made an impressive jolt to catch the bat that hung lower than the others…Only for the rodent to fly away the last second leaving the kitten slithering on the Tumbler to land on its paws meowing frustrated.

Bruce smiled: this animosity wouldn’t be easily settled.

“Mr. Wayne, I’m sorry for the waiting” Mannheim’s secretary came back to the line. “He’ll speak to you now – I’m connecting you.”

It was late afternoon yet Bruce had the certainty that Mannheim would be there.

“Thank you, Miss.”

“How did you find this number?” Mannheim growled immediately.

He was angry, Bruce thought, nice.

“It is a business number not a personal so I found it quite easily.’’

“What do you want, Wayne?” the man asked rudely. “Maybe you realized that you owe to give me my order?”

“Actually, I called to give you a last notice.”

Mannheim snorted.

“Last notice?” he spat.

Bruce pursed his lips.

“In accordance to the obligation LexLabs’ previous owner took concerning you, I felt that I should inform you that every unidentified item found in LexLabs will be reported to the officials and then destroyed” he heard the wrath in Mannheim’s sharp intake of air. “So if you want your order, you have a last chance to bring in the appropriate information so you take what you ordered..”

A slap of a heavy hand on a desk went through the telephone line and Bruce smirked.

“You’re playing with me, you stupid man?!”

“Not at all” Bruce replied nonchalant. “Actually, I was expecting that you would appreciate this notice since my intension is to ease your case. However you must hurry because you have only a few days before every unauthorized item will be destroyed. I’ll be waiting your news.”

“You’ll get news very soon, Wayne – be sure of this…”

The threat was vibrating the man’s rough voice but Bruce grinned and ended the call.

He had just set things in motion: he had to find out what this man and Luthor was scheming and if he had any connection with the fake Diana and Superman’s beguiling. Because Bruce was seeing a clear pattern with the peaks of the scheme interconnected but he needed proof.
And then the Intergang mystery was reborn from the moment Mannheim came to his office: Bruce never was sold for the option of Edge, the veteran gangster being the Intergang’s leader: his death during the Metropolis’ subway attack and his thugs’ disturbed mental state were very convenient. Exactly as the burglars busted for the raids at the LexLabs.

Mannheim was active in Metropolis and he was interested in these things so why not being the one who ordered the raids all over the states to find them? With that in mind, the fact that the agents on these two apparently unrelated cases had exactly the same qualities pointed to the option of being orchestrated by the same mastermind: and if the attack in the subway was the job of the Intergang then the raids were also so if Mannheim was behind the raids then he was also Intergang’s ghost leader. Which fact was also supported by his cooperation with Luthor and the latter’s release was achieved in the same way with the releases of the scum that according to Clark belong to the Intergang.

Mannheim was clever: staged the attack killing a known gangster and framing him up as the leader of the Intergang – then leading the gang underground to persuade everyone that it was over. While they were moving in the shadows which was more efficient. Also Mannheim was powerful to manage moving the wheels to release Luthor…Considering that his company except for its prosperity and annual balance sheets was much obscure concerning activities and deals the odds of Mannheim being the person of interest were very high.

Bruce wished he had Clark in this to investigate his city…But he doubted that he cared about investigating now that he was with Vivian…and that again was another clue that everything connected: have Superman under the effect of this woman in order to forget the case…not his duties as a protector but being indifferent to the Intergang’s mystery especially since everything indicated that the gang was over.

Suddenly, the processor beeped that it has ended the search and Hero frustrated from his failed efforts ran to Bruce and rubbed to his dead feet calling for a consoling petting that Bruce happily gave as his eyes set on the screen.

The company – “Build & Fit” - had no current or closed site and Bruce doubted if they had any archive or construction. His investigation had focused on the archives public services had on the company: a local company with too few projects in the three years of its life. The registration of the company was on the name Sandrey Felix and Bruce instantly pressed the key to start search for him only to crook his mouth seeing that too conveniently the man had died in a robbery a year after John’s death and the company’s closure.

Crossing the details of that company with others of its category Bruce knitted his eyebrows: “Build & Fit” was the same company with “Agiltex”, a company that Bruce knew very well because it was the company where Dick’s father had invested his money only to lose them.

Among the other data the processor gave was the report on the company’s performance at the local exchange market: the company appeared a morning and the next day its shares got rocket high: there were many articles advertising the shares. The company’s rally lasted some months gathering a large amount of money and then suddenly the company bankrupted leading its shareholders to disaster. Some voices in the local market and media talked about fraud yet it was Falcone’s era so everything was allowed.

So Felix created a new company a while later for what? To commit a new fraud? Bruce doubted that. He had a hunch: typed some orders to find the man’s accounts. Felix had some bank accounts but also he had an off shore company at Barbados which wasn’t difficult to hack into getting access.

“What?!” Bruce exclaimed and Hero turned surprised to look at him.
The offshore didn’t belong to Felix but to none other than Tony Zucco: of course, at the moment the accounts were almost empty which could explain the man’s sudden return in Gotham and his interest in Dick…

“Hm… I knew I’d find you here, sweetie…” a playful, loved voice broke the monotone of the waterfall and Bruce raised his eyes to her only to be faced with her scolding expression.

Selina wore a raincoat.

“This waterfall is a real security measure with this freezing cold” she said coming closer. “And you shouldn’t be here, Bruce… When the cat is gone…”

Bruce showed Hero with his eyes.

“As you see the cat is here… Why you didn’t knock at the Manor?”

She pushed off her head the hood and cocked an eyebrow.

“And lose the chance to catch you in the act?”

“It’s your shift to guard me?” he chuckled.

She sat on the bench.

“You blame us?” she moved her head to show the cave. “Really now, Bruce: you shouldn’t be here… But this isn’t the only reason I came: Steve left with Tony for Avengers’ stuff in New York so we can speak in private…”

Her eyes sparkled with her most witty way and Bruce narrowed his eyes eyeing the flood of data on his screen.

“Don’t pose the indifferent to me, kiddo…” she said smiling.

“I think we always are free to say whatever we want.”

“Mmm… I never got insight about Metropolis…” she said in a singsong voice and focused her eyes on Bruce’s profile.

Bruce’s hands stayed still over the keyboard, he sighed and then locked eyes with Selina.

“What do you want to learn, my dear interrogator?”

Selina pouted cutely.

“Interrogator? You’d have let your Selina in total darkness?”

Bruce chuckled and shook his head.

“Go ahead.”

Selina got serious which was a bit tricky with Hero who had climbed to her lap licking her chin.

“You saw him?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Yes, twice… The first was my mistake” he huffed. “I booked to the hotel where the ceremony for
the Pulitzer Awards was to be held” he decided that saying it all at once was better and hoped to sound indifferent but Selina’s eyes felt with sympathy and Bruce shook his head. “And I went there to see and clap for him” now Selina sighed. “He noticed me and we spoke…”

“I hope he didn’t insult you?”

Bruce grinned.

“No.”

Selina wasn’t convinced yet let it be.

“You said twice: the second time?”

Bruce didn’t want to hide from her the fact that Batman acted in Metropolis. Besides he was sure that she had figured.

“On a rooftop…Superman met Batman.”

“And?”

“He tried to kiss me and asked me to be with him even now that he is with her…”

Selina ground her teeth and yanked her head.

“That asshole! He has too much nerve! How dare he? Who does he think you are?!”

Bruce smirked and cocked an eyebrow.

“A whore…” he said dryly and Selina’s eyes flashed.

Bruce heard again the bang of thunder that colored Clark’s crude voice:

“You slander her – a noble, brave warrior – of being a whore while you are the whore!”

Selina left Hero down and slithered her arms around Bruce’s neck.

“You’re not a whore, sweetie…” she pecked his cheek.

Bruce smiled.

“My record says otherwise” he chuckled and Selina shook her head infuriated.

“I think I’ll change my policy and stuck a large piece of Kryptonite to his ass!”

Her friend smiled to her and lolled his head on the side.

“No need…I pushed him away and left.”

“You still love him, don’t you?”

Bruce grinned.

“This ended once and for all, Sel; I do care for him but…what we had…it was a mistake.”

“No…Sweetie…It was very beautiful but you rooted for the wrong person; however that doesn’t mean that there’s no other person who would cherish your feelings and give you what you deserve.”
He smiled.

“No more of that, Sel…You know better than anyone that I had had enough of this…”

Selina brushed his upper arm sad and Hero jumped to Bruce’s lap to give him a consoling rub. Bruce petted the kitten’s head and Selina cleared her throat and took her stern expression.

“Now, kiddo: upstairs! Enough humidity you have absorbed.”

“I have things to do, Sel and it won’t be long…and this cave is inspirational…”

“Inspirational?”

“I just found that the company John Grayson invested and lose his money was the same with the one that caused his death” Selina’s eyes widened “with a different name. And behind both companies is none other than Zucco himself.”

Selina spread her arms.

“Great! Tell the brat the truth!”

Bruce shook his head.

“Not yet. He won’t believe me: his grandmother said some things to him and the boy didn’t believe her. I need more and I need more and solid proof that it was the company’s fault that caused Grayson’s death which would lead to Zucco’s arrest.”

Selina stood.

“Great! Now we can go upstairs to the warmth and continue your investigation, Monsieur Poirot.”

Bruce chuckled but then his Cosmos rang with his number on the screen.

“Hello, Alfred!” Bruce greeted him putting the call on the speaker. “How many new pills Leslie gave you for me this time?”

“I have your pills, Master Bruce but there’s something more urgent.”

A knot formed in Bruce’s guts.

“Are you coming to the Manor?”

A slight pause but then Alfred spoke again with his poised voice.

“Master Bruce, Master Richard isn’t in the gym.”

“Damn that brat!” Selina gritted her teeth.

“Okay, Alfred” Bruce said calmly pinching the bridge of his nose. “Have you spoken to the bodyguards?”

He was listening to Alfred recounting his actions and at the same time typing orders to locate the boy from the signal his Cosmos emitted as he had done the last time the boy ran away. Yet the signal was coming from the gym.

“Alfred, he has left his Cosmos at the gym: he must have suspected that I can locate him through
“Master Bruce, we’ll find him: do not worry and please do not make a hasty movement.”

Selina knew what Alfred meant since Bruce’s eyes was focused on his armor that stood like a formidable guard ready to spring to life.

“We’ll be in touch, Alfred” he said ending the call.

“Bruce, no” Selina said as he moved towards the case. “Don’t do this.”

“I must: it’s night, Selina and we have no idea where Dick is; meanwhile Joker lurks in the city and knows that I have Dick’s guardianship.”

“I can find him!” she said exasperated but Bruce was absolute; his eyes still in hers.

“No…It's my responsibility. Sel, do not thwart me: you know me better than anyone and you know that I have to do it.”

Selina gulped: it was true, she knew Bruce and his need. Also, Bruce was full aware that she couldn’t deny him anything.

“I’ll come with you…”

Dick was sitting at a central café filled with people drinking from a can beer he had bought from a store: the café’s owner asked him to stop drinking since he was underage but the boy made a scene yelling that he could do anything he wanted since he was Wayne’s ward.

That way everyone in the café would know who he was even if he/she hadn’t already heard so he loved and enjoyed the appalled stares he caused. His delight was greater when some phones were drawn to shoot pictures of him. This would suit their purposes perfect.

But then he noticed an officer entering the café, probably called by the café’s owner and he hurried to leave from the back door. He had called Jason to find him here using his old, simple cellphone since he had left his tablet in the gym. He was sure that Wayne had ordered his people to create a signal so that he could be located.

Jason was waiting there seated at his bike’s seat; he had his arms crossed and smoked gazing at the garbage bin.

“Turn it on and step on it” Dick said jumping on the bike behind him.

“Joker is chasing ya?” the boy asked bored.

“No, there’s a cop and he will take me to Wayne.”

“The best he has to do! Are ya fuckin’ crazy?! That nutcase is loose an’ he has targeted ya once already!”

Dick smirked.

“Are ya afraid?” he mimicked his friend’s accent and Jason fumed.

“Of course not, ya dork!” he turned the bike on and sped up. “To where?”
“Narrows.”

They ended up to their favorite rooftop on the abandoned building; both boys sat at the edge dangling their feet to the void overlooking the area that now seemed less scary. Jason was smoking and drinking beer while Dick held the second can of beer for the night.

“What are ya up to, man?” Jason asked drinking his beer.

“I want my freedom and I don’t want to be Wayne’s pet.”

“Ya’re not a pet, man: ya might not like him but I think he cares…” the boy said sucking his cigarette.

Dick rolled his eyes and pretended to throw up.

“Care, my ass! He just plays the caring…”

“An’ what you gonna to do? I mean tonight…”

“I’ll stay away from the Manor…”

“Ya’ll go to Zucco?”

“No, because Wayne might give him a Hell..I’ll stay out.”

Jason spat the mouthful of beer he had sipped.

“yar fuckin’ crazy, man! Ya’re gonna be ice cream! Ya know, I think that if Zucco cared about ya wouldn’a want ya to freeze to death…” however Dick’s annoyed stare told him that his words were in vain and that pissed the younger boy but he couldn’t let his friend out with that cold. “Come home to us.”

“Wayne will look there and your mom is gonna inform him right away” he drank from his bottle.

“I’ll find a shelter…”

“In Gotham? Are ya nuts!! Oh, man! That Zucco is driving ya to death!”

Dick drank again and shook his head.

“No, he cares for me…”

“I’ll stay with ya, pal: I’m not leaving ya on yar own with Joker free.”

Dick grinned.

“You’re gonna protect me now that Batman is dead, huh?”

Jason lolled his head and drank.

“He isn’t.”

Dick chuckled and cocked his eyebrows.

“You didn’t see what happened in the city hall square? He never came to save the day: Catwoman and the Avengers did it. And they did because Batman is dead.”

Jason shook his head in denial and Dick sighed.
“I saw him trapped to death…” he mumbled swallowing a knot. “He couldn’t have escape from all that debris before the building collapsed; he died but there’s a plot to hide it from people.”

But Jason was staring down with narrowed eyes and pointed to two figures that were chasing a thin person to an alley. Their building was the least tall from the surrounding allowing them a clear view to the street.

“Who said that Narrows stopped bein’ thug driven?”

“This is still Narrows” Dick shrugged “and criminals gradually realize that Batman is gone once and for all” he threw his bottle down smashing it. “Let’s go!”

“Ya’re wasted, man – too much beer…” Jason chuckled. “How we gonna face those guys? With burps?!”

“I’m not gonna stand when a woman gets raped…” he said standing. “Are ya scared, littl’ Jay?” he said and began running to the other side of the rooftop to the threadbare door leading inside.

Jason smashed his bottle down.

“Of course not!” he spat and followed.

Batman was in the Narrows. When he left the Manor turned the systems in the Tumbler to analyzing every frequency in the city for any reference of Dick. He didn’t try to contact Jason because the boy should remain loyal to Dick and only to him.

When the AI informed him that a gossip show on TV mentioned Dick he opened and watched the footage some onlookers had shot; he crossed the images with all the cafes in Gotham to find the place but a fraction of a second before the result came out his systems caught the signal from a patrol car relaying that a boy probably drunk created trouble in Forester’s cafe.

Which was the place that his system identified as the one from the phone pictures. He rushed there at the same time getting access to the public and the store’s security cameras: he saw the boys leaving with Jason’s bike. From then it wasn’t difficult to follow their course hacking the cameras that covered the direction the bike took and following their signal through Tumbler’s tracker. All this time, Selina was following the boys from another direction so that everything was covered.

The boys had stopped to the Narrows and Catwoman who was watching them now on foot informed him that they ended up on the rooftop of an abandoned building at the west side of the Narrows.

“Stay with them but watch them discreetly’” he said to his friend and heard her annoyed huff: if it was to Selina she would spank both of the boys but Batman didn’t want to scare them into running away nor suspect that Batman and she were both looking for them.

Dick drunk! Bruce couldn’t believe it: he was a good boy and in his attempt to make Bruce’s life difficult he was damaging himself. Once again Bruce thought that maybe he was wrong in his acts…

And then he saw it: a woman running scared chased by two men with hoods. It was obvious what they wanted and Batman’s jaw clenched. He could inform Catwoman to intervene but he was tired of putting the weight on other people’s shoulders. So he opened the door and stepped out feeling like his old neighborhood was welcoming him.

He marched towards the alley knowing that the thugs carried guns and knives. He could hear their
threats and curses and the woman’s weak desperate cry.

“The boys have left the rooftop” Selina said.

“Stay with them.”

He could just call the Police but that wasn’t him; wasn’t Batman. And till police reached the place the crime would have happened.

So he proceeded to what he knew better: he became one with the shadows ready to attack the men when:

“Stop, you morons!”

Batman was happy for the lenses because his eyes bulged: two small figures surged the alley with bike helmets covering their heads. However Bruce knew they were Dick and Jason because he recognized the helmets, the boys’ forms and Dick’s clothes. His heart began pounding. Dick performed some breathtaking somersaults attacking the man with the gun kicking his hand; Jason launched a brick against the second thug and jumped on his back punching him with all his might.

“Foolish boys!” Batman mumbled; at least they thought of wearing their bike helmets.

The thugs soon overcame their surprise and took control over the situation grabbing the boys while the woman found the chance to run away. Batman heard Catwoman’s heels approaching and with a sharp gesture sent her away.

The thug who had lost his gun due to Dick’s kick took it again holding Dick from the lapels while the other man held Jason’s arms behind his back. The gun shone under the dim light of the street lamp as the thug put it on Dick’s neck: obviously he didn’t care about the boy’s identity.

“Ya thought that ya coulda mess with us?” Dick thrashed and gave him a kick in the groin that was too little to yield the guy. “Ya’ll die now, brats!”

Jason giving trouble to his captor jolting in his arms turned to.

“Well done, ya jerk!”

“It was yar idea, kiddo?” the one that held Dick sneered. “Who do ya think ya’re? Batman’s mini substitute?” both thugs began cackling and then he sobered. “It was yar idea so ya’ll die first” the boy thrushed and Jason tried to kick his captor to no avail. “No, Batman, seed: so who’s gonna save ya now?”

He tightened his finger to the trigger.

Batman launched the cables from his gloves grabbing the man’s wrists and twisting them so hard that not only the gun flew away and Dick was freed but a sickening crack was heard from his wrists. Dick kicked the man and the second thug shocked let Jason looking around and pulling out his own gun searching the alley with his eyes but Jason encouraged kicked him to the ass; the man turned to him growling. But another cable wrapped his legs throwing to the ground and the boys looked around.

Only then Batman stepped out of the shadows thick smoke hiding his half body.

“Fuck!” Jason exclaimed goggling at the imposing dark figure as his friend.
“Go!” he barked to the boys and they obeyed.

When the thugs lied unconscious he walked to the kids who had removed their helmets and gaped at him.

“Oh, man!” Jason exclaimed. “I knew ya’re alive!” Batman cast him a glare and the boy closed his mouth scratching his hair. “Okay…”

“You are alive!” Dick said and for once Bruce saw something different than hatred to his eyes.

“Foolish boys!” he growled. “Never do that again! This isn’t a game: they were ready to kill you! You think that’s funny?!” the vibration of that voice was more terrorizing than the thugs’ guns “you won’t do that again!” the boys nodded shyly and Batman changed his tone but not his stern attitude. “I’ll take you home…” he spat.

“No need, man, I had my vehicle…” Jason made to brag but Batman’s glare was enough to silence him.

“I’ll be right behind: don’t you dare to detour.”

Jason raised his hands in surrender.

“Okay, man: ya’re the boss! But ya know ya’re not the only who knows the Nar…”

“Cut it, kid!”

Jason rolled his eyes and looked sideways at Dick who shrugged.

“Get inside!” Batman ordered Dick; the kids hadn’t realized till then the car’s silent approach after Batman pressed the option on his gauntlet.

Both boys gaped yet again when the Tumbler’s passenger door opened upwards.

“Wow!” Jason goggled. “The Batmobile! Man, can I ride too?”

Batman scowled.

“You have your vehicle, remember?”

“Shit! No fair, dude!” Jason spat frustrated but stopped under the man’s glare.

After Batman made sure that Jason was in his house he turned the wheel towards Leslie’s clinic.

“Where are we going?” Dick asked tranquil.

“To Dr. Thompkins’ free clinic: she’ll know where to take you” he wasn’t going to betray that he knew where Dick lived now but he had no problem to let him know that he was informed of his grandmother’s disappearance.

“You know where I live and you don’t take me there because you know that my grandmother isn’t there…”

Batman nodded his gaze on the street ahead.

“I’m updated on the people I know…” he looked at him coldly. “You drank alcohol: that’s forbidden! What were you thinking?”
The boy crossed his arms.

“Mind your own business!”

"You're hurting yourself that way more than anyone else. Do you think that your loved ones would want this?"

Dick closed his eyes.

“I thought you died that night. And I'm happy you didn't...” the boy looked at his turned to the road face and Batman looked at him. "Honestly..."

Leslie’s eyes were two daggers when she saw Batman and she had to bite her tongue to not yell at the man; yet she just took the boy inside casting a glare to Batman.

“Thanks” she spat and Bruce knew that he was in for serious trouble.

He had left the Tumbler in an alley next to Leslie’s clinic just in case someone saw the vehicle and connected them: Falcone’s reign was over but he was still wanted.

Batman was ready to get inside the Tumbler when he heard someone approaching silently from the air. He knew that it wasn’t Superman. He turned calmly and saw the supposed Amazon staring at him with a smug expression, her hand on the hilt of her sword; yet he didn’t worry.

“The infamous Bat” she said snidely and Bruce’s eyes narrowed. “What are you? A demon as they believe or a stupid human trying to pose as something greater than he is?” she lolled her head on the side snorting. “The second obviously” she spat.

Batman’s lower face remained expressionless and after a second he turned his back and walked towards the Tumbler.

“Don’t you turn your back on me, you rat!” she yelled but Batman continued unfazed. “Or you are such a coward to confront me?”

On that Batman stopped and turned his head to her.

“I don’t see any bravery or any meaning in confronting someone like you…Actually, you’re wasting my time.’

She clenched her jaw.

“You’re saying that you shrug me off?” she grounded her teeth.

“You said it…I suggest you go back to your business and leave Gotham.”

“I’ll go wherever I want.”

“Then do it.”

“No!” she smirked. “What kind of a coward hides his face from his enemies?”

Now Batman turned his body towards her.

“Ancient Greeks warriors wore helmets covering almost their entire face: you should know better…” he said dryly and then yanked his head satisfied from her affronted look. “What do you want?”
“To meet you to see what you truly are…although I was sure that you’re nothing more than a useless vigilante: if you were better you’d have protected Gothamites and Superman wouldn’t have fell on Wayne’s trap.”

Batman scowled at her.

“I never believed that an Amazon would think only with her lower instincts: Amazons are independent… but it seems that your mind works differently now you left your island.”

On that she seemed upset and paler; she gritted her teeth and took off.

“We’re not finished, rodent!” she spat turning her flushed face to him.

“Definitely not…” he answered nonchalant and got inside the Tumbler.

During the way back to the Manor one thought prevailed in his mind: he had to do what was always in the back of his mind, itching him – the only solution: find the true Princess Diana.
As soon as the Tumbler jumped through the waterfall at the cave’s entrance Selina who had arrived earlier rushed to the flat rock where the monster car landed holding Hero to her chest; Selina had followed Bruce’s instructions and when Batman neutralized the thugs and took the boys to return them home she changed clothes at her place and came back to the cave.

She thought of bringing Bruce’s wheelchair along yet she was sure that Bruce wouldn’t want Batman sat in a wheelchair…Inside Selina a knot was formed: it must be a minute by minute constant fight for Bruce to be bound to that chair and yet smiling to everyone.

The door to the Tumbler’s driver seat opened and Selina had to hold tight Hero to not jump at Batman’s lap: it was clear that Hero’s instinct was stronger than the lack of scent the armor achieved so the kitten understood that his master and friend was under the armor. After all, Hero was a frequent inhabitant of the cave and had seen the armor in its case waiting its owner.

Batman came out and Bruce pulled off the cowl which was enough for Hero to escape Selina and jump to him. He caught the kitten but his expression was still filled with Batman’s strictness and determination before gradually loosening up.

“You took the brat to Alfred?” she asked as they crossed the glass-titanium narrow bridge to the working bench.

“No, I didn’t want Dick to start wondering how I knew where Alfred was. I took him to Leslie’s clinic instead.”

“I hope she gives him a good scolding before Alfred takes over…” she said snidely.

Bruce placed the cowl on the bench and let Hero on the rocky ground. Selina leaned to him with her arms crossed.

“You know of course that you’re on for a good scolding too…Not to mention some punishment…”

Bruce turned his gaze at her and then ruffled his sweaty, wet hair with both hands.

“I understand the worries of all of you but I did what I had to…"

Selina pressed her lips and cocked her eyebrows.

“You’re in trouble too” Bruce said pointing at her with his index “for letting me go.”

“Her sins are forgiven; she has loved much…” she sighed and Bruce smiled.

“So I took advantage of you?”

She shrugged and smirked.

“Even girls like me have their soft spot, sweetie” she caressed the locks that had stuck to his cheeks bringing them behind his ears. “Now, upstairs and shower! You should speak to that brat as soon as they return…”

Bruce lolled his head on the side, pressing his lips: it was the worst part of the night.

When he came out of his bedroom’s bathroom, Selina had laid out for him a fresh pair of clothes.
Bruce flabbergasted stared at her; she was sprawled on the thick carpet and played with Hero and Bruce smiled at the scene’s innocence.

“You know that you didn’t have to do this” he gestured to the clothes. “I can manage myself.”

Selina looked up at him and Hero found the chance to grab her hand between his paws and mock bite it.

“Of course, I don’t have to, sweetie, but I want to dress you according to my taste…you know, being my personal doll or model?” her eyes glimmered slyly. “Every girl would envy me for dressing someone so gorgeous!”

Bruce shook his head amused.

“I will be looking at Hero, so don’t be shy” she hastened to add.

“It’s okay, Sel: I’m not shy with you…” *you have seen me in a lot worse situations…*something bit his chest.

“Thanks, sweetie, but still I won’t. How are you? Do you feel pain anywhere?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“And… what happened when I left you?” she asked tickling Hero’s belly as the kitten rolled on the carpet.

“I had an encounter” he said putting on hastily his clothes in order to not force Selina to keep her head down; his friend almost forgot her own words and made to raise her head.

“With whom?” she remembered at the last moment and looked again at Hero.

Bruce snorted.

“None other than her majesty, Princess Diana.”

“That bitch! What did she want?” and then she huffed narrowing her eyes. “Wait…Do you reckon that that stupid alien told her about Batman’s ID?”

Bruce shook his head lowering his long sleeved T-shirt.

“I doubt that: if she knew who Batman is she wouldn’t have missed the chance to scowl and sneer at me: not to mention that she might have told everything to the police. You can look.”

She jumped to her feet and clutched her hips appreciating her chosen clothes on Bruce.

“Perfetto!” she exclaimed and Bruce chuckled as his friend sat at the mattress. “Well, what did she want?”

“To express her contempt for Batman and blame him for not doing his job which forced Superman to save Wayne and fell into ‘his trap’…” he couldn’t help but laugh with that and Selina did the same.

“I hope you told her off…”

“You tell me…” he recounted his exchange with the supposed Amazon and Selina raised her palm.

“Gimme five, kiddo!”
Bruce slapped her hand grinning mischievously but Selina’s eyes were sparkling satisfied as she pursed her lips and tapped them with her finger thoughtful.

“You’re a beautiful sweet boy but white suits you uniquely: mmm! white V neck long sleeved T-shirt with lapels and black pants – classic and perfect” Bruce was smiling with her enthusiasm yet she frowned. “But you love only black – the color of sadness…the color of mourning…”

Bruce narrowed his eyes and brushed her upper arms.

“Ei, c’mon, what’s this? We were talking about Vivian” Selina smiled and nodded. “She didn’t have the mark you did her.”

“It healed so fast?”

“No, I was able to see it with the night vision: she had covered it with makeup.”

Selina raised an eyebrow.

“She must know the tricks…But I don’t think that it is an Amazon’s trademark spending her time in front of a mirror to apply makeup.”

Bruce scratched his hair.

“Exactly; no Amazon would do that – she would carry a mark as a token of bravery.”

“Except she is no brave at all…” Selina shook her head.

“Selina, I must find the real Princess Diana.”

His friend widened her eyes and pursed her lips.

“You mean the legendary leader of the Amazons, a tribe that exists in myths and we don’t know if they are still around? And if they do exist their island is uncharted and impossible to find?”

Bruce nodded.

“Exactly.”

Selina shook her head amused.

“You’re really something, Bruce, and believe me: that makes me crazy about you but…” she sighed. “Now it’s not the time for this: you need to rest; to gather up your strength and stamina; you must focus on your health and your recuperation.”

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I know, Sel…but still…”

Selina jumped to her feet and touched her fingertips to his lips.

“Everything will be fine, sweetie: you’ll manage once again but you need to be patient and careful” Bruce met her honest eyes and got the hand Selina offered him to intertwine their fingers. “I’ll be always by your side, Bruce… Now, let’s dry your hair though the wet look makes you really yummy…” she rolled her eyes huffing “but we don’t want you to catch a cold.”

Bruce chuckled though memories flooded his mind of the times Clark showed to him how much he
agreed with what Selina said about his wet look; it was like blades piercing his insides.

“You didn’t tell me” Selina said as she dried his hair combing them simultaneously; the drier was almost soundless so it was easy to speak. “How it was Batman’s first time with brat-Dick?”

“Actually, it wasn’t the first time…”

“Right; but it was after that incident in the factory and many things have happened since then.”

Bruce nodded thoughtful.

“For the first time when he looked at me I didn’t see in his eyes distaste and hatred…He was really happy that I am alive and he really was listening to me.”

Selina smiled.

“That’s great! Maybe that way you get to approach him.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No: I don’t want him or Jason suspect the truth and meeting again with him as Batman would mean troubles for the boy and Dick has had enough. The boys attacked two dangerous thugs: the more they interact with Batman the more they could be influenced to continue…”

Selina pressed her lips.

“I wish the little shit would realize how much you care about him…”

“What matters is Dick’s happiness; he has been through so much…”

“You more than him!”

The sound of two cars approaching reached the bedroom and Selina bit her bottom lip chuckling.

“Ouch! Leslie came with them…Brace yourself, sweetie!”

Bruce cast a sideways glance at her.

“You were my accomplice, you know” he said chuckling.

Selina placed the drier on the vanity and combed Bruce’s hair once again softly before taking Hero from the floor.

“And Hero was the mastermind” she laughed.

Bruce and Selina were downstairs when the main entrance’s thick door opened; they rushed there and stopped the way to Dick who obviously outraged was ready to storm at the stairs to his room.

Alfred and Leslie were gloomy and Bruce knew that it wasn’t only due to Dick’s deeds.

Dick made to pass Bruce but Selina blocked his way and Bruce locked eyes with the boy; Dick yanked his head.

“I want to go to my room!”

“Not yet, Richard” Bruce said calmly. “First, we have a discussion to make.”
Dick crossed his arms over the chest and rolled his eyes.

“Is the moment you play the father?” he snorted.

Bruce kept his tranquility though he felt nervous about what he was going to do.

“No. I won’t play anything, Richard; I just try to stay true to what I promised to your grandmother: protect you.”

Now Dick’s eyes widened and cackled.

“YOU? Protect ME? Oh! Wayne, that’s ridiculous! You’re not able to protect even yourself! Look at yourself and leave me alone.”

Bruce was aware of the stares from the others and he had to recruit his entire training to continue that discussion: he felt that he didn’t have the right yet it was something that must be done for the boy’s own good.

“I may not be able to protect myself but I’ll do whatever I can to protect you – even from yourself. Richard, people saw you drinking alcohol and published your photos; you created a quarrel with the café’s director; a police officer came and you ran away…”

Dick rolled his eyes while shaking his head all the time.

“And that blemishes your image, huh?” he snorted.

“Master Richard, it is rude to interrupt your guardian” Alfred intervened and the boy crooked his lips in irony.

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I don’t care about my image, Richard; but I do care about yours and a good boy like you shouldn’t be stained with such things.”

“I don’t care about my image! I don’t want to be part of your perfect little world! You made me part of it without my will so I’m doing whatever I want now!”

Bruce let his hands fall on his lap.

“And what about your life, Richard? It is extremely dangerous to be alone in Gotham’s streets during night – anyone could have attacked you to rob you or kill you…and drinking alcohol? You’re an athlete, Richard, with great talent and potential: you’re ruining these that way.”

Dick was fuming.

“You’re not my father, neither my relative so mind your own business!”

“This is my business. Your grandmother trusted me with your care and I am obliged to give you back to her as I took you…Have you thought of her? Of your parents? Of your father? Would he want his son wandering to the mean streets of Gotham intoxicated?”

Dick grounded his teeth and stabbed his flashing madly eyes to Bruce’s face: if eyes could kill Bruce knew that he’d be lying dead by now.

“I’m not intoxicated! And don’t you dare speak again about my father! You’re not worthy to even mention him!”
Alfred’s face took an affronted expression and Leslie tapped her foot nervously on the granite floor yet Selina couldn’t stand anymore and made a step towards Dick clenching her jaw.

“Shut it, kid! You don’t know anything about Bruce and you have no right speaking to him like that!”

Bruce touched her upper arm.

“Selina, please…”

“I can’t stand it anymore, Bruce” Selina shook her head. “He is unworthy of your efforts!”

Dick frowned on that and Bruce locked eyes with Selina to make her stop.

Leslie moved forward too.

“She is right, young man” she addressed Dick “you might not like Bruce, you might hate that you have to live with him but this isn’t an excuse for your behavior or doesn’t make Bruce a lesser human being.”

Dick chuckled.

“Nice…Four grownups against a kid…You surely learnt your message from Falcone, right, Wayne?”

A blade pierced Bruce’s head but he didn’t show anything though Alfred’s still eyes on him told Bruce that the butler sensed his pain.

“I promise you, Richard, that the moment your grandmother returns and you go with her you won’t see me ever again.”

“My grandmother won’t ever come back!” the boy yelled almost desperate. “She is dead like the rest of my family and I’m stuck with you!”

“You’re wrong, Richard: do not lose your hopes; she will come back.”

Dick snapped his head disgusted.

“Let me go to my room!”

Bruce nodded.

“Of course but first we have to discuss your punishment.”

Dick’s eyes bulged from anger while Alfred bowed slightly his head in agreement.

“What?!” the boy snapped.

“I must protect you from your own self” Bruce continued. “Therefore: you won’t attend the gym for a week” Dick’s eyes now narrowed to glimmering slits but Bruce stayed unfazed. “You see your training as a chance for doing dangerous things that could eventually harm you; also, your use of alcohol manifests that you put your love for gymnastics under other things” he inhaled “so staying away for some days would remind you what’s more important.”

Leslie and Alfred looked each other impressed from Bruce’s handling and Selina smiled. Dick on the other hand, had his fists clenched and his face was red; Bruce could smell the stench of beer in his
pants of wrath.

“You think that not having your fucking cars drive me to the city would thwart me from attending my training?”

“No, and you’re not a prisoner but there’s no meaning on going to the gym on your own because Jeffrey is also very sad from what you did – you see, you took special care – on purpose, I’m sure – to show off among people. So he totally agreed and he won’t train you for a week.”

Dick was huffing and puffing.

“You plot against me! I wish you rot in that chair!”

He cast a thunderous glare to him and stormed at the stairs.

“Master Richard!” Alfred called after him shocked as everyone with what the boy had just said.

“Apologize at once!”

Dick halted and turned to him scowling.

“Why? He is gonna spank me next?! Let him show his ugly real face!” he barked with his voice distorted from hatred.

Bruce inhaled deeply.

“It’s okay, Richard; you don’t have to apologize to me, only to yourself. You can go to your room now…”

Selina squatted by his side and hugged Bruce.

“Don’t listen to him, sweetie…You’ll walk again and he is going to realize how wrong he is and regret.”

Bruce smiled to her and brushed her forearm.

“I’m not sad, Sel: it’s okay…”

Leslie came closer.

“That boy has lost his path…”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“And I make things worse…”

“No, Bruce; if you weren’t here for him, Dick would have been in much trouble…which reminds me…” she looked pointedly at Alfred and Bruce understood.

“It’s my turn now?”

Alfred chuckled and gestured to the corridor leading to the backside’s study.

“I think the backside’s study is more suited for our discussion” he said.

“Your idea for the ‘timeout’ punishment was very clever, sir” the Englishman pointed upon entering the small but cozy study that looked to the back garden. “You’ll be a great parent.”
Bruce remembered the child that probably Ra’s created without his will and a shudder crossed the healthy part of his spine.

“I wish no child has to have me as parent…” he mumbled moving to the large rectangular window; Selina knowing about the child bite her bottom lip.

Leslie left on the marble coffee table a small paper bag with Bruce’s new medication and the youth’s eyes fixed on it.

“More drugs?”

 Leslie shook her head.

“Just different, adjusted to your needs” Bruce nodded. “Which brings us to your case, Bruce” he huffed.

“Taken your chosen punishment for Master Richard, which punishment would be appropriate for you, Master Bruce?” Alfred asked softly walking to his master.

Bruce yanked his head.

“I’m an adult, Alfred, and I had to do what I did: the boy was in danger.”

“The police could have handled it, Bruce” Leslie crossed her arms.

“No, they couldn’t, Leslie! Dick had run away from an officer and there are many other things the police has to attend to.”

“So you considered it right to do something dangerous yourself while you could ask someone else to help” Leslie shook her head.

“Tony is out of town and I can’t have Selina all the time doing what it is my responsibility. I can do some things and it isn’t as if I’m strolling around picking fights! I’m fully responsible for my acts and as an adult I can take my own decisions.”

 Leslie frowned at him.

“You’re not much different from Richard…”

Selina couldn’t let her friend without help even if she agreed in some of the points made; however she could sense Bruce’s distress from this discussion and his suffering was unbearable for her.

“He is kinder and sweeter than this horrible brat!”

Alfred turned to her grinning and Selina spread her arms.

“What? He does have the right to an attorney, you know” Bruce despite his bad mood smiled at that. Alfred took his stern expression though he hardly hid his amusement.

“Actually, you are an accomplice, Miss Kyle.”

She crossed her arms over the chest.

“Unfair! I was all the time there watching over him: it would be better if I had stopped him and he sneaked out being all alone on the streets? And it’s not easy for me to say ‘no’ to Bruce.”
Leslie pressed her lips: that was difficult for all of them but they had to turn their hearts into stone to protect him.

“Then maybe we should separate you two for a couple of days” Selina’s eyes bulged and Bruce’s narrowed to slits.

“We were seeing each other almost every day even when I was in Falcone’s hands” Bruce said and Alfred locked eyes with Leslie who shook her head sad.

The doctor sat on the armchair near Bruce and touched his hand.

“Why you are doing that to us, Bruce? You must realize that this is extremely dangerous and we are in a daze on what to do.”

Alfred approached too.

“Have you thought Master Anthony’s reaction, Master Bruce?”

“He’ll understand…If you don’t say anything to him he’ll learn it later from rumors and it won’t be the same. I have neutralized his trackers on my armor and the Tumbler.”

Selina couldn’t hide her smile and neither the others.

“However that way he is going to suspect that you are going to do things you shouldn’t.”

Bruce rubbed his temple; a headache was slowly evolving to a migraine.

“You can’t put me in trial and confine me – I spent my entire life only with Selina taking my own decisions and we’ve managed quite well.”

Alfred gulped and Leslie took Bruce’s hand from his temple.

“A headache?” he didn’t answer and Leslie huffed. “Bruce…C’mon, a few days away from the cave would benefit you. You shouldn’t stay in cold and humidity…Alfred, can you prepare something to eat? Bruce needs to take his medicine.”

Bruce looked at the carpet where Hero sat having followed them from the great salon. He moved his chair away from Leslie who closed her eyes and stood following him. She leaned over him and cupped his face.

“You’re our angel, Bruce…We love you so much that you’re driving us mad when you endanger your life even for noble causes. You promised me to be careful.”

“I am! And I’m not abusing the armor but Dick was in danger…” he didn’t say anything more letting his eyes gaze the grounds from the large window.

The ring of the phone fell like a thunder alerting bad feelings in Bruce his eyes on Alfred who answered the phone.

“Master Bruce, Ms. Jhonas from the Social Service wants to talk to you.”

It was exactly what Bruce expected and the hits of the migraine became.

“Hello, Ms. Jhonas: Bruce Wayne.”

The others watched as he shook slightly his head listening to the woman. He pinched the bridge of
his nose.

“I know, Ms. Jhonas; I also feel terrible for that…”

“It is a case of neglect, Mr. Wayne.”

“I’m not trying to make excuses, Ms. Jhonas, but we never let Richard out of our sight: my most trusted butler was there to drive him back home. Yet the boy is facing a tough period and he tries to let out some steam that way – I promise you it won’t happen again.”

He nodded listening to the social worker.

“Yes…Good night to you to, Ms. Jhonas.”

When he ended the call and returned the phone to Alfred his face was pale and his migraine became really torturing; Leslie opened one of the pill bottles she had brought and took a pill.

“Take that, honey” she said forgetting her previous anger.

“Thank you, Leslie” Bruce took the pill but the thought of the social service berating him was stronger than any pill Leslie could conjure.

“It is rumored that last night Batman had neutralized and captured two thugs who attacked a woman at the Narrows area…”

Joker was pacing the ground floor of his newest hideout casting sideways glances to his newest boys who watched the news. In Gotham was too easy to find dorks to work for you: they were everywhere like cockroaches.

The truth was that the clever ones had gone underground since things got tight yet the stupid ones were out there and frankly Joker didn’t care about brains: he had brain for everyone. He just wanted hands. Not to mention that his busted old thugs were sent to Arkham from where it wasn’t difficult to snatch out given that dear Harleen had put them in low security wards. So they were somewhere in the building ready to serve their daddy.

The news took a few seconds to register because he was thinking other things: blades and laugh gas…and his cooperation with Scarescrow. But when the word of interest flashed in his head – Batman -, he narrowed his eyes and jumped.

“Up – uuuuup the vooooolume!” he barked and his thug obliged.

Joker hunched and listened eager sniffing like a hungry hyena.

“Police has arrested two men last night, finding them unconscious in an alley in Narrows: bystanders said that they saw the men chasing a woman. Police didn’t confirm anything about Batman’s involvement but insight says that some Batarangs were found on the scene.”

Joker made a sharp gesture.

“Oooooout! All of youuuuu: beat it!” he exclaimed frustrated and moved his hands gesturing to the thugs to leave which they did scared of their bosses’ explosions.

Joker jumped and landed on the cement floor hitting hard his buttocks.
“Ouch! Daaaaamn, that hurt!” he crossed his legs and lolled his head on the side focusing on the screen. “Now I’m getting seeeeeee--riously pissed! Is this a way to treat your lawfully wedded husband, huh? He’s sniffing aaaaat me an’ instead goes for two losers! That’s uuuuuun--acceptable! That’s an insult…” he scratched his head. “But I like it! I looooooooove tough chicks!”

Suddenly, the screen was filled with two pictures: one with Bruce Wayne’s face – which made Joker lick his red lips - and some boy’s whom Joker recognized as the Grayson brat. Then they took the pictures causing a hurt pout from Joker that became a Cheshire grin seeing the blurry video where the boy was drinking beer in a crowded café eyeing provokingly the customers while quarreling with a dude that probably was the café’s owner.

“The new year came with troubles for the Person of the Year. Mr. Wayne’s ward, Richard Grayson, was seen in one of Gotham’s most popular cafes drinking beer and swearing at the other customers; more so he created an episode when the owner asked him to stop drinking alcohol since he was underage. The episode escalated according to witnesses and the owner called the police but upon the arrival of a police officer the youth ran out from the back door…”

“HEHEHEHEHAHAHAHUHUUUUUU!” Joker was shaking his head licking his lips. “Kids are a pain in the aaaaass, baby-batsy! You should have asked meeeeee what I have tooooo endure with my booooyys…” he pursed his lips thoughtful and focused again on the screen where Bruce’s picture was again displayed. “Mmmm…my wife is THE HOT STUFF, huh? Wait…I wasn’t thinking this” he scratched his head. “I get it now, babe… Youuuuuuur brat ran away alone in the dark forest when the big baaaaaad…Joker is here” he gestured to himself “an’ you wore your beeeeeeest attire to go fetch the little bastard…You write me off but you rush for that shit and nooooot only this but you beat two common muggers while youuuur Joker is thiiiirsty for a little attention!” he lowered his voice in a mock whine “a tiny glance… Oh! Baby, why you are so difficult???” he screamed hysterically and licked his lips. “Obviously, to turn me on…” he answered himself.

He jumped to his feet.

“However I muuuuuust remind Brucey-bats to whom he belongs and who should have his fuuuuuull attention! Boooooooyyyssss!!”

His thugs gathered surprised from every corner of the warehouse and some of them leaned from the railing of the upper level to listen.

“Hoooooooidays are oooooover, kiddos! Daddy will take you for a stroll in the town…” he rolled his eyes on the baffled expressions. “And I’ll buy you some ice cream!”

The thugs cheered and Joker shook his head.

“Thoooooose kids! It’s touching how easily they are bribed…HEHE!”

“There are three cars that exhibit odd driving behavior, sir. Two black SUVs proceeded by a purple with violet dots – they don’t have number plates. ”

Bruce frowned at the AI’s voice and touched the screen getting image from what was happening behind him on the road. He was returning to the Manor with his car enjoying the ride even if he couldn’t drive as he used to.

“Back cameras and microphones” he ordered the AI seeing in the screen with the road diagram three dots maneuvering crazily between the cars of the afternoon traffic jam.
Horns and curses from the infuriated drivers filled the inside of the car and...a hysterical laugh that managed to tower all the other sounds. Bruce pressed his lips: he knew that laughter...

“So the truce has ended...” he mumbled and sped up.

Bruce had only one thing in mind: pulling Joker and his thugs away from the city before the madman killed some innocent; he could see from the cameras that where embedded on the back of the car that Joker held a machine gun and shot randomly at cars and buildings.

“Honeeeeyyyyy!!! I’m coming!!!” the jester yelled shooting at the tires of Bruce’s car.

Only this car was Tony Stark’s creation and impenetrable from any aspect so even the tires where bullet and rocket proof. There wasn’t any worry and the car continued without problem yet Bruce was glancing at the screen and the mirrors because Joker was shooting at other cars too and some of them were toppled rolling on the road and hitting other cars.

“I’m demolishing castles to get to youuuuuu! Uhuhu! C’mon, baaaabe! Don’t be shyyyyy!”

Bruce clenched his jaw.

“Can you say if someone is badly injured or dead?”

“No, sir; there is no dead in the upturned cars – only injured. Police and ambulances are approaching fast.”

“Right” he said and accelerated to the maximum turning swiftly the wheel to the less crowded sideways roads leading outside the city; his eyes were sparkling with determination completely still on the electronic map the AI provided on the control panel’s second screen: not that Bruce needed that – as Batman he knew that city like the back of his palm but he wanted to be certain about his movements.

Joker keeping his half body outside the window with the machine gun pointing to the air and shooting followed him and the other two cars with his goons in Rabbid’s masks did the same shooting around causing terrorized screams from people ducking behind garbage bins to save their lives.

Another smooth maneuver of the wheel took the car momentarily out of Joker’s eyes: Bruce wanted to keep him baited.

“Foooollow him! UUUUUUUU! I love good chasings! Baaaaaabe, hold oooon, Jokey is coming! Uuhuhuhuhu!”

Joker’s enthusiasm was such that he pressed the trigger raining the air with bullets causing a shower of debris from the buildings fall on his head. He pouted irritated.

“Stupid buildings!”

Bruce saw the Chelsea Bridge in front of him: the traffic was thick because people were leaving from their jobs yet the lane to Palisades wasn’t packed because few people had their residences to the outskirts of the city. Yet Joker’s thugs were careless in their driving making slaloms between the cars of the opposite traffic lane, accidents being averted only because drivers were extra careful. However some cars stuck on the side of the bridge and Bruce got some sweat drops dreading that next a car might end up in the river.

He stepped on the emergency accelerator that gave extra speed to the car intending to get away from
the bridge immediately taking the danger with him. When in the Palisades he could carry Joker to the woods where no innocent would be in danger.

“Wayne’s car is under attack!”

The pen fell from Lois’ hand and she along with her colleagues from the other desks at the Planet’s reporter floor gathered around Pete’s desk.

Clark’s heartbeat elevated instantly hearing that name but he put it again under reasoning: Bruce wasn’t his responsibility any longer even though his vitals still maintained some sensitivity to stimuli relevant to the human. Yet his feet dragged him to the same desk where on the flat PC screen images from public cameras showed Bruce’s unique car being chased by three SUVs.

“Put the Gazette’s site - their news helicopter must be on them” Lois urged her colleague.

Indeed, high definition footage showed the majestic in her gloomy city from above before zooming to a black sleek thunder heading to a bridge: behind three SUVs were running frenzied hitting on civilian cars. The screeching sound of tires was accompanied with enraged horns and curses but what stood out was a hysterical laughter that still nauseated and infuriated Clark: from the passenger’s window in the first vehicle that was purple with velvet dots (!!!) Joker had popped his half body out holding a machine gun which vomited fire constantly.

Bruce’s car was running so fast that hardly was visible.

“Let them try to catch THAT beast!” Frank exclaimed impressed but Lois was worried.

“He is dragging them out of the city” she whispered to herself but Clark heard her.

He agreed: this fit Bruce – he could imagine the man’s agony to draw Joker away from the innocent. Suddenly, he felt Lois’ eyes on him after what? One month? His heart filled with joy and hurried to meet her gaze. Out, she mouthed to him unnoticed by their colleagues who were mesmerized by the black wonder of Bruce’s car.

Lois and Clark left the space as Perry rushed to the desk his reporters were gathered.

“You won’t go to him?” she demanded once they were at the corridor opposite the lift.

“You’re talking to me again?” Clark grinned.

“Shut up, you dork! Bruce needs you!”

Clark shook his head.

“He doesn’t: the Avengers are guarding him and Thor…” he smirked. “I bet Thor tracks his vitals all the time.”

“Like you did?” she remarked snidely. “You can’t be sure, Clark: how can you gamble his life?”

“Superman is not welcomed in Gotham: the city and Bruce have their protectors. It’s over!” he murmured and smirked. “You want me to go there in hopes of reconciling with him but that won’t happen, Lois. You have to accept it!”

Lois’ eyes flashed and her lips stretched in wrath.
“NO, I don’t want you there for reconciliation because you’re not worthy of Bruce! Asshole!” she spat and returned furious inside.

Clark shook his head, rolled his eyes and rushed inside to watch the developments: he didn’t feel like going there besides it was sure that Bruce would get away. Besides if Superman was seen there Diana would hear; she’d be heartbroken and Clark wanted her happy.

Tony was working at his private lab at Wayne Tower with Lucius. He had returned this morning from New York and devoted all his attention to installing trackers to the items that had so much fascinated Bruce: alas! Lucius had already begun working when Tony went to the Tower adding another brilliant mind putting aside the surgery project for lesser things.

Despite the fact reports and some discussions he had with several S.H.I.E.L.D. agents from around the world had informed him about a general sense of strange movements he wasn’t persuaded that what he was doing now was worthy of his time and brilliance. Besides, there was nothing specific.

“Sir, pardon me for the interruption” Jarvis’ voice broke the silence of the lab.

Tony had put the AI in constant connection because he expected updates from Pepper about StarkExpo’s preparations.

“Speak, Jarvis.”

“Master Bruce’s car is under attack.”

The tools Tony was holding almost fell and Lucius looked at him: the billionaire’s eyes had widened and met Lucius’ worried ones.

“Who? Can you tell me who?”

“Police’s frequency is filled with…”

“Just the fuckin’ name, Jarvis!” he pulled the working whole face mask off and threw it on the floor.

“It is the Joker, sir.”

“Fuck!” Tony’s fist crashed on the working bench and Lucius grabbed some tools before falling.

Ironman’s armor began wrapping Tony’s body; the billionaire’s eyes were still, sparkling, and his breath was pressed. He was worried and angry.

“Lucius, I’m sorry…”

“Not at all, Mr. Stark. Please, hurry…”

“Where?” Tony asked his AI; the wall of his lab opening in the centre to allow him to take off.

“Downtown, sir; now close to the Chelsea Bridge.”

“Oooohh! Baaaaabyyyyyy! You turn me ooooon! I loooove your foreplaying!”

Bruce was hearing him clearly and growled: once in the Palisades he would be able to escape Joker:
the car had some attacking weapons yet Bruce didn’t want Joker be more certain about him being Batman.

Finally! Bruce thought as the car left the bridge and rushed on the almost empty Palisades road, the three cars of Joker at his heels.

“What’s your briefs’ cooooolor, baaaabe?” Joker yelled and Bruce couldn’t fight the blush on his face. “Black are myyyyyy favorite: AOUUUUUUUUUUU!” he howled like a wolf. “But black is your favorite, tooooooo, huh? HEHEHEHEHAHAHAHA!!! We’re a match maaaaaade in Heaawaennnnn – or even better: in Heeeell!!!!”

Bruce turned sharply the wheel leading the car out of the main road and to the soil path that crossed a small valley separating two forests right and left; a little snow covered the hard soil. Bruce heard the tires hissing as the three cars halted momentarily unable to take the turn instantly to start again turning to the woods.

He watched through the back cameras Joker’s SUV’s headlights smashing in shreds and then smoke emanating from the engine. The car halted so abruptly that Joker smacked the back of his head on the window before the second car hit the back of his car and then the third hit the second.

Thick arrows protruded from the headlights and the car’s metal and Bruce frowned but continued his way hearing Joker barking to his thugs to turn the engines on.

But then an arrow pierced Joker’s arm that held the machine gun and the weapon fell. The jester’s face distorted in a scream more of frustration than pain.

Bruce had lowered the speed watching through the cameras to see what he already knew: Arrow landed smoothly in front of Joker’s car, ready to launch another of his arrows.

“Kill him!” Joker barked but his driver had petrified staring at the arrow and the goons on the other vehicles couldn’t even see the archer.

Cursing Joker slipped his uninjured hand inside his belt grabbing his pistol to do the work himself only to get an arrow scratching his face.

Yet the jester wasn’t terrorized by that: he licked his lips and turned the gun on the archer who smirking launched another arrow to the driver who panicked started instantly the engine making his boss smack his head on the window frame and lose another gun.

“Wait, you moooooorron!”’ Joker screamed but the SUV was already rushing to the opposite direction, the other two cars following their boss whose hysteric cracked the peace of the woods. “What kind of a stupor- hero works in daylight! Where our world is heading?!?”

Bruce turned back his car and the Arrow walked confidently towards the still moving car. A clear confident smile was on his face while his eyes clearly visible under the hood’s shadow flashed like dancing flames as his focus was on the black car’s driver.

Bruce stopped the car and opened setting his chair outside to slither in. He moved the chair towards Arrow who was watching him a bit hunched with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Thank you” Bruce said.

Arrow shook his head.

“It is my pleasure taking you out of hard situations…” the flames in his eyes seemed to increase their
Bruce looked towards the dust that betrayed Joker’s convoy and moved his chair some feet away trying to see better.

“They’re getting away or they might do a U turn and come back.”

Arrow grinned having followed.

“Neither…My arrows pierced their tires – they don’t have the tires your car has – so in a bit they’ll be stuck and the police are coming.”

Bruce ruffled his hair and Arrow leaned over him.

“Are you alright?” the stranger asked Bruce worried.

Bruce nodded.

“Fine; Tony built that car” he smiled “believe me it is like a fortress.”

“I’m glad.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“I didn’t know you were a Gothamite…I thought you were from New York” Bruce knew that the man wasn’t either from New York or Gotham but the Arrow should not suspect that Bruce Wayne had met him elsewhere.

However the man’s smirk was amused.

“I can’t stay in one place for long…”

“I see…” Bruce nodded. “Mmm…I must get back to the Manor now before my people hear the news and panic.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you should go to a hospital first?”

“I’m just fine, thank you. Do you want to come with me to have lunch?”

Arrow narrowed his eyes.

“That’s a tempting proposition but another time.”

“Okay” Bruce gave him his hand and Arrow took it in a warm handshake.

“So long, Mr. Wayne” he said and with an impressive jump he was on a tree branch and in an instant he changed from branch to branch like a monkey.

If Bruce’s sight wasn’t trained he wouldn’t be able to follow him; he cocked an eyebrow impressed.

“A real Robin Hood, huh?” he mumbled and turned the chair to get inside his car that was some feet away.

Bruce smiled hearing the familiar no-sound of Ironman approaching.

“You’re late, veteran…You missed the fun” he chuckled.
“Can you connect me with the car or Bruce’s laptop?” Tony asked Jarvis as he was floating over the Chelsea Bridge where ambulances were taking the injured that the firefighters were taking out of the crashed and upturned cars. He was relieved that there were no casualties but his insides were clenched for Bruce.

“I’m afraid not, sir: too many noise…but Master Bruce’s car is in the woods and the cars that chased him are stopped. Away from him… police cars are heading there.”

Tony’s heartbeat returned to its normal levels: he was still over Chelsea Bridge to the end that led to Palisades.

“Sir, someone is approaching Master Bruce’s car…”

Tony frowned.

“Nobody can do anything to him inside the car” he pointed to the AI but he wanted to reassure himself.

Bruce smiled looking up to the red and gold figure approaching fast but immediately the smile vanished and a frown creased his brow; the figure had halted midair and raised his fisted palms revealing the beam launchers in his wrists. Bruce managed to push his chair away just a second before the bullets rained his previous position.

“Master Bruce is out of the car, sir, and the one who approached him shot at him.”

“No!” Tony exclaimed, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets; he accelerated to the top of his speed. “Can you give me view through satellite, Google Earth…anything?!! Who’s attacking, damn?”

“Sir, it is Ironman.

Bruce knew that it couldn’t be Tony but now what mattered was to avoid the bullets since the fake was once again upturning his palms. He realized that as much as the chair permitted him to move it also made things harder: he maneuvered the chair again to escape the bullets and towards the car – if he managed to get inside nothing could get to him.

But ‘Ironman’ hit with fire the path he was following towards the car. There was a little snow on the ground but the humidity couldn’t subdue that much fire power so pillars of fire filled the space between Bruce and the car forcing him to turn the chair to the right. He growled frustrated because it was so embarrassing trying to defend himself moving the chair. Thankfully, this chair wasn’t any chair so he activated the protecting field making a new attempt to surge through the fire to his car.

A blast right to the chair threw the chair far away from the car and though Bruce wasn’t hit by the blast due to the field the chair fell to the ground; a ‘coat’ of nanofibers activated at once sensing his fall and ‘hugged’ him protecting him from the hard ground.

Bruce smiled though the situation wasn’t for smiles.
“It’d be like Ironman protecting you” he heard Tony’s voice.

“It’d be like Ironman protecting you” he heard Tony’s voice. “Even from ‘yourself’…” Bruce mumbled inside his cocoon-shield when a white energy beam left the fake Ironman’s eyes to hit the chair and the field.

It felt like earthquake and Bruce realized that the field although held it wouldn’t last much. Thankfully, he had provided to install a bit of offense to his defense so he brushed a button on the armrest that was in front of his face after the fall and a laser beam hit the fake Ironman who drew back surprised.

But before Bruce could take a breath another light beam shook him hard cracking his shield and forcing him to gather himself behind the still strong part folding to the chest his dead legs with his arms.

‘Ironman’ landed in front of him and stretched his right hand fingers to him ready to launch energy daggers as Bruce knew from Tony’s sayings. Bruce brushed again the small round panel on the armrest to send a nanowave to his assailant’s chest making him stagger backwards: this should be able to deactivate the armor but the fake’s armor remained intact.

As ‘Ironman’ was recovering from the shock Bruce crawled towards the woods dragging along the chair and the field around: his attack failed and his opponent would strike again so he pushed himself towards the forest where he could take better cover.

But his assailant took off and launched a rain of attacks of every kind of weapons he had to break the shield. Bruce’s body felt the hits and the vibrations: the shield wouldn’t last much more that kind of onslaught so despite the rain of fire he continued crawling when a loud bang told him that the field was breached.

He turned his eyes to his attacker who landed and approached smugly; Bruce could imagine a smirk though he couldn’t imagine a face. Ironman upturned his palm manifesting the launchers in his wrist that loaded with a horrible sound.

Bruce looked at him with cold eyes totally fearless and put his hands on the ground launching his body some feet away avoiding the fire: to the right of the forest’s opening stood a big rock: not that the stone would hold that much firepower yet it was something.

‘Ironman’ growled in frustration and readied his launchers to fire again. But then a nightmarish bang blew ‘Ironman’ in the air among a cloud of smoke and fire to crash again on the ground.

Bruce saw Mjolnir spiting fires in Thor’s hand mirroring the wrath in its Master’s eyes. Thor’s face was distorted, anything but the kind, sweet face and Bruce could discern the flash of thunders – thunders that cracked the sky around him. It was the first time Bruce was seeing the kind god in all his magnificence and might and unavoidably his mind ran to Superman. Thor was a god fighting for his mate…

‘Ironman’ came over his initial shock and turned again to Bruce to be toppled by Thor’s body who growled causing a sound like a hundred thunders together; the two of them launched on the air, the fake Ironman distancing himself from the enraged god and launching missiles against him that Thor stopped waving his hammer.

Bruce’s insights formed a tight knot: he didn’t want Thor being so bonded with him. Not again…

But then as the god shook his hammer sending a wave of electricity and fire to blast on the fake Ironman’s armor Bruce heard hurried footsteps of many people approaching from every corner of the
frozen valley.

He took his gaze from the battle in the sky and saw with widened eyes at least twenty men coming towards him with squinted eyes and gloomy faces: they held firearms and Bruce began crawling backwards towards the rock: his dead legs a major obstacle. He could use his mind’s will but he didn’t want anyone witness his true abilities.

When the bang of several firearms echoed through the forest Thor’s eyes bulged and he looked down sweat covering his brow, panting from agony: he had left Bruce unprotected! He had turned his body already descended to him when the ‘Ironman’ attacked him bodily stopping his movement. Thor ground his teeth roaring in frustration, his panicked eyes searching for his mortal.

His heart returned to its place seeing a stranger in dark green attire and a bow in his back grabbing Bruce’s body and covering him with his: an ally. Thor had heard from Bruce about that man.

The fake Ironman fired his missiles against him but Thor managed to shake his hammer diverting the missiles.

Bruce stared at the eyes of the man who had grabbed him in his arms and brought him behind the rock where he intended to take cover.

“I’m here now, Bruce” the Arrow said calmly but so touched that Bruce frowned. “They would have to tread over my dead body to hurt you…” he whispered in Bruce’s cheek. “Are you alright?”

“Yes…” Bruce answered not as steady as he felt but with a slight tremor to manifest fear; he held Arrow’s upper arms and drag himself from under him to get some distance.

The men were approaching the rock raining the stone with bullets. Bruce recognized them as former thugs of Falcone who had gone in hiding after their boss’s downfall.

Arrow squatted and with swift movements began throwing arrows at them which were founding their target injuring the men who were falling on the ground screaming.

Bruce pretended to pant and looked on the sky were missiles and thunders collided filling the sky with multi-colored lethal fireworks.

“I guess you had a quarrel yesterday?” Arrow asked snidely pointing with his gaze at ‘Ironman’.

“This isn’t Tony” Bruce replied.

Thor’s thunder hit the man’s arc reactor.

“Thor seems to agree with you…” Arrow said launching three arrows at once causing screams of pain from three different men.

“If this was Tony such hit in his arc reactor would have neutralized him…” Bruce thought.

Mjolnir was hardly visible as Thor blocked the rainfall of laser and missiles.

“Loki” the god roared addressing the fake Ironman “this isn’t fun!”

Yet the fake Ironman didn’t answer which convinced Thor that it wasn’t Loki after all. Loki or not the Asgardian clenched his jaw, charged Mjolnir with his ire and launched a horizontal twister of thunders against ‘Ironman’ who was thrown off the sky and several feet away on the ground. Thor launched at him though this forced him to distance from Bruce.
Arrow saw surprised the men he had hit rising and surging at the rock.

“This is what you get when you don’t kill them at once” he said grudging at Bruce and placed three new Arrows to his bow’s cord.

“You could have knocked them out…” Bruce retorted and Arrow lolled his head on the side crooking his lips and freeing his arrows against their attackers.

“These men aren’t subdued by pain…” he said thoughtful and Bruce nodded thinking about the thugs in Metropolis’ attack. “And we are cornered…and in serious trouble if Thor doesn’t finish soon with ‘Ironman’…” he pointed with his eyes to new thugs coming behind the first twenty. “They are like zombies!”

Thor approached the fallen ‘Ironman’ and raised his hammer ready to give the final hit and return to Bruce who was in some considerable distance. But the fake ‘Ironman’ just evaporated.

Two of the thugs surged against Bruce and Arrow tackled them knowing that the others taking advantage of the lack of arrows surged the rock everywhere. While he was fighting them another came pointing his firearm’s barrel to Bruce who grabbed a stone and threw it to his head sending him away to topple another thug behind him.

Arrow turned his head to Bruce smiling blocking at the same time the punch of one of his opponents and kicking the second in the groin.

“You’re a brave young man, Bruce…”

His eyes bulged when another thug stormed at Bruce but the new attacker’s eyes widened and he fell on the ground.

Bangs filled the small valley and new screams of pain but for Bruce one sound mattered: the velvet humming of the true Ironman…and his friend’s curses as he was hitting the attackers.

Bruce careful because the still standing thugs were shooting looked from behind the rock. Steve was launching his shield to hit the thugs who were carried away from the force and crashed on the ground; upon sending his shield away, Captain fell on another cluster of thugs beating them to a pulp while Ironman was flying around launching beams and stunning bullets.

“Sonovabitches! This is my Bruce! You motherfuckers!” Tony’s voice was distorted, hardly recognizable from wrath and agony.

Thor out of breath arrived to the scene but his agony was eased seeing his comrades neutralizing the enemies. He hit Mjolnir on the ground and a giant crack began running to the battle field knocking out every thug it met.

Arrow having knocked out his own opponents and relieved from the Avengers’ intervention sat down next to Bruce and brought his face close to the youth’s trying to figure out if he was injured. There were some scratches on Bruce’s cheek that bled and he had some bruises to his cheekbones.

“I’m fine” Bruce answered his unuttered question and Arrow smiled.

The archer took his bow and stood; he fixed his bow across his torso and leaned to wrap his arms around Bruce’s torso to lift him in standing position supporting him. The archer’s palm was over Bruce’s belly supposedly to hold him more securely but the young man felt that hand trembling feathery touching him. He stared at that hand and saw that the green leather of his glove was torn and blood was visible from a scar.
Steve was engaged in a fight with three thugs and Tony was stunning those that lay on the ground still moving when several police cars swarmed the place from the country road; officers with pointing their guns came out; Jim Gordon first of all.

Thor ran to Bruce and his breath was ragged from agony and relief; Bruce’s eyes locked with the god’s eyes that had returned to their kind, sweet expression causing Arrow’s frowning.

“Thank you, Thor” Bruce said politely and Thor just nodded his golden locks framing his face.

Bruce saw Thor’s arms twitching ready to take him.

“No” Bruce said calm but determined and Thor’s arms fell at his sides.

Steve ran to them and Tony landed deactivating his face plate: the moments of agony he suffered evident in his stormy face; the billionaire was still panting. Their eyes met and Tony stormed to Bruce squeezing him in a bear hug; the Arrow stepping aside.

“Mr. Wayne, are you alright?” Jim Gordon arrived with his glasses askew from the running; he put his gun back in its holder.

Tony let Bruce breathe but not out of his arms and the younger man looked at Jim.

“I’m fine, Commissionaire, thank you…”

“We were chasing Joker and his thugs in the woods” Jim said.

Bruce smiled.

“I know: did you catch them?”

“His thugs, they were the same who were arrested in the attack at City Hall’s square: they escaped from Arkham. We chased Joker too but we didn’t find him.”

“Of course” Tony uttered exasperated rolling his eyes.

Arrow was retreating to the forest.

“Ei, archer!” Tony addressed him and the Arrow turned his head to him.

“I prefer ‘Arrow’…” he retorted smiling.

“Thank you! Bruce is…” he inhaled as his voice cracked from emotion. “Saving him is greater than if you had saved me…”

“You are welcomed to the Avengers” Steve said walking to him and Bruce looked at Captain America: he still didn’t trust completely the archer.

Arrow shook his head.

“That’s an honor, Captain, but I’m not a hero.”

“Then ask me whatever you want” Tony said completely serious.

Arrow’s eyes found Bruce.

“Look after Mr. Wayne: it is odd how evil is drawn to purity…” he stared at the youth for some
seconds and then withdrew to the forest.

Tony held tighter Bruce and turned to his comrades and Jim.

“I’m taking this, young man out of here…”

Bruce shook his head.

“The car… and the phone is ringing” his smartphone was in his black jacket’s inner pocket.

“Alfred probably: it’d be better to see you in flesh as for the car we’ll take it later” he said sharply not wanting to disclose that the car had auto pilot.

What was obvious to Bruce as Ironman took off was that Tony was shaking from ultimate terror and wanted to take him to safety as soon as possible. His friend’s face was still pale.
“Are you hurt?” Tony asked tightening his embrace around Bruce’s waist. “Do you feel any pain?” his voice was pressed, hasty.

Bruce shook his head.

“No, Tony, I…” he was ready to say that there was no reason for hastiness and that he could at least answer his Smartphone that was ringing, but his friend had already activated his face plate and left the valley which looked like a battle field.

Under them people lay unconscious on the frozen soil, some of them moving weakly and moaning. Police officers were handcuffing those conscious and the paramedics who had just come with ambulances gathered those injured or unconscious. The heavy smell of used firepower hovered over the narrow strip of land as the big rock and even the soil had the marks of bullets; smoke still swirled all over.

Jim was taking Steve’s and Thor’s testimonies clenching his waist troubled from this unexpected attack – not the one from Joker: anything was expected from the jester. But the second one was a mystery.

After everything that just happened Bruce felt a cold wave running his spine; Ironman although fake had just tried to kill him and now he was taken away by the same entity – of course, it was his best friend under the plate and he knew he was safe yet he’d like to be able to see Tony’s eyes and not that soulless alloy.

He could guess that Tony was checking his body for any serious injury: Tony must have been through a Hell knowing that Bruce was under attack by…Ironman. He had seen the dead paleness over his face, the blankness in his eyes, his disheveled hair, his ragged breath…

Bruce felt awful…and his friend’s suffering just added a load more. He tried to not think of what just took place, of how he had acted, but his mind replayed all. And Bruce felt horrible because once again he had crawled to save his life, waiting to be saved… Of course, he had done a lot of this during his years with Falcone: crawling waiting to take the blows just begging to be spared…during the last years was part of the plan, an act but before he just waited to be saved.

He had waited years to be saved, craving for someone to help him and nobody came…and now after the battle he gave to save himself, he was disgusted seeing himself being a ‘damsel in distress’: he was used to save people not being saved…

But he had to bury those feelings in the back side of the deeper depths of his mind to focus once again to more important aspects: the fake Ironman, the Arrow, Thor’s expression when he was fighting ‘Ironman’. He pressed his lips and the pain throughout his jaw line made him aware of the hits he got while rolling on the ground…like a warm.

“Hiding behind a tree trunk waiting better people to save you…” Diana sneered at him.

He swallowed the acid in his mouth and looked into Ironman’s cold lenses.

“Tony?”

“Almost there, litt’ guy…”
But still the face plate covered his friend’s features. Bruce turned his head towards the Manor that was coming closer fast. He could see Alfred already standing before the open main door: worry and relief playing on his wrinkled face. Next to him stood Matt; of course…it was almost the time for their session.

Ironman landed smoothly but then Tony’s movements were anything but smooth; he rushed inside supporting Bruce settling him gently on the sofa.

Alfred’s fast moving eyes were appraising his young master’s condition appalled from the tears on Bruce’s expensive fine clothes that were wrinkled, dirty and drenched: appalled not for the clothes’ damage, of course, but for the conditions that led there. But it was the sight of the youth’s face that clenched his chest because he hoped that he wouldn’t have to see again bruises and scratches on that beloved face. And blood: Bruce’s left eyebrow had a wound enough deep to bleed. He ran to the sofa to help Bruce take off his soaked jacket.

“Leslie is on her way here” Alfred said and Tony who had just deactivated his face plate nodded, his eyes determined.

“Is there a serious injury?” Matt asked Tony; the physiotherapist of the Avengers was certain that Tony had already scanned his friend.

Bruce used his hands to come into sitting position.

“I’m here, you know; and I’m alright, Tony, you didn’t have to call Leslie.”

Tony having disassembled his armor clenched his waist with both hands and looked at his friend in a way that made Bruce feel oddly.

“I didn’t call her” Tony realized the odd expression in his eyes and changed to something more Stark-ish. “I just saw her car approaching: she must have figured that I’d bring you to the Manor and rushed here; she will be probably stalled a bit from the police blocks” he licked his lips uncomfortable and looked at Matt. “There’s no major injury according to my scans and the energy casts are in their place, just contusions but I want to be sure.”

“I told you that I’m fine” Bruce said.

“No, you’re not: I’m not fine so you can’t be fine either” Tony spat.

Bruce was watching frowned Tony speaking for him without giving him any attention; in the meantime, Hero climbed on the sofa and on his lap licking the scratches over his face.

Alfred took softly the kitten and placed him down holding a piece of cotton drenched with alcohol. He began cleaning gently his young master’s scratches once again impressed by the youth’s handling of pain. Of course, Master Bruce was used to much worse pain than the sting of alcohol on open scratches.

“Master Bruce, pardon me for the pain” he had forced his voice to not shake from his previous terror upon hearing that Master Bruce was under attack.

Yet Bruce could sense how shaken his good friend was; he brushed his upper arms smiling.

“It’s nothing, Alfred…and I’m fine” he chuckled. “A bit shaken; scared” Matt was there after all “but I’ll live.”

Alfred knew that it was inappropriate for a butler but his fingertips moved a bit out of the cotton and
touched his young master’s cold cheek. He grinned.

Tony turned his head to them, his expression still tense as if ready to explode.

“His temperature is below normal: he is on the verge of hypothermia.”

“I’ll prepare a hot bath” Alfred suggested.

“No, Alfred, thank you but I want Matt to make a first examination” Tony retorted looking at Matt who nodded. “Leslie should be here any moment now so she’ll make her own assessment.”

He strode to Bruce who stared at him with narrowed eyes but Tony didn’t have the luxury to acknowledge that stare; Alfred stood and the billionaire from Malibu placed his hands around Bruce’s waist and under his knees lifting him up in bridal style. Two friends’ eyes collided.

“Tony…” Bruce could see in Tony’s eyes still the fear and the distress along with a dry determination; he needed to speak with his friend.

“Not now, Bruce” Tony cut him sharply “your health is the priority.”

Bruce pressed his lips and was ready to retort but Tony’s eyes became softer.

“Can you do me this favor, littl’ guy?”

Bruce closed his eyes and Tony activating Ironman’s boots took Bruce to the gym where a fully equipped examination room was attached. Matt followed but Alfred stayed in the salon shaking his head troubled having sensed the odd atmosphere between the two friends. He saw Hero storming to the way his master was taken and the butler grinned.

“Your young master needs your warmth…”

Tony laid Bruce softly on the examination table and put his hands on both his shoulders looking his friend straight in the eyes.

“Listen to Matt, will you? Leslie will be here soon.”

Bruce shook his head and huffed.

“Tony, I’m fine!”

Tony grinned.

“I know you are, buddy, but it is better to be sure, huh?” he winked and walked towards the exit. “When you’re finished” he said to Matt “notify me to come and get Bruce.”

“Okay, Tony” Matt nodded and closed the door behind Tony.

He came to Bruce who had raised himself in a sitting position.

“I’d like you to take off your clothes and wear your sweat shorts to examine you” he took the screen and adjusted it around the examination table knowing how shy his patient was. “And we’ll make some massage afterwards to ease the tension and possible cramps from the exertion.”

“Fine” Bruce said licking his lips, swallowing his distaste.

Upon returning to the salon Tony found Leslie as he had guessed. Her face was like made of granite
and her eyes sparkled with a mix of worry and anger while her tight bun of working hours was disheveled.

“How is he?” she demanded as soon as she saw Tony.

Alfred cocked his eyebrows.

“I told dear Leslie that Master Bruce is fine but she wasn’t satisfied with my diagnosis” he remarked in his snide way.

“My scans showed nothing worrisome but Matt is examining him right now at the gym.”

“You scanned him for brain injuries? Internal bleeding?” she asked already starting to move towards the gym. “We can transfer him to the clinic.”

“I’d have taken him there immediately if I had found anything yet you know better.”

But Leslie had already moved out of the room just nodding.

“I’ll make some tea” Alfred said “since bath is called off for now a hot brewage will warm Master Bruce up.”

Tony nodded and watched Alfred leaving. He however needed something more than a tea…

When Alfred returned to the salon his eyes slightly widened.

“Master Anthony, I do not think that…”

Tony raised his index finger stopping him and swallowed in a gulp the rest of his glass’ whiskey. He filled it again from the bottle he had on the fireplace. Alfred approached: he could see from the remaining booze in the bottle that Master Anthony had drunk at least two more glasses; also, he could see that Ironman was shaken; scared maybe...

The Englishman took softly the bottle and the glass from the younger man’s hand.

“Alcohol isn’t any kind of solution, sir.”

Tony yanked his head backwards huffing and ran his fingers through his messy hair.

“Thankfully, I have a spare wheelchair – I must bring it because the other is completely wrecked” he said bypassing the subject.

Alfred pressed his lips: so that was the reason for Master Anthony’s weird behavior. The attack was really lethal if Master Bruce’s wheelchair was destroyed. Tony as if reading the butler’s understanding stretched his hand to take the glass back raising his eyebrows.

“I’m afraid I can’t comply with your wishes, Master Anthony” Alfred said with his voice of conviction holding the bottle away from his hand and Tony let his head hang on his chest disappointed. “Drinking won’t correct things neither will change what has happened.”

Tony yanked his head backwards growling and made a small twist to turn his back to the Englishman hiding his face in his palms only to raise his head a second later turning again to Alfred.

“Alfred” he said confiding, leaning towards him “the chair’s protecting field was destroyed! If Thor had come a second later Bruce would have been dead!” he pointed out widening his eyes. “In the hands of a bastard impersonating me!” he stabbed his index finger to his own chest. “Dead! It was
sooooo close…” he showed the tip of his fingertip. “We almost lost him again, Alfred, after everything! And this time it’d be definite…”

Alfred left the bottle and glass on the fireplace’s white marble mantelpiece and approached his young master: he felt for him, he shared his agony and dread. He was still distraught himself.

“Master Anthony, it is alright now. Master Bruce is here, safe and sound.”

Tony shook his head.

“Till when, Alfred?” he closed his eyes “Can’t take it anymore…Won’t let it anymore…I won’t lose him again…” he turned his back to the butler. “I love that little guy and I can’t just watch each time a bastard attacks him at will endangering his life…I was late today, Alfred…and my delay could have cost Bruce’s life…”

Alfred touched his hands to the younger man’s hunched shoulders.

“It wasn’t your fault, sir” Tony was shaking his head in disbelief.

“It is, Alfred, because I let it happen…”

Alfred frowned.

“Sir, you must be careful; do not be hasty to make something that you might regret later” Tony turned to him, his eyes glimmering. “It is better to calm down.”

“No, Alfred: if I calm down as you say, I will continue this failed Mondus Vivendi and next time Bruce might…He is so selfish in his self sacrificing nature…” he sighed.

“Master Anthony…” Tony closed his eyes and ruffled his locks discerning Alfred's disagreement. “Miss Potts called: she tried to reach you through your personal phone number and Jarvis but she couldn’t. She is very distressed: if I may, I think you should speak with her.”

Tony smiled and nodded.

“I will; thank you, Alfred” he pouted “I’m going upstairs to talk to her; if Matt and Leslie finish before I return you know where the spare chair is.”

Alfred gave a court nod.

“I certainly do, sir.”

Tony saluted Alfred in military style and ascended slowly the main staircase to the bedrooms. Alfred pressed his lips.

The Smartphone rang and in the complete silence of Harleen’s office at Arkham echoed like a thunder. The young psychiatrist was writing at her laptop and was startled; she cast a glare at the gadget: it was her second Smartphone, the personal one… she crooked her mouth annoyed and picked it up.

“Dr. Quinzel speaking.”

“Do yaaaa make aaaaah… house calls? Heheheheha…”
A shiver ran Harleen’s spine hearing that nasal voice.

“It depends…” she slurred.

“Touuuuugh piece…” Joker mumbled and chuckled. “Mmm…even when youuur patient bleeeds to see ya?”

Harleen took off her glasses.

“Where are you?”

“There’s an abandoned kiosk at the right alleyway besiiide our favorite Asylum…”

She bit her bottom lip.

“You’re…”

“Let me guess…crazyyyyy?! Wowww! You reaaaallly needed those Phds to make that diagnose, huh? Hehe!”

Harleen crooked her mouth and snorted.

“I’m coming.”

Joker heard the end of the dial and smirked.

“Of course you are, Harlequin…”

He squeezed the spot on his upper arm where the thick arrow had pierced the skin; Joker had already removed the arrow himself. He could have treated his injury yet he thought that this was a great chance to have Harlequin more invested in him: women loved to take care of wounded people.

And truly it took Harleen only ten minutes to arrive. She had stashed in her briefcase the contents of a first aid kit and entered her car. In order to not raise suspicions to the guards she drove away from the Asylum and when she was out of vision range took a sideways road to approach the abandoned kiosk from the road behind the kiosk.

Joker heard the car and his eyes stayed focused on the door till the young psychiatrist entered; the jester noticed that her glasses were slightly askew despite the calmness all over her face. Harleen regarded the covered in spider webs and dust small space with disgust but as soon as she laid eyes on him her eyes bulged: his left side was drenched in blood and some drops had stained the dust covered cement.

Harleen rushed to him and fell on her knees touching the spot where the blood spurted. Joker giggled.

“Oh! Dooooc, sooooo much interest for good ooool’ me?”

“Take your jacket off!” she ordered him pressing her lips.

Joker cocked his eyes.

“Soootttoo much haaasty!! I sympathize with your thirst for this goooooorgeous boooody but” he blinked cute “be gentle, baaabe… I’m a virgin! HUHUUUUUHUUHUUU…”

“Shut up!” Harleen cut his shit and helped him remove the jacket and then his shirt.
She looked at his wound hiding her loathe under her poignant professional expression and opened the first aid kit.

“Who did that?” she demanded as she began cleaning the wound.

Joker giggled.

“Youuuuu don’t even waaaaatch the news?! Nerd! If people don’t watch the news how am I going to become faaaaamous?”

Harleen placed her palm over his brow to see if he ran a fever.

“Noooooo, doc, I’m my charming usual self…Uuuuuuu! I’m always hot headed aaand hoot all over!” he twitched his eyebrows glancing at his groin pointedly. “Ouch-y!” he uttered as Harleen cleaned the wound with antiseptic. “HAHAHAHAHAHAAAA! Youuuuu like making me pain, huh? Nauuughty girl!”

“You attacked Wayne again?” she asked dissaprovingly, her disbelief evident.

Joker looked at her with cocked eyebrows enjoying her reaction.

“Everyon’ has his soft spots!”

“He is going to be the death of you, Mr. J.”

Joker closed his eyes in delight.

“Aaaaand what sweet deaaaath that’d be…Uah! I’m so rom--antic!”

Harleen rolled her eyes.

“It looks like a wound made from an arrow…”

Joker nodded giggling and stretched his other arm to take from the floor a thick arrow whose head was drenched in blood and flesh.

“Yeah! This one…HEHEHEHEHEEEEEE!! I was hit by freakin’ Robin Hood himself” he scratched his head thoughtful. “I guess this makes me the Sheeeeeriff of Gotham and Brucey Lady Maaaaarion?” he burst out in a fit of maniacal laughter.

The young psychiatrist didn’t comment and occupied herself in preparing the needle for sewing the wound.

“You pulled out the arrow yourself?”

“Yeeeeees, Ma’am! Since maaany of my boys were busted! Oh! It was such a spreeeeeee; I couldn’t stop laughing!”

Harleen stabbed a bit hard the needle and Joker jerked.

“Then you won’t have a problem with that…” she snorted.

Joker yanked his head backwards completely unfazed.

“Doooooo your magic, doc…”
"I think you’re a masochist, Mr. J” she said sewing the flesh.

“For loving Bruuuuucey?" 

She cocked an eyebrow.

“That too; but mainly because you laughed pulling the arrow of yourself.”

Joker pouted surprised.

“Aaaand what should I have done? Crying? Pain is soooooo much fun…”

Harleen lolled her head on the side.

“Then you are a masochist!”

Joker sobered and leaned towards her; his eyes engaging hers with a sick shine framed by his untamed green curls.

“Doooooo I look like a masochist?” he hissed and then cackled. “HEHEHEHEEEEEE! The American Psychiatry Association would have to make a new DSM only for meeeeee…and still they’d have failed to scratch even the surface…” he whispered sensually to the young doctor who was almost done with the sewing.

She knew that; Joker was a unique sample: different from everything known; out of any category. Suddenly she realized that his lips were too close to hers and slightly open; this time her eyes dove into his. They were both serious as if estimating the pros and cos of this proximity.

And then Joker captured her lips making funny noises like in cartoons and detached abruptly.

“Mmmmuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu! Thanks, doc…Ooooooh! You doooo look good in my lipstick…” he scratched the top of his head “good think I didn’t wear the other: the baaaaaad lipctick with the spicy mix” he pointed his index finger at her lips where Joker’s lips’ outline had stayed in a grotesque red.

Harleen wiped her lips with the back of her palm and Joker giggled because the result was worse. The young psychiatrist annoyed took out from the first aid kit the adhesive gauze and stuck it to Joker’s upper arm.

“Mmmm…Teeeeell me, Harlequin, aren’t you happy that I told you to get a new phone for the two of us?” she rolled her eyes. “Otherwise now our little kioooooosk would have been flooded by cops an’ I’d have to use you as a shield against the bullet rain, Hehe…Youuuuu know that the big bad bat certainly is watching your phone an’ not only that…”

Harleen began gathering her things in the kit indifferent.

“And how do you know that he isn’t watching right now and won’t surge at any moment?”

Joker jumped to his feet wearing his jacket without wearing the shirt.

“Shirts are ooooooverprized…” he smirked slyly taking in Harleen’s stare at his torso “you agree to that, huh?” he cocked his eyebrows smugly “my shaggy chest are legendary after all…” he looked at his hairless chest and shoo his head “almost shaggy…Weeell, I know that Batsy won’t come ‘cause…” he narrowed his eyes pouting “hm…bats are nocturnal” he exclaimed in the end in a scientific manner “an’ during the day they are disabled! HEHEHEHEEEEE!” he giggled with his hint that only he could understand.
He stooped to take the arrow and hopped to the exit happy with himself for the allegory he had just made. Grabbing the knob turned to Harleen who had stood.

“Dr. Harle–quin, my booooy will be delivered to you…You know what to do, huh?” he winked.

“I don’t know, Mr. J” she said “it has become too risky: they will suspect.”

Joker shrugged pouted.

“Whoooo cares ’bout them? I’ll find new ones: idiots are easy to find – it’s like they sprout up everywhere…like weeeeed…See ya lator, alli–gator!” he jumped out and after a few moments Harleen heard enraged horns as the jester crossed the road without seeing around.

She huffed and shook her head. Her fingers touched intrigued her lips where she still tasted Joker’s lipstick.

The ceiling was light blue like the walls and had some stern, simple geometrical shapes at the corners…

Dick was sprawled on his mattress from the moment he reached the Manor and ran to his room. He had no mood to make his homework: if Wayne wanted war he’d get it!

He had his hands under the back of his neck and sketched mentally shapes on the ceiling like the good old days with Brian. He was pissed from yesterday but finally something came to somewhat lift his spirits: at some point he heard some weird fuss downstairs and left his room to find out. Of course he didn’t eavesdrop – he wouldn’t fall so low – but still it was easy to discern how distressed Alfred and Wayne’s physiotherapist were. It was almost the time for Wayne’s session yet he wasn’t there and the upset of the two men said much.

He returned to his room and opened his tablet to watch the news on the net and…bingo! Gotham’s news’ outlets were transmitting updates about some attack on Wayne. Now Dick could relax on his soft mattress… Some justice at last!

His tablet rang and Dick jumped startled: it was Jay’s melody.

“Hi, Jay…Sorry we didn’t meet but Wayne put me in detention.”

Jason cackled and Dick pouted.

“What’s so funny, brat?”

“He finally decided to give ya what ya deserve?”

“What?!!!! You’re a traitor! I deserve to be forbidden to go to my training?”

“’Course, man: ya ran away” the boy chuckled. “An’ I was punished ‘cause of ya! Not that this can stop littl’ ol’ Jay… Anyway…Ya bought some voodoo doll with Wayne’s face?”

“What do you mean?”

“The attack: don’t tell me ya didn’t hear? Mom called Alfred to learn what happened: yar voodoo isn’t strong enough after all – Wayne is still alive.”

“Yeah…” Dick mumbled.
“Oh, man! Ya remind me of that coyote that chases road runner an’ always loses…C’mon, man: ya can’t honestly want him dead…”

“Why not? He was the reason my family was murdered and I’m imprisoned now…Hold on, I have another call” he read the name on the screen. “Jay, will talk later.”

“Fine, chaya!”

Dick answered the call with his heartbeat rising.

“Hi, Mr. Breizic.”

“How are you, Richard?”

“Please call me Dick.”

“Okay.”

“Mr. Breizic, my guardian forbade me to attend my training for one week” he said haughtily expecting to find an ally.

There was some seconds of silence.

“I can see his point, Dick…I saw in the news the reason of this decision. You ran away, drank alcohol and created an episode with an adult. Dick, drinking alcohol in your age is very bad and you’re aspiring to be a professional gymnast which makes your deed even worse.”

Dick pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes licking his lips nervously.

“Mr. Breizic…I…”

“You want to follow your father’s career, don’t you?”

“Of course I do! It is my dream; what keeps me moving on…”

Breizic sigh reached the other end of the line.

“Then why are you…how you Americans say it? Shooting yourself in the foot? Listen, Dick, your father detested alcohol and any drug and that was the reason I never believed that he had used illegal drugs. So if someone” Dick could sense in the coach’s voice that he had already someone in mind “urges you to that kind of behavior, he is your enemy. Imagine how your father would have felt…”

Dick lowered his head.

“If my father was alive I would never have drunk” he said blatantly. “My father would have understood why I did that…”

“He would have been very hurt, Dick…but I cannot say more for him, I think that deep inside you know better than me. I can speak for myself, Dick.”

Dick’s eyes widened and his breathe was pressed because the man’s disappointment was evident in his tone.

“Mr. Breizic…”
“Dick, many athletes – with admirable responsibility and devotion to their craft - want me in their coaching team so I’m very selective and strict in my criteria. Therefore…”

Dick felt the room spinning: he was sure that his father’s old coach would dismiss him.

“I won’t hide from you that at first thought of leaving your coaching…”

“No! I mean…it was…”

“For a young athlete was very bad and unprofessional” Dick let his head fall to his chest his breath turning into pants; he felt his eyes watering: not this too... “But considering all the things that have happened to you I’ll give you a second chance.”

Dick managed to breathe again; the room turning solid again. He couldn’t believe that Breizic wouldn’t leave him: the man had indeed the fame of being very adamant in his demands – besides, that was the reason his athletes were the best.

“Thank you, Mr. Breizic! Thank you very much! I won’t disappoint you! I swear!”

“What matters, Dick, is to not disappoint yourself not me…I want you to know that I agree with your guardian’s decision: Mr. Wayne is very wise for his age and lax” he chuckled. “I’d have made your detention longer…I think you should thank him for being so lenient with you.”

Dick’s face tightened again; thanking Wayne for anything? No way!

“Use those days to think properly, Dick. I want you to know that I’m here for everything you want to discuss.”

“Thank you, sir…I…I’ll do that.”

Bagdana emerged in the center of Darkseid’s throne hall and the oval shaped vessels framing the wide aisle to the god’s throne launched their flames to the high ceiling as he marched towards his ally. With the corner of his eyes he registered beside Darkseid’s throne ‘Ironman’ standing like a bodyguard yet the ancient demon had eyes only for his ‘master’. The demon’s eyes were red spitting fires that accompanied the fumes from his nose-less nostrils.

Darkseid looked sideways at ‘Ironman’ and smirked to his minion’s enraged marching. He turned his head to Bagdana and the demon felt something colliding with him – something like an invisible barrier that stopped him in front of the four granite steps leading to the alien god’s throne.

Bagdana’s eyes narrowed to fire slits stabbing his ally’s gleeful confident eyes: the demon’s short horns sparkled like silver thunders making the smirk on Darkseid’s face more intense.

“What have you done?!”

Darkseid snorted and cocked his hairless eyebrows.

“Judging from your expression you don’t need me to answer that…you already know…”

‘Ironman’ at his side chuckled and Bagdana clenched his fists.

“You almost killed him!”

Darskeid clenched the edges of the armrests with pleasure and yanked his head.
“If I wanted him dead now his friends would have only his ashes!” he growled and the twirls of thunders on his thrones sides moved. “Besides” he calmed his tone “I prefer doing that myself…” he smirked to the demon’s ire.

‘Ironman’ sniggered and Bagdana stabbed him with his eyes; Darkseid glanced at the impostor and ‘Ironman’ dissolved to give his place to Granny Goodness who laughed maniac like a chalk grazing a blackboard making her bush of hair move around.

“It was so funny seeing the pest crawling to save his pathetic life!” she cackled and two rays of fire surged at her to be grabbed by Darkseid who casually threw them to the wall causing several stones to shatter.

The alien god looked at Bagdana whose eyes were ready to launch more fire against Granny.

“We agreed that you wouldn’t harm him!” Bagdana barked. “He is mine!”

Granny made a move forwards at the edge of the platoon of her master’s throne.

“Everything belongs to Master Darkseid! You have too much nerve speaking about something being yours” Darkseid grinned satisfied. “He decides if you will take anything from the spoils!” she hissed enjoying the demon’s face that was distorted in wrath.

“Exactly” Darskeid added. “The human pest provoked me and I punished him…too magnanimously: he demanded an answer from me about my things he has stolen and I gave him my answer.”

Bagdana shook his head.

“He doesn’t know who you are neither that you are behind this attack…not that it’d make much difference.”

“It is useful to be reminded of his mortality…”

Bagdana yanked his head exasperated.

“If you believe that this will scare him, you’re wrong! He isn’t a pest as you think!”

Granny sniggered, her ugly eyes glimmering spiteful.

“He looked like one when I almost squashed him under my foot!”

Bagdana roared with his eyes bulging like fire balls ready to hit her but Darkseid stood.

“Enough!”

“The fact you crave for his beautiful ass doesn’t make him any better from the rest of this worthless lot!” Granny hissed and Bagdana ground his teeth making the walls of the hall tremble.

Darkseid sat again at his throne and Bagdana shook his head.

“You’re carried away from your self confidence and your minions” Bagdana cast a glare at Granny “and you are damaging your cause. If you had discussed this with me…”

“You would have discouraged him in favor of your pest” Granny barked.

“In favor of your cause, Lord Darkseid” Bagdana said and bowed. “Your cause is mine too and my duty is to advice you about this planet and its inhabitants. Now with that attack you have alerted
them about something powerful that threatens them from the shadows and that can be quite the obstacle to your plans."

Darkseid raised his eyebrows smirking.

“And here is where you come…your use: cover my traces, though I’d gladly confront the Avengers and every other useless hero this garbage planet has” he said casually spreading his hands.

“That moment will come but you want to be ready by then…You told me that you want your machine ready and if they suspect that Mannheim is behind that attack – the power that was launched during that attack – will make them destroy your precious items.”

Darkseid smiled.

“Prove your usefulness then: you are an ancient demon after all. Make them suspect someone else.”

Bagdana snorted.

“Why should I do that? You put my prize to lethal danger and I’m not persuaded that you wouldn’t have killed him if the Avengers hadn’t intervened” he turned his back ready to storm out of the hall.

Darkseid tapped his armrests watching through narrowed eyes.

“If you break our alliance, if you leave now, there’s nothing that stops me from burning your precious pet to ashes.”

Bagdana turned his head to him.

“Do not threat me…”

“Why not? I can…Well?” he lolled slightly his head to the side.

Bagdana seemed to think hard under Granny’s gleeful expression. In the end he turned towards the throne and nodded.

“Fine but no more surprises: no more attempts against Bruce. Do not let him distract your attention.”

“As he does to you?” the enormous god laughed. “How intriguing that littl’ human is…” he mumbled behind his intertwined fingers and seeing the demon’s uneasiness: “That will depend on your effectiveness…So…who is behind the attack on Mr. Wayne?”

Bagdana smirked.

“Luthor.”

“I just released him from prison; I won’t like to waste more energy for him.”

“You won’t need to…We talk about suspicions not proof.”

When Bagdana evaporated from the room Granny looked at her master.

“It was too pleasant to torment that human, your Majesty! If you give me the permission I could make him a good sport for your entertainment…” she smirked. “He showed an odd disregard to the imminent death…he fought back.”

Darskeid pouted interested gazing at the dancing perpetual flames of the vessels.
“Bravery…I’m interested to uncover more from the secrets of the human that Bagdana wants to hide from me…”

When Tony returned to the great salon Steve and Thor were there talking with Alfred. Both men turned to look at S.H.I.E.L.D.’s director and their teammate and from their astonished expressions Tony realized that his look was too grim but…frankly he didn’t give a damn!

He walked casually to them and grabbed one of the oval shaped glasses from the buffet and filled it with whiskey.

“I see Alfred has taken care of you” he said looking at the neglected tea set on the coffee table; his voice was just an imitation of his usual cheer.

Alfred walked to him and looked him in the eyes.

“Master Anthony, if I’m permitted to make a suggestion, I believe that some tea would be better than alcohol” the Englishman felt for his young master but he wanted to refrain him from worsening things.

“Alfred, please: let me know better about alcohol’s healing qualities…”

Alfred pressed his lips.

“Master Anthony, if I’m permitted to make a suggestion, I believe that some tea would be better than alcohol” the Englishman felt for his young master but he wanted to refrain him from worsening things.

“I think that Alfred is right, Tony” Steve intervened having approached.

Tony rolled his eyes and emptied his glass with one gulp twitching his eyebrows challenging.

“Party pooper!” he spat to his Captain and placed the glass back to the bar.

Thor came closer too.

“Alfred told us that there’s nothing worrisome in Bruce’s condition: has anything changed?” the god’s voice was steady and determined but Tony could see the angst in his warm eyes so different from the wild eyes he saw upon arriving at attack’s site.

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head, grinning: that was what they needed right now – a lovesick god! He sighed and marched to the Asgardian, stood before him and grabbed both his upper arms in a gesture of appreciation.

“Thank you, Thor: if you hadn’t arrived, that impostor would have killed Bruce” he bowed slightly his head and then turned to Steve. “Thank you too, Steve…”

Steve approached them.

“Don’t mention it, Tony.”

Thor held his comrade’s upper arms too.

“There’s no need to thank me, Tony; I’m just glad I arrived on time.”

Tony cleared his throat and looked pointedly at the god.

“About that…hm…although it was very useful this time, ehm…we have to talk. Later” Thor blushed a bit and Tony turned to Alfred who was watching the scene in his cool demeanor. “Alfred, is
“Everything alright with Bruce?” he looked at his wristwatch. “It takes too long…”

“There is nothing to worry about, sir; Master Bruce is having a nice, hot shower and Mr. Leench will massage him. Now, if you excuse me I shall go to the kitchen and prepare lunch; will the kind masters honor us with their esteemed presence?”

“The honor and pleasure will be ours, Alfred” Steve replied and Thor nodded. “Do you have any idea who attacked Bruce?” he asked Tony after Alfred was gone.

“A coward!” Thor spat; his wrath for the attacker returning. “To attack someone in a wheelchair.”

Tony shook his head.

“That too…and a powerful one…”

Steve frowned.

“But he was an imitator.”

Tony snorted.

“That doesn’t thwart him from being strong…” he ruffled his hair. “He destroyed the protective shield field of Bruce’s wheelchair” he licked his lips and huffed. “I’ve made that shield to last my full firepower…”

Both his comrades looked at him shaken and Tony nodded.

“Exactly! Fuck this!”

“I can’t imagine who might have that kind of power” Steve mumbled frowned.

“As I was fighting with him I thought Loki: he usually takes forms at will but it wasn’t him.”

“How do you know?” Steve asked.

“He wouldn’t lose the opportunity to laugh at my face and I can sense his presence.”

“Then we have to do with an unknown enemy” Steve said.

Tony shook his head.

“I have my suspicions but no proof…”

“Well?” Thor asked approaching him. “I’d like to meet him again and have a word.”

Tony locked eyes with him but the doorbell interrupted them and he yanked his head to see who it was. Though that wasn’t necessary since Selina stormed there as soon as Alfred opened the door, her eyes frenzied and her face distorted from fear.

“Where’s Bruce?” she demanded from the three men.

Steve came to her and held her upper arms.

“I told you on the phone, dear, that he is fine…”

She nodded looking at him with arched eyebrows but her clenched jaw revealed that this wasn’t enough.
“I prefer my own eyes, handsome!”

“Then look here” Bruce said grinning to her.

Selina turned to the right entrance from the corridor that led to the gym. Bruce’s smile was broad and he was calm between Leslie and Matt yet Selina noticed the adhesive gauzes on her friend’s face and the butterfly stitch on his left eyebrow.

“Sweetie!” she exclaimed and rushed to him, kneeling and hugging him, Hero along since the kitten was on Bruce’s lap.

She cupped his face with both hands and kissed his cheeks under Steve’s touched and slightly amused stare that was asking: should I be jealous? No... Thor’s eyes were fixed on Bruce and his friend admiring their relationship and wishing he could have some of this. Tony’s stare however was grim.

“I’m fine, Sel; calm down…” Bruce said to her rubbing her back.

“I should be trying to calm you down after what happened…” she answered searching with her eyes and hands Bruce for injuries as she was doing every night while he was Falcone’s captive. “I won’t ever leave you alone again: so if someone thinks to do that again…”

“It won’t happen again!” Tony said determined and Bruce looked at him facing again that strange unfamiliar expression on his friend’s features.

“What do you mean?” Selina asked. “Have you thought another something to stop them?”

Tony walked to them.

“The best” he said with conviction. “Bruce will come to my house at Malibu. I’ll tell Alfred to pack your things.”

Bruce frowned and met Selina’s puzzled eyes for an instance before staring at Tony.

“Are you taking me away from Gotham?”

“Actually I’m taking you away from your death” Tony cocked his eyebrows.

Bruce licked his lips.

“Without asking me first…Tony, I can’t leave my city.”

Tony blinked: that stubborn boy! He crossed his arms over the chest.

“You can and you will, Bruce! I had had enough of this!”

His tone made those present frown despite the fact they knew how much Tony cared about Bruce.

“Richard has his friends, his school here, his training; I can’t disrupt his program.”

Tony lolled his head on the side looking at Bruce with an expression crying: ‘seriously? We both know what it is your true concern.’

“Pepper is already making arrangements for him” he retorted in a smartass way. “There’s no reason for you to not come.”
Bruce shook his head and Selina stood clenching her waist staring at Tony.

“I doubt that Pepper is doing that” Bruce said calmly “she can’t agree with something so unreasonable.”

Now Tony’s eyes flashed; he grabbed the armrests of Bruce’s chair and leaned to him so their faces were one breath away.

“Unreasonable? Unreasonable is your obsession with this city! That drives you to stay here even if that leads to your death!”

“Tony…” Leslie tried to intervene because Matt and Steve who didn’t know Bruce’s secret were staring puzzled.

But Tony wasn’t listening to her absorbed in his friend’s mesmerizing eyes.

“It is unreasonable that I want to keep you alive!?”

Hero on Bruce’s lap hissed and Tony rolled his eyes.

“No, it is unreasonable that you try to force me into things that I…”

Tony nodded.

“You don’t want!” he completed for him. “You were telling me that you feel bad for holding me away from my own affairs, here; well, that’s your chance to prove that you were saying the truth. Come to Malibu so I’m free to see into my business. Prove that you’re not selfish!”

Bruce inhaled sharply.

“Tony, your breath smells of whiskey…maybe it is better to talk some other…”

Tony lolled his head on the side chuckling.

“No! We’ll talk everything now! Don’t try to run away from this!”

“Don’t talk to him like that!” Selina spat to him, her eyes flashing like a wild cat’s.

Steve touched his comrade’s upper arm.

“Tony, Selina is right: calm down.”

Thor approached too, his eyes a bit angry.

“I’ll take Bruce away from you. You better sober up” he remarked calm but a bit disapproving.

But Tony stood and looked at his teammates’ determined faces. He chuckled and locked eyes with Bruce.

“Oh, Bruce! I wish you used your charm on people for your own good” Bruce lowered his head sighing. “Steve, Thor!” he spread his arms in a dramatic gesture “I’m the real Ironman therefore Bruce doesn’t need your protection.”

Thor stretched his impressive body.

“Then stop acting like the fake Ironman! Bruce doesn’t deserve that kind of treatment.”
“Poor blondie!” Tony exclaimed understanding the god’s soft spot for Bruce.

Thor frowned but Bruce yanked his head.

“Please…We’re having a discussion with Tony – no need for such tension. Alfred, can you treat our guests some aperitif till the lunch? Tony and I will be at the study.”

Tony crossed his arms and stared at his friend with cocked eyebrows almost amused.

“Of course, Master Bruce” the Englishman was completely undeterred from the tension.

Steve understanding Bruce’s need of calming the spirits retreated to one of the armchairs, Thor however was still adamant in his place looking puzzled at Tony who pouted.

“What?” he snapped to the Asgardian. “You heard him!”

Thor shook his head and followed his captain casting a last glance at Bruce who blinked and looked at Tony.

“Shall we?” he asked his friend with an inviting gesture and let Hero on the floor.

Tony nodded.

“I’ll come with you” Selina said still pissed glaring at Tony.

“Me too” Leslie said.

Tony looked at his comrades.

“As you see, we’ll have our peace forces…” he chuckled.

However Thor remained standing even after they left while Steve and Matt settled down.

“Come sit, Thor” Steve said to his comrade.

Thor shook his head.

“Maybe we should go along?”

Steve smiled.

“Tony adores Bruce: his life is for Tony more valuable than his own.”

“I agree” Matt added nodding.

Thor looked to the corridor leading to the lift.

“Yes, but Tony has drunk a lot and he is sick from the terror he experienced…”

“You know, huh?” Steve said to him teasingly. “You experienced the same terror?” Thor met his gaze annoyed and Steve nodded. “Selina and Leslie are with them.”

“I’m sorry, Tony” Bruce said to his friend the moment they were in the first floor’s study.

Tony grinned and shook his head.
“So, we tell Alfred to start packing?”

Bruce huffed and lolled his head on the side.

“Not for that; I didn’t want to create a problem with your teammates”

Tony waved that off.

“What matters now is your answer: will you come to Malibu?”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Tony, you know I can’t.”

“It’s not a matter if you can or not: it has to do with your will. You don’t want. You’re thinking only yourself, Bruce; only what you want. You don’t think of the others.”

Bruce gulped.

“You don’t believe that, Tony; I just have some things that can’t be delayed.”

Tony shook his head.

“One of these things almost led to your death” Bruce inhaled. “You had to provoke Mannheim, don’t you?”

“Tony, we were in this together!”

“Then why you didn’t let me do the call?”

“Because LexLabs are under my control, Tony: I have the responsibility of this company and he came to me.”

“Yes, but I could take that kind of attacks while you can’t. Do you realize that you were almost killed? The protecting field of the chair was broken by his attack and I had made it to hold back all of my firepower. He was more powerful than me…Weren’t for Thor and the Arrow you would be dead! Do you realize?!”

Bruce huffed.

“Tony, calm down…I’m alive; I’m safe.”

Tony stormed at him and Selina’s eyes bulged but then she relaxed seeing him just leaning above Bruce.

“Until the next time…You continue picking fights with them while you’re in no position to handle it! I can’t take it any longer, Bruce! I won’t tolerate it anymore! Fighting criminals in your state.”

“We can’t let them terrorize us, Tony! Would you prefer to have had cringed before him?! Because of my impairment? You prefer me in my room scared to come out in case someone attacks me? You saw today that wearing the armor is less dangerous than being Bruce Wayne” the study’s walls were full soundproof so Bruce could speak freely.

Tony grabbed the armrests and brought his face in front of Bruce’s.

“I won’t gamble your life! I won’t take no for an answer! StarkExpo is starting next week: it is the
perfect excuse to come to Malibu and STAY: I’ll handle the rest till you have your surgery and walk again.”

He let the armrests.

“I’m saying Alfred to pack…”

Bruce yanked his head.

“No, Tony. Let me explain…”

But Tony snorted, yanked his head backwards and opened the door.

“Call me for a ‘yes’…” he spat and stormed outside.

Selina hugged Bruce.

“He’ll rethink it, Bruce. He was a bit dizzy…”

Leslie marched there and sat on the sofa near Bruce’s chair.

“He’ll come over…”

Bruce shook his head.

“I made him drink” he mumbled looking at the floor.

“Don’t say that, Bruce” Leslie retorted.

Selina cupped her friend’s face and locked eyes with him. “The only one to blame is Joker and the other lunatic who attacked you. Tony isn’t mad at you…” she gritted her teeth but only mentally: I dare him to be angry with you!

Bruce bit his lip.

“I wish he was just angry with me…” he inhaled deeply and looked at the two women.

Leslie rubbed his back.

“He’ll be downstairs waiting for you; you know how much he loves you.”

However Tony took his car and drove to the city as soon as he left the study and didn’t return for lunch. Thor also had to leave to due to an urgent call from Asgard.

It wasn’t the first time Tony wasn’t at the table yet today wasn’t the same: his absence wasn’t due to obligations but anger and that made Bruce’s stomach a painful knot. Memories of Tony’s anger the last Christmas they spent together at the Manor were coming to him. Then by mistake he had thrown his favorite toolbox to the cliff – today was even worse because Tony believed that Bruce on purpose was throwing himself from the same cliff.

He was feeling the other people staring at him every now and then so Bruce pushed some food down his throat to not aggravate their worries but the corner of his eyes constantly slipped to his friend’s empty chair…Of course Richard’s chair was also empty since the boy was furious for his punishment in addition to his overall loathing.

Bruce closed his eyes, the need to get some fresh air was demanding: all this worry for his well being
that surrounded him was heartwarming but also made him uncomfortable; he pushed a bit his chair backwards but Leslie cleared her throat. She as everyone else was unusually silent.

“You need to eat to get your medicine, young man” understanding was clear in her voice yet her eyes were strict.

“I can’t eat more, Leslie but what I had till now is enough for my medication” he answered and moved his chair to the sink bench where Alfred had left his pills ready for him to take.

“Excuse me” he said after swallowing them and moved out of the room patting Selina’s shoulder acknowledging his friend’s sad stare.

He had just left the room when she caught up with him.

“I won’t leave you alone.”

“They won’t attack me in the Manor…Continue your meal, Sel…”

She sighed because she didn’t want to leave Bruce but sensed his need to stay alone. She nodded and watched her friend moving to the back salon before defeated returned to the kitchen.

Staying inside was unbearable for Bruce, so upon arriving to the back salon slipped out to the back garden. He closed his eyes and performed some diaphragmatic breaths sucking the clean air of the Palisades.

He pulled out of his jacket the Cosmos Smartphone hoping to find some message from Tony. But nothing: Tony needed some time alone and that prevented Bruce from following his whim and calling him; the shock must have been severe for Tony…He huffed and turned the Smartphone into tablet to peruse the news sites. Bruce was sure that Mannheim was behind the attack: the methodology was the same. The thugs who were arrested during the interrogation manifested the same signs of confusion: Bruce was reading their ‘testimonies’ in GCPD’s data base. As for Joker he was injured but the police had lost his traces…

Bruce was sure that the jester had run to his psychiatrist for help though his surveillance didn’t have any indications of that.

Gotham Gazzette’s site had full coverage of the valley where the attack took place and Bruce relived those moments that the fake Ironman launched lethal firepower after lethal firepower to kill him.

“You’re in no position to handle this!” Tony’s exasperated voice echoed again in his ears.

Bruce looked at his non-responsive legs and rubbed his thighs so strong that it should have ached. But nothing…He focused there, his stare intense and he was ready to apply his mind’s will to them forcing his legs to move; his left hand touched the Black Butterfly pouch that hanged on his chest. Walking again would ease Tony’s dread and panic and all of his loved ones’ sadness… And he wouldn’t have to crawl like a worm before assailants.

His legs were almost ready to respond to his orders and Bruce felt the thrill yet at the last second he turned his head away breaking his focus… He shouldn’t do that nor take the Immortality Water…He wouldn’t become Ra’s Al Ghul.

He turned his eyes to the grey sky; he recalled the moments when Thor was fighting with Ironman and then when Arrow fought the thugs. He felt again the heartbeat, the sub conscious expectation… The expectation for the red-blue figure to arrive to the scene and hammer the bad guys…
It wasn’t flattering for him; Bruce didn’t want to be saved by others yet seeing Superman flying to his aid never made him feel bad for himself…It was almost pleasant even if that was buried deep inside him and the thought now made him flushed. It was a remnant of his years in Falcone’s clutches, he realized: when he waited for the raven haired angel to come and save him, even though he knew then, as he knew now, that Superman wouldn’t come…

On his screen, a folder smiled to him: the folder with the video Leslie and Alfred made for him. His Christmas present. He tapped on it.
Chapter 56

“…Joker and his thugs ran away and Gotham’s police managed to apprehend many of them minus their leader; but another attack took place against Mister Wayne. Our information say that a full blown battle took place here in this narrow patch of soil – as you can see from what is left behind. Intelligence says that an impostor impersonating Ironman attacked Bruce Wayne and it was Thor’s intervention that prevented the worst for the young billionaire. However, it is reported that a small army of thugs from Gotham’s underground resumed the attack and the situation escalated to a full range battle with the Avengers coming to the rescue along with another mysterious hero. Police is conducting investigation for the mastermind behind the attack.”

The camera zoomed to the cordoned narrow strip of terrain – officers were still there not allowing entrance to anyone. However the cameras managed to capture some pieces of elegant wood and metal scattered around and Clark immediately understood what they were.

He still remembered the day Stark presented to Bruce the wheelchair he manufactured…Bruce was impressed by the chair but decided to stick with the one Superman had made for him. That day Clark felt proud and triumphant both because Bruce chose his chair over Stark’s and because the airhead billionaire was disappointed. Not that Stark had seemed much disappointed that day: Clark could see in his expression that he wished that Bruce didn’t need any chair and actually it pained him to manufacture that illusion of mobility for his friend.

It was obvious from the pieces that had remained in the field – Stark must have taken the rest for conducting his analyses - that the attack was really fierce. And if they managed to destroy the chair to pieces then Bruce’s life had been really at stake there…The fake Ironman was definitely far too powerful if he managed to overcome Stark’s protective measures…

They almost succeeded in killing Bruce…a shudder ran his spine: the young man had stayed alone and unprotected after Joker’s retreat and someone took advantage, someone powerful enough to engage the Avengers in full confrontation.

Superman rubbed unconsciously his chest because an unpleasant feeling settled there: he could imagine the scene. The fake Ironman launching fire against Bruce who had to rely on the wheelchair’s shield for his life; and then the chair must have fallen dragging Bruce along; the fall could have injured him. The reports Planet got said that Bruce was fine yet how could they be sure? He felt tempted to seek the young man’s vitals…But held himself: Bruce had kicked him off; he had stabbed him…

However he couldn’t stop himself from imagining Bruce’s feelings as he realized that the shield was breached…no, Bruce definitely wasn’t scared…instead, he must have been filled with determination and outrage that he had to endure without being able to fight: Bruce could fight but doing that would mean using his brain’s power and that could deteriorate his condition. And there was the issue of maintaining his secret…Nobody, especially his enemies, should know Bruce Wayne’s true abilities; that he was Batman.

Superman shook his head: if Bruce was in the wheelchair he had made with the Fortress’ alien tech, nobody would have been able to breach the shield. He would be safe…But the stubborn human sent the chair back. He lolled his head backwards: what else was he to do after everything that happened? The proud, dignified human…

He remembered Lois’ urge to fly to Bruce…She was right: if he had been there Bruce wouldn’t have been in such danger and Thor wouldn’t have been the savior, the hero. He snorted…Thor… images
of the blond god pinning Bruce under the Battery park’s bridge and thrusting in him, Bruce moaning in pleasure made Superman’s stomach twist, though he knew that it was only products of his imagination. What happened today proved that the Asgardian wasn’t losing his time.

A snort came out…Maybe Bruce wanted to be saved by the blond god; after all, he had refused Superman’s advances when they met on that rooftop at Metropolis. Maybe now he was celebrating his rescue with Thor… His jaw clenched as scenes of passionate sex breached his mind’s barriers. The too familiar naked body of Bruce under the divine body of the Asgardian…Bruce’s hands hugging the broad back clenching the perfect flesh every time he was rocked by the god’s passion; panting as Thor thrust wild in him, kissing hungrily the mortal’s neck that was lolling backwards to permit him freer access; Bruce’s sapphire stars of eyes sparkled from pleasure as the god’s mouth sucked his erected nipples. Their combined moans and grunts moisturized the half darkness of Bruce’s bedroom.

His groin twitched from Bruce’s sensual body covered with the sheen of sweat…Bruce was moving sensually in his unique hips’ slow dance that had brought Superman to Heaven every time…for Thor’s pleasure… Superman knew so well that irresistible aspect of Bruce. The mortal’s intoxicating, cinnamon perfume conquered his nostrils making him realize how much he had missed this perfume.

Superman pressed the button of the remote closing the TV set hearing Diana’s light footsteps coming from the bedroom. He shook his head and sucked her powerful perfume clearing his head: that woman was for him; and at the moment the important was Diana not suspect his momentary arousal (?).

Diana was there so he smiled and crossed every other thought: everything with Bruce was over – the human could use his body as he wished… However just the thought of Bruce giving his body to somebody else made Superman angry.

“Good thing you turned that thing off” she said meaning the TV. “They are showing constantly things about Wayne…that attack…You know…I was almost sure that I’d see you there…”

He jerked.

“What?”

She shrugged.

“I don’t know…maybe his charm is still too strong on you…”

“That’s not true!”

She nodded.

“I figured” she wrapped her snake-like arms around his neck feeling the semi god shivering from pleasure. “I’m glad you didn’t run behind him – it shows how strong willed you are. And that your love for me is real…”

Her eyes on him were paralyzing his body and mind.

“Did you have any doubts?” he asked almost insulted.

She captured his lips with hers.

“I did, Kal El…because Wayne knows all the tricks to light the flames of desire in someone while I am a warrior: my dignity doesn’t allow me compete someone like him in such things. I don’t know
the whore tricks he practiced all these years.”

Superman smiled.

“And you don’t have to, darling…You are everything I ever wanted.”

The melody from his Smartphone fell like a thunder in the room and Superman felt a cold current running his spine seeing Diana’s frown. He had forgotten to leave his Smartphone to his apartment before coming here.

However he smiled carefree to her.

“I need a Smartphone so various officials and organizations can find me when they need me” he said indifferent and stood hurrying to the bedroom.

He didn’t want Diana hear him talking with his mother because it was the melody for his mother.

“Hi, Ma! How are you?”

“Disappointed, pissed…sad.”

Clark frowned and ruffled his locks; he could easily figure the reason for these emotions. The bedroom’s door was closed and thankfully the apartment was sound proof.

“Ma, don’t be unfair to me. Let me…”

“You weren’t there, Clark” her voice was more sad than angry and that hurt him. “They attacked Bruce, they almost killed him; the Avengers were there but not you…”

“There was no reason for me to be there, Ma: we are finished with Bruce.”

“This wasn’t a matter of being in a relationship with him; his life was in danger: he is a human being, you know…And you didn’t go there; you knew he was in danger and you ignored his need, Clark…How could you?”

Clark huffed and yanked his head backwards.

“Clark, you have taken a wrong path…and I’m afraid that this is…”

“You’re overreacting” he didn’t want to use much ‘Ma’ in case his voice passed the walls. “I haven’t taken any wrong path; I’m still Superman. I just knew that Bruce would be rescued by Stark and his teammates.”

“How on Earth you could be sure? They could be busy with some other urgency or reach Bruce too late while Superman could arrive immediately; however you stayed with your arms crossed watching. Imagine if Bruce was killed! What excuse you’d have used then? How would you look at yourself in the Mirror if Bruce had died because you weren’t there?”

Clark closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“There was no such option!”

“How do you know?! It is what that woman told you?”

“Don’t bring Diana into this…”
“I will! Because when you were with Bruce you never denied your help to anyone even to your enemies. And now under this woman’s influence you stayed indifferent in Bruce’s need!”

“I…”

“Do you remember the story of Hercules I used to narrate you when you were a boy?”

Clark huffed: he had an eidetic memory, of course he remembered.

“Ma, I don’t understand…”

“He was standing in a road and before him two roads opened; he was indecisive about the road he should follow. Two women appeared to him: the one was breathtakingly beautiful, luxuriously dressed and stood in the one road. The other woman was aged and dressed in rags; she stood in the other road. The beautiful young woman was called Vice; she flattered Hercules for his semi-god nature and strength and promised him glory, wealth and all kind of pleasures if he chose her road. The old, ragged woman was called Virtue: she didn’t promise Hercules any of these, instead she warned him that her road was filled with hardships and hurdles but in the end of the road he will win purity and eternal morality. Hercules chose the path Virtue offered him. Those days you were telling me that you choose the same as Hercules but now I realize that you left that path…”

“Of course not…I’m still Superman; I haven’t changed.”

“This is what you say but your deeds prove otherwise; I hope you wake up soon, sweetheart. Think, Clark and be careful.”

Superman stayed staring at the Smartphone’s screen with the indication of the ended call. The knock on the door startled him.

“Come in.”

“Bad news?”

“No…” he hugged Diana; it was the only way to escape that grim feeling inside him. His Ma had misjudged; only Diana wasn’t unfair to him.

They ended up on the bed making love to her emptied his mind from everything.

But afterwards as he was lying beside Diana’s naked body her beauty wasn’t drawing his eyes; his eyes were seeing again the Chickey’s factory in Gotham ready to collapse and kill someone who was trapped inside, barely alive; his heartbeat weak but still calling his name.

And then he saw himself in the endless darkness of the Universe holding Bruce’s dead body; floating in eternity, his life having lost its meaning: not breathing; the dark void having swallowed every life inside him…He remembered his father: his death was still haunting him…he was watching his mother withering year by year and dreaded the inevitable day that he would lose her too…the pain worse than being hit with Kryptonite. Although he was immortal Superman realized that he was ensnared in human mortality… His only escape route lying beside him.

His nostrils sucked Diana’s cheerful perfume and caressed her naked back. He needed at least one person in his life that would be always there with him; a person like himself blessed with immortality. Diana was the pillar in his life; he wouldn’t lose her in the wind’s slightest blow…
The baby was hardly one month old: his cheeks were rosy and fluffy and his lips so small and red. He was smiling and blinking; his long eyelashes making the sparkling of his big eyes playful. His small head was covered with raven hair that seemed so soft...

The baby seemed so happy in the nest of his mother’s chest and he was looking awed and mesmerized her beautiful face as she sang his favorite lullaby. At times his eyelids covered his eyes as he was ready to fall asleep but suddenly the baby was opening his eyes to watch his mom singing. And she would kiss his dot of a nose making the boy giggle happy.

Bruce’s eyes were absorbed in the images played on his screen, heavy; he knew that his father was there too, behind the camera, watching Martha and him, touched and happy.

“Everything will be fine this time, Martha”

Bruce remembered his father’s reassurance to her about her pregnancy. She had many miscarriages prior to him and Bruce couldn’t stop himself from thinking that maybe it would have been better for everyone if he hadn’t managed to stay perched to his mother’s womb. Then she and his father would be still alive with an adopted child blessed with their love: maybe Selina…

The baby was watching his mom mesmerized, with so much love that blended with the love in Martha’s eyes…and then softly his eyelids covered his eyes and Martha gathered him tighter to her chest; she kissed feathery his brow and then the top of his tiny head.

“Good night, Bruce…Daddy and mommy are here: we won’t let anyone hurt you…”

And they didn’t, Bruce thought: they sacrificed their lives to safe him…His eyes lowered to the marble terrain but was seeing the blood stained filthy cement of an alley feeling again the same painful, frantic heartbeat, the iron, burning knot in his throat and the acid fluid running from his eyes as he stared at his dead parents. Fleetingly because his dad had asked him to run away and he was running…to nowhere…although he wanted to stay there with them, to go with them wherever they were going.

“What a beautiful little angel!”

Bruce was startled to hear that touched voice; he was so absorbed in the video that hadn’t heard him coming. He knew who he was.

Oliver Queen was standing by his side staring at the paused image of the sleeping baby. Bruce fixed his eyes on him.

“Our father would give his entire fortune to keep that beautiful smile on this angel’s face.”

Bruce turned his head on the other side.

“He did.”

But Queen’s expression was grim.

“He failed.”

Bruce gritted his teeth and snapped his head towards him.

“Thomas Wayne didn’t fail in anything!”

“Except for the thing that counted more to him: protecting and saving his only son.”
Bruce averted his gaze.

“It wasn’t his fault…”

“She was very beautiful and she seems so content, so perfectly happy holding her little angel…”

Bruce looked at his tablet and abruptly touched the screen closing the video. Queen grinned bitterly and his fingertips almost touched the tears on Bruce’s cheeks that the young man had forgotten that were there. Bruce hastened to wipe them with the back of his hand.

“Please…” Queen said with his velvet voice omitting entirely his usual smugness. “Your tears are the most precious gems on earth…like diamonds…only purer.”

Bruce clenched his jaw disgusted by Queen’s shameless flattery.

“There’s nothing pure in me!” he spat.

Queen crouched beside him; his eyes locked with Bruce’s; they were filled with warmth but also a vein of hot anger.

“Nothing of what those people did to you, left a stain to you, Bruce!” his voice slightly trembled. “They were more stained than you!”

Bruce chuckled.

“I assure you that they didn’t have any stain… unlike me.”

“Do not do that to yourself…”

“You don’t know anything.”

Oliver looked at the Manor and then back at Bruce smiling.

“It is they who don’t understand…am I right?”

Bruce knew what he meant but he didn’t want to discuss it.

“How come and you’re here?” he chose to divert the subject.

“I heard what happened and I was worried so I came here; your butler was so kind to let me pass the gates – the back gates because the front gates are besieged by reporters.”

Bruce shook his head.

“As you can see I’m fine: you could just call.”

Queen smiled and pointed to the stitches on Bruce’s face almost touching the skin.

“Not completely fine but physical injuries are not the worst thing, right?”

Bruce frowned.

“I don’t understand…”

Queen brought his face closer to Bruce placing his hand on the armrest.

“I think you do…You’re outside away from them, alone, secluded…” he grinned “because you
know that they can’t understand you.”

“They love me.”

“And that makes things worse, more painful. You know they love you; you know they want to understand and you wish they could…and then you wish they never understand you…because what they can’t understand is for their own good…Right, Bruce? You long for someone from your loved ones to understand but at the same time you dread the moment they will see what you have inside…the darkness, the loneliness, your need to be free…”

Bruce looked at him puzzled.

“You don’t know anything about me!”

Queen smiled benevolently.

“I think you know that I understand you more than anyone other…because I feel the same” his cheek almost touched Bruce’s and he felt Queen shivering. “Feeling happy for being again with them only to realize that you’re a stranger; you don’t, you can’t be part of their world…and then the moments you feel that maybe you should have stayed trapped in the other world you know better…saving your loved ones from the distress of being unable to feel and help you…”

Bruce turned his head to the other side and Queen closed his eyes sucking the younger man’s perfume; he could have stayed years breathing that perfume rather than oxygen but he didn’t want to freak out Bruce so he focused on the tablet’s screen.

“Sometimes you wish you could be with them” he gestured to Bruce’s mother and Bruce hurried to turn off the screen. “You seek understanding to them; feeling that you belong more to their world.”

Bruce locked eyes with him: how he could know so much?

“I feel the same, Bruce: a stranger, an outcast despite people’s good intentions. My dead father sometimes seems better company than the living…”

Bruce’s heartbeat was heavy but he couldn’t afford to be carried by that man’s words – he remembered what happened during their meeting. He searched for an outing and his eyes focused on Queen’s white leather gloves.

“You wear gloves?” Bruce’s mind recalled another gloved hand in green leather this time; Arrow’s green leather glove had a rip from where he had seen a bleeding scar.

Queen smiled.

“Of course: it is freezing – you should be dressed warmer too.”

Bruce noticed that while Queen acted indifference he instantly stood, pushing his hands out of Bruce’s sight.

“…it is odd how evil is drawn to purity…” Arrow had said.

“…like diamonds…only purer…” Queen said.

Bruce frowned inside: it could be?

Queen’s eyes were filled with sadness taking Bruce’s silence as displeasure; for the first time Bruce couldn’t discern any speck of smugness and he hated that. Bruce preferred his smugness rather than
that sympathy.

“Do not take that for pity, Bruce” Queen said as if he had read his mind. “It is only understanding.”

“Mr. Queen, there you are!” Alfred came out. “I was waiting for you from the main entrance. Please do come in and you too, Master Bruce: the tea is ready.”

Tony sat on the stool in front of the bar, the flashing blue neon with the word ‘Bar’ was illuminating his grim features. He had chosen a low profile bar in the Downtown to have his privacy.

Behind the bartender the shelves with the bottles was settled over a mirror and it was the first time Tony didn’t like to look at his reflection.

The young bartender with the long raven ponytail brushing his sturdy back gave Tony his glass of bourbon and gestured with his gaze at the flat screen TV that was built in the central rectangular pillar of the bar.

“Good job there, Mr. Stark; Gotham can count on the Avengers now that Batman slacks off…I never believed the bullshit for a flying rodent after all…”

Tony stared at the screen where footage from the location of the attack was played. The bartender left to attend to another customer and Tony swallowed hard thinking what he just had heard:

“…Batman got idle…I never believed the bullshit…”

He pushed the glass away pressing his lips.

“Alex, it seems, that the Avengers have taken over Gotham…” the female reporter told to her colleague.

He closed his eyes and mumbled a curse. Bruce almost died for these people; he had been rendered paraplegic for Gothamites’ sake and…

He sighed. He cursed Bruce’s obsession with secrecy: his friend should have come out and announced that he was the Batman thus nobody could say anything and Bruce would have the acknowledgement and respect he deserved. Yet for Bruce the praise and the appreciation didn’t matter: what was important for him was to fight injustice and evil…

He ran his hand through his locks: and that was killing his young friend. Why Bruce couldn’t see that this city was eating him alive?

“Tony…” a voice behind him stopped his thoughts.

The billionaire jerked on his stool startled and turned to see a sturdy, imposing fellow in jeans, leather jacket and a jockey; a blond ponytail was falling to his back.

“I’m too young and handsome to die from heart attack” he said grim but in the end chuckled on the sight of the other man. “Nice outfit!” he raised his index finger “I admit it flatters you and hides your identity…Thor” the rock music was loud enough to muffle his words.

The blond sat at the stool beside Tony and nodded to the glass of bourbon.

“You shouldn’t be here, Tony” the billionaire shook his head crooking his mouth. ‘You should be with Bruce. Drinking won’t help in anything.”
“Thanks, Alfred…” Tony replied snidely. “I won’t return if Bruce doesn’t call and say that he will come in Malibu.”

Thor closed his eyes.

“Blackmail?”

“There’s no other way…I’m trying to save the stubborn brat for his own self!”

Thor shook his head.

“He is so stubborn! So obstinate! So defiant!” Tony huffed. “So…”

“That man has a strong, passionate fire in him…”

Tony looked with narrowed eyes the hue of admiration and something else in the god’s eyes. He cocked his eyebrows.

“And this fire is gonna consume him…”

“So you want to put out that fire?”

“No; put a stop before this fire kills him… and can you stop being so in love with him?”

Thor yanked his head.

“I just care for him and you, Tony. Have you thought that if you force him to quench that fire, Bruce will be unhappy? He won’t be himself.”

“But he’ll be alive. His life will be saved!”

“Exactly, Tony. It is his life: you can’t blackmail him to change his life according to what you believe is right for him. Do you really want him to decide things scared that he’ll lose you?”

“At first…Later he’ll realize that it was for the best.”

“Would you like it if he had done the same thing to you? A few hours ago Bruce was almost killed; you almost lost him forever and now you try to lose him with your choices. Tony, Bruce is right now in the Manor without his best friend; do you really want to do this favor to the people that attacked him? Give them the satisfaction to rip you apart? Scaring you so much to dictate your deeds?”

Tony chuckled shaking his head and raised the glass gulping at once the content.

“It is easy for you to speak like that. Your family; your loved ones; you are immortal. You don’t know anything about death and mortality. I buried my parents! I lived 18 years mourning my best friend, my little guy. Blaming myself because I didn’t save him. Few hours ago he almost died because I failed to be there for him, to protect him: every measure I took for his safety proved inadequate. And to make matters worse: I was late! I won’t spend the rest of my life having lost again Bruce and knowing that I didn’t do what I could to save his life. I prefer hate myself because I blackmailed him than hate myself for letting him being killed.”

Thor inhaled.

“You’re right: I’m immortal, my family is immortal but many of my friends are mortals; I can feel your agony, believe me. But bringing Bruce before this difficult choice doesn’t help things. What if he doesn’t come with you? Do you honestly believe that this means that he doesn’t love you
enough? And then what? You’ll leave and let him continue his dangerous life without his best friend? Superman has already broken his heart: you’re willing to add another blow? You realize that if you leave the friend you love so much you won’t be there when he’ll need you? I don’t know anything about death but I’m sure that if anything happens to Bruce while you stubbornly are away then you’ll feel much worse.”

Tony huffed and Thor raised an eyebrow.

“Think about it. You’re the genius after all” he stood, patted his friend’s back and walked away, hunching his proud body to not be recognized.

Steve caressed Selina’s locks and kissed her neck that bent on the side for him. He could tell that the young woman was still shaken.

They had stayed to the Manor for the night: Selina didn’t want even to consider leaving Bruce alone. When Bruce went to his bedroom, they ended up to their usual bedroom and now they had settled on the bed without having stripped.

“You were afraid that your nightmare might come true…”

Selina looked at him.

“I always dread that…I can’t understand why people try so much to hurt Bruce.”

Steve huffed.

“Arrow said that purity draws evil… I guess he is right: like the evil tries to extinct everything pure on this planet or just capture and maim it…” Selina closed her eyes recounting the tortures Bruce suffered all these years and Steve rubbed her back. “You said that you’ll be all the time with him and if someone tries again he’ll have to face you first…I admire that devotion…”

Selina however could see in his eyes that he was curious about how she could have defended Bruce. Steve didn’t know who she really was and her fighting skills nontheless he didn’t doubt her ability to protect her friend.

She smiled.

“I might not have your strength or training; and certainly I’m not a god with a hammer or a billionaire in a can but I’d use everything I got to defend Bruce” she cocked an eyebrow. “Sometimes even when you are an untrained amateur you manage to fight…”

Steve kissed her lips.

“I’m sure that your spirit alone would make them run for their lives but I don’t think that Bruce would like you in danger for his sake.” He pressed his lips. “I do understand how you feel” he raised his eyebrows “I had many friends, brothers in arms…” his eyes were lost in his past. “They weren’t as lucky as me to be turned into invincible super soldiers…”

Selina caressed his jaw staring at him with sympathy.

“I still remember them…especially Bucky” he chuckled. “With all the chemicals they instilled in me, all my strength and speed I didn’t manage to protect my friends…Not that they would be still alive now…after decades.”
Selina kissed his lips.

“Aren’t you happy you live in this era and having the chance to meet me?” she asked playfully to raise his spirits.

He laughed.

“You seriously have to ask that?”

“Sometimes girls face some insecurity…” she pouted sensually.

“I just wonder: if you defend Bruce then what would be our usefulness if you take our job? Huh?”

Selina grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and took it off, Steve helping her. Her lean, dexterous fingers caressed his stony abdominals loving the arousal of his flesh.

“Hm…I don’t know ‘bout the other lot but I could certainly think of some things where you’d be always useful…” she said slyly and pushed him flat on his back straddling him.

Steve chuckled and raised his torso to meet her lips.

“We will never let Bruce unprotected, darling…You can be sure of this.”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“I know that a soldier would never lie to a lady…” she said unzipping his pants and Steve grabbed her waist and glued her to his body capturing her lips to a passionate kiss.

However Selina’s heart was heavy because Bruce and Tony had quarreled and that certainly had a toll to her friend. And when Bruce was unhappy how could she enjoy anything in full? Even if that involved her Captain?

Tony thought of staying at his penthouse at Gotham’s midtown: he wished he was angry with Bruce for his stubborn, stupid refusal to come to Malibu. The little guy didn’t call: Pep’s did and as usual she reprimanded him… He rolled his eyes: that injustice should have made him more pissed with his best buddy.

But he wasn’t angry: shit! He understood how Bruce felt but there was no way to continue this kind of life without risking being killed and that for Tony was atrocious! Yet he wasn’t angry. He was in agony; he was sad for having yelled at Bruce and storming away: it was as if his anger of the last Christmas they spent together re-happened; then he had told the eight year boy off because he had accidentally tossed his tools over a cliff. What a moron 14 year old Tony had been!

And how moron the thirty… well, something - year old Tony was now! His stupid, childish wrath taking the better of him. And Bruce had spoken to him and he still rushed away without a second word, giving another blow to his friend’s already wounded heart.

However if that was necessary for making Bruce change his mind…well, Tony was willing to spend his rest life hating himself. Yet he couldn’t stay away from his friend while they had quarreled… Actually, he quarreled, Bruce just listened to him and keeping his tranquility refused: damn, that ninja training! He envied Bruce’s ability to be so calm when he had to do with Tony – fucking Stark.
Tony didn’t ring the doorbell because he didn’t want to wake anyone: it was well past midnight. He walked inner in complete darkness pumping on the narrow marble dresser.

“Fuck! I should have used the night vision goggles.”

“Tony…”

Tony’s heart gave a joyful jolt forgetting what had happened before. There was no reason for secrecy anymore so he clapped once and light flooded the corridor revealing Bruce dressed in his pajamas and night robe, Hero on his lap. His eyes were full with love and Tony inhaled deeply lolling his head on the side.

“You sneaked out from Alfred, huh? Naughty littl’ guy! You should be sleeping, you know.”

Bruce grinned discerning that his friend was in better mood.

“I couldn’t sleep while we’re not in speaking terms…”

Tony ruffled his hair.

“C’mon! It’s not that serious! It happens to the best families, you know…Ask Peps how many times we ripped one another… And don’t start crying like that day…this time I’ll start crying too!”

Bruce laughed.

“And we don’t want that, huh?”

Tony pouted.

“No! It would hurt my image irrevocably” he kneeled by Bruce. “How are you?”

“Perfect! Tony…”

“Hm…”

“I’ll come to Malibu.”

Tony huffed.

“You don’t have to, buddy! I was wrong… I was…”

“Panicked… Scared for my life…” he mumbled and Tony nodded. “I know how much you love me, Tony…and I want you to know how much I appreciate that and…I love you too.”

“Shsssss…” he hugged him. “You don’t have to say anything…I know…” he kissed the top of Bruce’s head and Hero between them hissed to the billionaire. “I guess I deserve that, huh?” he petted Hero’s head.

“I’ll come for a few days and then I’ll return; after all, it will be better for everyone and will persuade them that I’m scared; and that will give them open space to steal the items.”

Tony shook his head amused.

“So it is work and pleasure, huh? Only I don’t know if I am work or pleasure…” he frowned.

“Always pleasure…”
“Thank God for that!”
Bruce chuckled.

“Also, I think that our ‘friend’, the Arrow knows who I am and follows me around.”

Thor hovered over the Wayne Estate, just in case. He knew that Tony had returned and that the place had the best security but still it was better to be sure. Also, he wished the assailant would try something so he could finish what was left half with the coward’s runaway.

His gaze was drawn to the gravestones over the small hill. The graves of Bruce’s parents. He flew there and landed softly bowing his head slightly in respect. The place was filled with melancholy and Thor could only imagine how Bruce was feeling every time he came here. On the soil, were placed bouquets with white roses.

The god pressed his lips. Death…Losing the people you love…knowing that this was irrevocable and you won’t see them ever again…

“You don’t know anything about death; about mortality…” Tony snorted to his ear again.

He could admit that this kind of fear was unbeatable: the terror of losing someone you love so much; someone who is the meaning of your life. It must be the worst torture…Being weak before the absolute absence of your loved one; the potential of losing your loved one, a noble, brave warrior sacrificing himself for the others…So perfect but so…mortal…

“This place has something that helps meditation…” a serious voice said behind him and the Asgardian startled turned to see Bruce grinning to him.

The human was fully dressed, wrapped in his black long coat. The god blushed as if being caught in mischief.

“How?” the god asked baffled. “I didn’t hear you coming…”

“Ninja training” Bruce mumbled “very handy when you want to startle a mighty god.”

“I hope you don’t mind I’m here… I keep an eye on the Manor”

“Two eyes…No, I don’t mind you being here…” he steered his chair closer to the graves and touched the stone with his fingertips; his eyes stayed for a few seconds fixed on the stones and then turned to Thor. “Before I didn’t thank you as I should.”

Thor waved that off.

“You don’t have to.”

“I was cold, abrupt and maybe rude.”

“Not at all… I understand: a noble, brave, mighty warrior like you being forced to watch as others fight…” he smiled shyly “ not to mention that you would have prefered to see Superman fighting with the impostor.”

Bruce shook his head.

“You’re a great person, Thor, and I always am happy to see you. And that’s the reason I don’t want
“You to…” he locked eyes with Thor’s baby blues and bit his bottom lip. “I can’t love you the way you wish and you deserve.”

“I know…”

“Then fight it off, my friend: you deserve someone to make you happy. You must realize that what you feel for me is…” he inhaled. “You have to understand that there are things in me that could influence someone…My half DNA is Lilith’s” Thor frowned; he had heard of her – Bruce nodded “she was an irresistible enchantress and unfortunately this comes out of me affecting people…great people like you.”

“You were saying these things to Superman too?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I was…but he didn’t want to understand and…it was my fault. I didn’t stop it and look where that brought us.”

“Nothing of what happened is your fault, Bruce” Thor came closer.

“Do not torment yourself with me, Thor. I’m not made for love like this…Your feelings are too much for me... And I don’t want you to be hurt.”

“You care so much for people…even if they are gods…You want to protect everyone.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Which is ridiculous, I know. I can’t protect myself, huh?”

“No, no! I know you felt awfully being forced to not do what you best know. You’re a great warrior who saved so many people and it must have been torturous to wait from others to stop evil people. But you have to be patient, Bruce, until you get fully healed. Nothing of these should make you feel bad: you still protect and save people with your acts and self sacrifice: you’re so unique and special that it is not only your fighting skills that win the battles.”

“Thank you” Bruce nodded his head in appreciation.

“And I’m proud to be in the circle of your trusted people; it’s an honor to have your love…whatever kind of love. Let me continue being around you” however the blond god couldn’t guarantee that he’d stop feeling for Bruce the way he did.

The human could sense that yet he didn’t want to insist.

“You don’t have to ask that, Thor.”

“Everything alright with Tony?”

Bruce grinned and nodded.

“He loves me so much that he wouldn’t have stayed angry whatever I had done…” he gazed at the sky.

Thor followed his gaze.

“This is mutual…”
Bruce turned to him, the freezing breeze ruffling his locks as much as Thor’s.

“I love Tony so much that sometimes I wish he had never met me” Thor narrowed his eyes. “Tony is life in flesh and blood and I drain that life out of him.”

Thor kneeled before him.

“Do not say that, Bruce” he locked eyes with the human his blond locks touching Bruce’s face. “It is a blessing you two were met…a blessing for everyone. When I saw that coward scoundrel attacking you…threatening your life…”

Bruce raised his fingertips stopping him.

“I saw you there, Thor…please, do not do that to yourself: it is a mistake…”

Thor seemed to be lost for a minute and Bruce averted a bit his gaze; he had to change the subject.

“Tell me, Thor: have you ever heard of Themyscirra?”

“The island of the Amazons?”

“Exactly.’’

Thor stood.

“You’re thinking of going there?” he chose to not utter his thought: Bruce still had Superman's best interest in mind.

“I know that many answers to our questions lie there…” Bruce looking in the god's eyes realized what Thor was thinking and appreciated his discretion to not address this; he loathed himself because this kind person felt bad yet maybe he was helping him to accept it and go on.

Thor pouted.

“I’m sorry, Bruce; but the Asgardians have no affairs with the Amazons. But I’ll try to find anything that will contribute to your quest.”

Bruce smiled, the flapping of Thor’s red cape reminding him of another cape.

“Thank you.”

Thor smiled and gestured to the quiet Manor.

“Now I think you should go to sleep because I’ll have to face both Alfred and Tony for keeping you awake.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Hm…Believe me they are quiet formidable those two, even for a god.”

“Don’t tell me you had any doubt that I’d come for you?”

*In the twinkling blue topaz of those beautiful eyes Bruce saw his reflection: the face of a teen; a*
skinny face, dirty with bruises but with the shine of joy. The raven haired angel in red and blue had surged Falcone’s camparet and taken him in his strong arms. Saving him, carrying him to the sky; in complete freedom, in complete happiness.

**His angel had come...** Bruce wrapped his skinny left hand around the man’s neck – his right arm was dead but now it didn’t hurt. The angel looked at him with so much love and smiled his blinding smile.

**Bruce let his head nestle to the young man’s broad chest...so warm...so safe...**

**That was a lie...**

Bruce even in the depths of his exhausted sleep was finally aware that this wasn’t true; it never happened. He wanted to open his eyes but he was so tired that he couldn’t. However the raven haired angel had left as he had done in reality...

When Alfred knocked the door to Bruce’s bedroom, the youth was already dressed and Hero was purring at his feet urging him to go downstairs and have breakfast.

“Come in. Good morning, Alfred.”

“Good morning, sir.”

“I overslept.”

“Hardly, sir: it is just 35 minutes after nine. Also, you very much needed some extra hours of sleep. Would you like me to bring your breakfast here?”

“No, I’ll come downstairs.”

“Mr. Collins called while you were asleep; I asked him if he wanted to wake you up but he said that he would call later.”

“Thank you, Alfred. I’ll call him.”

Alfred was tidying up the room without missing his young master’s reactions to what Mr. Collins was saying to him. Well, not much reaction since Bruce had learnt to hide his feelings. However the paleness that settled over the youth’s face was enough.

“Is anything the matter, Master Bruce?”

Bruce just looked at him.

“Alright. Thank you, Mr. Collins; I’m coming to the Tower to discuss it from up close.”

“What happened, Master Bruce?” the Englishman approached.

“Zucco had petitioned against my guardianship” Bruce replied dryly.
“A hearing will be held by the court examining Mr. Zucco’s petition and the state of your guardianship.”

Bruce watched calm Mr. Collins seated behind his office’s desk detailing the procedure.

“But Ms. Turner made me the legal guardian of Richard.”

Mr. Collins nodded.

“Indeed but in some cases the state can countermand that if judges that it is for the child’s best interest.”

Bruce licked his lips.

“Is it possible to judge that?”

Mr. Collins inhaled; he took the letter from his desk.

“Mr. Zucco claims that you are inadequate for Richard’s guardianship and he mentions the recent incident when Mr. Grayson was seen drinking alcohol and quarrelling with adults; he ran away when an officer came. Furthermore, he references another older incident where the teen was seen by several witnesses running away from you” Bruce shook his head and Mr. Collins pressed his lips. “Also, he claims that the boy is in constant danger since you are often the subject of violent attacks that could affect the boy’s life.”

Bruce nodded and raised his eyebrows.

“Like yesterday…”

Mr. Collins intertwined his fingers on the desk.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Wayne.”

“The hearing procedure what will include?”

Mr. Collins waved his hands.

“Testimonies from both sides.”

“And Richard? I don’t want him dragged into this.”

Collins raised his eyebrows.

“I’m afraid that this doesn’t depend on what we want, Mr. Wayne. Zucco asks for the boy’s presence.”

Bruce snorted.

“Of course. For him Richard is not the priority and he knows that the boy hates me: he took care to fuel this.”

Collins stood and came out of his desk to approach Bruce.
“We’ll try to prove exactly what you said, that Richard isn’t the priority for Zucco. However the youth evidently favors him and Zucco is married” he inhaled. “And there is something else.”

Bruce frowned.

“What?”

“He makes insinuation about your mental and emotional health…”

Bruce yanked his head.

“I have been evaluated by psychiatrists when I testified against Falcone.”

Collins nodded.

“I know but it’s up to the court to decide and ask a new evaluation.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Whatever…The important thing is Zucco doesn’t get the boy. So Richard will have to be present?”

“That is not necessary but the court will eventually decide if his testimony is needed.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I wouldn’t like him in all this; he has had enough to be dragged in court rooms; a court isn’t the best place for a young boy.”

Mr. Collins approached Bruce and patted him on the back.

“We’ll do everything in our power for you to retain the guardianship of the boy.”

Bruce nodded and smiled.

“I know, Mr. Collins. Thank you.”

Upon coming out of the lift to his office’s floor, Bruce met Tony who was also heading to Bruce’s office.

“What happened, Bruce?”

“Come inside.”

Once in the office, Tony looked at his friend.

“I called to the Manor looking for you and Alfred told me that you are in the Tower and then Synthia tells me that you immediately went to the legal department. What’s going on?”

“Zucco petitioned against my guardianship and the thing will go to the court.”

Tony shook his head infuriated and cursed.

“That sonovabitch!” he pinched the bridge of his nose thoughtful – another test for his friend: why they couldn’t let him alone to heal?

But then he felt that he should encourage his friend and crouched in front of him holding his upper arms. Their eyes locked.
“Everything will be fine, littl’ guy…You’re the best surrogate father there is!”

Bruce laughed.

“Thank you, Tony! I hope the court has the same opinion with you because Zucco is really dangerous” his face became grim. “I gathered evidence that he was the one that caused John Grayson’s death and prior to that he made fraud resulting in John losing his savings.”

Tony’s eyes flashed with determination.

“Great! Show this evidence and send him in jail.”

Bruce huffed.

“Tony, it is just evidence not proof: I need to prove his guilt without any doubt because otherwise there is the risk of him being exonerated and then his influence to Dick would be even greater and so the danger for the boy. So we must win this to the court and buy some time.”

Tony pursed his lips.

“Yes, but starting a case against him for John Grayson’s death will erase any possibility of him getting Dick’s guardianship.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Or not. They could claim that I used my connections to issue this case just to degrade and blackmail him into retreating from Dick’s guardianship. Everything is a matter of right timing.”

Tony raised his eyebrows.

“As you proved perfectly with Falcone and the League of Shadows, huh?”

“I hope everything goes as smoothly…”

Tony cupped his friend’s face.

“Me too; with the League of Shadows you were tortured by them before we managed to exterminate them. You’re stressed?” he frowned because usually his friend was tranquil.

“It is Richard’s life…Enough damage has been done to this boy.”

Tony brushed his cheek.

“And that just proves that you’re the best guardian for this ungrateful brat.”

Bruce just crooked his lips.

Tony stood and ruffled his hair.

“Let me guess: that cancels your visit in Malibu, right?” he asked almost laughing hiding his disappointment.

But Bruce smiled reassuring.

“No, I’ll come but for a couple of days. You honored me with the central stand in StarkExpo; I’d be ungrateful to not come.”
Tony leaned to him and held his shoulders.

“You don’t have to, Bruce” he said seriously. “I want you to forget everything I told you yesterday: I wasn’t my usual, sweet self” Bruce chuckled and Tony did the same.

“I want to come, Tony: the last time I was in Malibu it was great. Also my absence from Gotham will fit our plans.’’

Tony nodded.

“Problems for Bruce Wayne don’t seem to stop, Alex. According to reliable sources there is a petition against the billionaire’s guardianship of Richard Grayson – and after the videos showing the boy drinking alcohol wandering Gotham at night time the petition would certainly be solid for the court. Not to mention that the constant attacks against Bruce Wayne’s life – not only by Joker but also by this new attacker - can be a real concern about the well being of the orphan.”

“Do you know who made the petition, Tom?’’Alex Knox from the studio asked his colleague.

“Our sources say that it is the boy’s only remaining blood relative that petitioned. It’s Richard Grayson’s uncle, Tony Zucco, cousin of the boy’s late father John Grayson the world famous gymnastics’ Olympic Champion.”

“When the hearing is going to take place?’’

“In a few days.”

Knox raised his eyebrows.

“Let’s hope that the court will decide the best for the boy. Thank you, Tom.”

The image of his colleague vanished from the screen on the wall and Alex Knox turned to face the camera.

“And as if this wasn’t enough for our Prince, there is a leak from Wayne Enterprises stating where the company keeps priced items taken from LexCorps. Lucius Fox, the Wayne Enterprises’ chief of the Research and Development sector denied that the information was true.”

Footage from the packed with people coming and going Wayne Enterprises’ foyer was played where a brightly smiling Lucius Fox waved the question off.

“I assure you there’s no truth in that leaked information: someone tried to gain money and attention leaking false information.”

Mannheim cocked an eyebrow watching the news playing in thin air between him and Bagdana that sat at an armchair in his business office at Metropolis.

“As soon as you informed me about the leaked information, I sent Granny Goodness and her minions to watch every movement at the Wayne Tower” the square shaped gangster said to his minion who watched frowned from his seat. “This Afro-American might have said that it was a lie but” Mannheim smirked and his eyes took the fire essence of his real self “the fact is that trunks are moving from the Tower to some location outside Gotham where Wayne has storage units.”

Bagdana cleared his throat thoughtful.
“They are trying to denounce the information but they are panicked and attempt to get my property to a new unknown – as they believe – location.”

“Hm…” the ancient demon rubbed his square jaw.

Mannheim stood and the footage from the news evaporated.

“What?” he asked approaching his minion.

“Movements of panic are not Bruce’s characteristic.”

Mannheim rolled his eyes.

“The fact you failed to make him your slave and mistress makes you overestimate him” Bagdana cocked an eyebrow. “He is panicked, Bagdana: two days ago he was almost killed and now someone figured that inside the Tower he had stashed the items from Luthor’s labs and leaked that information. The pest didn’t expect that and in his fear of me stealing them he takes them away” he lolled his head on the side. “As he did with himself…” he sneered “he ran to the safety of Stark’s house. He doesn’t suspect that I’m already watching and I’m going to take what’s mine.”

Bagdana intertwined his fingers in front of his face.

“He didn’t expect?” he asked mostly himself deep in thought.

Mannheim narrowed his eyes to slits.

“You mean that all this is a scheme to frame me up?” he snorted. “Is this man so wicked? No way… If you believe that then why you rushed to report the leaked information?”

“Because it is my job, right?” Bagdana raised his eyebrows. “You’re the boss and you make the decisions after all.”

Mannheim crossed his arms.

“If Wayne thinks that he can fool me by sending my things away or that he can frame me up, then you’re heading to a new shock” he shook his head self satisfied “I’d like to see his face when he finds out that the items are gone. For a demon you are much too scared, Bagdana” he sniggered and the demon crooked his mouth. “It is time to get back what is mine. I waited enough: things must start moving.”

Bagdana stood.

“You’re planning to attack the storage units and steal the items?”

Mannheim lolled his head on the side and smirked.

“Granny has already been ordered to acquire the items for me…”

Bagdana nodded and bowed slightly his head.

“As you wish.”

Mannheim grinned satisfied for the demon’s submission.

“What have you done about your other duty?” he asked abruptly.
“Your traces are covered.”

“Then you are dismissed” he waved him off and Bagdana bowed once again and vanished.

Mannheim smirked and his eyes shone gleefully.

“Now you realized that nothing stops me from killing your pet you are in line, you worthless demon!” he smirked. “But you are going to be punished for your prior behavior” he chuckled “and I know what to use to chastise you so you never dare to doubt me again.”

Pepper gave Bruce a warm hug that made Tony cock an eyebrow. The red haired kissed the youth in both cheeks.

“I’m here, you know!” Tony exclaimed raising his voice though the buzz from the jet’s engines was very mild. “And I’m not blind! Also I’m a bit selfish so when my girlfriend shows so much enthusiasm for someone else than me…”

Pepper turned to him – of course both she and Bruce knew that Tony was joking.

“Your girlfriend? I see you remember that once in a while…”

“He never forgets that” Bruce hurried to defend his friend and Tony nodded pouting.

“Thanks, buddy! I need a lawyer…”

Pepper stood and smirked at him before turning again to Bruce.

“How was your flight? Are you feeling tired?”

Bruce chuckled.

“Don’t tell me! You were speaking with Alfred, right?”

The red haired laughed.

“As a matter of fact I did…He is worried and I’m too after that last attack.”

“I’m fine, Peps.”

She cleared her throat and cast a sideways glance at Tony who frowned.

“You know, Bruce, he is a good kid deep inside but sometimes he acts like a brat – especially, when he is scared. And when they attacked you, he pissed himself.”

Tony opened his mouth enraged and slapped his thighs increasing Pepper’s amusement.

“Wha’…Of course not!” he looked around.

Thankfully, they were inside the hangar at his house’s grounds; Tony’s jet could easily land vertically in the moderate space of a hangar. Of course, as with everything owned by Tony Stark this wasn’t a usual hangar: its dome roof opened to admit the owner’s jet. All in all, one of the blessings of a private ‘airport’ was that the only one that could have heard was Happy but he was still inside the jet and he was used to hear Pepper reprimanding him for worse.
Pepper crooked her mouth to Tony and turned again to Bruce.

“What I wanted to say, Bruce, is that what your stupid friend said to you that day was due to his terror and panic, he didn’t mean it; so, please, do forget everything. He loves you more than anything.”

Bruce smiled.

“I know, Peps…I already forgot everything.”

Pepper nodded and Tony surged to her from the back and hugged her kissing her cheek.

“My sweet Peps! Always takes care of me and worries about my well being…I’m so lucky!”

Pepper rolled her eyes and then locked eyes with Bruce who chuckled at his friends’ happiness.

As they slowly left the hangar the cheerful sun of California greeted them and Bruce looked around the carefully manicured lawn, the Olympic dimensions’ pool with the isle in the middle where a beautiful polygonal marble kiosk stood under the shadow of two enormous palm trees. The nearby sound of the sea waves under the hill on top of which Tony’s house was built completed the whole sense of relaxation and particularly the seagulls’ cries made Bruce feel numb.

“I missed that place…” he said as they crossed the grounds to enter the house.

Tony cocked his eyebrows having his arm wrapped around Pepper’s shoulder causing her rolling of eyes.

“Definitely you need some sun, buddy and you can stay as long as you like whenever you like” he commented as the main door opened automatically.

“Welcome back, Master Tony, Master Bruce; I’m very happy to see you again, Miss Potts: you are lovely as ever.”

“Hello, Jarvis” Bruce said.

But Pepper turned to Tony.

“You need to program your AI to stop his Stark-ish attempts at flattering.”

Tony pouted.

“Yeah…he lacks my charm so it sounds stupid.”

Pepper shook her head and smirked.

“Even with your…charm still sounds stupid!”

Bruce chuckled and Tony grimaced.

“That hurt my pride…” he said pouting like a baby.

Pepper winked.

“I know; that’s why I said it!” she smiled and escaped Tony’s hug heading to the kitchen. “I’ll bring some coffee, boys.”
“Use the espresso gadget this time!” he remarked and turned to Bruce conspiratorially. “You don’t want to drink Pepper made coffee…” his eyes bulged in terror.

However he stayed still watching her. He shook his head.

“In any case, she is crazy for me!”

Bruce smiled.

“You are lucky, Tony: you need to take care of her” Bruce commented as they headed to the vast minimally decorated leaving room.

“I’m doing my best, littl’ guy…” he said diving into his elliptic armchair. “Just before we landed I received a report from Fury – by the way, he is furious about the attack against you.”

Bruce smirked.

“He fears that he’ll lose his potential Avenger…He never accepted that I’m not Batman.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows and pouted.

“I’m not a fan of good ol’ Nick but he is a very clever man…”

“What about that report?”

“Right…SHIELD’s agents sent urgent intelligence about appearances of a flying robot which is similar to Ironman” Bruce nodded smirking.

“Did they manage to locate it? Or identify the culprit?”

“No but our men speak about high levels of activity in newly created labs near Metropolis which our agents found that belong to none other than our friend Luthor. Intelligence speak about a flying android” Bruce pursed his lips in disbelief and Tony frowned. “You don’t believe that, don’t you?”

Bruce inhaled.

“I do believe your agents and that these are real.”

“Then?”

“I just don’t believe that Luthor was behind the attack.”

Tony narrowed his eyes.

“What?” he exclaimed surprised. “But that android is a copy of Ironman and we know that Luthor was working with Obadiah who had manufactured a replica of my masterpiece. So Luthor could easily take his information and improve what old Obadiah did.”

Bruce rubbed his palms together together.

“It could be but I don’t believe it, Tony. First of all, it is the timing this info came: too convenient, don’t you think? Plant some clues so to turn our attention to Luthor: who could be a better candidate for an attack against me? He hates me and what happened during the meeting in LexCorp is a very persuasive motive. Yet even if we accept that Luthor made that attack, what about the thugs that attacked at the same time?”
Tony lolled his head on the side.

“He could buy them – he has done that again when he planned to use that weapon to breach the Wayne Tower.”

“Yes, but the thugs manifest the same symptoms with the thugs that made the attack at the Metropolis’ subway and those who broke in LexLabs.”

“Still Luthor could be implicated with Intergang.”

“Yes, but when all these happened Luthor was in jail and if he had ordered the attacks at the Labs he would know exactly where to look for what he wanted so Mannheim wouldn’t be so pissed for his unfinished order.”

“Then we’re still with Mannheim…”

Bruce nodded.

“I’m positive that it is him. After I told him that the items would be destroyed, I expected him to wait the right moment to steal them; I didn’t expect that he would make an attempt against me because it would be too obvious. However he acted impetuously and exactly like a man with great power who isn’t afraid of the consequences” Tony pressed his lips “his wrath urged him to give me a lesson. But now probably someone of his allies advised him to cover his tracks by spreading information that will turn the suspicions elsewhere – very much like we did leaking the items’ location and sending them away to show that we are panicked by the breach in secrecy.”

“So that makes him the ghost leader of Intergang.”

“I don’t have proof but there are too many connections to be ignored. The secrecy around him and his business’ activity; Luthor’s release with the use of high connections exactly like the way several gangsters of Metropolis were released from prison; the LexLabs’ burglaries and then his demand to deliver him the items.”

Tony clapped: he liked action not waiting.

“So get him!”

Bruce on the other hand was a man of patience; he shook his head calmly.

“If we act now, our case will be easily dismissed and if not easily he still will be released in no time: we should be patient.”

Tony clenched the armrests.

“Things took their way then.”

Bruce nodded.

“Lucius called and told me that the items’ shipping started in tight secrecy but I’m sure that Mannheim knows and has his people to it.”

“The items have been wired in a way that they wouldn’t be able to detect no matter the means they got. Also will have the control to whatever they’ll manufacture with these thingies.”

Bruce nodded thoughtful.
“I made sure that there won’t be any casualties – I spoke with Lucius and we agreed to place only mechanical security system without people.”

Tony slapped his thighs.

“So the ball is in their field, huh? Great! I hate waiting: I just want to kick his ass really hard after what he did.”

“Alea jacta est…” Bruce said solemnly.

Tony met his gaze: this was a phrase Bruce used often.

“Ra’s Al Ghul had you study Latin, huh? The bastard knew the gem he had in his hands and tried to exploit you in every possible way!” he pinched the bridge of his nose thinking of Ra’s Al Ghul using the weak teen for his twisted desires and plans.

Bruce could understand what his friend was thinking and wished to bring him out of those thoughts.

“He was obsessed with the ancient great generals.”

Tony smiled and lolled his head on the side.

“No wonder you’re a great general yourself…” Bruce fixed his eyes on his friend and Tony cocked his eyebrows. “C’mon! Don’t be so modest! You are!”

The clicking of Pepper’s heels echoed on the light golden granite floor as she came carrying a tray with cups of hot steaming coffee.

“What he tells you, Bruce?”

Tony shook his head and sighed.

“I’m sooooo misunderstood!”

Bruce chuckled and took his cup of coffee thanking Pepper.

“He didn’t say anything bad, Pepper: I swear.”

Tony nodded widening his eyes for emphasis.

“You see how prejudiced you are against me?”

Pepper crossed her arms and cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah…sure. I heard about the hearing on Richard’s guardianship, Bruce.”

He shook his head.

“As if the boy didn’t have enough…”

Pepper pressed her lips.

“I’m sure everything is going to be fine: Mr. Collins is one of the best lawyers.”

Bruce grinned.

“He is and I trust him” however he was wary about the whole ordeal of the hearing and uncertain
about the outcome. However for now he had other things to settle too. “Tony, you had found Princess Diana’s apartment.”

Tony frowned over his cup of coffee.

“Of course” he cocked an eyebrow “nobody can hide from the sun and Tony Stark” Pepper cast him an amused and exasperated glance.

“Great!”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“You are still tormenting yourself with that sonovabitch?” he shook his head. “I mean Superman!” Bruce closed his eyes. “Bruce, stop thinking about him: he has done enough damage!”

“I think that she plays a role in this scheme, Tony: I don’t believe in coincidences and the way she entered our lives and acted doesn’t seem random at all.”

Tony huffed grimacing.

“Then Oliver Queen could be implicated too.”

Bruce looked at his friends.

“That remains to be seen…Of what I’m sure though is that Arrow knows who I am” he took in Pepper’s questioning look. “I mean Batman.”

Tony narrowed his eyes.

“We were talking about Queen” he said suspiciously. “What Arrow has to do with this?”

Bruce smiled.

“Nothing. I just jumped from one subject to another: Arrow is another mystery.”

Bruce was almost sure that Queen was the Arrow but he didn't want to share yet the man's secret with anyone. He thought about the clues he had: Queen wore gloves and that might not be so odd except that he wore them only that day after the attack when Arrow was wounded on the back of his hand and naturally Queen knew that Bruce would notice and make the connection. And the hurried way he removed his hand as soon as Bruce mentioned the gloves… The two men had the same body and though Arrow’s face was always shadowed Bruce could discern that it had the same structure as Queen’s. Also, the Arrow first appeared in the Avengers’ Tower where Queen was; and then Arrow led him to the rooftop where Superman and the Amazon was having sex because he knew what this meant to Batman and because he was interested in Bruce.

Of course Arrow appeared once in Chicago while Queen was in Gotham but for a billionaire with a private jet the distance wasn’t a problem. He just wanted to confuse Bruce. And then again in Metropolis when Batman met Superman, the Arrow was conveniently there watching ready to even kill Superman with a Kryptonite arrow.

“He was great in every sport except than archery”

Queen’s friend from university had said and the man seemed annoyed for the mention of archery. He was helpless in archery: that troubled Bruce: of course Queen could have trained in the years that followed however archery – Ra’s had been telling him - wasn’t something someone could easily
improve from being lousy into becoming a modern Robin Hood…

“We certainly have to solve Queen’s riddle and find his role in the pattern” he said thoughtful deciding that he had to close some deals with the man in order to watch him closely.

Zucco was waiting at the yard of Dick’s school covered behind the small shed with the janitor’s equipment; he had texted the boy and it took no more than a few minutes for the boy to appear.

Dick looked around searching for his uncle and Zucco stretched his hand to draw his attention and then popped his head for a second just for Dick to see him. Zucco knew that the boy had bodyguards watching his movements.

Dick walked casually behind the shed and as soon as he saw his uncle rushed to his arms. Zucco chuckled for the boy’s enthusiasm.

“So I assume that you heard the news?” he asked pressed in the boy’s hug.

“It was about time!” Dick exclaimed. “I thought you wouldn’t do it! I couldn’t take it anymore: Wayne playing my daddy and punishing me!”

“Calm down, champ!” he laughed. “Soon it’ll be over and we’ll be together.”

“Are you sure we’ll win? Wayne is filthy rich…”

Zucco ruffled the boy’s raven hair and pinched playfully his blushed cheeks.

“Don’t worry, Dick. The days of your suffering will be soon over – a bad memory. He might be rich but justice cares more about your well being so they won’t give you to a mental case like him.”

Dick grinned broadly.

“And I have showed many times how unhappy I am with him. Thank Goodness he went to Malibu and I don’t have to endure his presence.”

Zucco nodded.

“I feel for you…And you really made a fantastic job, champ, showing to the world who is Wayne!”

Dick locked eyes with him.

“I’ll speak in the court too?” he asked eagerly.

Zucco raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know if you should get mingled in this…” he said thoughtful wanting to show concern hiding the fact that he indeed asked for the boy’s presence at the court. “I wouldn’t want you in a court being examined by lawyers” he chuckled “I hate the lot.”

Dick shook his head unconcerned.

“I don’t mind testifying if that helps…”

Zucco grinned.
“I’m sure Wayne will do everything in his power to stop that” he frowned slightly his eyebrows. “How are things between you and Breizic?”

Dick shrugged surprised that his uncle brought that up.

“We haven’t been able to interact much but I see already that people are right about him: he is great! He has given me some very useful advice that thanks to Wayne” his voice was filled with poison “I didn’t have the chance to practice in the gym but I’m sure they will help my technique.”

Zucco pressed his lips thoughtful: he didn’t like the sudden reappearance of Breizic in Gotham and his interest in Grayson’s boy. That could ruin things for him.

“Listen, Dick, I know that ol’ Breizic is a legend and he enjoys the appreciation of the federation yet…there are things” Dick frowned. “Your father had many quarrels with him and in the end he fired him.”

“And you became his trainer – I know – but later they reconciled and Breizic returned to his team. What do you want to say?”

“That he is skilled, smart; top in his job but he isn’t trustworthy.”

Dick’s frown became deeper – frankly, he was tired of being advised all the time against people he liked. First, his granny warned him against Tony and now Tony against Breizic.

Zucco read the boy’s expression and ruffled the boy’s locks.

“He is trustworthy in everything that has to do with gymnastics but not to everything else…” he huffed. “Your dad didn’t trust him in other matters because Breizic…” he licked his lips feigning uneasiness “of course, he was doing it for John’s best interest but many times he tried to close deals for John with sponsors that John didn’t like.”

“You mean…”

“Breizic likes money” he opened his arms “that’s his biggest sin that sometimes ruins his relationships with people. And as a matter of fact his sudden returning to Gotham after you became Wayne’s ward…”

Dick’s eyes widened and Zucco stopped because the boy understood without him having to say anything.

“You mean that he came to Gotham and approached me because Wayne asked him to?” the boy was baffled and almost angry.

Zucco licked his lips uncomfortable and shrugged one shoulder.

“All these years he was absent and then when you became the ward of a billionaire he returns and becomes your advisor…”

Dick’s mouth stayed agape; he remembered the discussion he had with Breizic after Wayne’s punishment.

“He told me that he agrees with Wayne’s punishment…”

Zucco smirked and huffed exasperated.

“Of course he would!”
However Dick was troubled. His granny used to say about Tony the same things Tony was saying for Breizic now. What was true? He turned his eyes away and Zucco brushed his upper arm.

“Are you alright?”

The boy nodded.

“I have to return…” he gestured with the head to the building.

“Okay, champ; remember: everything is going to be fine – soon you’ll be free and things will get better.”

Dick looked at him and smiled but his eyes were clouded.

“See you, Tony!”

Zucco watched him running towards the school and smiled.

“Indeed some people are so much drawn by the money…” he sneered and headed to the back exit of the yard.

The StarkExpo was traditionally held in the center of Malibu in a gargantuan area owned by Stark Industries.

Tony had guided Bruce again to the facilities when he had come immediately after Falcone’s fall. Yet now, during Stark Expo which was the event of the year for Stark Industries, the whole area was more impressive than ever.

The rectangular endless space had two floors with such high ceilings that gave the impression of being even more enormous. The walls, floor and ceiling was painted in flashing red and gold and rolling stairs or glass lifts scattered around brought the visitors to the upper level where someone could find cafeterias, restaurants, bowling and shop. The StarkExpo facility was one of the favorite event centers throughout the year where live concerts were held.

Bruce couldn’t stop himself from staring around awed like a small child causing Tony’s amused and satisfied grins.

The place was flooded with people that goggled on the Star Industries’ new products that were displayed in spectacular stands; the most impressive was that the products however massive or heavy didn’t need any base to support them and floated in their stands washed in light.

Despite the vast number of visitors since it was evening, the peak hour, the facilities were so spacious that it was very easy to move even if you were in a wheelchair.

“Congratulations, Tony!” Bruce said to his friend smiling broadly.

Tony was waving to people beaming for the visitors’ cameras that once in a while didn’t shoot the products but the Ironman himself. He turned to Bruce.

“You like it?”

Bruce laughed.

“Like it?! I’m awestruck! This is a wonder, Tony: not only your creations but also the facilities, the
organization, the planning…”

“Sorry for not blushing before such praise but I’m a genius, babe!” Tony took his smuggest expression though he was blushed and his eyes shone cheerful.

A dry cough caught their attention and Pepper joined them.

“The points for the planning and organization belong to someone else, Mr. Stark. *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s…”* 

She was wearing an elegant dress suit with black midi jacket, black knee length skirt and a shiny white silk shirt that its lapels fell on the jacket’s lapels. Of course, the assorted black stiletto heels made her shapely legs even more breathtaking.

“Pepper, you are dazzling!” Bruce said.

She beamed at Bruce.

“Thank you, Bruce: it is the grand opening after all” the Expo had started two days ago but the official opening was today. “I’m glad someone noticed me…” she said snidely to Tony who was eyeing her from feet to head goggling.

“Oh, boy! We must get isolated soon…” Tony mumbled cocking his eyebrows.

Pepper rolled her eyes but Bruce could see the satisfied shine in her eyes.

“Mr. Stark, be—have…” she said in heavy British accent and Tony chuckled.

“Ugh! That attire and that stern look make my creativity flow…and I don’t mean inventions…” he twisted his eyebrows upwards.

“Now, Tony” Pepper said “we are among people…” 

He looked around shocked.

“Really?! Suddenly, I felt like only three people were here…”

Pepper smirked.

“You need to check this with your doctor” she snapped and stretched her body walking ahead.

As they explored the exhibition and Tony explained to him each product – better than the person in each stand, Bruce was sure – Bruce felt dazzled.

“The more I see the more inadequate our products look…I don’t know if Wayne Enterprises deserve the central stand in StarkExpo, Tony.”

The older man rolled his eyes.

“Lucius would be very disappointed hearing that! Littl’ guy, you need to take some lessons of self esteem from the best…that is: moi.”

Bruce chuckled and Pepper smiled to him.

“You know which stand had gathered the most visitors?” she asked. “The central stand featuring Wayne Enterprises’ Cosmos polymorphic tablet.”
“Really?”

Tony nodded.

“Pepper never tells lies, buddy: I’ve got bitter experience…”

They moved ahead towards the central stand that was situated in a huge round shaped space; in the middle, there was a light blue column where the Cosmos tablet stood in midair changing in its various sizes while the female employees demonstrated how the tablet turned into a Smartphone and then to a professional camera.

As Pepper had said, this place was the most packed with people asking questions and watching avidly the demonstration.

“We have already people asking if they can preorder” Pepper remarked. “Not to mention their interest on the applications Wayne Enterprises features.”

“And as you see” Tony gestured to the next light green column “our joined project about the bionic body parts is as fascinating for people. I can’t imagine their reaction when they see you walking again.”

Tony crouched and held Bruce’s upper arms.

“And that will happen soon – I promise you, littl’ guy.”

“I know, Tony; you will make another miracle.”

“Together…We’ll make wonders together, buddy…”

Pepper smiled touched but cleared her throat because some journalists turned to them and began taking pictures.

Tony stood and Pepper leaned to his ear.

“It’s show time, Mr. Stark – time to announce the official opening.”

Tony dusted his impeccable shining, light gray two piece suit and fixed his tie of the same color. He sighed.

“They wait everything from me, littl’ guy…I feel being exploited.”

Bruce chuckled and followed them to the glistening stage where Tony was to announce the official opening giving the signal for the party to start – the stage was still cast in darkness waiting for the billionaire to give the signal for the party. Tony had brought the most popular pop stars to sing for StarkExpo’s grand event.

Pepper ascended the few steps and announced Tony to the crowd that cheered.

Tony fixed his hair and looked at Bruce’s loving stare.

“Dazzling as ever?” he asked Bruce who nodded. “A heartbreaker?” the younger man chuckled nodding. “Great ass?” he asked glancing at his buttocks.

“Perfect.”

“Then fire at will, babe!” he winked. “Right back to you, littl’ guy!”
“Are you enjoying yourself, Bruce?” Pepper asked.

The party was in full vibe and the three friends watched the people dancing from the upper level: the central cafeteria had tables on the balcony that was made of reinforced glass so it gave the impression of floating. The lights were lowered and the music loud even louder from the special effects that accompanied the live performances; Tony in his chair was moving to the rhythm.

“It’s great, Peps, thank you for everything. I wish I could stay longer.”

Tony shook his head getting serious.

“I wish that too…Being away from that city would have benefited you.”

Bruce didn’t answer: however great his time in Malibu he missed his grim, grouchy city.

“Mr. Wayne, you prefer Malibu’s safety over Gotham?”

Tony jerked like a snake startled by the journalist who had approached them unnoticed; Bruce had sensed him but didn’t want to show.

“You’re intruding, buddy! We already made statements!” Tony said annoyed.

“After that attack nobody blames you for wanting to get away from Gotham” a second reporter joined.

Bruce remained calm.

“I came in Malibu because my friend Tony honored me by giving Wayne Enterprises a very special place in the greatest Expo in the world. The timing is completely random. I feel equally safe in Gotham and in Malibu.”

More reporters rushed there noticing the famous company. One of the lot snorted.

“That’s not very flattering for Malibu…” he remarked.

“Actually, is flattering for both cities” Bruce smiled but Tony was still pissed and Pepper wasn’t better.

“Do you know anything about the attacker?”

Bruce shrugged.

“Gotham’s police is doing investigation right now…but I don’t have any knowledge – I’ll wait like all of you.”

“Luthor was clearly pissed in the last meeting at LexCorp… Can he be the mastermind?”

“Do you worry about the guardianship of Richard Grayson?”

Bruce smiled calmly.

“I trust that Gotham’s system will decide the best for my ward.”

Now Tony had had enough. He stood.
“Luthor isn’t the only one pissed!”

Pepper however stood and put her body between him and the paparazzi.

“As soon as some development occurs you’ll be the first to know, ladies and gentlemen. Now, I’m sure you’ll have more interesting and thrilling things to cover downstairs.”

At the same time, security guards came and politely but decisively removed the gang.

“Sorry about that Bruce” Tony said grim resuming his seat.

“It’s okay, Tony: I’m used to it. And I’m sure this was nothing compared to what waits me once I return to Gotham.”

Tony stretched his hand and squeezed Bruce’s hand on the round glass table.

“You have all your friends on your side, Bruce…” he said locking eyes with him and Bruce grinned.

Thomas Elliot sat at the couch in his apartment’s living room the only light coming from his tablet. He wore his maroon silk night robe above his pajamas and he was sipping his fine, rare molt whiskey; his tablet’s screen showed footage from GCTV’s news. He smirked listening to the newscaster speaking about the case against Bruce’s guardianship.

“So, Brucey, you have many fronts to fight…Someone wants to take from you the ward you care so much about…”

He turned his head towards the bedroom; from the open door he could see Kelly sleeping on his bed with the dark purple silken sheet covering the down half of her naked body.

He closed his eyes and snorted shaking his head. Thomas was really annoyed with all this secrecy about Bruce’s medical file. Kelly didn’t manage to find the report from his latest exams…Not that he expected much from her but still the dump girl would have made everything to give him what he wanted. However Leslie and her colleagues were doing everything to hide the details about Bruce’s condition. Why? Such secrecy certainly hid fascinating things…

“Damn!” he growled from the frustration of being denied something so alluring.

He stared again at his tablet’s screen where the GCTV’s news showed now footage from Gotham’s courthouse where the procedure would be held.

“I have some surprises for you, Brucie…Your love for this stray brat will bite you hard…”

Clark stared at the small delicacy in his hand, stupidly indecisive.

Ms. Rose looked at him surprised when he placed his order; he had stopped ordering that for long.

He was tempted for days…he missed that. He had resisted the temptation but today he was defeated. He brought the delicacy to his mouth and took a large bite.

“The Prince’s Donuts, Mr. Kent? I thought you didn’t like them anymore…”

Clark closed his eyes letting the delicious taste fill his mind and erase the fuss of the Planet’s reporter
area. However soon his satisfaction gave its place to disappointment: it wasn’t the same.

He knew what the problem was: what was missing…It wasn’t the same taste as when he ate the donut’s crumbs from Bruce’s smeary lips. The younger man laughed like a small child realizing that he had crumbs and cream all over his mouth; and blushed because it wasn’t appropriate for an adult…

Clark smiled: donut was delicious only because it was mingled with Bruce’s taste…

He suddenly realized what he was thinking and slapped his face to come over. It was stupid: he loved Diana; he had made his choice and Bruce kicked him out. There was nothing more beautiful than Diana and with her he was happier than ever.

He licked his lips and tapped his pen on the desk staring at his PC screen’s customized wallpaper. He realized that it was the recent attack against Bruce that stirred all these to him and of course his Ma’s reprimand. The idea that Bruce could have died there while he just watched…

“Don’t you think that the attack’s method reminds the way Intergang acted?” Clark heard Lois’ voice.

“You mean that Intergang never ceased to exist and now reemerged?” Martin replied.

Clark felt annoyed. He stood and walked to Lois’ desk. Martin looked at him while Lois ignored him as always.

“Martin, can you leave us for a moment?”

The man shrugged.

“Sure, Clark.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” he whispered to Lois who began typing looking at her screen avoiding him. “Lois! We were in Intergang’s case together! It is my case not Martin’s.”

Lois jerked her head at him.

“Lately you don’t have time for your old interests and I don’t want to interrupt you from what really matters to you now.”

“Lois, stop that! You know how much I love my job. As a reporter.”

Lois cocked an eyebrow.

“Only as a reporter?” she asked snidely.

Clark lolled his head on the side and huffed.

“Everything!” he retorted.

She snorted.

“Funny…Because I noticed that you’re not interested in your old job anymore.”

“You mean the attack against…” he ran his fingers in his hair. “Lois, let me explain…”

“Don’t bother…” she turned her head away from him. “If you want to investigate Intergang, do it
yourself. I already have a partner. And stop eavesdropping: it’s rude and unethical.”

“Lois…”

But she didn’t even glance at him.

“I’m working!”

Clark returned to his desk disappointed and stared at the donuts. He didn’t like his sudden attraction to those delicacies which were tied with Bruce. He wiped them off the desk tossing them to the bin under his desk.

He sat heavily in his chair and clenched his jaw. He wouldn’t let Bruce ruin his happiness with Diana…Clark had a suspicion about what was wrong with him: he loved Diana, he desired her like a man dying of thirst desire water but lately his insides twitched for things connected with Bruce.

There was only one explanation.
Chapter 58

Superman hovered outside Wayne Tower, in front of the glistening window of Bruce Wayne’s office. The glass was reinforced after the incident with Joker and of course didn’t permit anyone to see inside even him. He smirked: lead lined – how authentic! Stark and Bruce took every precaution against him…The feeling of betrayal fuelled the anger that already burned inside him.

He was angry yet he was hesitant to surge inside and the fact that certainly the glass was Superman proof was the least reason. He wasn’t a criminal.

His hesitance came to a stop by the soundless opening of the central panel which dove inside the wall and revealed Bruce sat in his chair staring at him determined. Despite the fact he was now a paraplegic he still wasn’t afraid of heights.

“Do you want to come inside?” the younger man asked with an inviting gesture.

Superman smiled and floated inside, the panel rapidly returning to its place isolating them from the outside world.

The Man of Steel landed on the light brown carpeted floor and looked at Bruce.

“You aren’t going to reprimand me for coming to Gotham and specifically to your office?” he asked smirking because he knew that Bruce wanted him to come.

The human locked eyes with him.

“What do you want, Superman?”

“You don’t know?” Superman retorted and crossed his arms on the chest; when Bruce didn’t answer he shook his head sniggering. “Oh! That’s good! You’re a great actor after all! Feigning ignorance is too easy compared with your other roles.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“If you came to insult me get out!” his eyes flashed.

Superman felt irritated by the man’s nerve to try to fool him. Bruce was trying to play with him again; and dared to kick him out once again.

In a flicker of a second he surged on him and grabbed his wrists wanting to stop him before conjuring some of his weapons. He dragged him along and pinned him to his desk, having toppled the wheelchair in his rush.

Bruce gritted his teeth but his wrists were pinned over his head with such force that no human could overcome. However Superman was using only one hand to keep Bruce’s wrists pinioned, his other arm wrapping Bruce’s waist in order to protect him from injury.

The human’s breath was calm – Bruce had nerves of steel after all – but Superman could feel the defiance, the trapped body vibrating from resistance. Bruce’s mesmerizing eyes sparkled like the rarest gems: midnight blue sapphires with emerald stars; locked with Superman’s in a stare contest that the Man of Steel felt that Bruce was sure he would win. And that perfume was intoxicating Superman casting his mind in fog and his body in trembling arousal.
“You don’t carry your dagger with you here, huh?” Superman sniggered and cocked an eyebrow. “It’d be inappropriate for a businessman, right?”

The perfume of rare cinnamon was like a magnet and Bruce’s rosy lips waiting and frankly there was no reason for Superman to oppress his desire. He lowered his lips to capture Bruce’s but the human averted his face leaving Superman kissing the void.

“What do you want, Superman?” Bruce spat. “Let go off me.”

Superman chuckled. Bruce thought that he could still boss him around: after all, the wicked human had secured his power over him. He felt enraged: Bruce knew about strategy and he was sneaky enough to destroy two empires at once – Falcone’s and Ra’s Al Ghul’s – so the naïve Superman wasn’t a difficult opponent, right?

It took only a fragment of a second for him to torn with one movement Bruce’s jacket and expensive shirt stripping his torso, enjoying the human’s shiver at the violence of the deed. Superman admired the the younger man’s body that despite its scars remained the most beautiful body he ever saw.

Bruce stabbed him with his eyes since Superman captured again his wrists immobilizing him on the desk, his groin rubbing on Bruce’s dead one. Superman knew that he couldn’t feel that but could see and hear the sound.

“Stop that” Bruce told him completely unfazed by the fact that the most powerful being on the galaxy had him half naked at his mercy.

But Superman smirked.

“Why? Thor is jealous?”

Bruce clenched his jaw.

“Why are you here? What do you want?”

Superman felt enraged by the human’s insist on playing the innocent. He tightened his grip on the man’s wrists failing to get a pain expression out of the stubborn human whose stare became more defiant.

“Stop pretending that you don’t know! You planned it that way!” he ground his teeth over Bruce’s face.

The human narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Really?” Superman snorted. “You kicked me out of the Manor; you forbade me from coming to Gotham knowing that in the end I would be forced to return and...beg you.”

Bruce frowned.

“What’s wrong with you, Clark?”

The Man of Steel wrapped his powerful arms around Bruce’s back and lifted him slightly off the desk; their faces came close, their breaths blended, their eyes collided hard.

“Well?” Bruce asked unfazed but Superman felt that he was jeering him.
His breath became heavier and his eyes roamed the human’s naked torso.

“Your body is made to give pleasure to gods…” he mumbled and tightening his hold choked Bruce’s attempt to shake him off.

“Let me go!” he growled and his eyes flashed like thunders; like the thunders Thor used to attack him.

Thor whom now Bruce could have in his bed without any obstacle and at the same time torment him; just to have fun with Superman’s torment, maybe sharing the information with Thor and laugh together.

Bruce was looking at him as if he was reading him but there was no fear. And that enraged more the Man of Steel.

In a blur he pinned the human face first on the wall, taking off of him the remnants of his jacket and shirt and then pinioning his arms on the wall above his head handcuffing with his grips Bruce’s wrists separately. Bruce couldn’t resist him; actually Superman’s body was the only thing holding him upright. He was breathing a bit harsh but otherwise he was calm though Superman was sure that Bruce’s past experiences were ringing crazy alarms in his head.

“You don’t want to do this, Clark” he said calm but determined.

However Superman couldn’t stop now: he was enraged with the human and being so close to his body erased any self control Superman had; he clenched Bruce’s wrists with one hand and with the other unzipped Bruce’s pants pushing the fabric down along with his black boxer. Bruce certainly heard the sound of Superman’s fervent movements and then the fabric falling to his ankles. The Man of Steel grabbed again Bruce’s wrists separately satisfied from the younger man’s surprised intake of air.

“Don’t you dare tell me what I want!” Superman’s whisper in Bruce’s ear was something between threat and moan; his body suffered from desire; he was shaking. “Besides it is what YOU want; you denied my advances at Metropolis because you wanted to break me and force me to beg.”

Bruce made to yank his head but Superman didn’t let him squeezing him to the wall with his body and pressed his head to the human’s. The perfume and the softness of his hair made Superman’s mind go crazy and his length harden – Bruce would have panicked if he could sense that iron erection pressing his buttocks but Superman knew that he could feel only the penetration.

“I really don’t understand, Clark: what are you talking about?”

Why he had to pretend? Why he had to be so sneaky?! Bruce did it on purpose to gain him back from Diana and hurt her. He bit Bruce’s ear lobe and felt the man twitch. If Bruce wanted him then he’d have him but he wouldn’t have the pleasure to wreck Diana’s heart.

He pushed with his knee Bruce’s unfeeling legs apart; the trapped man hearing the motion and understanding his intentions writhed but Superman pressed him more against the wall and his clench on Bruce’s wrists became vicious so much that he felt the fragile human blood vessels tearing.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Bruce…” he hissed to his ear; his throbbing erection making his voice rough “though you keep hunting me trying to ruin my life. Don’t try to resist” he cocked his eyebrows “though I know you like it violent but I’m not that kind… I’ll give you what you want and then you’ll leave me and Diana alone” he changed his clench to Bruce’s wrists holding them one upon another with one hand because he needed one hand to get rid of his annoying suit and his
length rushed to find its target.

Bruce cast him a sideways glance since Superman’s head pressed to his didn’t permit him any motion.

“I’m not trying to ruin your life…” but he didn’t manage to finish his phrase because a sharp intake of air accompanied with a grunt left his lungs as Superman thrust his entire length at once inside him.

Superman felt the fragile body tremble from the strength of the motion and the sudden pain which was worse coming from an area that didn’t give any stimuli for long. Bruce was biting his bottom lip to not scream and Superman used his free hand to caress his lair, his mouth sucking the man’s cheek.

“This is what you wanted from me…” he breathed burning the soft human skin. “Take it…”

Keeping his body glued to Bruce’s began moving inside-out of him progressively increasing the speed and power of his thrusts, enjoying the human’s convulsions on his body. Bruce insisted on muffling his moans and cries even as the alien’s thrusts became much more than any human could endure – exactly the pace he used to give extreme pleasure to Diana: if Bruce envied her, then Superman would oblige and give him the same.

Bruce’s body was covered from the sheen of sweat and that made his cinnamon perfume stronger, so intoxicating that Superman’s senses went foggy and on fire making his need for satisfaction torturing and demanding; his heart beat frantically. His rapid pants hit the back of Bruce’s neck before Superman realized and bit hard the taut, delicious flesh causing a desperate jerk: a feeble attempt to get away which Superman squashed increasing with an angry roar the power of his thrusts and the clenching in Bruce’s wrists.

“You like this, don’t you?” he whispered licking silken flesh on Bruce’s back. “Like the last time I fucked you… You wanted that again, huh? And you knew that I’d be dragged back to give it…” he sucked Bruce’s neckline devouring Bruce’s elevated heartbeat and his helpless trembling from the force and the pain he was put through. “What’s the matter? Your golden haired god doesn’t fuck as perfect as me?” he sneered and pushed even harder getting at last a grunt from the stubborn human who might have had his eyes fixed on the wall but hadn’t allowed himself a single moan till now.

“I didn’t do anything to you, Clark” he said gulping his screams and Superman admired how steady this voice came despite the fact he was in dire pain – Superman could read the brain waves of severe pain flooding Bruce’s skull.

“Liar!” he roared and pushed so hard that Bruce grunted and fisted his trapped hands desperately.

Superman felt the human body tremble underneath him and Bruce trying to draw away his hips which was stupid really, definitely a childish reaction remnant of his years with Falcone. He continued moving in and out with his super speed making the human moan and pant as if he was ready to pass out. Bruce’s hair was soaked in sweat and Superman fisted them yanking his head to touch his; he could feel the human’s exhaustion: it was almost an hour pinned to that wall subject to Superman’s power.

He released abruptly his head but before it touched the wall, Superman captured the half opened lips kissing so wildly that looked more like biting and chewing the soft flesh. He could have prolonged that savage kiss forever establishing more his superiority but he sensed Bruce’s air supplies finishing. He released his lips yet he fisted viciously the soaked locks; his grip was mighty like the rush that surged to his erection. He roared his orgasm in Bruce’s ear and his fluids attacked the younger man’s insides with such force and hotness that the wounds from the frantic friction hurt like Hell and made Bruce’s bare naked body writhe helplessly.
Yet Superman didn’t yield; he kept the human pressed on his body, completely immobile – not that the spent human could have resist. He mouthed the human’s hot, drenched in sweat cheek, chewing as if trying to jail inside him that perfume so that he’d never have to come back to get relief. Bruce was on the verge of fainting but he wasn’t going to permit it.

“Now that you got what you wanted, Bruce, call Fox.”

“Superman!” a voice that wasn’t Bruce’s called.

Bruce had spoken with Lucius and now he waited for him in his office at Wayne Tower working at his tablet while in the cave, his monster processor was connected with Tony’s system that was tracking the items that had been stolen from the Wayne Enterprises’ storage units.

His Cosmos’ screen was split in two: in the right half Bruce was perusing the data from the analysis of the screw cork that Mr. Breizic had found in the gym after John Grayson’s death.

In the left half, he was watching a video from one of Oliver Queen’s public appearances before the shipwreck; it was the tenth he had seen: he wanted to observe better the man in occasions that he wasn’t aware of Bruce’s eyes on him. Of course, a life threatening experience like a shipwreck could change someone yet Bruce focused on other aspects of him rather than his psychology.

For instance, Bruce had noticed that the Arrow was left handed while Oliver Queen during their meeting for dinner manifested his preference for his right hand. Bruce couldn’t cross out the possibility of the man doing that to confuse him – actually, he was sure that Queen did it exactly for that. However there was also the possibility that the man was amphidextrous, that is, he used equally right and left hand.

That was the reason he wanted to watch videos from Queen in public, to know more about the man, since Queen knew so much about him. Yet after his return from the dead the man had made barely any appearance so Bruce had to rely on the videos prior to the shipwreck. He wanted to observe everything: his facial expressions, his voice, the way he moved around – his preferred hand. Which was the right hand, fact that proved that Queen was playing with Bruce using his left hand when being Arrow in order to shake off any suspicion.

Bruce frowned…Yes, that was quite clear but Queen’s friend had said that Queen was lousy in archery so being so skilled now at his 35 with his left hand was impossible.

He glanced at his right hand that never fully recovered from the bullets and the lack of proper healing: after Ra’s’ masterful relocation of the bones and years of training he had managed to restore the rough movements while the fine movements were still problematic. Could something like that had happened to Queen as well? He stared at the man on the screen. No, because if he had injured his right hand so badly to be forced to develop his left hand’s skills then he wouldn’t be able to handle the knife and fork as being right handed.

At the same time, his research about Vivian’s apartment showed what he expected: it was bought by Oliver Queen some days after he made his return to the world at his company’s annual meeting.

He huffed and stopped thinking for a second as his mind travelled elsewhere. The temptation was great and he had to know. He brushed the screen to push the video he was currently watching to have live footage from the evacuation process in Texas.

A blast had occurred in a sea oil platform and now the large premises were on fire ready to collapse
trapping the people working there and causing major pollution to the ocean due to the breach in the undersea pipeline.

“Superman! The evacuation is over: the people are safe in the coast!”

Superman blinked and registered the massive weight he was holding: the burning platform that he kept from collapsing and trapping the people working there. A figure dressed in flashy red skin tight uniform with a yellow thunder across his chest looked at him puzzled.

“Okay, Flash; where’s Diana?” Superman said casually.

“Covering you, of course” he heard the melody of her voice from the other edge of the platform.

She was holding the gargantuan platform’s other edge to ease Superman’s effort and thwart any accident as Flash with his speed took the people to the safety of the shore.

“Are you alright?” concern was evident in her voice but the frown over her brow showed that she was suspecting something from his absent mindness during his reverie.

Superman smiled.

“Of course! On the count of three, we let the platform fall to the water, okay?”

Over their heads the news helicopter buzzed like a giant mosquito and Flash waved them to go before he sped away too.

Superman and Diana released the enormous mass to the ocean flying away just a second before the mass caused a huge wave.

The Man of Steel floating over the site watched the fire slowly being quenched by the water and dove to the sea using debris to seal the breach from where oil was purring to the sea.

Upon emerging from the water, the helicopter was again over them capturing the proceedings. Diana flew fast to hug him searching his body to find any potential injury.

He kissed her lips gently but in his mind twirled what he had seen during his daydream. Subduing Bruce like that night…Tasting his body and flesh again…That must stop right away: Diana was the only one for him and he loved only her.

What was happening, this obsession had one simple explanation and he knew where to go to solve this.

Bruce rubbed his chin seeing the three heroes clearing the mess: Superman had formed a small team around him. He was happy that Clark was still thinking of humankind and gathered allies – apart from the Princess who was serving other purposes mimicking Superman’s concern for the world. Nevertheless, the Man of Steel’s effort showed that Vivian’s influence hadn’t corrupted him…And that made him so proud of Clark.

However as Bruce looked at Superman’s face through the zoom of the news’ helicopter’s camera, he could see that the hero was deep in thought, absent minded as if he was somewhere else and only his body was there.
Thankfully, Flash woke him up before some accident occurred and Superman took the lead. His heart clenched in agony when Superman went underwater despite the fact he knew that Superman could survive without oxygen; however the previous expression on the hero’s face could be indication of Kryptonite’s presence or of something connected with the influence cast on him. Bruce gulped: if anything happened to Clark, he would never forgive himself for letting him go and sink to Vivian’s toxicity.

Fortunately, the Man of Steel immerged safe and sound and Bruce felt his eyes flashing from relief and joy but then Superman hugged Diana and Bruce knew that he shouldn’t but a sense of depression clenched his insides.

He touched his lips; he still remembered how sweet Clark’s kisses were; how velvety soft and careful and gradually strong and passionate and fervent his lips became each time…Exactly as he had imagined them all these years before meeting the clumsy reporter at the balcony during Falcone’s party…

His pelvis still experienced the shadow of the last night Superman spent in his bedroom…When he had claimed him like a stranger; an enemy…So unlike every other time. Bruce bit his bottom lip: only to remind him cruelly of the times Clark had made love to him; so tender; so dreamy…

He ruffled his hair with both hands: that was over. Actually, it shouldn’t have even started. He knew that it was a mistake…and now it hurt so much…No! He ground his teeth and closed his eyes: his emotions had to be buried as he always had done because there were more important things than his…stupid body, a body that now reacted again with repulsion on the thought of being again…touched.

Bruce pressed his hands on his face: nice! This would stop him from making the same mistake again and let him focus on all the mysteries around him.

Dick had run to him stopping his tactic of avoiding him.

Bruce had still Hero on his lap caressing him a bit more before leaving for the Tower. Alfred had opened the door for him. He intended to first go to the Tower and then to the court: it was the first day of the hearing. It was too early in the morning so the boy hadn’t come downstairs yet for his breakfast before school – not that Bruce expected from Dick wanting to see him.

*Bruce looked at the boy surprised; Dick’s expression was determined.*

“I want to come to the court!” he snapped at him.

*Bruce inhaled deeply feeling Alfred’s concerned eyes on him.*

“That won’t be necessary, Richard” he answered calmly. “And you have your school.”

*Dick crossed his arms on the chest and snorted.*

“You’re going to jail me as you did to keep me from training?”

*Bruce shook his head.*

“I didn’t jail you then and I’m not now: it was the mere consequence of your deeds” he blinked. “Believe me, court rooms are not the best place for anyone.”

*Dick sniggered and Alfred glared at him making the boy stop.*
“Of course you’d say that! You don’t want me there because you know what I want and you don’t want the judge to know.”

Bruce pressed his lips and shook his head.

“I just want the best for you, Dick.”

“Really now?” the boy spat. “Then how about quit my guardianship and let me live with my uncle?”

Bruce closed his eyes and Hero sensing his distress licked his hand.

“Your grandmother didn’t want that, Richard. She didn’t think Zucco a good man. I’m just doing what she wanted for you.”

“She was wrong about Tony and wrong about you!”

Bruce met the boy’s eyes.

“I must stay true to what I promised to her, Richard. She didn’t want Zucco to have you so I won’t quit your guardianship to his favor. When your grandmother returns” the boy shook his head in disbelief “you can discuss all these matters with her but till then…”

“She won’t return and you know it!” Dick snarled and leaned towards Bruce causing Alfred’s twitch as if he feared that the teen would attack his master.

Yet Bruce remained completely calm.

“You’re my evil demon!” the boy spat and Bruce felt a stab in his chest. “I lost my family because of you and when my granny began speaking with you she disappeared as well! What do you want from me? Why are you chasing me?!”

“Master Richard, I must insist that you mind your language.”

But the boy didn’t even look at him absorbed in the staring contest with Bruce who remained calm as ever.

“I’m sorry, Richard… I’d never wanted to cause any damage to anyone and I wish I could reverse things somehow so that you wouldn’t have to suffer so much and endure my presence. I only want you to become happy again.”

“That’s impossible!” Dick snarled. “And whatever tricks you might use stick it right in your head that you’ll lose! And whatever you might do to stop me I will testify in that court so that everyone learns the truth.”

Bruce looked at him.

“What truth?”

“That you are a lousy guardian that made my life a Hell and only Tony can give me back some of my happiness.”

He turned his back and ran to the stairs and back to his room. Bruce pressed his lips and inhaled making Hero perch to his chest and touch his pink nose to Bruce’s chin. Alfred walked to him slowly and placed his hand on his shoulder.

Bruce raised his eyes to his butler’s always comforting face.
“Maybe you should tell him the truth about his so-called uncle?”

Bruce shook his head.

“No; at the moment it will only make things worse... When the proof it’s gathered and everything comes to the fore he’ll understand” he licked his lips. “Believe me, Alfred I don’t care if he hates me...as long as the boy finds a piece of his lost peace.”

Alfred smiled.

“I wish he could overcome his pain and his stubbornness and see how much you care about him, sir...and how many things you have done for him.”

Bruce looked him in the eyes and frowned.

“Never! Promise me, Alfred, that you won’t tell him anything.”

“Of course, sir” Alfred said solemnly yet Bruce could discern his disagreement. “I would never even think of betraying your trust.”

Bruce let Hero down slowly and moved his chair to pass the open door.

“I’ll come to the Tower later to drive you to the court house” Alfred said.

“Thank you, Alfred, but I’ll drive myself: you know how much I love to drive” he smiled trying to make his butler forget what just happened.

“I do, sir” the Englishman mirrored his smile. “Well, since I won’t see you again till then, allow me to wish you good luck, Master Bruce.”

Knocks on the door brought him back to his office.

“Come in.”

Lucius’ beaming face was sunshine to Gotham’s cloudy morning.

“Good morning, Mr. Wayne! How are you today?”

“Fine, thanks, Lucius, and you? Please have a seat.”

Lucius sat at the armchair in front of Bruce’s office and intertwined his fingers on his crossed leg.

“Lucius, have you found some time to look at Queen’s proposals for cooperation?”

Lucius smiled.

“Of course, Mr. Wayne.”

“And?”

Lucius grinned and Bruce saw in his eyes the smart shine of understanding.

“I think that collaboration with Queen Industries would be highly creative and profitable for both corporations. Especially, in the field of transportation and trading I believe that Wayne Enterprises will make a nice profit by shipping Queen Industries’ products. Not to mention that we’ll secure another important alliance in the field: Mr. Queen expressed his fervent interest in our medical
projects and he is willing to invest a large amount of funds. I’ve already added our counterproposals for your consideration.”

Bruce nodded.

“So we can speed up the sign of the deals?” Lucius cocked his eyebrows smiling.

“I see…” he mumbled with deeper knowledge “I bet there are other reasons as well behind your interest and hastiness?”

Bruce lolled his head on the side and regarded his loyal scientist amused.

“You know me so well, Lucius…”

Lucius waved his hand.

“You flatter me, Mr. Wayne. Well? The fact that Mr. Queen has a connection with Princess Diana is relevant, right?”

Bruce shook his head.

“Absolutely. I want to observe this man, Lucius, because he might hold the key to finding out the truth about her.”

Lucius sobered.

“And free Superman from her potentially dangerous… hm…proximity? Given that something is off.”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded.

“If what I suspect is true then not only Superman could be faced with a grave danger but also the entire planet.”

Lucius frowned and gave up his relaxed stance to lean forward.

“You believe that her presence might be connected with something larger that affects the world? That the image of the heroin she presents is a façade and she is in fact a villain?”

Bruce looked elsewhere for a second and then back to Lucius.

“For the time being I have only the connections I traced and…my instinct” Lucius nodded “so I want to get proof in case I’m wrong.”

Lucius pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes.

“Do you think there might be some underlying connection between her and the artifacts we so meticulously made them steal?”

Bruce tapped his fingers on the desk. That was still a thought in the background: he couldn’t accept nor deny the possibility of being true…Everything was possible till he found more evidence.

“That remains to be seen, Lucius…You handled the whole think brilliantly.”

The scientist cocked his eyebrows.
“I just followed your instructions: leaking again some inside information about a huge robbery in Wayne Enterprises’ storage units; denouncing them and in the meantime, conducting a shadow of an investigation to persuade our thieves that they achieved a major blow against us…Genius playing, Mr. Wayne.”

“Thank you, Lucius; but the end will show…For the time being, the surveillance system didn’t give us anything useful about the culprits” Bruce blushed and the older man smiled.

“Mr. Stark’s tracing system works perfectly so they didn’t suspect anything nor were able to find it; we are watching them constantly. In the meantime, I’ll contact the legal department about the deal with Queen Industries and then discuss the terms with Mr. Queen but I’m sure he’ll ask for your presence in the proceedings, given” he cleared his throat “his great interest in you.”

Bruce crooked his mouth.

“Whatever it takes, Lucius. Ehm… Lucius, the research on the Immortality Water: how is it going?

“We have made huge steps, sir, for developing medicine” Lucius locked eyes with his young employer. “Excuse me for my indiscretion…”

“Please speak freely.”

Lucius blinked and pursed his lips.

“You’re thinking to use the Water to heal your wounds and walk again faster than with the orthodox method?” he leaned forward and his eyes shone with concern.

Bruce inhaled deeply and intertwined his fingers on the desk.

“I won’t refuse that the temptation is too great, Lucius…especially, now that imminent threat might be near and I must…” he met Lucius’ eyes that were concerned and gulped. “But I won’t make use of that rare gift: using the pure, mighty form of the Water has terrible impact in people’s morality and sanity – Ra’s Al Ghul was using it all the time and in the end he became worse than the criminals he wanted to stop.”

Lucius was lost in his thoughts for a few seconds: he didn’t know a lot about Al Ghul but from what he had heard and more from what he understood he wasn’t sure that the Water corrupted the man: more it increased the man’s exist immorality. Yet he definitely wouldn’t have like his young employ using that powerful elixir that the side effects of its miraculous strength weren’t known so he was relieved and proud for Mr. Wayne’s maturity to not exploit what it was in his disposition. Now he could relax again in his seat.

“I won’t become like him…” Bruce remarked looking him in the eyes as if having guessed his thoughts.

The scientist breathed a bit easier, smiled and crossed his legs casually: Thomas Wayne would have been proud of his little ghost.

“Not many people would have the golden morals to not exploit such a great power for their self and instead use it for curing other people’s suffering” the scientist said solemn.

Bruce pressed his lips and rubbed his temple.

“Maybe I don’t want such power but I have to thwart others from getting it and I’m lucky to have people like you helping me” he shook his head. “You and Tony gave me the armor that gives me
enough independency to settle some things” he preferred to change the subject.

“Mr. Wayne, I trust that you won’t attempt something that exceeds the limits of the armor…and yours” he raised his eyebrows for emphasis.

“I’ll try not to, Lucius. That I can promise you.”

“The project for your operation is almost perfected. Mr. Stark and I believe that it won’t take long before we are ready for our most important and ambitious project.”

Bruce nodded, clenching his jaw.

“About that…” he said thoughtful and Lucius frowned.

“You’re getting second thoughts?”

Bruce met Lucius’ gaze.

“Of course not. Yet the whole surgery thing drives Tony extremely stressed and I worry about him…”

Lucius licked his lips.

“He knows how difficult this procedure will be and his love for you makes him wanting to test and re-test everything, every tiny detail to make sure that everything will be perfect” he saw that the young man was concerned. “Do you want to undergo this surgery?” he asked carefully; he didn’t want to question this man’s bravery, it’d be ridiculous; yet maybe Bruce was seeing things differently.

The younger man ran his hands through his hair.

“It is my dream, Lucius. Walking again and for that I’d do everything however dangerous.”

Lucius knew that already; he had told so to Tony.

“I can’t wait for that surgery…” he continued “however I don’t know if I have the luxury to dedicate so much time to that, given the circumstances.”

Lucius narrowed his eyes.

“Don’t think that way, Mr. Wayne. Your recovery must be your first priority and when you walk again you’d be able to settle all the matters.”

Bruce smiled.

“You are right, Lucius, but from a brief discussion I had with Leslie I will have to stay in a hospital for at least one month after the surgery. And I don’t know if I can afford that…for now. I will definitely do the surgery – nothing will change that – but the time concerns me and the urgent things that demand my attention…”

Lucius understood.

“Like the hearing about your ward’s guardianship that begins today.”

Bruce nodded and shook his hand.
“Exactly” he looked at his wristwatch. “As a matter of fact, it’s about time I left for the court” he said pressing the option in his Cosmos turning it into a smartphone which he slipped into his jacket’s inner pocket.

Lucius smiled and stood.

“Our Cosmos made quite the impression in StarExpo” Bruce nodded “and Wayne Enterprises’ shares show a nice rising. So to take advantage of that momentum, I’ll prepare everything for our deal with Mr. Queen.”

Bruce wheeled his chair outside his desk.

“Thank you, Lucius.”

“You welcome, Mr. Wayne” they moved along to the office door and Lucius opened. “Good luck with the hearing.”

“Thank you, Lucius” Bruce had the feeling that he’d need as much luck as possible for this case.

Superman was flying over the endless, white, sparkling landscape of the North Pole. It seemed to him like ages from the last time he came here to bring the wheelchair Bruce sent him back; and even longer since the night he had carried Bruce; dead; to his Fortress. All the times he had returned here during his relationship with the human he wasn’t noticing the things that stood out today.

He wanted to close his senses to all these but it was impossible. Impossible to not discern the deep marks on the icebergs he had caused with his scream of despair when Bruce left his last breath in his arms whispering that he was happy because now Superman wouldn’t be in danger from the Kryptonites of his eyes.

That memory bit hard on his heart even now… When Bruce’s condition had stabilized that night Superman returned there and froze with his breath the icebergs to their previous form stopping their melting; if Bruce had died he wouldn’t have cared if the entire world had flooded…But despite his repairing work the marks were still there for him to see and remember.

He pressed his eyes shut, clenched his fist and rushed to the glowing crystal pyramid of the Fortress of Solitude. The roof of the cone opened like the petals of a blossom at his approach and he immediately floated to the hall of the holograms where Jor El always waited for him.

The silver haired image of his late Kryptonian father regarded him solemnly.

“Kal El, to what do I owe the honor of your returning?”

Superman yanked his head: he wanted to discern irony in his voice yet there was none; only a slight melancholy.

“I need the antidote” Superman crossed his arms.

Jor El frowned.

“Antidote to what? Are you experiencing any symptoms, Kal El?”

Superman huffed.

“Just make the antidote” and seeing the hologram’s puzzlement. “The antidote to Bruce’s body effect
Jor El widened his eyes slightly on realization.

“What do you experience?”

Superman blinked and shook his head.

“What I experience is my business. I know what’s happening to me: the inoculation Bruce gave me was of limited duration: he did that to have me under control so that when the inoculation wore off I’d return to him. Well, the inoculation is wearing off and… I re-experience the same symptoms.”

Jor El didn’t seem persuaded.

“Are your powers lessened? Are your senses disturbed? You feel the need to be around Bruce?”

Superman was shaking nervously his head in denial in every question. In the end he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“No! But I know it’s happening and I want you to create again the antidote and the inoculation.”

“You really believe that Bruce had given you deliberately an inoculation that would wear off and sink you to agony?”

Superman clenched his waist with both hands and lolled his head on the side thoughtful. Bruce deliberately had set the bases of rendering him again under the same effect that the human made everything in his power to stop? It seemed unlikely yet Bruce had attacked him with a dagger that could kill him: they had become enemies; he couldn’t trust him anymore. He yanked his head.

“There’s no other explanation: my mind constantly replays incidents from our life together; my senses seek stimuli from his body” he admitted. “It is like what I have with Diana only with her is real whereas that is the product of the effect Ra’s Al Ghul created using Bruce’s body: it is confirmed that this effect was true.”

Jor El cocked an eyebrow regarding his son skeptical.

“If you remember when you first experienced those symptoms with her you believed that you were ill.”

Superman felt irritation rising.

“But I wasn’t!”

“We never had the chance to find out. I told you that I would need to examine you more but you never accepted to be examined again.”

Superman looked at the hologram challenging.

“And I was right! If I was ill one time would have sufficed to find out. But now we have the prior experience and we know that it is indeed the effect of the essence that is inside Bruce’s body. I need the inoculation.”

Jor El was expressionless.

“Why didn’t you ask it from him? I don’t believe he would have denied giving you the inoculation.”

Superman rolled his eyes and snorted.
“Yeah, sure. He gave me that inoculation knowing that eventually would wear off and tie me with him; when I realized that Diana was my true love and left him, he kicked me out because he knew that sooner or later the return of the effect would bring me back to him.”

Jor El pouted and cocked his eyebrows.

“So Bruce is that evil, huh?”

Superman huffed.

“No…no…it’s not exactly malice…I mean he is sneaky but also he must believe that he saves me from…something. Bruce is selfish and will use any means to achieve what he believes is right.”

Jor El’s look was still questioning and Superman shook his head.

“And I won’t give him the satisfaction of crawling to his feet; besides being close to him will only make the effect stronger, remember? Also, I don’t have any business with him: he attacked me.”

He rolled his sleeve and showed to his father the scar from the Knife of Justice on his upper arm. Jor El seemed impressed.

“So there is an earth weapon that can hurt you, after all.”

Superman growled frustrated.

“Bruce is relentless when he wants something as you can see.”

“Or he just defended himself after what you did to him that night…”

Superman lolled his head on the side and ran his hand in his hair: despite the fact he didn’t believe that he had done anything wrong that night, still he didn’t want to remember.

“I explained to you that Bruce liked it…Maybe he enjoyed that night more than all the other times with me…”

“Really?”

Superman yanked his head upwards.

“Would you make that inoculation or I must give the orders myself?! Kal El could re-create the inoculation from the data the Fortress had stored analyzing his blood after Bruce injected him yet he preferred his father’s expertise.

Jor El nodded solemnly.

“I will make it myself but I had to examine you first, Kal El.”

The Man of Steel frowned.

“Why?”

“It is simple. Months have passed since you took that inoculation so I need to estimate your body’s condition and readjust the synthesis to your current needs exactly as the human scientist…”

“Lucius Fox.”
Jor El nodded.

“Did.”

Superman huffed and pursed his lips thoughtful causing Jor El’s frown.

“You don’t trust your own father? You know that I and the Fortress are here to serve you.”

“Right.”

He won his last hesitance and stepped in the central crystal column, the examination cylindrical column that with a hissing opened at his approach; he locked his eyes with Jor El.

Superman was suspicious and expected to feel something odd that would attempt to change him. But nothing happened apart from the custom procedure he underwent every now and then when Jor El wanted to be sure about his son’s condition and study how the earth environment affected the Kryptonian nature. So when he stepped out he was feeling the same passionate love about Diana – his major fear was that Jor El would do something to alter that – a strong guilt flooded his insides about doubting Jor El’s loyalty.

“Well?” he asked his father’s hologram. “You see that I was right? Bruce did try to trap me with Ra’s Al Ghul’s effect.”

Jor El stared at him.

“I agree: it is Bruce’s fault” Superman smiled but anger boiled inside him for the sneaky human. “There’s no sign of that effect, Kal El: your organism is clean from any trace of the effect we encountered months ago.”

He frowned.

“You said that it is Bruce’s fault.”

“A figure of speech. It is inevitable to remember and seek him, Kal El: he is your true love.”

Superman’s eyes began to redden but Jor El gazed unfazed his irritation till his son calmed down.

“Give me the inoculation!”

Jor El looked down at him with his wisdom’s authority.

“Certainly” a crystal syringe-like object popped out of the examination column and Superman grabbed it and stabbed the sharp point to his thigh. “But do not expect to stop experiencing these symptoms…”

The Man of Steel turned his back, his red cape ripping the air and the Fortress’ spike opened for his departure. Jor El watched his son disappearing as the spike of the crystal pyramid closed back.

He had gotten his answers at last.

Two green acid eyes watched the entrance of Gotham’s court house; in front of the building the same fussy lot of reporters had been gathered closing the street and creating sound pollution. He wanted to laugh hysterically but he was in a cafeteria, in a corner booth and for once he didn’t want to draw attention. He was eager to see his batsy-Brucie…and that scarf he had wrapped around his face was
itching him!

He chuckled seeing his own reflection on the glass of the window: he looked like an old lady.

After his failed attack, his wife had fled to Malibu.

“Hehe!”

Ooops, here we go! He couldn’t stop himself; Thankfully, the place was empty and the owner had
gone to the bathroom probably while the young waitress had found the chance to go to her boyfriend
outside.

Oh, that Brucie! He was playing everyone in his fingers! Well, he knew someone else that wanted
to be played in these beautiful, lean fingers…Jockey twitched from anticipation.

“Shsssss! Baaaad boyyyy!”

He had come there because he missed his darling. TV – that fabulous and damned gadget – had
offered him a glimpse of Brucie at Malibu – well, not exactly a glimpse… since the paparazzi there
were quite persistent. The youth had gone to the StarkExpo and Joker’s jaw once again went slack:
Brucie was dressed in an impeccable black suit and a white silk shirt with a black stripped tie.
Yummy! Black was really Brucie’s favorite color – not that Joker had a doubt…

But now he waited in that corner cafeteria opposite the court to have a live image.

He huffed.

“I aaaaam jealoouuuus…” he mumbled.

“What?” the waitress was passing by and turned to him. “May I help you?”

“No, dear. I’m just speaking to myself” he said in a carefree voice.

The girl laughed.

“Please continue…” she said and walked away.

Joker rolled his eyes.

“I coooome to Gotham an’ suddenly eeeeeveryone sprouts a sense of humor…”

Well, he was jealous…Brucie cared so much for this brat that he was willing to put himself to the
testing process of a court hearing. And a few months ago he almost died to save the same brat. That
was…mmm…disgusting!

Suddenly, the bunch of reporters surged forwards ascending the stairs to enter the gothic building but
police officers held them back. Joker hadn’t seen a glimpse of Brucie and that meant that the babe
had entered from the back entrance of the building to avoid the annoying lot. Joker snorted: he
should have known and now he had lost his chance…

“Shit!”

But all his envy for the brat for the care and attention he had from Brucie could work in his favor.
Hm…

He pulled away the scarf from his face and hopped to the exit turning his head to the young waitress
who was petrified upon seeing his best Cheshire smile.

“Thaaaaank you, my dear” he said kindly throwing to her a generous tip and getting out to vanish in the nearby alley.

Mr. Collins was waiting in the second’s floor corridor where the hall of the hearing was situated. As soon as the lift’s door opened and Bruce steered his wheelchair out the veteran lawyer walked there holding his leather briefcase.

“Good morning, Mr. Colins. How are you?”

“Fine, Mr. Wayne, thank you. Are you ready?”

Bruce smiled.

“Of course” he replied though he understood that the experienced lawyer knew his agony.

Collins made an inviting gesture towards the small hall’s door. Bruce knew the room because he had studied every detail beforehand wanting to ready himself as best as possible: his experience from Falcone’s trial still distressed him.

Yet despite his preparation still seeing it now made him nervous as if he was going to write school exams, which was ridiculous given his life experiences.

“Everything is going to be fine, Mr. Wayne” Collins said reassuringly walking by his side sensing the young man’s nervousness. “Also, whatever they might say you shouldn’t get affected: erase it immediately from your mind: they’ll try to unsettle you.”

Bruce grinned and nodded.

As they were ready to enter the hall that thankfully wouldn’t have any audience, a man of average height and weight met them. He was brown haired and around thirty; a bright smile appeared on his face seeing them and his gray eyes sparkled.

“Mr. Wayne, I’m so happy to see you.”

“May I know the reason?” he asked smiling and the fine dressed man blushed uncomfortable.

He offered his hand for a handshake.

“You are right; I didn’t even introduce myself. Griffon Magnie” Bruce shook his hand taking in Mr. Collins’ grin. “I’m Mr. Zucco’s attorney.”

Bruce knew the name but he hadn’t found a picture so his surprise wasn’t entirely pretended.

“Nice to meet you. Mmm…Griffon?” he asked because it was a strange name.

Magnie smiled.

“Mom was French. I understand that meeting me isn’t so nice to you… I’m the enemy” he grinned. “But we’re all here for the boy’s best interest” Bruce nodded. “So I just wanted you to know that whatever happens during the hearing isn’t personal. Actually, my respect for you is great and I wouldn’t want you to form a wrong impression for me based on whatever happens in this court room.”
Bruce lolled his head on the side.

“I guess that will depend on the nature of that ‘whatever’…”

Mr. Collins grinned approvingly and they moved inside. Bruce couldn’t shake off of him the feeling of being the accused… Zucco was already seated at the chair next to his attorney; he looked at Bruce gleefully but the youth didn’t pay any attention to him.

Judge Moot was going to handle the case and Bruce’s research had ensured him that at least the man was an honest servant of the law. Not that this made his uneasiness less…

“We are here to discuss the petition of Mr. Zucco against Mr. Wayne’s guardianship of Richard Grayson” the judge said in a strict, authoritative voice.

“Your honor I would like to ask the presence of Richard Grayson as the boy is old enough to have an opinion about his guardianship” Magnie said.

“Objection, your honor. At the present, there is nothing to demand Richard Grayson’s presence in this court room. We all know that court hearings may have a negative impact to children.”

Judge looked them over his round glasses.

“Sustained” he said. “If during the process I consider it useful I shall call the boy to testify but till then I think it is for Richard’s best interest to not be involved to the proceedings.”

Bruce breathed easier and felt the judge’s eyes on him. Zucco was also glaring at him and Magnie cleared his throat to make him stop staring at Bruce and look at him instead.

Judge Moot took in his hand the paperwork with which Ms. Turner gave her grandson’s custody to Bruce Wayne.

“Ms. Turner, the boy’s grandmother and closest alive relative gave Richard Grayson’s guardianship to Mr. Wayne in case anything happened to her” he said.

Magnie stood.

“We believe, Your Honor, that Ms. Turner did that influenced by her sympathy for the man. However, my client made that petition because he worries about the suitability of Mr. Wayne for the role of the foster father. You see, Your Honor, there is extensive bibliography that proves that the victims of abuse are very keen to manifest abusive behavior to their children or wards.”

Bruce twitched hearing that but Collins touched his upper arm calming him.

“Mr. Wayne has suffered abuse that surpasses anything charted in the history of US justice so there are much more chances he turns abusive towards a child under his care.”

Mr. Collins stood when Magnie finished.

“The bibliography, Mr. Magnie, mentions doesn’t prove anything” he came out of the desk and gave to the judge a thick packet of documents. “There are indeed some cases where abusive behavior is manifested from parents who had suffered abuse in their childhood yet there are even more cases where victims of severe abuse became perfect parents” he smiled confidently. “Following Mr. Magnie’s reasoning would have to forbid every person who suffered abuse from becoming parent thus punishing those people and stigmatizing them more. Therefore that argument is both non-solid, non-scientifically based and an insult to everyone who had the misfortune to be subject to abuse.”
Suddenly Bruce felt a slight vibration to his Cosmos that was in silent mode. He looked on his lap where he had his wristwatch hand. He pressed a small button and the wristwatch showed the message his Cosmos had received: it wouldn’t be proper to bring out his Smartphone during the process. He read:

“There is indeed an effect on our common friend”

The message had reached his Cosmos through the cave computer and there where an indication showing the latitude and longitude from where the message was sent. The North Pole. And it wasn't from Santa Claus...
"The data from scientific research on abuse victims may be ambiguous yet there is no objection to the fact that Mr. Wayne – unfortunately – remains the target of many manifestations of violence, the latest occurring just a few days ago" Magnie continued unfazed. "These constant threats not only can affect a teenager’s emotional stability but also his very safety."

Judge Moot was staring calm and without any trace of what he was thinking. Mr. Colins stood up.

"Mr. Wayne has taken every possible security measure to ensure that Richard won’t be in any danger. Following your reasoning, Mr. Magnie, no celebrity or politician should have a child due to the threats they face. Also, their children are equally normal emotionally and mentally with every other child whose parents aren’t facing attacks or threats."

Zucco stood up.

"He doesn’t care about Dick’s safety" Magnie tried to calm him down but Zucco didn’t relent "he uses his gorillas to keep the boy away from me!"

Judge Moot yanked calmly his head and looked sternly at both Zucco and his attorney while Collins smiled to Bruce who didn’t follow Zucco in yelling. Bruce knew better than biting such baits.

"Mr. Magnie, I suggest you advice your client not react like this because I will refer him for contempt of the court."

Zucco sat and Magnie looked at the judge.

"It won’t happen again, Your Honor; my client was carried away from his concern for his nephew."

"Whom, according to Ms. Turner, he did never visit once since his birth" Mr. Collins pointed calmly.

The judge looked at Zucco whose face became red.

"There were reasons” he retorted.

Mr. Collins grinned and nodded.

"Of that I’m certain, Mr. Zucco; as I’m sure that there are reasons for your sudden interest about your…nephew."

"Objection, Your Honor!” Magnie jolted upright. "These are unfounded insinuations."

"No, Mr. Magnie. These are facts” Mr. Collins replied with conviction “based on the frequency or better the absence of Mr. Zucco from his nephew’s life until very recently.”

Bruce would have liked to present everything he had found about Zucco and his shady activities yet he knew that it was not the time yet. Speaking now, it would only serve into making him look like trying to slander the man and thus proving that he is unsuitable for Dick’s guardianship. Despite the fact he’d like to end as soon as possible with this man first and foremost to save the boy from him once and for all and second to be able to focus on what the message had just revealed, Bruce knew that he needed to be patient once again.

"Councilors, I would like both of you to stay on the subject. Mr. Wayne, is it true that you thwart Richard from seeing his uncle?”
Bruce looked at him in perfect tranquility.

“Not at all. I don’t see why Mr. Zucco feels that way, especially since he often meets with Richard. During the Christmas Gymnastics Gala nobody stopped Mr. Zucco to watch Richard’s performance from up close or posed any obstacle when he congratulated Richard.”

Zucco nodded nervously.

“Yeah, sure…Because people were all around and you didn’t want them to know.”

Magnie glared at his client. Bruce didn’t follow the man’s lead into personal quarrels which the youth could tell that the Judge appreciated by the slightest of sparkle into his rather poised eyes.

Luthor stood before the huge column of light where the strange items he was so familiar with hovered. He had his hands clenching his waist and a grin was spread on his face as he was full aware of Mannheim’s narrowed eyes on him.

This time the gangster had brought with him his right hand: that ugly woman with the bushy bleached out blond hair. She wore skin tight blue trousers that displayed her plumb legs and buttocks; an equally tight blue leather jacket completed her attire reaching the beginning of her hips. Luthor cocked an eyebrow at the bad taste of this woman yet she looked at him with more smugness than her boss and the tycoon felt chills even if he wanted to suppress that.

He met Mercy’s suspicious eyes which were estimating the situation for possible threats to her boss.

“My dear lady, how lovely to see you again!” the tycoon addressed Granny Goodness on purpose omitting her surname though he knew it; she showed him her teeth and Luthor turned to Mannheim “I see you’re quite efficient” Lex said grinning broadly to his partner.

Mannheim walked closer.

“You had any doubts?” he growled and Luthor lost every trace of humor.

“Of course not.”

Mannheim gave a poor mimic of a grin.

“Nice.”

Luthor shook his head trying to shake off that foggy sensation from his head.

“It must be a heavy blow for Wayne’s ego” he said trying to entertain his own insecurity. “Losing the items he so avidly was using to piss us: I’d have given my half fortune to see his face when he found out about the theft…”

Mannheim cocked both his eyebrows.

“No theft: re-acquiring what it is mine.”

Luthor smiled.

“You’re right! He chose the wrong man to challenge, huh?” he said and patted Mannheim’s back only to get a glare from the gangster that made his blood ran cold and his hand stay in midair over Mannheim’s back.
Mannheim stretched his imposing figure and Luthor thought that the man towered him even more than ever. It felt as if clouds had gathered all over the premises casting the place in darkness.

“Now it is your turn to show that you are useful and not a waste of space as your lot” Mannheim’s voice sounded like thunders in Luthor’s head and even Mercy was shaken though the woman was always dead calm however difficult the situation. “Finish the job you were hired for!” the gangster clenched his fist in the air. “I had had enough with your inadequacy.”

Goodness sniggered satisfied but Luthor nodded slavishly without feeling any twinge of anger.

“I will but I’m getting daily nuisances from government agents insinuating that I was the mastermind behind the attack on Wayne.”

Mannheim cocked an eyebrow and crooked his mouth.

“You did?” Luthor shook his head in denial “If they had any proof you’d have been already in jail again. So focus on your job.”

Mannheim turned to live, his lieutenant following, when Luthor cleared his throat.

“Did you check the items for any tracking devices?”

The gangster stopped on his heels and just tilted his head to Luthor smirking.

“You too are afraid of this man’s cunning…” he remarked jeering.

“I have bad experience…”

Mannheim laughed.

“Though I don’t share your fears, the items are clear – so just do your job. Fast!”

Both he and Goodness began again walking towards the exit and the woman’s snigger echoed through the vast premises making Luthor and Mercy shiver.

“There are traces of a foreign influence on Kal El” Jor El’s deep, solemn voice told Bruce from the screen of the processor in the cave.

As soon as the hearing ended for today Bruce returned to the Manor and descended to the cave despite Alfred’s efforts to persuade him to eat something first; Jor El was already waiting on the screen. Bruce knew that the Kryptonian could gain access to his processor since he had come to the cave many times with the wheelchair Superman created for him: the wheelchair gathered information about the environment and his computer. However he didn’t take measures to thwart to block Jor El’s access because he wanted to be informed in case something happened to Clark.

From the moment he watched the evacuation operation in Texas Bruce was almost expecting – no, hoping – that he’d take a notice. He was hoping because if he was right and something was off with Superman, then Jor El was the only safe option for the hero to run to for help.

Bruce rubbed his chin with his hand.

“Organic symptoms? Body malfunction? Weakening? Illness?” he asked but Jor El shook his head in refusal. “His brain is affected?”
“No. There is nothing life threatening.”

The relief in Bruce’s eyes was evident to the Kryptonian yet Bruce realized and instantly made his gaze neutral.

“Then how you came to that conclusion?”

“It is more abstract; something in his aura as you humans name it.”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“Magic?”

Jor El gave a slight wave with his hand.

“It is more complicated than that and I’m afraid that at the moment I’m not able to isolate the factors that constitute it. There was an odd perfume around him – a strong perfume that was affecting everything but I am certain that there was more.’’

Bruce looked at him lopsided, mentally noting the perfume factor.

“What kind of perfume?”

“Of flowers of every kind – not artificial.”

The human nodded remembering Vivian’s room in his nightmare and Tony’s description of the Amazon’s apartment: the abundance of pots with flowers and plants. Yet something else troubled him right now.

“If he didn’t have any bodily symptom and the effect is located in his aura” he waved his hand “influencing abstractly his behavior, then how did you persuade him to get examined?”

“He thought that he might be ill.”

Bruce nodded.

“Yes; I saw him during the evacuation mission in Texas; he seemed a bit troubled but I’m glad he is fine and” he nodded “his love for humankind is stronger than this effect.”

Bruce’s voice was steady and indifferent just stating the facts yet Jor El immediately felt that the young man had accepted that Superman’s love for him wasn’t strong enough since the effect had defeated it.

“It is not the only love that it is stronger than this effect.”

Bruce nodded.

“Thankfully, he never stopped loving his human mother.”

“His love for you is also strong, Bruce” the young man shook his head cocking his eyebrows. “He came to the Fortress because he indeed experiences some symptoms: he thinks about you; his nostalgia urges him back to you. So he thought that the inoculation you gave him to stop Ra’s Al Ghul’s effect wore off resulting in the old effect resurfacing.’’

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose.
“He considers me so devious that I’d have given him imperfect inoculation?” he shook his head.
“What I’m saying? Of course he does.”

Jor El looked at him with sympathy which was something new for the hologram.

“You know that these ill thoughts about you are the result of that strange influence. The fact remains that his resisting love for you made him believe that he is ill giving me the chance to find an excuse to examine him.”

Bruce nodded though he wasn’t convinced about the love part. However he didn’t want to discuss it.

“Yes, what matters is that you confirmed our suspicions” he raised his eyes to Jor El’s. “Can you make an antidote?”

Jor El closed his eyes and then looked at him.

“I’m afraid that I can’t: there is nothing organic to base the antidote.”

Bruce bit his bottom lip.

“What about the perfume? Can’t you make an antidote analyzing the synthesis of it?”

Jor El shook his head.

“It is not a common perfume: it cannot be analyzed.”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“And? Was he persuaded that his symptoms weren’t due to the inoculation wearing off?”

“I am afraid that he didn’t… so I gave him the inoculation again.”

“Good” Bruce said determined ignoring the growing disappointment for Clark’s persistence to believe the worst for him; besides it was expected… “I wouldn’t want him stop trusting you. Jor El, I wonder… As you tested his body did you find any information on Diana? You said that this perfume can’t be analyzed but maybe something else?”

Jor El grinned.

“Whether she is indeed divine?”

Bruce looked at him.

“That too.”

“You know already that she isn’t the semi-goddess my son believes.”

The human nodded.

“I have met her before many years. She was one of the whores in Falcone’s cabaret; she had a slightly different appearance then but she definitely was the same person. A person of trust confirmed that this woman existed and she wasn’t one of my nightmares’ illusions. However I couldn’t find her in the files of Gotham’s police or the public archives.”

“A mystery then.”
Bruce tapped some buttons on his keyboard and in the smaller screen on the right of the one with Jor El, the Amazon’s sword and her golden lasso appeared accompanied by a thick raw of data in the right part of the screen. He showed there with his index finger.

“Batman encountered her once and the Tumbler analyzed the weapons she carried…Her weapons aren’t of human creation” he raised his eyebrows “and the material doesn’t match anything known: maybe you can recognize the materials’ origin?”

“You mean if her weapons are coming from another planet” Bruce nodded but Jor El after a thorough examination of the data shook his head in refusal. “I am afraid the material doesn’t match anything in my knowledge. That however doesn’t change the possibility of someone providing them to her.”

“That actually fits my theory of her acting as part of a broader scheme” Jor El knitted his thick silver eyebrows. “And she is also able to fly, has incredible strength, fighting skills of an Amazon…” he shook his head.

“I’m sure you’ll find the answers, Bruce. I trust your intelligence, my friend. Your intellect is brilliant…for a human” Bruce chuckled. “I have missed our chess games.”

“Me too, Jor El” well, not only the chess games… his mind travelled back to the happy times in the Fortress before he stopped it.

Jor El’s expression was filled with understanding.

“Bruce, he still loves you.”

The young man shook his head.

“Jor El, you know better than anyone that I’m not the proper one for Kal El. So it is for his best interest that he doesn’t love me.”

Jor El’s face became grim.

“I don’t know a more appropriate person than you for my son.”

Bruce smiled.

“But you know very few people, Jor El…”

Jor El smiled.

“How is your kitten? I’m glad my son didn’t bend so low to take the animal from you.”

Bruce grinned.

“Hero is fine: he has grown a lot – Clark will be proud of him when he comes round. Maybe despite the effect he knew deep inside that Hero would be better staying here.”

Jor El inclined his head solemnly.

“My son treated you awfully, Bruce yet I detect how deep is your love for him” Bruce shook his head in denial and the Kryptonian grinned with sympathy. “I must leave you now: as a scientist, I’m not much religious yet may Rao help you in your efforts. Please, do bear in mind that I’ll be at your services for whatever you may need.”
Dick came out of the showers carrying his backpack on the shoulder; he headed to the main hall of the public gym only to find Jeffrey waiting for him. The Afro-American patted the boy on the back and Dick answered only with a lukewarm grin.

“Dick, you were great today” his trainer sighed “I hope we now focus on our work here and don’t have any incident again.”

Dick rolled his eyes and huffed.

“If only you could understand, Jeff…”

The trainer crooked his mouth.

“I do understand, Dick” he shook his head “and I see that from the moment Zucco entered your life he pushes you to wrong choices.”

Dick crossed his arms on the chest and pressed his lips.

“You’re not fan of his, huh?” he spat.

Jeffrey licked his lips and locked eyes with the teen.

“No; and I know that he started a court dispute to get your guardianship from Mr. Wayne…and I’m worried.”

Dick shook his head.

“You’re wrong, Jeff…Tony is a good man and cares for me” Jeffrey crooked his mouth and Dick widened his eyes for emphasis. “You’ll see that as soon as I’m with him and free from Wayne nothing would distract me again from my training. Because, Jeff, what happened that night was Wayne’s fault. You know me: I wouldn’t have done something like this if his presence wasn’t imposed to me. This man makes me sick.”

Jeffrey huffed.

“I think you’re wrong about Zucco, Dick” the boy yanked his head frustrated and his trainer held his upper arms and met his gaze. “He isn’t a good man.”

But it was obvious that the teen didn’t believe him.

“Ya’re losing yar breath, pal” a young voice that tried too hard to sound older came behind him and Dick detached from Jeffrey to pat his younger friend. “Are ya a free bird again?” Jason chuckled.

Dick crooked his mouth.

“Yeah… my…” he cocked his eyebrows ironically “ban from the gym has ended…”

Jeffrey cleared his throat.

“You deserved that, Dick – wandering Gotham at night was very dangerous and consuming beer can easily push you to stronger booze which can destroy not only your future in gymnastics but also your life as a whole.”

“Yeah, sure…”
Jason cocked his eyebrows to the trainer lolling his head on the side helpless.

“Jay, care to join me for a juice?” Dick asked pointing out the ‘juice’.

“Only if juice isn’t for me!”

Jeffrey patted Dick and pulled of his hoody’s pocket a USB stick.

“Mr. Breizic sent me an entire set of new movements to practice. Study them and tomorrow we’ll discuss and put them into practise, okay?”

Dick’s face brightened hearing that the veteran trainer had sent him new material but then he remembered Zucco’s warnings about Breizic and hesitated to take the stick. Jeffrey frowned.

“Is anything wrong, Dick?”

The boy shook his head in denial and took the stick putting it into the front pocket of his backpack.

“Thanks, Jeff!” he said and began to walk with Jason towards the cafeteria.

The boys chose a corner table.

“I saw yar face when Jeff gave ya that stick; I thought ya liked Breizic” Jason mumbled chewing the straw of his milk shake. “Ya were as if ya’re given shit…”

Dick sipped from his juice.

“You exaggerate as always.”

Jason frowned.

“Cut the crap, pal! Ya’re talking to me now!”

Dick rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Okay, okay…I just realized that he came into my life rather suddenly and…it might not be in random.”

Jason slapped himself.

“Wow! Don’t tell me there’s another plot against you?!” Dick rolled his eyes and sniffed. “An’ who mighta alert ya to that? Mmmm…” he pouted and tapped his finger on his temple as if thinking hard. “Oh! Zucco!”

Dick crossed his arms on the chest and shook his head exasperated.

“Wayne will do everything to keep me away from my uncle so he put Breizic to slander Tony taking advantage of my enthusiasm to have him as my trainer.”

Jason took a big gulp from his milk shake.

“So everyone is evil except Zucco? Oh, man! I thoughta ya’re smart but ya’re dump as a brick…Ya’re granny was lyin’ to ya too?! Get a grip, dude! Why not Zucco lyin’ about everyone? What do ya know ‘bout that guy except from what he says an’ what yar dump mind makes?”

Dick ran both his hands in his still wet hair.
“Ya put Zucco above yar granny, man?! Why? What has he done for ya all these years?”

“He knew my father...he...he cares for me and even if his fears about Breizic are too much he does it only for me...”

Jason widened his eyes, cocking his eyebrows jeering.

“Yeah, sure...”

Dick licked his lips and twirled his straw in the orange juice.

“Tony will take my guardianship from Wayne and I'll be again calm and happy.”

Jason formed his hand like a gun and pretended he shot his own head. Then leaned towards his friend.

“I don't trust him, man...he sucks...” but then his eyes fell on the built-in TV screen at the wall far behind Dick’s back and laughed. “Speakin’ of this...it seems ya’re a celebrity, man!”

Dick frowned and twisted in his chair to look at what Jayson was talking about. Vicky Vale’s talk show played on the screen and Dick saw on the wall screen his face pixelated – since he was underage - along with Wayne’s and his uncle’s.

“Media and audience are not allowed inside the court room yet we have information that Mr. Zucco’s side bases their case about Mr. Wayne’s inability to be a guardian to the fact that the young heir has a really lumbered up past that definitely has left some mental disorders on him. Thus, making him a potential danger for a child.”

Vicky Vale watched with attention her guest and her audience did the same. She had formed a panel to discuss the currently hottest issue in Gotham’s social life. She turned to a man around 50 on her right.

“Dr. Spellman, what’s your opinion about the matter?”

The man pursed his lips in a hard thinking grimace and shook his head.

“People get marked for all their life by lesser things than what Mr. Wayne has suffered.”

“But could these wounds really make Mr. Wayne a danger for a child’s well being?” she asked.

The doctor cocked his eyebrows.

“This isn’t something that can be answered easily, Vicky. There are cases with victims of abuse that became great parents and others that the victims became the perpetrators repeating their awful experiences to their children...”

Vicky touched her earphone and nodded.

“We have Gil with Mr. Zucco” in the wall screen behind her a young female reporter held a microphone in front of Tony Zucco.

“Good evening, Mr. Zucco. I’m Vicky Vale.”

“Hello, Miss. Vale.”
“Do you really believe that Mr. Wayne is potentially dangerous for your nephew?”

Zucco pressed his lips.

“Miss. Vale, what matters is not what I believe but what is happening to Richard. You all saw the boy drinking alcohol and quarrelling with adults, running away when a police officer came in” he shook his head sad. “This isn’t my nephew; this is all Bruce Wayne’s bad influence. And that was the reason I was forced to petition: to save my boy who suffers under Wayne’s custody.”

Vale cocked an eyebrow.

“But from all we know you came back in Gotham only a few months ago so you don’t know that much about Richard.”

A shine of irritation crossed Zucco’s eyes but he grinned.

“It is true that I didn’t have the chance to be very close to my nephew but that doesn’t mean that we don’t have a really wonderful relationship that Bruce Wayne tried many times to thwart by putting his security people guarding Richard.”

Vale lolled her head on the side.

“Richard is the ward of a billionaire and Joker is unleashed so I think it’s reasonable to have tight security around the boy.”

“And only for the dangers that threaten Richard because of him it would be better for the boy to be with me rather than Wayne; my attorney, Mr. Magnie, has pointed out that to the judge. Everything that surrounds Wayne is inappropriate for a boy. You certainly have heard the rumors about him and Superman…”

Many people from the audience chuckled but Vale chose to not answer and played her golden pen between her fingers.

“Mr. Zucco, do you believe that the court’s decision will justify you?’’

“Definitely!” his smile was almost Cheshire.

“Thank you, for our discussion, Mr. Zucco. Good luck to you and of course we all wish the best for Richard.”

“Man” Jason shook his head “I don’t trust this buffoon…”

Dick rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, talks Jay, the Wayne fanboy…”

Jason’s eyes widened and he jerked exasperated.

“Bollocks! Ya’re an asshole! I’m yar granny’s fanboy an’ ya shoulda be too!” Jason huffed and puffed a bit before calming. “If Zucco begins sayin’ bad things ‘bout me, ya’ll believe him?”

Dick looked at the younger boy’s eyes and for the first time he saw the eleven year old boy without any acted coolness or macho facade. Only the little boy who had seen his mother in jail and almost dying from alcohol. He touched Jason’s forearm and smiled.
“Tony has never said anything bad about you.”

“An’ if he does?”

Dick pressed his lips.

“I’ll say to him that he is wrong; Jay, you’re my best friend: nothing is gonna change that.”

The younger boy nodded and resumed his macho expression causing Dick’s smile.

“Mmm…Ya’re a lucky sonovagun, ya know?”

Dick snorted.

“Why, Jay?”

“I mean, ya know, not for…ya know, what happened to yar family…Lucky ‘cause Batguy took ya in his car…I’m thinkn’ that all the time! How was it?”

“Awesome!” the older boy exclaimed overenthusiastic on purpose to tease his friend.

Jason slapped the table.

“Fuck! I want a ride too!”

Dick chuckled.

“It’s not the roller coaster, you know!” he cocked an eyebrow amused from the childish pout in Jason’s face; but then Dick became serious. “I want to see him again…now that I know he is alive…”

“I told ya so…”

“He saved my life…”

Jason nodded.

“It’s what Batguy does…”

Dick lolled his head on the side and snorted.

“No kiddin’! I didn’t know, thanks for telling me!” he sneered. “Maybe if I run away again…”

Jason blinked.

“Forget it, dude! The Bat sure has better things to do than babysittin’ a brat an’ this time Breizic will ditch ya an’ Wayne will ban ya for a month.”

Dick snorted.

“Wayne won’t have me for long…” he said relieved. “And then I’ll be free!” Jason crooked his mouth.

“Speakin’ of which…Wayne is comin’…” he whispered to his friend seeing Bruce leading his wheelchair towards them. “Yar trainer didna say that Alfred would come?”

Dick snorted.
“Wayne wants to show off how good guardian he is…”

Jason raised his eyebrows at his friend’s grudge and his gaze caught again the huge TV screen.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed and Dick seeing his friend’s goggling eyes turned curious to see as Bruce reached their table.

“Hi, boys. Nice to see you again, Jason” Bruce greeted them but immediately frowned seeing both of them absorbed in the TV screen and turned his gaze there.

Vicky Vale after the discussion with Zucco ended turned again to her guests, vaguely aware that the wall screen was resuming the initial theme with the faces of the three protagonists in the court dispute. However soon she registered that her audience was looking at the wall screen with bulged eyes. That was odd because they hadn’t scheduled to present anything so fascinating that would caught the audience’s attention; curious she turned to see what was going on.

Vale frowned and paled.

Bruce’s face lost every color: he knew the place that the TV played: the quality wasn’t high but it was good enough to show every detail.

“Strip!”

This brute roar was so familiar and so close as if he was experiencing one of his nightmares, here in a public place. The healthy part of his spine froze as if the order was made to him.

Falcone was standing in front of his big desk at his office in Dolcetto and his fist had a little blood. His face was – as always – contorted in a grimace of rage. And the object of his wrath was lying in the floor, right in the base of the wall: a cringing ragged mass of a small boy who trembled.

“Stay there!” Bruce almost yelled to the boy.

But the boy stood up stumbling on his shaking weak legs – Bruce knew he would and bit his bottom lip making the flesh bleed. Exactly as the mouth and nostrils of the bruised boy…

The gaunt boy could use only his left arm since his right hung by his side like a dead log but that didn’t stop him from taking off hastily his tattered clothes. He was crying and his chest heaved violently but he didn’t stop because he knew there would be more beating if he did. He stopped only when his bony body stayed completely naked in front of Falcone’s gleeful eyes.

The Grey Wolf surged at the boy and fisted his hair and dragged him to his desk. The crime lord used his other arm to push the objects off the desk and dropped the boy on letting his miserable trembling legs dangling off the floor.

Bruce saw appalled his buttocks displayed in common view but he couldn’t avert his eyes, which were glued there freezing his existence and erasing everything else around.

“Open yar fuckin’ legs, ya bastard!”

The boy forced his legs that shook uncontrollably to open as much as possible yet Falcone barked unsatisfied.
“More!” he growled “And stick yar asshole out for me! Ya slut!”

The boy immediately obeyed, trying to swallow his sobs but failing; his buttocks convulsed because he was crying and because he knew what was coming next... Falcone laughing came and stood between his legs slapping cruelly the naked buttocks causing more sobs.

Vale’s eyes bulged as everyone else’s in the studio: what was that? Who was doing that?

She saw Falcone, his backside to the camera, dropping his pants and briefs; his erection was visible and it was rock hard.

She had had enough: she stood and ran incredibly fast for someone in stiletto heels to the control panel where the staff there watched equally shocked.

“Sam, cut it!” she screamed outraged.

The man with the raven ponytail in front of the control panel turned to her and shrugged helpless.

“I can’t! It comes from somewhere else and I can’t overcome it! Somebody hacked our signal!”

“Then cut our signal entirely! We can’t let that play!”

Steve widened his eyes.

“You’re crazy! The Boss will kill me!”

“Absolutely!” a rough voice came behind her and she knew that Solomon Wizze, the President and owner of the station had just arrived.

She turned with a nasty frown on her face and glared at him. Unlike her he was completely calm in his fine tailored suit, smoking his cigar.

“Solomon, you surely don’t want this abomination broadcasting from GTV.”

But the sturdy man chewed his cigar and cocked his eyebrows.

“Show must go on, Vick! This might be gruesome but we won’t hide the truth – people have the right to know everything.”

Vicky narrowed her eyes to slits that flashed; she gestured to the screen where a half naked Falcone had thrust to the bent boy.

“Wayne here is barely eleven! What truth?! This is child pornography! This is a federal crime, Solomon!”

“They have hacked our signal” he cut her “we’re not responsible for that and...our numbers are exploding!”

Vicky could see the $s flashing to Wizze’s eyes; she was disgusted.

“And unethical...” she ended her phrase hissing between her gritted teeth.

Leslie was returning to her office at the clinic having finished her visits to the patients’ rooms; she was holding the tablet with the latest data on her patients’ condition. She stopped to the nurses’
station to sign a patient’s discharge when unusual fuss from the waiting area drew her attention.

“What’s this?” she asked Michael who was making his shift at the nurses’ station.

“Probably something they see in Vale’s show: it is very popular with these people.”

Leslie stretched her posture and her face took its strictest expression.

“This is a hospital though!” she marched there and she was ready to scowl at them when she saw what they were seeing.

Leslie during these months since Falcone’s downfall had watched everything about the crime lord trying to gain some knowledge about Bruce’s experiences to help the youth; so she recognized immediately the office and of course the skinny, battered boy.

She stayed like a thunder had just struck her: Falcone was abusing Bruce and everyone was audience to that. She felt the breath caught in her lungs and bile filling her mouth forcing her to gulp constantly; her eyes watered seeing the little boy taking off his clothes obeying Falcone’s orders shaking from his terror.

And then the sturdy adult grabbed the poor thing and bent him on the desk barking to him to spread his legs…

“Enough!” she screamed and pressed the button to the remote control closing the TV.

People still shocked from what they had just seen looked at her dumbstruck trying to register her presence.

“Leave! There’s nothing to see!” she clapped her hands glaring at the nurses who had been watching along with the visitors.

When everyone had dispersed she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She heard footsteps approaching and saw Kelly.

“Dr. Thompkins, are you alright? Do you need something?”

“No, Kelly, thank you” she turned and hurried to her office; she couldn’t leave the hospital right now but her heart was bleeding for Bruce.

She dialled Alfred’s cell number to warn him – Leslie didn’t call the Manor’s number because usually at this hour Alfred was in the city to bring Dick back home from his training. And she didn’t want to make Bruce suspect that something had happened.

“Good evening, Leslie” her friend’s poised voice greeted her.

“Alfred, where are you?”

“At the Manor; Leslie, I detect you are upset…” his face’s frown was reflected in his observation.

“Open your TV at GTV” she ordered and Alfred obliged.

The cell phone almost fell from his hand seeing the footage.

“Good Lord!” he exclaimed. “Bloody Hell! That is impossible!”

“Alfred, if you’re in the Manor, where is Bruce now?”
“He went to the city to bring Master Richard back to the Manor” the man felt the room spinning as the images from Falcone’s brutal abuse played before his eyes as if they had sprung from one of his nightmares. “Oh, my Goodness! Do you gather that he is seeing this?”

“I don’t know, Alfred…If he is…Damn!”

“I’ll try to reach him, Leslie and understand his condition. We must keep our calm, my dear: he might not have seen.”

“Alright. Call me right away as soon as you hear from him…Damn! I can’t leave the clinic right now but if Bruce needs me, call me ASAP, okay?”

“I will, Leslie.”

Kelly ran to the little closet with the nurses uniforms to call Thomas; she was sure that he would want to know about Leslie’s sudden distress.

“Hi, Tommy: something odd just happened: people were watching TV and Dr. Thompkins furious closed the TV and yelled at everyone. She was shocked and her eyes almost terrorized.”

Thomas Elliot smirked. He was sprawled on his sofa, still dressed in his tailored blue stripped suit minus the jacket and held between his fingers a crystal flute filled with champagne.

“I know, babe, I know. Thank you…I can’t wait to see you tonight after your shift!”

The nurse giggled and ended the call sending him kisses.

Thomas rolled his eyes at her stupidity and shook his head exasperated; he hurried to focus again on what he was watching the moment Kelly called: GTV’s show – Falcone fucking the underage Bruce Wayne.

He sipped from his flute and raised the glass.

“Cheers, Brucie!”

Bruce, his eyes still fixed on the screen, realized that people were goggling at the screen and at him slowly realizing his presence there. Operating in auto pilot he brushed one of his wrist watch’s buttons and the screen became black as Falcone began cruelly thrusting in his younger self.

Only then he managed to take his eyes from the screen while everyone else in the room was still staring at the screen. The boys too.

“Boys” he said calm as ever and both Dick and Jason looked at him with widened eyes. “We have to go.”

Even Dick didn’t protest and hastily took his backpack and stood. Bruce left a bill on the table and followed the boys while still people numb were trying to understand what had happened.

As Bruce crossed the gym’s central hall his mind was racing: he had closed that TV set but everywhere else in Gotham people continued watching…He bit his lips that now bled more and
brushed the panel on the armrest to speed up the wheelchair to catch the boys who were rushing to
the exit.

Vicky’s face was distorted from rage watching her boss’ mock sad face and his glistening eyes that
manifested his triumph for the attention the station would get and of course the money from the
advertisements.

“They hacked us, alright, but this doesn’t mean we can’t stop the broadcasting!” she felt her perfectly
groomed hair becoming a bush.

Wizze frowned, not understanding like the crowd that had gathered in the meantime. The frown
became a full grimace of rage when Vicky rushed to the control panel, grabbed the foam cup with
Sam’s steaming coffee and splashed the content on the bench with the audio visual aids.

Her eyes shone enthusiastic when sparkles began dancing from the bench making Sam and the
others who sat there jumped away scared. Thankfully, the foam cup was almost full.

“You crazy bitch!” Wizze growled.

The sparkles became more and smoke began emitting before a loud bang that made everyone bent
for cover. Vicky stood unfazed watching satisfied the blank screen: the signal and the image were
down.

The technicians and Wizze knew very well that it would take much time for the damage to be
restored and of course the hacking signal would be lost.

The boys had jumped in the car’s back seat and Bruce calm as if nothing had happened slipped from
his armchair to the driver’s seat.

He felt numb, like being in a surreal world; empty from everything; he wasn’t thinking and his eyes
weren’t seeing although somewhat aware of the world around.

However, he knew his condition and felt grateful to Tony for having installed auto pilot to every car
Bruce had to ease him with his disability. Bruce didn’t make use of the auto pilot in his black car
neither in this custom one but now that system was very useful. Despite the fact his eyes were fixed
on the street, were seeing only blurred lights and masses; his hands were holding casually the steer
wheel but he didn’t trust his current ability to drive safely. Sweat was purring all over his body
although his heartbeat and his breath were below the normal levels.

“Jason, we’ll first drive you home” he said so casually and indifferent that Jason goggled.

“Dude…” the younger of the boys mumbled “I’m sorry, man…”

Dick elbowed him scowling him with the eyes and mouthing that he should shut up but it was too
too late.

But Bruce turned his eyes to them and smiled though his face muscles felt cramped.

“Thank you, Jason but I am the one who should apologize to you…for what you saw there” he
replied.
When the sparks from the blast stopped and people recovered from the shock Wizze stormed at Vicky who looked at him unfazed smirking satisfied. The old man was fuming and almost eating his cigar.

“You’re fired!” he screamed and his cigar along with a lot of spit dropped from his mouth.

Vicky laughed at his spectacle.

“Nah! I’m quitting, you cock sucking, greedy bastard!”

She ground her teeth gathering her entire strength and stabbed her stiletto heel to his foot; Wizze bent in two and growled like a wounded beast.

“And I’ll testify in the sue Wayne will do against you” she spat at his face smirking and stretched her posture, fixed her hair and left elegantly the control room in front of the eyes of every member of the staff and her show’s audience. Several people applauded and wolf whistled.

“Here we are” Bruce stopped the car and turned in his seat to look the boys.

They had arrived at the apartment building where Ms. Todd and Jason lived. Jason eyed first Bruce and then Dick.

“Ya’ll be okay?” he said without being sure to whom he was making the question.

Dick nodded and Bruce grinned.

“Your mother…” he showed with a head gesture at Ms. Todd who had just come out of the building.

The woman leaned to the window of the driver’s seat and Bruce lowered the glass. Her face was pale and Bruce felt a cold current running through his back realizing that she had seen…

“Bruce…” she said panting trying to read if he knew. “The GTV’s signal is down…” she chose to give that ambiguous information.

Bruce didn’t expect to hear that: he definitely could have brought down the signal but from the cave. Maybe Tony? But Tony was in New York and perhaps he didn’t even know about…

“Thank you, Kate” he replied with a smile that flickered uncertain. “I brought Jason.”

“Thank you…” the woman’s bottom lip was trembling obviously from shock and sadness for what she just saw.

Jason sensing that her mother’s presence at the moment was worsening things jumped out of the car and grabbed her upper arm.

“We leavin’ now, mom…” he found Bruce’s eyes “goodnight” he mumbled and Bruce grinned.

“Goodnight to both of you.”

The two men slipped through the shadows of Metropolis’ dusk leaving the warehouse they were in
for hours. They stepped out from the shady alleys to the crowded, buzzy, innocent streets mixing with the pedestrians to end up to the corner bar.

A third shadow followed them from a distance and after waiting a couple of minutes to not raise suspicions entered the same bar choosing a secluded table on the less lighted part of the place.

The two men had chosen to sit at the bar’s stools – the third shadow grinned: of course they wanted to act the innocent, law abiding citizens.

Suddenly someone sat at the chair next to him.

“What are you doing here?” a whispered demand came in a pissed female voice.

“The same as you” he answered.

“It’s not your business, farmboy” Lois spat.

“It is! We were in this together from the start and it’s my case as much as yours!”

Lois gritted her teeth and cocked her eyebrows.

“Your passion for her died so fast that you stopped running back to her as soon as the school bell rings?” she sniggered.

Clark lolled his head on the side.

“Why you’re bringing her into this? I’m doing my job.”

She smirked.

“Which she obviously doesn’t know because you’re afraid to tell her because she snubs everything human related.”

“Lois…Stop spitting poison at her” the woman rolled her eyes. “I’m looking forward to go back to her as soon as my job is done.”

“Then go! I don’t need you…And I’m right: you’re scared of her reaction if she learns that you work as a” her face turned a feigned expression of disgust “common human.”

Clark pressed his lips.

“Can we just continue our job here? It seems that something stirs in the city’s underbelly.”

Lois nodded.

“And those two indicate that Intergang is in fact alive and kicking.”

Clark remembered Bruce’s doubts when everyone believed that the Intergang died at the Metropolis’ Subway attack.

“However we can’t be positive yet” he said not wanting to accept something that Bruce had said: the man had tried to trap him giving him a faulty inoculation.

“I’m not talking to you!” Lois spat and turned her head at the bar where a flat screen played the news.
Clark took in the rising of her heartbeat and looked too. He had heard the newscaster warning the viewers for the disturbing content but he assumed that it was another one of those ISIS videos.

“Holly shit!” Lois exclaimed.

Clark didn’t speak but his heartbeat spiked too: the late Falcone from several years ago in his office at Dolcetto was barking to a boy of barely eleven to strip. From that moment on the image was mostly pixelized but it was obvious that the sturdy man was penetrating the sobbing boy.

The car had hardly stopped in front of the Wayne Manor when Alfred ran to the driver’s door opening for his young master. Dick opened his door and jumped out but didn’t rush inside the Manor and to his room as usual; instead he stood staring at the two men like paralyzed.

“Master Bruce…” Alfred was almost shaking but found the calmness to take the folded wheelchair and press the small control panel on the armrest to unfold it for Bruce who thanked him sitting. The butler had eyes only for his young master, agony and worry radiating though he didn’t want that.

Bruce felt exhausted: driving to the Manor seemed like the most difficult thing in the world. However inside him there was nothing; he was numb as if he didn’t exist.

“So…you saw…” he said expressionless to his butler registering with a pang Alfred’s paleness. Bruce’s heart that till now beat very slowly gave a hard kick with a thud that pained his chest.

Alfred’s wet eyes searched his young master’s face and Bruce smiled to him raising his eyebrows.

“I’m fine, Alfred. Nothing happened. Can we go inside now?”

His eyes met for a second Dick’s and the boy walked first; Bruce lowered his head only for a second hasty to play indifference as Alfred still shaken looked at him.

“I was calling you, sir…” Alfred tried to hide his worry walking by his young master’s side.

Bruce frowned realizing that he hadn’t heard anything…and remembered the puzzled expressions of the boys. However he couldn’t admit that to Alfred.

“Oh! I must have forgotten the Cosmos in silent mode. I’m sorry, Alfred, I didn’t want to worry you.”

Alfred grinned to him as he ascended the stairs and Bruce the ramp.

“Master Anthony called…he was calling you too.”

Bruce closed his eyes as his heart gave another violent kick.

“He saw too?” he asked in a low voice. “I was hoping this hadn’t reached New York…” he pressed his lips and inhaled. “Anyway, I’ll call him now.”

However as soon as they reached the great salon the telephone Bruce and Tony had set for their private communication rang. Bruce steered his chair there determined, being aware of Dick’s eyes on him. Hero who was curled in front of the fireplace ran to his master and climbed to his lap stealing a smile and a caress from Bruce.

“Littl’ guy?” agony was evident in Tony’s voice and made the tombstone on Bruce’s chest heavier.
“Yes, Tony: everything is fine, I’m fine – end of story. I’m sorry for the upset I caused you.”

“What are you saying now, littl’ guy?! You don’t have to apologize for anything” a small pause. “I’m coming there.”

Bruce yanked his head and huffed pressing his hand to his hair.

“You don’t have to, Tony: continue your work. It didn’t kill me then, it certainly won’t kill me now.”

Alfred pressed his lips: Dick stared at the Englishman’s face and could say that he wasn’t so sure about the harmlessness of that video.

Bruce returned the receiver to its place feeling exhausted and Hero rubbed his small head to the human’s jaw purring.

“Sir, would you like to have some tea? The cinnamon biscuits are just out of the oven” he added with hope.

Bruce shook his head.

“No, Alfred, thank you. I have work.”

“Of course, sir” the butler said burying his disappointment.

Bruce had isolated himself in the cave, alone with Hero who as usual didn’t let the bats alone till the flying rodents left for hunting.

His odd heartbeat had stopped from the moment his wheelchair touched the rough surface of the cave. As if this place was a haven: a place where he could escape the outside world and be safe; free and lacking any memory…

It seemed that the humid, cold air of the cave swept away what had happened… and he delved into what he should be doing – what he loved doing: investigating.

The central processor was connected with Tony’s surveillance system receiving image from the stolen items and Bruce focused on the footage they had received: Luthor had gone there with Mercy and he was talking with two other people which Bruce couldn’t see. He frowned – that was odd: if the tracking system had a visual failure then Luthor and Mercy wouldn’t be visible as well.

Something else hid these people from the nanocameras…

Bruce huffed and tapped the keyboard frantically trying everything in hopes of overcoming whatever made the other two bystanders ‘invisible’.

He slapped the working bench frustrated and felt Hero’s surprised eyes on him. He shook his head and breathed slowly to calm himself.

Luthor was too clever to say any names: even if his partner reassured him that he didn’t find any tracing system he still didn’t name them. The voice of Luthor’s ally as Bruce expected was definitely that of the man’s that had come to Bruce’s office to demand the same objects: Brunno Mannheim.

However they would need more than a voice identifier to convict him… Of course the man had said ‘re-acquiring what’s mine’ yet it wouldn’t suffice for a judge. Not to mention that arresting him for the theft wouldn’t solve the mystery. He tapped his fingers on the bench and watched closer for any
He narrowed his eyes and leaned closer. Was Luthor...scared? And the ‘invisible’ man had said “as your lot”...What did he mean? What ‘lot’? The businessmen? The billionaires?

Sure thing Luthor didn’t retort as he always did in such circumstances and both he and Mercy looked shaken...What could have made Luthor indifferent to such attitude; so slavish and so...scared? Even with the League of Shadows Luthor wasn’t scared but he made his counter-schemes in order to backstab them...

The Manor’s phone rang and Bruce pressed the key on his keyboard to answer from the cave since obviously Alfred was too busy to answer.

“Bruce Wayne speaking.”

“Well, hello, Bruce...”

Speaking of the devil... Bruce thought rolling his eyes. It was Luthor and in contrast with his demeanor in the video he sounded jubilant.

“What do you want, Mr. Luthor?”

“To congratulate you, my young friend” Bruce’s mind went immediately to the incident during Vale’s show.

“If you refer to that video everyone already knew what Facone did to me” he said indifferent.

“Yeah...but the continuation of the video was very interesting...fascinating I’d say” he sniggered and Bruce could imagine the smug expression on his face and the flute of champagne in his fingers. “I didn’t expect your tiny asshole to have such capacity” he sneered. “And you managed to impress millions of others: congratulations, Brucie – after the Person of the Year you managed to break Youtube’s record!”

Luthor’s laughter was the last impression before the dial ended.

Bruce leaned on the keyboard and opened the Youtube site where what he wanted was on the top of the list with an insane number of hits.

His heart began beating faster, cold sweat washing his body seeing the duration of the video: it wasn’t the ten minutes footage that the GTV’s signal’s breakdown stopped abruptly - it was the whole thing.
Jim Gordon was pacing inside his office at the MCU’s building hardly containing his eagerness to rush outside. He had to be calm and collected before his colleagues even if his insides were upturned; what happened earlier at GTV was sick; inhumane…After the DA’s order, Jim had initiated police activity but he decided to not act himself though he wanted it so much: he had a soft spot for the Little Prince after all.

Yet he was the Police Commissionaire and he shouldn’t show partiality to any citizen especially to someone as rich as Mr. Wayne. So he was waiting in his office for his officers to return; also, Robert Hatchet the temporary DA was on his way there. The man had issued a warrant for GTV’s president.

After Harvey’s resignation, Jim had continued the good co-operation with the DA’s office through Harvey’s replacement. And he was very happy about that.

“Come in” he said when knocks on the door interrupted his thoughts.

Robert Hatchet entered the room with his leather briefcase in his hand. He offered his hand to Jim for a handshake and the police commissionaire shook it appreciatively.

“Did they bring Wizze yet?”

“They are on their way here trying to avoid reporters” Jim replied raising his eyebrows.

Robert shook his head.

“You have already a horde of them on your doorstep” Jim nodded with an expression of helplessness. “Can I have a cup of coffee?” he asked gazing at the machine on the small cabinet.

Montoya had given it to Gordon.

Jim looked there.

“Of course…Sorry I forgot to offer you.”

Robert filled a small foam cup and lolled his head towards Jim.

“Don’t mention it…We are all a bit shaken, huh? Anyway I’d like to put behind bars that bastard Wizzie.”

Jim fixed his glasses.

“You know better than me that we can’t hold him much…The GTV’s signal was hacked…although he could have stopped it as Vale did.”

Robert sipped from his coffee.

“Yeah, who would have thought that she would do that: she earned my respect. Did you locate the hacking spot?”

Jim paced a bit more.

“The officers at Cyber Crime are close.”
Robert grinned.

“I can’t wait to press charges on the sonovabitch who did that!” Jim ran his hand through his hair and nodded.

“What kind of person does that? I mean, Wayne has suffered so much…what kind of a sick mind puts salt to his wounds like that?”

Robert shook his head.

“Harvey called; he was very upset.”

Jim shook his head.

“Harvey still watches Gotham’s developments, huh?”

“He loves his city.”

Suddenly, Montoya burst into the office.

“Commissionaire, there’s a leak on the internet!” Robert frowned. “It is the entire video that was stopped after the signal’s breakdown.”

Robert immediately dialled the DA’s office in his Smartphone.

“Order Youtube and the other file hosting sites to take down the video!” he barked to his subordinates in the office. “Contact FBI for instant results.”

Jim clenched his waist with both hands and shook his head: he dreaded what the entire video could be showing.

A young officer ran to the open door.

“Commissionaire! We have located the hacker!”

Jim grabbed his jacket and Robert shoved his Smartphone in his jacket’s inner pocket.

“Montoya, Bullock, take some officers and follow me!”

The long, rectangular window opened at Superman’s arrival and the Man of Steel landed on the dark green carpet of Diana’s apartment; the sweet, mesmerizing smell welcoming him. He was still shaken but as soon as he entered the room his head cleared and he felt careless, peaceful; free from every sadness and wonder.

Diana was standing with her arms crossed and watched the flat screen fascinated – a smirk on her face.

“Welcome, Kal El” she greeted him without taking her eyes off the screen watching greedily.

“Good evening, Diana” he answered and suddenly he felt so exhilarated that flew to her wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her neck.

Until his eyes fell on the screen…
“How can you watch this?” he asked sick.

She gestured indifferent to the screen.

“You mean Wayne being fucked?” she snorted. “This is the entire video: I connected the TV with Internet. As you can see it’s more than a simple fuck.

Superman’s face was distorted in disgust: it was never a ‘simple fuck’…

“Sometimes I find it difficult to understand you, Diana.”

Diana turned her head to him narrowing her eyes.

“For watching this?” she snorted. “I am a warrior, Kal El: I have seen much worse than this in the battlefield” her voice was contemptuous. “How can this upset me?”

Superman shook his head: he didn’t feel anymore the heavy tombstone over his chest that fell there since he saw the news but still Diana’s indifference bothered him.

“Yes but still…It’s a little child…being brutally abused.”

Diana kissed his lips and looked him deep in the eyes making his misery evaporate.

“Aren’t you happy you’re not connected to this man anymore?” she whispered in his ear sending goose bumps to his spine. “Imagine if you were in the middle of all this; all this filth passing to you… Kal El” she sucked his ear lobe and Superman closed his eyes. “He never deserved you: he is filth and you’re pure light…Every time you touched him this dirt was transferred to you…”

Bruce was saying exactly the same things to him. Bruce…He was hearing the little boy screaming and crying and one part of him wanted to save him or flew to Gotham and hug Bruce and another part was happy that this wasn’t his problem anymore.

He blew at the remote just enough air to turn off the TV set. He tightened his embrace on Diana’s body.

“I don’t want to waste our time together with that” he said determined and Diana nodded gifting him her brightest smile.

“I agree.”

The man turned on his car’s engine and sped away from the dark alley satisfied for the merchandise he just bought that lay inside a small innocent paper bag. At the same time however he was a bit shaken and stepped on the accelerator: his provider was clearly a wacko coming to their meeting wearing that sack mask…What was wrong with Gothamites and masks?

He shook his head rolling his eyes. At least, the stuff was of great quality.

Crane followed the car with his eyes till it was out of sight: the pack of bills was pleasantly warm in his jacket’s pocket. He knew that this kind of activities was below a great genius like him but he needed the money for survival and for his experiments.

He turned towards the rusty door of the abandoned building; he wouldn’t come out of the alley in case someone stalked there; instead he’d cross the building and come out of the back exit to another alley.
“Waaaaait, waaaait, waiiiit!”

Crane under the mask crooked his lips and rolled his eyes before turning displeased to face his uninvited guest.

“HEHEHEHEHEHEEEEE!” the purple dressed clown bent in two giggling hard.

“How you sprang out here? How did you find me?” he hissed.

“I’m a clown sooooooooo I spring out of booooxes” he blinked “and not only… Aaaand I juuust follow the smeeeel of the weed: youuu’re the hoooooot dealer in the town. 
UHUHUHUHUUUUUU! Nice mask, croooooow! Thooooooough…” he slowly straightened his body sweeping imaginary tears from laughter “hehe…though” he ran to him and brought his face close to the sack mask “you’re like a potato in a sack! HAHAHAHAHAAAAA!”

Scarescrow crossed his arms on the chest and stared at him blankly. Joker took his most solemn expression and watched him puzzled before patting his back.

“Youuuuu need to do something wiith the styliiiing, huh?”

“What do you want, clown?!” Scarescrow hissed coldly.

But Joker just giggled.

“Oooooops! It seems I stepped on a callus or something? Sooooorry, mate” he said with a totally un-honest expression “buuuuuut you have to love your friend with his faults” he blinked innocently.

“You’re not my friend!”

Joker pouted and cocked his eyebrows. He leaned closer.

“Why? Do youuuu have someone elseeeeee? HEHEHEHEHEHEHEEEEE!!” he burst out in giggles.

Scarescrow gritted his teeth.

“What do you want?!” he spat.

Joker raised his palms in a motion of appease.

“Oooookay, oooookay…Let’s talk like civilized gangsters…I can see you rolling your eyes…Why? I’m not civiliiiiiiiized?”

“Get over with it!”

Joker patted him on the chest and nodded.

“I just waaaaant what I ordered. It’s your job after all – selling drugs an’ stuff…You made what I asked or it was too difficult?”

Crane grabbed his mask and revealed his face that was distorted with disgust and smugness.

“There’s no substance that Dr. Crane can’t make.”

Joker leaked his lips nodding like a hungry dog.
“Weeeeell?”

Crane lolled his head on the side smirking.

“You don’t expect me to have it on me…I’ll contact you when the time comes.”

Joker’s face hardened and he locked eyes with the doctor.

“The tiiiiime has already come: I want myyyyy order.”

Crane nodded gulping.

“You’ll have it.”

“In twoooooo days, I’ll meet you here” he hissed threateningly but immediately he scratched his head.

“Unless I change my mind…I’m a bit…mercurial, ya know…”

He made a spin in his position and began walking towards the alley’s exit under Crane’s knowing smirk.

“Wait!” the scientist yelled.

Joker made another spin and looked at him blinking.

“I knewwwww you’ll want mooooooore ooof your paaaaal…” he poured.

Crane cackled.

“As a pal” he said snidely “I owe to inform you about your legally wedded wife…”

Joker frowned.

“My…Brucie?”

“Not only yours” he cocked his eyebrows and pouted. “Are you sure you’ve made the right choice?” he held his Smartphone up with a video already playing. “The whole Gotham and States goggles at this!”

Joker narrowed his eyes and surged to him grabbing the phone and bringing it to his face that was completely still except than a nerve that ticked next to his right eye as he watched Falcone thrusting in little Bruce’s body.

Crane watched him wildly satisfied; he was sure that if Joker’s face wasn’t covered with paint he would be ashen or red from wrath.

“Who did that?” the clown hissed low with no nasal hue in his voice which had more effect than his usual hysterics.

However Crane held his composure.

“Falcone!” he answered nonchalant but Joker tossed away the phone and grabbed him from the lapels dangling him.

“You destroyed my phone, you fool!”

Joker’s teeth shone in the half darkness close to Crane’s face.
“You want to have the same?!?” his teeth shone in the dim light of the street lamps outside the alley.

Crane felt something cold touching his cheek before seeing the sparkle of a blade.

“Someone hacked GTV’s signal and broadcasted this…the signal broke down soon but the whole video leaked to Youtube…” he said in one breath.

Joker detached the hand that held Crane’s lapels and the doctor hardly stayed erect fixing his clothes with dignity. He saw intrigued Joker’s eyes going completely blank.

“I should have tortured more that motherfucker!” the jester almost whispered to himself erasing Crane’s presence. “Anyway…someone is going to suffer tonight…”

He turned towards the alley’s exit and ran, Crane breathing relieved that Joker’s wrath was for someone else. He walked to the place where his phone ended among cans and used condoms: he took it grimacing disgusted. The screen was badly scratched but the video was still playing showing what Falcone did after the rape.

“I have to buy a new phone now, you imbecile!”

Bruce stayed numb in the confinement of his chair; his eyes fixed on the small square of the video that aggregated a record number of views; duration: 1 hour and something.

His palm touched his mouth without even knowing…Thankfully, Selina was away from Gotham with Steve and if he was lucky she hadn’t seen the video or heard anything.

“That video is down from every site in the net” Bruce was startled and turned to the entrance of the cave where one second ago Ironman floated; because now the red and gold android stood only a few feet away from him. “Pepper and Lucius took care of that.”

Bruce nodded calmly noticing Tony’s hesitance to get closer; his friend didn’t deactivate the face plate probably because he didn’t want Bruce to see his face. However Bruce could imagine his friend’s turmoil.

He ran his hand through his hair.

“Tony, I told you I was fine; you didn’t have to let your work in New York and come here.”

Ironman now walked closer.

“No way I would stay there while…” he stopped abruptly unwilling to utter what he had in mind or not knowing how to express it to not hurt more his friend.

Bruce felt his stomach becoming a knot but simply turned his head towards the screen changing Youtube’s site with the footage from the warehouse where the stolen items ended up.

Tony rolled his eyes behind the cold face plate. He huffed shaking his head and finally deactivated the face plate: although he would like to hide his feelings from Bruce he just couldn’t continue looking at his friend through the face plate.

“You should have alerted Lucius about the video and asked him to act stopping it from spreading to every site” Tony berated. “It was a happy coincidence he heard what happened and acted on his own accord.”
However Bruce was staring at the screen where the footage with Luthor was playing. Tony glanced at Hero who sat on the bench and watched puzzled his human friend.

“Bruce, I’m talking to you.”

The younger man turned nonchalant to him.

“I’m listening, Tony but since you’re here we should examine this. Do you have any program to overcome whatever hides the other people present in the warehouse? It’s very odd.”

Tony closed his eyes exasperated and leaned to his friend.

“You should be tracing the hacking location right now, Bruce! To find the bastard who uploaded this” Bruce frowned and Tony sensing that something odd was taking place inside his friend calmed himself. “Jarvis has almost located the hacker and…”

But Bruce shook his head.

“Why don’t you leave it to the police? This is more important! We have to understand what’s going on: Luthor’s behavior is bizarre – he looks scared and…confused.”

Tony yanked his head backwards and huffed.

“Fuck Luthor! Fuck everything!” he shouted. “Nothing is more important than finding the sonovabitch that did that!” he stood abruptly but realizing that he had raised his voice again ruffled his hair and looked tenderly at Bruce.

He could understand that his friend was still in a state of shock.

“Listen, littl’ guy” he licked his lips “go upstairs: it’s dinner time.”

“I’m not hungry, Tony.”

Tony closed his eyes and jerked his arms to the air.

“Of course you’re not!” he exclaimed exasperated. “But you must, Bruce! You need to take your medication…” this reminded him that his friend was still recovering and some bastard chose to give him that devious blow – that thought alone made him want to tear him into pieces but Bruce’s narrowed eyes were fixed on him and was reading him.

Suddenly, Jarvis sent him the data he anxiously awaited and Tony forgot everything.

“Tony, let police handle it…” Bruce repeated realizing but Tony was adamant.

“No way!”

Bruce watched Ironman taking off and flying out of the cave; he pressed his lips, inhaled deeply and turned to the computer screen when the Manor’s cable phone rang again. He closed his eyes because answering seemed exhausting but thankfully it stopped ringing; probably Alfred had answered.

Bruce felt relief only for a few seconds because the line was passed there.

“Yes, Alfred” he said pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Pardon me for the interruption, sir, but Mr. Collins would like to talk with you.”
Bruce looked at the cave’s ceiling as if trying to gather strength from the rocks.

“I’ll speak to him, Alfred” Hero came to him and rubbed his head to his hand that had stayed forgotten on the working bench; Bruce smiled to him.

“Mr. Wayne, I’m terribly sorry for what happened” the veteran lawyer told him in his admirably calm voice. “The DA’s office has already posted a warrant against GTV’s president but we can sue him as well.”

However that wasn’t what bothered Bruce right now.

“Mr. Collins, what happened…I mean that video can affect our case negatively?’’

Mr. Collins certainly didn’t expect that to be his employer’s main concern right now although he had called for that case as well.

“To be honest, Mr. Wayne, in a case of guardianship everything can have an effect” Bruce nodded. “As a matter of fact, I called you to suggest that we ask for an adjournment; I’m sure that Judge Moot won’t deny that.”

“Adjournment?”

“A break of the hearing for a few days until…” he couldn’t utter ‘you’re better’ though he was sure that that video had a major impact on his young employer – the truth was that he was prepared to hear from Alfred that Mr. Wayne couldn’t talk to him; Collins expected that Bruce would have taken some sedatives to handle this. But the youth was talking to him calm as ever. “Until the ruckus calms down” he said exploiting his skill on finding quickly the best words to say something.

Bruce bit his bottom lip staring at the display case with Batman’s armor.

“It won’t be necessary, Mr. Collins” he could almost hear the man’s surprise. “I’m alright and it is exactly what would serve Zucco best: manifesting weakness and being unable to meet Richard’s needs. I won’t let this undermine what’s important, that is Richard’s life.”

Collins stayed silent for a few seconds.

“That’s…” brave he wanted to say but he felt that Bruce wouldn’t want to hear that. “As you wish, Mr. Wayne…however if you change your mind do not hesitate to call me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Collins. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Wayne.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Collins” he replied but his eyes were fixed on the armor inside the transparent case.

Selina was staring fascinated at the painting at the wall before her, glad that the mass of visitors was somewhere else. She tapped her index finger to her lips thoughtful. El Greco was one of her favorite painters.

Being in that enormous exhibit hall in New York’s Metropolitan Museum inadvertently reminded her of that night, almost a year ago in another museum when she snatched the black diamond that helped her friend being free. Of course a Museum’s hall was completely different with people around and broad artificial lighting.
Steve had gone to the Avengers’ Tower for the team’s meeting and she decided to fill those empty hours by visiting one of the world’s biggest museums.

Behind the fake spectacles she wore her eyes narrowed hearing familiar footsteps on the glistening floor approaching her. She turned smiling to greet Steve who dressed in jeans, leather jacket and hockey cap passed unnoticed.

He kissed her on the cheek.

“I left you here but I didn’t expect to find you still here…”

Selina lolled her head on the side and raised her eyebrows.

“I’m a diletante, handsome.”

“Really? I didn’t consider you for that type…”

Selina slipped her arm under his upper arm and cuddled to him.

“I wore glasses” she said pointing to her spectacles “and…it’s clear I am an art lover: I spend hours staring at your abs…” she winked but she noticed that Steve’s smile was a bit forced. “School ended so soon?”

Steve gulped and looked her in the eyes.

“You didn’t hear anything…” it was evident. “There wasn’t any meeting” Selina detached from him and frowned worried. “Tony flew to Gotham…”

“Bruce…”

Steve took out of the jacket’s pocket his StarkStel; he didn’t know how to use every application but Selina did.

“There is a site…Youtube I think…there’s a video.”

She didn’t need more; with fast movements opened the said site and show what Steve was talking about. She bit her lips; Steve could see her eyes flashing like flames sad and angry at the same time.

The young woman stormed through the hall to the exit and he followed her.

Steve was there as she mounted her bike. Their eyes locked as she turned on the engine.

“I’m sorry…but I can’t stay…”

“Do not apologize. I understand: Bruce needs you.”

She took her helmet.

“You don’t have to come along” she said and put on the helmet.

“There’s no other place for me to be; I’ll lead you through shorter routes” he replied and jumped on his own bike that he had parked next to Selina’s having foreseen her reaction.

Ironman flew over Gotham seeing nothing else than Bruce’s indifferent eyes; Tony didn’t brag about
his ability to read people yet he knew that under this indifference lay an emotional numbness, a great shock that when subsided his friend would be in terrible pain.

His fists clenched without realizing: Bruce shouldn’t be in pain anymore, damnit! His systems displayed in front of his eyes the exact location from where the hacking occurred: no surprise there, a small house, near the outskirts of the city.

Though he wasn’t registering the landscape underneath him he could hear the police sirens heading to the same place he was. He crooked his mouth: so Gotham’s police had made progress in technology – Bruce’s donations certainly had been used for the best. But officers wouldn’t ruin his plans. Not to mention that if the culprit heard the sirens would run away.

He sped up to the maximum and scanned the house that was situated in a neighborhood near the exit of the city towards the airport. A man sat before a computer that seemed custom but Tony could see that had increased capabilities. “Kirk Isaac, student of the Engineering Department; Gotham University” Jarvis sent him what he had dug for the owner.

Tony gritted his teeth: a nerd bastard who probably bragged over his feat and found ways to spread the video despite the ban from the hosting sites.

Ironman surged through the exterior wall to the small living room filling the space with debris and smoke. The man, no older than 20, sprang up, shocked – obviously, he didn’t believe that they would manage to overcome his firewalls and trace him: the arrogant motherfucker believed that even Stark would fail. Well, his shock became complete terror seeing the red and gold android glaring at him through the cloud of dust the debris had raised.

The screen of the PC was still filled with data related with his current effort to spread the video.

"Ironman! Wow! Look, man…” his voice trembled as the emotionless android walked slowly to him glaring through the cold lenses.

Tony couldn’t stand this bastard looking and speaking to him: the cruel monster had wrenched Bruce’s heart; he dreaded to consider what lay under his friend’s tranquility. He never thought of putting a growling system in his face plate but his own roar was more effective than any artificial one.

He surged against the man and his growl was gradually becoming louder as he grabbed him from the throat and lifted him in the air with his legs dangling. Tony was happy seeing the man’s eyes goggled in terror as Ironman was closing his air supply.

“Look, man, I didn’t know what the video was about…” he squealed but Tony clenched more causing a sob.

“Motherfucker!”

“I” he gargled “I hacked the signal and…uploaded the video to the net before…”

Isaac’s eyes bulged more.

“Okay, okay, you’re right…but I swear I didn’t know…” he panted. “I found the DVD in my mail with a letter saying that it’ll rock Gotham…I thought it’d be fun…” he yelled as the iron fingers squeezed his throat. “Help!”

Fun…That word fell like thunder and lightning in Tony’s head. Fun?! He tossed the man to the opposite intact wall and before the long haired man slumped on the floor he grabbed him again from
the throat and pressed him to the wall.

“Having fun now?” he spat.

The man closed his eyes and began sobbing.

“Please…”

“You humiliated a brave man who did nothing wrong! You realize how much he suffers from what you did?! Do you imagine his emotional state?!!”

The man tried to nod though Ironman’s hold on his neck was unrelenting.

“I’m sorry…” Isaac sobbed.

But Ironman shook his head in denial.

“Not good enough!”

The man began crying and his eyes widened as Ironman’s clench became fierce busting blood vessels.

“Mr. Stark, don’t do that!”

Tony closed his eyes behind the face plate, recognizing the voice. In his manic haze didn’t realize that the police had arrived. Neither the door being demolished, as they burst in. It was Jim Gordon who had spoken the first of a team of officers with guns in their hands.

“Mr. Stark” a second voice was added and Tony recognized the new DA. “Give him to us and he’ll face justice.”

Tony snorted and would have rolled his eyes if he was less enraged.

“You won’t make Bruce feel better with that” Jim insisted his eyes fixed on the hero.

But Tony didn’t want to acknowledge the man.

“Jim, keep yourself and your cops off this” he said coldly without looking at them.

Jim pressed his lips because he felt for the man.

“Tony, you know that I can’t do this. You’ll only make things worse.”

Isaac whose face was almost blue from lack of air darted his panicked eyes to the Commissionaire; he was drenched in sweat and his eyes watered.

Tony clenched his jaw and tightened his grasp on the man.

“No fuckin’ way!” his boots emitted flames and Ironman took off taking the hacker with him.

Jim cursed.

“Follow him!” he said and ran through his officers.

“He is Ironman, Commissionaire” a rookie officer said awed but Jim glared at him and the youth gulped and ran behind his captain.
But Ironman was already far from the wrecked house carrying Isaac along: the man who was looking terrorized down and sobbed inside the hero’s suffocating hold. He breathed easier when Ironman landed on a rooftop but immediately moaned as Ironman brought his metal face to his.

“Please, Mr. Stark…I’m sorry…Please, don’t hurt me…”

“But you hurt my friend: a man who has offered everything to the people of this city.”

The man gasped and nodded.

“I know, I know…as soon as I realized what the video showed I tried to…”

“Cut the crap! You did nothing! You just enjoyed your…feat!” he raised his iron fist in the air ready to catapult the man’s face.

But a dry cough made him halt and frown.

“Oh, oh, oh! Youuuuuu were always my favorite hero, Iron--y – hehehehehe!” a pout “after Batsy, ‘course. Hehe! I want you tooooo know that I approve from the bottomest boooootom of my heart what you’re gonna do, Tony ol’ pal!”

Tony sniffed behind his face plate; he didn’t cast even a sideways glance but he knew who was. Joker was hopping to the rooftop with his hands inside his pockets.

The clown lolled his head on the side and pursed his lips.

“Al--though I’d loooooove to see you doing somethin’ useful for once…Mmm…I suggest you give ‘im to me” he patted himself on the chest. “The past showed that I’m better in these things” he blinked emphatically. “You remember goooood ol’ Falconi? I think you doooooo! An’ since Brucie is myyyyyy wife” Ironman snapped his head at him growling and Joker cocked his eyebrows.

“Sensitive subject, I know, my friend, yet” he raised his index finger “I have equal rights to revenge aaaaaaaand I’m the crazy villain here soooooooo this fella will certainly take what heeee deserves.”

Isaac began shaking uncontrollably Ironman’s grasp the memory of Falcone’s fate making him indecisive as to which option was the lesser of two evils.

“Shut the fuck up, Joker!” Ironman roared and Joker giggled.

The jester shook his head.

“Uhhhhh! I definitely like youuuuuuur style, Starky boy!Buuuuuut” he pursed his lips and put his palm beside his mout as if he was to share a secret “you loooooook like copying Batsyyyy… UHUHUHUUUUUUHAAHAHAAAAA!”

“After him is your turn, bastard!”

Joker stopped abruptly lolling his head to the side.

“I’m shaking from fear now…” he said nasally.

Tony clenched more his fist and lowered it to the cowering hacker who had closed his eyes and waited for his fate.

Tony was ready for the blood this blow would splash yet as his fist was a breath from his target something stopped it; something that he couldn’t overcome. Ironman growled frustrated and turned his face.
Batman stood there; his steady hand grabbing Ironman’s wrist keeping it still even if the hero tried to free it. Batman’s lenses locked with Ironman’s.

“Enough!” he spat.

Joker jumped several times in the air and clapped enthusiastic like a fanboy.

“Oh, boy! Oh, boy! My two favowite hewoes together!” he mimicked a child’s voice. “Wow! I’m gonna wet my pants!”

Tony clenched his jaw: Bruce…He risked his health for a sonovabitch! To stop him! He was pissed beyond words. He jerked his arm but Batman managed to keep his hold.

“Beat it!” Ironman barked. “It’s not your business!”

The hacker still trapped in Tony’s grasp breathed a bit relieved. Joker on the other hand was watching fascinated rubbing his chin thoughtful.

“This is Gotham!” Batman said calm but adamant. “It is my business!”

“Go save some old lady then! Do somethin’ useful than protecting someone who spreads child pornography.”

“I’m saving you from a mistake” Batman growled.

“Fuck you!”

Joker clapped and whistled.

“Wooooow! Greeeeeeeat performance, guys! Sooooooo persuasive…”

Yet Batman had eyes only for Ironman.

“Someone else gave him the video. He couldn’t have it in his possession: he is too young and without any connection to Falcone. Someone else did it and just used him. Killing him you’ll let the real culprit get away and do more damage.”

Isaac nodded trembling and Joker snorted.

“Party poooooooper!” the jester cried seeing Ironman dropping the hacker who caressed his bruised neck and coughed. “Byyyy the way, Batsyyyy, nice to see you again! Youuuuu wanna pleyyyy oooor you’re incapacitated?”

Batman glared at him but then hurried footsteps were heard coming to the rooftop and Joker began running.

“Oooooops! I have to leave now, kids!”

“No, you won’t!” Tony having recovered a bit from his trance surged behind him: he had unfinished business with him.

Batman followed and dove taking him along to the ground just a second before Joker’s small bomb made impact with his arc reactor.

The jester cackled as police officers flooded the rooftop shooting at him.
“We’ll see each ooooother again, Mr. hacker!” Joker said cheerfully and grabbed the fire escape ladder that unfolded taking him to the alley.

Batman fell to the void spreading his wings to chase him and Ironman followed as Jim handcuffed the hacker who laughing still shocked but very happy for his arrest.

Ten minutes later Ironman stood in the middle of an alley unable to locate either Joker or Batman. He was following both of them when they just vanished from his systems.

“Fuck!” he shouted iron teeth biting his insides from worry; Bruce had come out and was facing Joker alone.

“You’re going back to Arkham.”

Joker looked the wall that had stopped his course; he was trapped like a mouse in an alley. He lolled his head on the side and his acid green eyes sparkled focusing on Batman who walked slowly to him.

“Ooooh! It’s a highly misunderstooood facility – not bad at all. Aaaand greaaaat company tooooo! Fiiive stars from me” he made a spin and faced his pursuer. “Walking slower for the impression effect oooooor because you can’t faster?” he rubbed thoughtful his chin.

“No more nonsense, Joker” he moved to grab him but calls for help made him stop.

The yells were coming from the street and the victim was desperate. There was no option for him but he couldn’t let Joker free; he was ready to punch him to knock him out when something pull him up – a cable.

“I’m learning from you, Batsyyyyyy! Huhuhuhurray!”

Two of his goons were pulling Joker up and the yells for help became faint. Batman knew he hadn’t any time but he wasn’t going to leave Joker like this.

“Huuumuurrly up, Batsyyyyy baby, because my men out there will killllllll…Youuuu muuust acknowledge my wits: having my men attack innocents was ingen…Ugh…”

One of Batman’s sedative Batarangs found him in the butt and Joker passed out immediately and fell to the ground exactly as his men who had been hit by the same Batarangs. That way he’d get Joker as soon as he finished with the others.

Yet as he exited the alley to confront the thugs who had attacked a couple he saw with the corner of his eyes Joker disappearing. He growled realizing that Loki had interfered but he had to harry up.

Tony deactivated his armor as soon as Alfred opened the door for him. The butler frowned seeing the rushing movement of his young master who didn’t stop a second as his armor vanished.

Alfred followed him inside keeping his composure in complete contradiction to the man’s anger and upset.

“Where is he?” Tony demanded. “You know what he did?! He wore that damned suit and went out!” he knew that his voice wouldn’t reach the soundproof rooms upstairs but to be honest he didn’t
give a fuck.

Alfred was watching him calm as ever and all over his face was apparent that he already knew. Tony was expecting that Alfred would share his anger learning what Bruce had done but there wasn’t any anger in the older man’s face.

“You did know?” he raised his eyebrows.

“I’m afraid I did, sir.”

Tony ruffled his wet hair.

“And you’re not mad at him? You didn’t try to stop him?!” his puzzlement was greater than his wrath.

Alfred pressed his lips.

“I’m afraid I did not, sir. I didn’t try to dissuade him because he needed to act like that. The consequences if he had stayed inside would have been worse than now he got out. You see, Master Anthony, there are times that Master Bruce is in dire need of an outlet and being bereft of that could hurt him more… Moreover I reckon that his intervention was beneficial for you too.”

“You were watching?”

“Through the cave’s system, I did, sir. I wouldn’t let Master Wayne out of my sight just in case.”

However Tony’s wrath didn’t subside.

“Where is he?! We have to talk!” and taking in Alfred’s reluctance “Never mind, flying here I saw that he was in his bedroom.”

He surged to the stairs and Alfred followed him catching up with him at the corridor.

“If I may, sir, since you scanned the Manor and found him, you must have realized that he is sleeping: he was exhausted.”

Tony yanked his head.

“Of course he was! The stubborn, strong headed dork! But I don’t care: he can lose some sleep since he could come out and…”

Alfred hushed him sensing that he was going to say something that it should not be heard so close to Dick’s bedroom.

“Pardon me, sir, but I think it is prudent to keep your voice low.”

“If he can do what he did, he can afford to wake up and speak with me.”

He turned and stormed at the master’s bedroom, Alfred follow him afraid that Master Anthony would wake up Master Bruce and quarrel with him.

But as soon as Tony reached the bed and the flames from the fireplace illuminated his friend’s calm, sleeping face the billionaire from Malibu stopped abruptly and closed his eyes touched.

Hero who was sleeping on Bruce’s belly opened his eyes and stared at him. Tony hushed him with his index finger and caressed his friend’s hair lowering to his cheek. The sight of Bruce sleeping
calmed his own boiling insides. He looked Alfred and then left carefully the room; Alfred followed closing the door silently.

Tony stood.

“I can’t stay angry with him” he said ruffling his hair uncomfortable.

Alfred smiled.

“Nobody can, sir; especially in times like this.”

Tony nodded.

“I’m still seeing the same kitten boy I met at his father’s office…”

“I know, sir…I can certainly see your point.”

Tony shook his head regretful for his previous anger.

“Do you want me to prepare your bedroom, sir? I dare say that you are tired too.”

“Thank you, Al. But still I’m gonna tell that brat off first thing in the morning!”

Alfred grinned.

“Of course you will, sir.”

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Bruce was seeing the large restrooms while the loud music and the laughter from the main hall of the building hurt his ears. People were so cheerful…He couldn’t understand that; okay, he could understand but it seemed so strange…

The door to the restrooms seemed so distant…so high above him…

Wait. Bruce realized that he was small and his insides clenched: he knew he was dreaming; he knew where he was and the danger that lurked but he couldn’t run away. He couldn’t stop what was happening…he couldn’t halt and not go inside the restrooms: he was supposed to clean up whenever a customer left.

He pushed the door with his shoulder but as soon as he was in someone grabbed him from the waist and lifted his body to sit him on the granite countertop of the sinks’ row. His breath was pressed in his lungs and his eyes widened: a man he didn’t know stood in front of him pressing his body on him.

The man was approximately at Falcone’s age but thin with a prominent chin and small, sneaky eyes that smirked gleefully.

“I didn’t know that Falcone had such a treasure in his store…Oh! A little angel…” he began fondling the boy’s torso undeterred by the filth on his clothes.

Bruce’s heartbeat got frantic; he knew what this meant.

“Please, sir” he mumbled “I don’t do this job…”

The man cackled.
“Don’t be afraid, sonny…You’ll like it…” his hands slipped inside his pants and groped his buttocks causing the boy’s gasp.

“Please, no…I can’t…Please…”

“Hush, angel…you’ll like it” he whispered and suddenly pushed his index finger inside Bruce who jerked upright with a sob. “Oooh, my cutie…” the man smiled knowing. “I see you’re not new to that…” he moved his finger deeper twitching it to make the boy convulse. “So you have already a master?”

Bruce’s eyes were wet as the man touched his lips hungrily to his cheek.

“Please…He’ll be angry…Let me go…”

But the man’s finger played more inside him and it hurt grazing the existent scratches and burnings from past frictions.

“He is possessive, huh?” he mumbled licking the boy’s cheek and thrusting another finger to the narrow channel making the boy squirm and sob. “I think with the proper cash, he’ll stop being that…I can be better than him, boy…I’ll make you moan from pleasure…I’ll give you candies…”

“Please, sir…Don’t” the man with one hand lowered the boy’s pants. “You must ask Mr. Falcone…”

The man cocked an eyebrow.

“So good ol’ Carmine is the lucky guy?” he chuckled. “He’s my friend, boy…” he withdrew his fingers and brought them to his nose sucking the smell with closed eyes. “Your scent is awesome, kid! I’ll fix everything with Carmine and then will do more…”

The man grabbed Bruce from the armpits and brought him down. He unlocked the door, winked to him and left.

He was mopping the floor near Falcone’s office after the songs and the music died and the cabaret was left quiet and dark; his butt still hurt from the stranger’s fingers but he had had worse than that and at least the man stopped there: Falcone definitely wouldn’t accept to give him to that man…

“C’mone, Carmine, I’m gonna pay you handsomely for the boy…One time I ask – you know how much I like small boys…and he’s like an angel.”

Falcone cackled.

“You’re a scum pedophile, Roth – I know you ‘collect’ fucks with boys but this isn’t for rent.”

Bruce’s heart was clenched: he was begging inside that his master wouldn’t be persuaded and give him to that man.

“You have him filthy and in rags…and he works in the toilets: I don’t think that he is so important that you won’t rent him to me for once. I’ll give you much.”

“Roth, we’re pals but forget this! The boy is not for rent!”

Bruce heard the man sighing.

“You’re so selfish, Carm. At least, gimme a compensation” he sniggered. “You know how much I like watching videos…be a littl’ generous and share somethin’ with your friend…”
Falcone’s laughter was amused but made Bruce’s spine froze.

“Roth, you ol’ scum! You’re such a perv!”

Bruce saw the man leaving Falcone’s office whistling a melody and his guts clenched.

“Ya’re fishin’ clients, slut?!”

The blow to his face was devastating and sent him crash to the opposite wall. He gasped but he didn’t dare to sob, just stayed there waiting; his Master never stopped with one punch…

“No, sir, I swear I didn’t…” he mumbled wiping with the back of his palm the blood from his lips.

“Fuckin’ liar! Ya shook yar ass to ‘im, huh?”

Falcone’s mass stood over him casting him in his shadow; the mobster was regarding his property and then suddenly he grabbed him from the ragged T-shirt and lifted him, grinding his teeth to Bruce’s face; Bruce wanted to be brave; he had promised that he would be brave and not cry but his heart was kicking in his bony chest and it hurt so much that he couldn’t breathe properly.

A second punch harder this time crashed on his right eye and sent him to the niche of the two walls; he cringed there gathering his legs to his chest to a quivering ball.

“Please, Master…I…I swear I did nothing…He just grabbed me” he hiccupped choked in his sobs.

A kick to his ribs was the only answer and he yelped like a wounded puppy causing a chuckle from Chill who stood some feet away watching amused.

“C’mere, ya faggot!” he grabbed him from the hair and Bruce closed his eyes feeling his legs dangling.

“Pleas…” a slap tossed him again to the floor.

Falcone paced for a few seconds and then stopped facing the boy’s cowering mass. Bruce’s guts twisted in nausea as the copper taste filled his mouth and the blood flawed from his throbbing nose. Another kick found his belly and he convulsed grunting.

The Gray Wolf clenched his waist with both hands.

“Strip!”

This order always came as a stronger punch than the physical ones. He didn’t want to but he knew that he couldn’t do anything else. He used his one working arm to support his trembling body; it was difficult to persuade his tired and scared members to support him but hearing Falcone’s impatient snort he closed his eyes, gritted his teeth and finally managed to stand staggering.

“Strip!” the mobster barked again.

Bruce swallowed hard and hurried to take off his clothes baring himself completely. His breath had become rasps that were disrupted by choked sobs; he was trembling harder than before because he knew his fate.

Falcone fisted his hair and dragged him to his desk: Bruce’s heart was shivering more than his weak body. The Gray Wolf pushed away the objects from the desk and tossed Bruce face first to the desk, his legs dangling over the floor.
“Open your legs!”

Bruce obeyed; the air was trapped in his lungs hurting him; tears ran from his eyes blending with the blood dripping to the desk. His legs wanted to close not open for the mobster but he clenched his jaw and kept them open wide.

“Spread them more an’ stick out yar asshole!” Falcone barked and Chill sniggered.

He did that though it was difficult as if his legs had their own will. Closed his eyes and bit his lips knowing that the time had come. He heard the familiar sounds of Falcone unfastening his belt, unzipping his fly and lowering his clothes. He felt the air being ripped by the man’s mass coming near, too near.

Bruce felt the man’s hard length already touching his buttocks; he clenched the only hand he could and let his cheek touch the desk though his wounded face hurt. The pain was excruciating as always as Falcone thrust his entire length at once.

Bruce yelled, his body jerking like a dying fish but Falcone’s heavy hand pushed his waist down and began thrusting in him harder and deeper causing his sobs and cries.

The pain became worse with every thrust and Bruce was panting, trying to tell his heart to not pound like this…but it was futile…Falcone’s length was hardly contained in his narrow channel and every motion ripped his insides burning him; nausea flooded him as the sound of Falcone’s flesh slapping his became louder – the man’s testicles blew his stretched buttocks worsening his torture.

Falcone slapped his buttocks and chuckled hearing his moan; “I love yar squirmin’…” he sniggered and continued hitting him laughing with his body’s desperate jerks to escape. “Ya like that, huh?”

Suddenly, Falcone’s hands clenched cruelly Bruce’s buttocks stretching them more to the point of tearing and thrust deeper than before roaring as hot liquid made Bruce’s wounded insides burn.

The boy’s body convulsed desperately but Falcone pressed his head on the desk pulling his member out.

Bruce was still breathing in rasps and his heart trembled; but at least it was over. He heard relieved his master wearing his clothes and closed his eyes swallowing the pain, waiting to be left alone.

But then he heard footsteps approaching him and knew it was Chill. He felt the thug’s hand fisting his hair and lifting him from the desk dragging him away. He was tossed on the bare, rectangular table on the other side of the room; face first; to his panic Chill grabbed his ankle and tied it with rope that fastened to the table’s leg.

One thought made his heart begin kicking again inside his ribs. That thought became certainty when Chill grabbed his other ankle and repeated what he did with the other binding his leg to the opposite table’s leg spreading him.

Falcone approached smirking and Bruce lifted his head to look at him through the water curtains covering his eyes; the blood from nostrils, eyebrow and lips was still slithering hot on his face. Chill was binding his crippled right arm and with every cruel move Bruce moaned.

“My sir…” he pressed his lips choking a cry from Chill’s cruel handling of his arm. “Please, not tonight…Please let me…only for tonight…”
But the mobster fisted his hair and yanked his head upwards; his gleeful eyes shone angrily and jeeringly to Bruce’s.

“The only reason ya exist is my entertainment” he jerked his head harder “ya know that?!”

Bruce wanted to nod but his master’s hand was unrelenting so he gathered the few air in his lungs, swallowed sobs and grunts and looked at him.

“Y…Yes, sir…”

Falcone let his head so abruptly that it fell hard on the wood but Bruce didn’t care. Chill was fastening his other arm spreading him so much that he felt his body ready to tear in half…and he knew that this was nothing.

Gotham’s Emperor returned smirking and showed him what he was holding; it was bigger and broader than every other they had used on him…it had the width of a Coca Cola’s glass bottle. Bruce’s heart stopped. He shook his head desperate.

“It’s too big, sir…please…I can’t…”

Falcone raised the thick, metal dildo and slapped him in his already bleeding nose sending his head crashing to the table.

“Ya became an expert now?!” he leaned above Bruce’s ear “I know ya like them big and thick, stretching yar asshole…”

Bruce’s body was shaking drenched in cold sweat; sobs were heaving his trapped chest burning his constricted throat.

“I beg you…please…”

“Open yar mouth!”

He did though his mouth trembled. The mobster pushed the dildo inside violently, stretching his cavity. The metal was thrust deeper choking him; his eyes bulged as he was choked.

Falcone drew out the dildo and punched him in the jaw. Bruce gargled on the wood, coughing and salivating.

“If it fits in yar mouth, it fits to yar hole too… Don’t ya dare clenchin’ yar asshole! I’m gonna skin ya alive, ya bastard!”

The metal was cold to his hot abused skin; his opening was stretched to its limits and waiting agape still beating and hurting from Falcone’s penetration.

Bruce felt Chill’s hand pressing his buttocks and then something enormous and cold hit his opening trying to invade. Bruce wished it got inside so that Falcone wouldn’t get mad at him but even after Falcone’s hard treatment his opening was too small for that object… Chill pressed harder his buttock to the table and pushed more the object cursing.

“It’s too small…” he said to his boss.

“Nah…The bastard clenches his asshole…If it doesn’t get in I’m gonna skin ya alive, sonovabitch!”

Bruce clenched his hand and closed his eyes as the metal wounded his flesh trying to expand the opening to fit; he bit his lip but then a hard movement that stretched his burnt from friction flesh
made him scream and his extended body began trembling trying to escape the bounds and the pain.

A blow to his buttocks made him scream.

“Please…” he howled as the dildo managed to stretch the opening so much that the peak managed to fit – he wanted to beg again but his howlings swallowed his voice.

His body was drenched in sweat that was getting cold instantly; he felt his anal channel tearing as the metal slowly, torturously invaded. He was crying like a baby; moaning and begging; his outstretched body twitching in its bounds in vain just worsening the pain.

“Push it deeper!” Falcone cheered. “The littl’ slut likes that!” he said goggling at the boy’s bleeding opening.

Bruce heard Chill’s teeth rattling and then the metal impaled him with a swift, rapid motion aggravating his existent wounds and making new. His eyes shut…

Cold liquid washed his head and every pain returned worse than before. He was seeing everything under fog but he could feel Falcone’s enraged breath on his hot, sweaty face. The mobster grabbed his hair and brought his face to his mouth.

“Passin’ out is forbidden” he growled. “Ya know that but ya did it to ruin my fun!”

“No, sir…I didn’t do it on purpose…Please…”

“Ya’ll be punished!”

“No, I beg you…I didn’t want to…forgive me…Please forgive me!”

“There’s no forgiveness for a brat like ya! Ya understand only with punishment!”

He dropped his head on the table and ordered Chill to continue. He was thrusting the big object in and out of him deeper, stronger and faster…It was so big that his channel was unbearably stretched and every motion hurt like his entire spine was cracking and breaking. Bruce closed his eyes and clenched his fist crying and yelling, his throat burning; his body squirmed desperately causing the men’s laughter. He was exhausted and feigning seemed his only escape but he struggled to not pass out because his punishment would be worse.

Alfred was in the kitchen wearing his dark maroon night robe; he couldn’t sleep and decided to prepare a tea since he wasn’t going to lie down again. He wanted to be alert, in case his young master needed something: he knew that this day was devastating for the youth even if he hid it so perfectly.

The Englishman was scared for what was going on inside his young Master but it was relieved that at least Master Anthony had managed to calm down a bit.

Well, it seemed that he was wrong because he heard the familiar footsteps of Master Anthony entering the kitchen. Alfred turned. The billionaire from Malibu was dressed in his turquoise pajamas with Garfield winking face all over his torso.

“I am preparing tea, would you like some, Master Anthony?”

Tony raffled his messy hair with a grimace crossing his face.
“I prefer a cup of good ol’ espresso” he yawned and walked to the black granite countertop where a brand new espresso machine awaited. “It is a good thing that at least Bruce is sleeping.”

Alfred nodded but frowned hearing running footsteps heading to the kitchen.

Both men saw puzzled Dick in his pajamas surging into the kitchen. The boy was clearly shaken.

“Wayne is crying…” the boy said and Tony shook his head.

Alfred leaned to the boy.

“Master Bruce has as many reasons as you to cry, Master Richard…in his sleep, because during the day, in front of us he smiles to not make us sad.”

Dick closed his eyes and shook his head.

“But he is crying right now and…and begs and groans…as if he is in great pain” the boy’s eyes were almost wet and Tony frowned at that sudden change. “He writhes in his bed…I was walking to the corridor…to come downstairs and drink something when I heard and I opened the door” he explained in one breath. “He suffers…”

Alfred and Tony simultaneous hurried towards the stairs to reach Bruce’s bedroom but the Englishman halted the younger man.

“Master Anthony, could you do me the favor and contact Leslie to come here.”

Tony understood that the butler wanted to handle this himself at least at first. He nodded because Alfred had more experience with Bruce’s nightmares and Leslie should be informed.

Falcone approached him holding his thick, tight leather crop. They left the dildo stabbed in him keeping his opening spread to its limits.

Bruce looked at his master sobbing; his eyes were wet as his entire face.

“I beg you, sir…please, no…no, no…forgive me...”

“Boys like ya learn only with the crop.”

Bruce heard his footsteps going back and his heart beat so fast and hard that he thought it was going to jump out of his chest. The man stopped along with Bruce’s breath.

Falcone grabbed the edge of the dildo and pushed it inside causing Bruce’s cry. But the small body had hardly returned to the table when the sound of leather ripping the air made Bruce’s heart stop…and then the sound of leather lacerating tender flesh, the pain…the pain…that pain stabbing his cranium like a blade and piercing it throughout squashing the bones.

He howled with all the power that his exhausted lungs didn’t have. It was crazy but he squirmed in his bindings to get away only to cause the two men’s sniggers; finally he slumped down to the table sobbing and moaning whispering futile pleading.

The crop hissed angrily and crushed again to his buttocks stronger than before and Bruce cried.

“Please, stop, please, please, I beg you, I’ll do anything…” his body squirmed again only irritating his pains and the stretching of his anus. “Anything…please forgive me”
The same whistle, the same crushing sound, the same pain tearing apart his bones and burning every muscle.

“Please, I do anything…Please…”

“How many strokes did ya get?” Falcone asked strictly. “Let me see how watchful pupil ya’re.”

Bruce didn’t know and his heart began convulsing; it was hurting so much that he didn’t count. The blood in his mouth choked him.

“If ya give a wrong answer we’ll start all over.”

“No, please…”

“Don’t try to evade the answer! I said how many?!”

He gulped hard; they seemed so many…

“TTen…” he mumbled and Chill gave a loud laughter.

“Wrong!” Falcone cheered. “Ya’re not payin’ attention to yar lesson: we start again – ya’ll count aloud this time. Ya see how good I am?”

The crop howled again and landed splashing flesh and blood from his back this time.

“One…” Bruce moaned.

“Louder, ya bastard, or I’ll double the strokes!” the crop slashed again his flesh.

“Two!” Bruce cried before his voice was choked in moans.

“That was one, ya dork! Again!”

Every time the leather string stabbed his flesh Bruce counted gathering every drop of quivering stamina he was left…his body didn’t convulse anymore, resigned to its fate.

He was a quivering, cringing mass before Falcone’s feet; his punishment was over but his body was throbbed from pain. With the corners of his swollen eyes he saw Chill carrying a small disk that he put on his boss’ desk.

“Up!” the mobster demanded and Bruce hurried to use his healthy arm to obey but his legs couldn’t move although they had removed the dildo.

Falcone cupped his jaw and spat to his face. Then he turned to Chill who was staring at the still naked boy.

“Take him down and then take the disk to Roth.”

Chill stopped abruptly a few feet before Bruce’s cage; he forced him to his knees; Bruce couldn’t lift his head so the thug grabbed his hair and yanked cruelly his head.

“I didna carry ya her’ free of charge…Time for my reward.”

Bruce gulped a sob and the torturing loud thud of his heart began again; his anal channel was throbbing and each throb sent waves of excruciating pain to his entire body.
“But yar ass is a mess so…open yar mouth, faggot!”

Bruce obeyed though his lips were bruised and swollen and his jaw hurt like Hell.

Alfred opened hesitantly the door to the Master’s bedroom and clapped for the lights. The bed was empty and the wheelchair was in its place. Hero ran to him; the Englishman could see that the kitten was distraught and he caressed his head.

“It’s alright, Master Hero…I’m here now…”

He heard the shower. Master Bruce was in the bathroom. He won his hesitance and fear hurrying his steps; opened the door and walked inside the enormous space. He saw remnants of vomit in the toilet and flushed.

Master Bruce’s pajamas were discarded on the floor.

“Master Bruce?” he asked carefully not wanting to burst inside the hydromassage cabin.

However when the water kept running and Bruce didn’t answer Alfred forgot his discretion and opened the door determined to be composed and not disturbed whatever he’d see.

But his determination evaporated at once with what he saw…
Chapter 61

Desperate screams echoed to the entirety of the endless circular cave that opened to many new caves forming a dark labyrinth; yells filled with agony and pain that seemed to be coming from inside the rock formations. The enormous mineral columns that nature had made from stalagmites and stalactites seemed to emanate these eerie shrieks.

The circular cave was cast in dim yellow-red light that looked as if being radiated from the stone walls and the big lake at the center the water of which boiled emitting sulfur.

“Interesting…” Darkseid’s jeering voice towered the cries of pain as he marched through the cave to the lake.

Bagdana in his granite like body, dressed in leather was bent over the dark boiling waters and his eyes – two black stains – were completely immobile. He sensed his ally’s coming but he didn’t care. He was in pain and while physical pain wasn’t something new to a demon, this kind of pain was.

Pain which situated everywhere inside him; pain that was unbearable; pain that made him want to rip his own body to get the pain out. A demon wasn’t supposed to be in that kind of pain; a demon wasn’t made to suffer this kind of pain. But Bagdana was in the worst kind of this type of pain. And this wasn’t the first time in his endless life…

The first time was when he held in his arms Lilith’s dead body…The second when he sensed that Bruce had breathed his last breath. And the third, now having access to his human’s suffering: double suffering – the pain of a small child whose body was tortured mercilessly along with his pure soul and the pain of a youth who re-experienced all these through his nightmares… He had his fists clenched but this wasn’t something that could be intimidated by his wrath: it was irony…pain wasn’t afraid of anything.

Before his eyes replayed the night he first saw the ragged, skinny boy who was to rock his eternal life. A small boy wandering to the caves, at night time; a boy who wasn’t scared of the bats that swarmed the caves; the boy loved the flying rodents that everyone else hated.

It wasn’t difficult to see into the boy’s troubled mind – tortured souls were always easy to penetrate yet there was another reason for being instantly drawn to that boy; a reason that he figured long after, a reason that Ra’s Al Ghul already knew: Lilith’s blood.

He took the form of the boy’s father to play with his suffering and have fun with the momentary hopeful shine in his unique eyes. But most fun the demon had when the smart boy realized the fraud and his hopes, his happiness shred with the pieces stabbing his insides. Bagdana had laughed then: he enjoyed, he feasted on that boy’s pain: the bigger the pain the bigger the demon’s entertainment – the stupid demon didn’t suspect that this horrible pain was to become his as well…

Bagdana felt Darkseid’s presence next to him but insisted on ignoring him in hopes that he’d get the Hell out of his domain. But the alien god was arrogant and selfish; always wanting to get what he wanted.

“Your lair’s decoration is interesting” Darkseid cocked his eyebrows “plain but atmospheric – the sounds as well.”

Bagdana didn’t reply; his eyes were still fixed on the boiling water that slowly turned the golden color of the lava.
“I summoned you” Darkseid said frowned irritated from the demon’s indifference. “Why you ignored my call?”

Bagdana’s nostrils were fuming.

“What do you want?”

Darkseid stilled his red eyes on the demon’s face despite his unwillingness to look at him.

“My servants owe to answer my calls immediately!”

Bagdana didn’t reply but the silver peaks on his head filled with red dancing flames.

“You didn’t need my services” he retorted hissing “you just wanted to laugh at me.”

Darkseid snorted and a smirk carved his blue, square face.

“You do know me, demon…I see that you are…” he sniffed “heartbroken?” he asked snidely. “I couldn’t imagine that a demon would have a heart neither that he would be bent by the revelation of his pet’s true, filthy nature. That video was highly entertaining…”

Bagdana clenched his jaw.

“Leave…” he growled.

Darkseid’s teeth rattled and sparkles were emitted around.

“You’re too cheap to order Darkseid!” he yelled and for an instant his voice covered the miserable cries of pain. “Your demeanor is another proof that you’re the most pathetic, ridiculous demon!”

Bagdana turned his head to lock eyes with him: he’d like to show that arrogant fool who Bagdana truly was but it wasn’t the time. He needed the alien idiot. However his state at the moment prevented him from controlling entirely himself.

“Then I work for the proper god…” he spat calm cocking an eyebrow.

Darkseid raised his gigantic fist to hit him and the demon just stared at him undeterred, a faint smirk shadowing his features. The new god growled several times but eventually lowered his fist containing his wrath.

“It is the first and last time I spare your miserable existence.”

Bagdana made a deep bow but his eyes were red.

“Thank you for your generosity, my Lord” he replied humbly but Darkseid had the feeling he was jeered.

“I understand your carnal interest in Wayne but I do not see the reason you esteemed so much that Batman…He isn’t anywhere; he doesn’t do anything” he chuckled. “He is the worst of all these pathetic heroes in this waste of a planet.”

“He doesn’t act to be seen…he acts mostly in the shadows and he is deadly effective.”

Darkseid wasn’t persuaded.

“Follow me.”
“I beg your generosity to give me some hours…”

Darkeid stopped and turned his head to look at him.

“What?”

Bagdana gazed at the quivering stony arches of the cave.

“I have some souls to torture…” he hissed and the shrieks and sobs became more desperate.

Darkseid smirked.

“Inferno and Paradise in action?”

Bagdana’s eyes became two enflamed slits.

“What chose me during life is attributable to me.”

Darkseid snorted.

“All these for a pathetic pest…”

Bagdana saw with the corners of his eyes his ally vanishing knowing that despite Darkseid’s snubbing expressions the alien god was intrigued by Bruce and the ancient demon hated that.

Superman hovered over Gotham with his fists touching his hips; the naughty raven lock fell on his brow playfully. The strong wind waved his red cape.

His acute sight could see through buildings and his hearing could overcome every wall. Everyone knew that this city was the capital of crime and corruption so Superman was more useful here than anywhere else. Yet till now he hesitated to come here: he was a Kryptonian but at the same time he was a journalist that knew very well how the world worked so he was aware that Superman’s action wasn’t enough to clean that hellhole.

Till now he had chosen to act in places where his actions would manage something even if he felt bad for leaving the citizens of that city in their fate. On the other hand he had heard countless times that Gothamites weren’t much better than the crime lords who ruled the city.

He didn’t have any faith in Gotham’s people or the city’s salvation… and that made him disappointed because this city was not only his failure but also the proof of his cowardice… So it was easy to turn his gaze elsewhere and forget this city.

Till now… Something inside was stinging him to fly there; a clenching in his guts; agony like someone was in dire need of him. Someone was dying or too close to that.

He turned his head to every directions hearing carefully… Despite the usual ruckus of the big city, one sound topped everything else; a sound that seemed coming from inside him rather than outside. A heartbeat: a weak, tired, scared heartbeat – a heartbeat of a teen…

His super sight turned there as if drawn by a powerful magnet: one of the Gotham Emperor’s buildings, his first and most beloved cabaret – Dolcetto. The heartbeat was coming from the kitchen; he focused there and he saw him.

A boy no older than 14 years but he definitely looked younger. He was dressed in rags, rags stained
with filth and…Superman’s heart clenched as much as the boy’s…blood, dried and fresh. The boy was skinny and his right arm was immobile and in pain; he was on his knees mopping the floor but Superman could see him carefully and shyly lifting his beautiful eyes to glance at the table over him.

There was a TV set open. The footage showed Superman rescuing a woman from a burning building. The boy forgot his fear and stared at the small screen, his eyes full with hope and despair at the same time.

“Help me…” the boy whispered and a sob sadder than anything other Superman had heard left his lungs.

And suddenly the same boy was tied spread eagled to a table, completely naked, his face touching the hard surface in hopelessness; completely resigned to his fate, to the merciless abuse of the adults who held him captive.

Superman was hearing the boy’s desperate howls of pain, his sobs, his pleading for mercy. A fire inside the hero urged him to smash the wall and take the boy away, to the safety of his arms…but something held him in his place.

The boy lifted his bruised face, his tired, blood shot eyes and it was as if those unique, mesmerizing eyes pierced him to the core. His lucky Kryptonites…

“Save me…” the boy whispered in a weak voice that emanated his awareness that he wouldn’t be saved.

Superman pressed his lips and stormed…

Two tender yet strong arms hugged his torso and a flexible, naked body cuddled to him. He felt two breasts slithering up his chest, dominating, and he opened his eyes only to meet with two glazing dark blue eyes in the darkness of the bedroom.

“You’re dreaming about him?” she asked concerned but demand was evident as the flashes from the after midnight traffic slipped through the drapes.

Clark wrapped his arms around her naked back and caressed the hot flesh.

“That video…”

She shook her head and smiled.

“You’re too strong yet too soft hearted…Or Wayne’s spells on you still hold…”

Superman frowned and his mind went to the effect that Bruce’s body had on him. Diana couldn’t know about that; she must have used that word as a figure of speech.

“Or you just pity him…after all he is a pitiful being” her lips curled in disgust. “I’m glad your glory isn’t connected with his miserable existence.”

Her lips touched Superman’s lips and electric current surged through his body making him forget all the misery of the world; all the misery that thinking about Bruce brought to him. Her groin rubbed sensually to his aroused length and Superman just wanted to be happy; to enjoy his life, to not be bothered by other people’s misery and suffering. He just wanted to delve into his lover’s body without remorse or fear that he might cause more pain.

Diana’s magic fingers cupped his face and her sparkling eyes pierced his.
“You know that I love you, Kal El. From the first time I lay eyes on you I knew that you were my one and only mate; the one I want to make happy and give him what he deserves. When I learnt about you and Wayne, my heart clenched because I was sure that this man would cause you only pain and you, after all the good you made for these people, deserve only the best.”

She captured his lips in a passionate kiss that numbed Superman to the core and Clark knew that this was true love, true pathos and not mercy.

It was still dark and the cold was bone crashing; his entire body was howling in pain but he gathered his quivering strength and walked, just walked, hoping against hope that nobody was going to see him. After all, it was too early and everyone was still asleep. He needed to go there.

He stood in front of the ready to collapse small wooden cabinet that served as his shower. He had discarded his ragged, filthy clothes around and stepped inside hoping that Signora Bruna would stay asleep till he finished. He hoped that he’d have the time to mop the blood drops he had left on his way here.

His fingers shook as he twisted the tap for the water to start washing his quivering from the cold body. He was ready for the shock of the icy water since they didn’t allow him warm water. However his major fear was that they will hear the water running and bust him…

The water crashed on him like bricks making his muscles cramp and his teeth rattle yet he didn’t care; he only wanted to get cleaned.

“Nothing of what those people did to you left a stain on you, Bruce! They were more stained than you!”

However Bruce could see the stains all over his body; big stains with all kinds of shapes and others that were drops from splashing liquid. Red-brown stains that were dried blood blended with flesh specks that stuck there, and sick yellow stamps that were the remnants of…He felt again the rush of hot liquid inside his anus…It had dripped everywhere…marking him as Falcone’s toy, a useless vessel for his body liquids.

He shivered because the water was so cold and because it irritated his injuries; yet it was the persistent stains that mattered to him so he rubbed with all his despair and disgust wishing that his right arm was operative to help.

He twisted more the tap increasing the quantity of the water in hopes that the increased pressure would help to rub off the dirt. But the water was of no help…So he rubbed; he rubbed desperately to remove the stains and chase away the stink, the stench.

He stank of Falcone…of the copper smell of blood…of his own sour sweat…of his own gross body…of dried semen… And that stench twisted his stomach so much that he felt the need to throw up again even if he had done so before…

In his frenzy to scrub his skin clean, his legs lost their balance and he landed to the filthy cement…His heart was convulsing with hopelessness: the stains didn’t vanish…

He saw again people goggling, their eyes wide watching Falcone using him; watching his outstretched opening being invaded…and then turning their eyes and goggle at him…smelling the stench of semen on him; the stench of the people who violated him; his own stench.

For an instance he brought his forearm to cover his eyes to stop seeing the disgusted Gothamites
goggling at him but then he remembered what he had come to do and began scratching his skin with more persistence, gritting his teeth to the point of sobbing.

He couldn’t stand neither he wanted to stand…some soap would have helped…a bath foam even more but he had years to use bath foam. The bath foam his mom used to wash him with: the perfume of hibiscus and orange hit for a second his nostrils and he saw again his mom’s smile reassuring, soothing. But then the foul smells from his body attacked him again and he surrendered…resigned…stopped rubbing accepting that he couldn’t get rid of the stench.

He used his arm to gather his non responsive legs to his chest and called his mom to console him singing that beautiful lullaby…

Jim Gordon and Robert Hatchet were still at the Commissionaire’s office; the first standing thoughtful with his hands clenching his waist and the later pacing nervously. They had just finished Isaac’s interrogation.

“He swears that he doesn’t know who sent the parcel with the video…”

Jim shook his head.

“If he knew he’d have betrayed him to save himself; he is too scared after Stark’s attack.”

Robert took the transparent case containing the disk.

“Only his fingertips” and then took the other case with the parcel that contained the disk they had found in Isaac’s apartment. “Of course no sender’s address and Isaac’s address is typed. Our man is very clever.”

Jim shook his head and lifted his eyebrows.

“So we end up in this: who could have access to that video?”

Robert nodded.

“Someone working for Falcone or someone associate. Harvey told me that he spoke to his father and he knows some mobsters for which nobody except Falcone and Chill knew the exact nature of their businesses.”

“You took the names?”

“Yes.”

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Still, why would some former associate of Falcone want to publish that video risking being arrested?”

“Maybe someone who hates Wayne learnt about that video and managed to acquire it.”

Jim nodded.

“And he must hate him too much to do something like this” Jim tapped nervously his fingers on the desk. “We must watch the video” he told the DA who was startled.
“What?”

“Maybe we can notice some detail that will help.”

Robert rubbed his face; it was evident that his abhorrence in the prospect of watching that content was as strong as Jim’s.

“What do you think you can find in that shit?” he said grimly.

Jim yanked his head pissed; his eyes widened.

“Anything!” he yelled jerking his hands. “Anything that could spare Wayne from the process of answering our questions!”

Robert pressed his lips and sighed.

“You know that we can’t spare him from the ordeal: it is the standard procedure. Wayne must answer some questions.”

Jim cursed.

“Yes, I know but if we find something, the procedure will be fast and it won’t have to be too persistent. Don’t you prefer to endure this appalling video than torment Wayne?”

Jim knew that having to answer questions about something like this was like living it again in front of strangers and Wayne had already experienced that with every stranger in the world goggling at the spectacle. His conscience revolted in the thought.

Robert bit his lip and nodded determined.

“I do. And it is my job, after all” he spat and sat in the chair.

Jim walked to the door and popped his head outside.

“Montoya, Bullock!” eight eyes were better than four.

The water was running but the system’s quality was such that the sound was soft, so soft that a low murmured melody managed to be heard.

Alfred’s eyes widened and froze on the curled body in the niche the two walls of the cabin made. Master Bruce in his confusion used his mind’s power to make his legs move till the cabin but then the same confusion made him lose control falling on the cabin’s floor.

The Englishman’s eyes were glued on the youth’s convulsing body: his young master had his legs gathered to his chest and was rocking slowly back and forth; his blank, sparkling eyes were turned to the floor not seeing anything…or better seeing somewhere else.

The young man was murmuring; singing in a low voice that was cracked every now and then by sobs; he sang the melody that made butler’s heart break: Bruce was singing his favorite lullaby, the one his mother used to sing to her only child. It was the same song Alfred found him mumbling that day he went secretly to Dolcetto. It was easy for the Englishman to figure that the poor boy all these years sang this song to console himself whenever his suffering was unbearable – maybe bringing back his mother’s voice to blend with his own.
In spite his paralyzing sorrow, Alfred registered the deep fresh scratches running Bruce’s naked back and by the blood on Master Bruce’s left hand fingernails, Bruce had done them just now. And then another awful realization came like thunder to shake his numb with sorrow and fear mind: his young Master’s back was too red as his entire body…irritated but not just from the scratches.

Suddenly, he dawned to him that the cabin was filled with steam, too hot steam…His eyes bulged more seeing the temperature of the water.

“Dear Lord!”

The temperature was much higher than what a human body could tolerate and Alfred bet that Bruce’s body had burnings where the butler couldn’t see. His hand flew instinctively to the control screen turning off the water yet Master Bruce didn’t seem to realize and his sad song continued having greater impact on Alfred’s soul now that it wasn’t disrupt by the water’s falling.

He rushed outside, grabbed the bath robe from the stand and squatted next to his young Master wrapping carefully the wounded and superficially burned skin. The feeling of something touching his oversensitive skin drew Bruce out of his secluded world; he turned his eyes confused and Alfred relieved saw recognition.

“Alfred?”

The voice was so low, so cracked, so filled with complain that Alfred’s eyes watered.

“Yes, Master Bruce, I’m here now…” he said trying to hide his distress and be soothing.

“I need the water…”

Alfred gulped.

“It was too hot, Master Bruce and was hurting you.”

Bruce’s eyes were sparkling stabbing Alfred’s.

“I’m not Master…” he whispered “I’m just Bruce…” his voice was too hoarse. “And I need the water…”

Alfred made a pathetic attempt at smiling.

“You made those scratches, Master Bruce?”

Bruce closed his eyes tired.

“Signora Bruna brings me here for shower…and the water is always cold…it was too cold and I need to scrub off the filth… too cold…but it’s nothing…after all the lashes hurt more…”

The youth’s body was quivering and though it wasn’t the only reason certainly his young Master was cold because his teeth rattled. Also, Alfred noticed Bruce’s right arm placed over his belly, completely immobile.

The Englishman felt his heart beating fast as the boy’s he had wrapped in his hug; he felt sobs besieging his filled with thorns throat but he knew he should be strong so he pressed his lips.

“You’re clean now, Master Bruce and it’s time for us to leave…”

But the youth shook his head.
“No, I need to… more…the stains are too deep…they don’t leave…” he moved his left hand and began rubbing his skin grounding his teeth.

Alfred took gently his hand to stop him from injuring more his skin.

“No, Master Bruce…it’s alright…let us wear the bath robe now…” he guided the arm to the sleeve and Bruce shyly slid it to the end.

It was more difficult with the other arm and Alfred felt helpless: Bruce’s right arm was like a log and as soon as he touched it Bruce cried in pain.

“Forgive me, Master Bruce.”

The youth gulped.

“It’s my fault, Alfred…” he mumbled and with his left arm helped his immobile arm wear the other sleeve despite the fact his grimaces showed how much that hurt.

Bruce’s eyes fell on the drenched floor.

“I’m sorry” he said and when Alfred looked at him questioning what he couldn’t utter “for the blood…” there wasn’t any blood on the floor (the blood from the scratches had stayed on the skin) but Alfred swallowed his panic and didn’t mention it. “I…I’ll mop it right away before Signora Bruna sees!”

“There’s no need for that, Master Bruce” he reassured him with a faint smile “I’ll take care of everything…Now, can you do me the favor and lean on me? Please, Master Bruce, do not try to support your body on your legs; can you do that for me? Just… lean on me, sir, please.”

Bruce gave a shy nod and wrapped his arm around Alfred’s neck and the Englishman put his arm around the youth’s torso rising carefully. Bruce did as he was told and leaned on Alfred for support; the kind man fixed Bruce’s bath robe to give him the decency he deserved and moved out of the hydromassage cabin.

“I’m sorry for everything, Alfred” Bruce said with the steadiness of the determined youth of the previous day and Alfred grinned to him.

“You did nothing to apologize for, sir” he answered reassuringly.

Bruce’s arm around his neck was put exactly the way a little child would have done with an adult he’d consider safe and Alfred felt his young Master’s head resting exhausted in his chest. His face was cold and Alfred felt Bruce’s entire body shivering. Hypothermia and pain: Alfred prayed that Leslie would come soon. But what worried him more was his young Master’s quick breathing.

“Alfred…” his voice had lost the momentary steadiness.

“Yes, Master Bruce?” he didn’t haste his movements because he didn’t want to upset more the young man.

Bruce’s face was hidden in Alfred’s chest and the butler wanted to caress his dripping hair but he needed both hands to support him right.

“Promise me that this time you won’t leave me here…Promise me that you’ll get me with you…” there was complain and a small sob in his voice. “I can’t take it anymore…please…”
Alfred’s heart bled remembering that time he had gone to Dolcetto and found the little boy mopping the floor on his knees bleeding from his anus. Those child eyes when he was forced to leave and let the boy in Falcone’s clutches still haunted Alfred’s nightmares. Eyes filled with pleading and despair; eyes that became resigned realizing that the only adult who could help abandoned him.

Bruce had lifted his head and was looking at him with the same eyes as 15 years before; Alfred couldn’t stop the flow of liquid from his eyes so he stopped walking.

“I swear, Master Bruce: this time I’ll take you with me…”

Bruce wrapped his arm tighter to the man’s neck and let his head nestle with trust in his chest. Alfred closed his eyes swallowing a sob for Bruce’s pain.

“I’m sorry for causing you pain, Alfred” Bruce said in his steady voice subduing his panting breaths for a moment.

Alfred was ready to reassure him that he was alright but the youth jerked forward and the butler hardly restrained him from falling.

“I have to…”

Alfred understood and helped his young master knee before the toilet to throw up. Bruce’s body jerked violently and Alfred hugged him from behind to smoothen the effect; but still the motion was too strong and Bruce bent over the toilet throwing up the contents of his stomach and after a couple of wrenches just transparent fluids. Alfred knew that the pain in Bruce’s diaphragm was horrible and with clenched jaw was caressing the youth’s hair throughout the ordeal.

When the jerks stopped Bruce’s exhausted body made to collapse on the cold floor but Alfred held him gentle but determined. The Englishman used his sleeve to wipe the youth’s mouth and caressed his cold cheeks.

But then his Master began panting, breathing too fast and too swallow that Alfred felt his own breath choking him. He cupped Bruce’s face with both hands and made their eyes lock.

“Master Bruce, please, I want you to breath slow and deep; do you understand what I’m saying?” the young man nodded and tried to slow down his breaths failing.

“I can’t” he whispered through his panting.

“Look at me. Master Bruce: you know how to breathe right; follow me, sir” he inhaled deeply, held the air and then exhaled slowly.

Yet Bruce couldn’t master something in which he was expert.

“You’ll make it, Master Bruce: do not give up the effort.”

And then a cute meow caught Alfred’s and Bruce’s attention. The butler turned behind him and saw the black and white fur ball running on the glistening floor, a paw slipping every now and then. But Hero reached them and rubbed his head to the human’s hand urging him to pet him. Alfred smiled.

“Hero…” he mumbled grateful seeing his young Master petting the animal causing the kitten’s purring that made Bruce somehow relaxing in Alfred’s arms. “Now, Master Bruce, breathe in the rhythm of Master Hero’s purring.”

Bruce did as he was said and after some efforts, his breath reached almost normality. Alfred caressed
the young man’s wet hair.

“It is over now, Master Bruce. Do you want us to stand?”

Bruce nodded: wet stray locks had fallen to his eyes and made his sight even more difficult but he could see his kitten’s bright eyes looking at him with love. Hero was there and Alfred was there and wouldn’t abandon him.

The Englishman clenched his jaw to lift himself and his exhausted master however hurried steps entered the bathroom stopping him.

“Leslie was already on her way here: she suspected that something like this would happen and…” Alfred heard the gasp and after the initial shock Tony ran to them. “Let him to me…” he whispered in a hoarse, cracked voice.

Alfred was hesitant because he was afraid that Bruce would panic if he felt other hands on him.

Indeed, Bruce is his hypervigilant state sensed the new presence in the space and jerked in Alfred’s arms ready to flee. But the Englishman caressed his locks calming.

“Master Bruce, please, calm down…I’m Alfred, remember? I won’t let anyone hurt you” he bit his bottom lip because that was a blatant lie: he had let many people hurt the defenseless child. “It is Master Anthony he came to help us…”

Bruce nodded closing his eyes and Tony’s insides clenched painfully seeing his friend in such suffering, some scratches visible on his friend’s shivering torso.

“Is it alright if he touches you?” Alfred asked carefully and Bruce nodded.

The butler raised his eyes to Tony who was watching avidly and when Alfred gave him a nod he leaned and carefully put one hand around Bruce’s back and one under his knees. Tony wasn’t the most empathetic man on the world but now seeing Bruce on his knees, quivering with his head bowed having just thrown his guts out; he knew that his movements should be very gentle and extra careful. So he brought his face to Bruce’s eye field; the younger man was staring at Hero who enjoyed his rather mechanic petting.

“Little guy…it’s me, Tony…”

Bruce hearing that voice felt new courage filling him. He raised his eyes and Tony smiled reassuringly though his eyes watered because Bruce’s eyes were now exactly as he remembered them from their childhood.

“I’m going to lift you up now, okay?”

Bruce nodded and Tony having already activated Ironman’s boots lifted him in bridal style and Alfred who stood up took Bruce’s right arm that hung dead and placed it carefully over the youth’s belly.

“Carefully, Master Anthony: his skin is injured and he has some minor burnings…” Tony licked his lips and inhaled deeply.

Bruce knew that he was safe now and exhaustion invaded every cell of his body breaking every resistance his body sustained till now. He wrapped his left arm around Tony’s neck and let his head nestle to his shoulder closing his eyes.
Tony did the same, his insides screaming for his friend’s suffering. However at the same time he realized how cold his friend was.

“He is frozen…” he whispered to Alfred.

The butler had stormed to the granite cabinet on the wall and rummaged the first aids’ stuff.

“We’ll fix that, sir…”

Tony began walking to the bedroom minding his steps to not upset the trembling man in his arms.

“I knew you’d come, Tony…” Bruce mumbled to his neck and Tony pressed his lips because that wasn’t true and stabbed him cruelly.

“I’m late, littl’ guy…” he answered in a raspy voice. “Too late…” his touched eyes met with Bruce’s puzzled ones.

“No” he protested “you did come: the bats were telling me you will…” the younger man closed his eyes and Tony was happy that the comment about the bats was told while still inside the bathroom because Dick stood at the bedroom’s doorstep watching expressionless.

Dick’s eyes were narrowed but not from anger…he was numb, speechless in front of so much suffering.

“Master Anthony, place him on the chair to sweep the water” Alfred said coming out of the bathroom with a big, fluffy towel under his armpit and some medical stuff in his hands.

As Tony put Bruce gently on the wheelchair the bathrobe’s sleeve slithered and Dick saw the man’s torso. He frowned: Jason was right – Wayne’s body was staggering. The body of an athlete. And there were scars the nastier one that throughout his stomach; a scar definitely made with knife.

Alfred was sweeping Bruce’s wet hair with the towel and then he continued with his young master’s body. Bruce was silent watching him; Hero who had followed them from the bathroom stood at his human’s feet and stared at him. Bruce suddenly registered again the kitten’s presence and smiled to him shyly petting him with his trembling hand.

“Hero…”

Alfred’s ministrations were extra careful due to the scratches and the superficial burnings all over Bruce’s body but still he sensed the young body cringing in every touch. Tony who had squatted and watched his friend noticed too.

“Master Bruce, where does it hurt?”

Bruce rubbed his eye with his left hand.

“I know it’s not real…” he retorted in a steady, undeterred voice. “I’m sorry I upset all of you…” he shook his head. “I know it’s not real but it hurts… everywhere…” he inhaled grimacing.

Tony met Alfred’s eyes sharing their agony.

“Leslie is coming, Master Bruce; she’ll take care of everything… Master Anthony, can you take Master Bruce to the bed?”

“Of course…”
But Bruce shook his head.

“I don’t wanna sleep” he said stubbornly.

“There’s no need to sleep, sir” Alfred said softly and Tony lifted him carefully to lay him even gentler to the mattress.

Alfred chose to not dress yet his young Master because he wanted to tend to his injuries first.

Alfred hurried to his side to take care of his injuries; at the same moment, Hero climbed to the bed and curled at Bruce’s side leaking his immobile hand.

But then the doorbell fell like a thunder in the silence of the room and Alfred raised his head toward the bedroom’s door. He registered Dick’s presence there and the boy felt uncomfortable like he’d been intruding something that he had no right.

“I…I’ll open…” the boy mumbled hastily and ran downstairs.

Leslie reached the bedroom faster than Dick and she rushed to the bed placing her tool case on the nightstand. She sat at Bruce’s side and cupped his cheek.

“How are you, dear?”

Bruce shook his head.

“I’m sorry for all the trouble…I…I…it was just a dream…a nightmare…and I shouldn’t…”

“Hush now, Bruce” Leslie said smiling tenderly, as she was already checking his heartbeat registering at the same time that his temperature was too low.

She took of her briefcase the stethoscope and examined his chest. Her stare was estimating the burnings and the scratches on his skin.

“What happened?” she asked Alfred and Tony.

“I found Master Bruce in the hydromassage cabin; the water was too hot.”

“It felt so cold” Bruce said gulping realizing that he must have been in a hallucination.

"Jarvis checked his body for any injury to his bones” Tony added. "We were lucky" his voice was deep.

Leslie didn’t need to ask about the scratches: she was sure that Bruce rubbed his skin trying to clean himself. She washed the scratches using the water Alfred brought and disinfected them bandaging the deepest. Then she cleaned the burnings and applied ointment that was instantly absorbed by the skin.

“You’re frozen” she said “but we’ll take care of that.”

In the meantime Alfred took from the drawer new underwear and pajamas and began helping Bruce to put them on. Leslie frowned seeing that the youth wasn’t using at all his right arm. She felt Tony’s persistent stare on her and met his eyes.

“It’ll pass” she answered calm his unsaid question and prepared a syringe.

She cleaned with alcohol Bruce’s forearm but as she brought the syringe near the skin, Bruce looked
at her frowned if not scared.

“It’s for your hypothermia, Bruce” she said reassuringly and when he nodded she made the injection.

When the doorbell rang again everyone was startled. They didn’t expect anyone else but there were a handful of people that could enter the grounds without the need of someone ordering the gates to open.

Dick went again returning with Selina and Steve. Selina ran to Bruce’s side immediately and Bruce turned his head to her their eyes locking.

“Sweetie…” her voice cracked stopping her from saying anything else and she cupped Bruce’s face kissing his cold.

Bruce pressed his lips as Selina caressed his face taking in with agony his death paleness.

“You shouldn’t have returned, Sel…It’s nothing…I just…I had a nightmare and…it wasn’t something serious…” he sighed “I messed things up…I panicked everyone.”

Selina hushed him caressing his hair.

“You’re ashen, sweetie and Leslie is here so I doubt it was nothing… and you didn’t mess anything up: you didn’t do anything wrong” Hero rubbed his head to her hand and she petted him.

Steve approached Tony who stood at some distance from the bed, grim with his arms crossed.

“We left New York as soon as I told Selina about the video – I couldn’t hide it from her.”

Tony pressed his lips and nodded.

“How is Bruce?” Captain America asked in a whisper.

Tony huffed and didn’t answer; Steve shook his head with sympathy.

Leslie and Alfred were relieved that Selina was there; her presence seemed to bring Bruce out of his hallucination and establish a solid connection with the real world. Alfred went to the bathroom and returned with mouthwash and a porcelain vessel.

“Master Bruce, would you like to wash your mouth?”

Bruce looked shyly at his butler.

“I can go to the bathroom, Alfred; there’s no need to…” he gestured to the things he held.

The Englishman smiled although the fact Bruce still didn’t move his right arm troubled him and Leslie.

“No worry, Master Bruce; I have everything you need here.”

Bruce washed his mouth spitting to the vessel though he felt bad doing this.

“What happened, Bruce?” Leslie asked carefully.

“I had a nightmare…a flashback with…you know…what happened…and I woke up but it looked like I wasn’t in the Manor but back there…I…I’m sorry…I should have known and…I caused you so much turmoil” his eyes hugged his loved ones and stopped on Dick who stood at the door step.
Their eyes stayed locked only for a second before Dick turned his head away.

“Don’t think about that, Bruce” Leslie told caressing his hair, bringing the stray locks back. “Are you in pain? The truth” she arched her eyebrows mock strictly.

Bruce blinked.

“No.”

Alfred cleared his throat and Leslie raised her eyebrow more.

“I know it’s not real…”

“But…” Selina prompted.

“I feel pain…everywhere…”

Leslie opened a small vial and dripped a few drops of liquid in the glass of water Alfred had brought. She moved it to Bruce’s lips but he looked at her suspicious.

“Some sedative: it will stop the pain and help you sleep, dear.”

Bruce met Selina’s eyes and she nodded but her friend shook his head with conviction.

“No…I don’t wanna sleep!” his eyes shone determined and his voice was steady but it was clear to everyone that he was afraid of re-experiencing the same.

Bruce realized and pressed his lips.

“I’ll do some work…”

Tony hearing that moved forward.

“You’re in no position to do anything other than rest” his voice was altered, raspier from the night’s strong emotions. “Do not stretch yourself more, littl’ guy…And I’ll call Collins to ask for the hearing to be postponed.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, the hearing will take place normally” Tony frowned and Dick did the same: Wayne’s face was death pale and his arm still placed on his bale like a log, surely he wouldn’t want to face the hearing like this.

The boy just couldn’t understand the man’s stubbornness.

Tony wanted to retort, to force Bruce to see his own good but Alfred looked at him in a way that told him to forget it.

“Okay, little guy, but this makes some hours of good, restful sleep even more necessary.”

“Exactly” Leslie agreed.

But Bruce looked at his hands and shook his head.

“No…I don’t need any sleep” his voice lost its steadiness.

Selina noticed the change of his voice and her insides twisted.
“But I do, Bruce” she said quietly and widened her eyes when he looked at her. “I’m tired so if you want it, can I sleep here with you?”

Leslie smiled realizing her intention: Selina hoped that her presence would help Bruce relax and sleep. But Bruce realized too.

“Sel, you don’t have to…I’m fine now.”

Selina crooked her mouth.

“But I’m not, sweetie. I need to sleep here to have some of your strength and bravery infused to me” she pushed the shoes off her feet, discarded her jacket carelessly to the floor and lied on his side, Hero settling between them. “You won’t deny your friend the favor?” she looked at Steve and he smiled nodding.

Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I’ll drink that sedative” he told Leslie knowing that this would calm at last his loved ones after what he made them suffer; he sipped the water with the sedative.

Leslie put on Bruce's index finger a small device that would keep her informed about the young man's vitals and then stood tucking both of them with the blankets smiling touched.

“I think it is time we went to sleep, as well” Alfred said giving the signal for them to leave the room.

Dick left first running to his room not wanting his presence to be noticed again and to avoid any exchange with Wayne’s friends.

As Steve was ready to leave the room cast a tender look to Selina and Bruce that reclined face to face with the kitten curled between them purring happy.

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous?” Tony asked him having come to his side turning his head to see what his comrade did.

Steve shook his head.

“Not at all… I was just thinking…How wrong people that call us superheroes are.”

Tony patted his back and stepped to the corridor casting a last tender glance at the bed.

“Do you have any hint about who did that to Bruce?” Steve asked in a low voice to not be heard by Bruce.

Tony snorted.

“I was ready to kill the fucking hacker who published that video…Batman stopped me” he shook his head remembering his stupid previous anger at Bruce. “Of course that stupid nerd just worked for another who had access to the video and hated Bruce.”

Steve smirked shaking his head.

“I think you have already someone in mind…”

Tony smirked and his eyes flashed.

“I do, my friend.”
Steve lifted a shoulder.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s get the bastard!”

The last to leave the room were Alfred and Leslie.

“I’ll be sleeping in the guestroom” Leslie said to the youths “just call me for whatever you need” Selina nodded and Hero meowed causing Bruce’s weak smile.

“Sleep well, Miss Kyle, Master Bruce” Alfred said before clapping once to turn off the lights leaving only the gentle light of the flames in the fireplace. He wanted to stay there wake at the bedside yet he knew that this would only make Master Bruce nervous.

“You’re too good for me, Sel” Bruce whispered when the door closed. “I constantly ruin your life…”

“Nonsense! You never did that.”

“You could have a home, a family and you tossed away all these to stay with me.”

Selina licked her lips.

“You’re the only family I ever wanted.”

Bruce lowered his head.

“Because of me you witnessed so many horrors…” they both understood that he meant the times Selina saw Chill rape him.

She caressed his hair.

“Don’t think about that, sweetie: you gave me more than I ever hoped.”

Bruce sighed.

“Everybody saw, Sel…everybody knows what should have stayed inside me…”

“Bruce…” she whispered. “Everyone now appreciates more the brave man you are.”

He shook his head and Hero licked his cheek.

“I feel so much shame…” he narrowed his eyes.

Selina shook her head.

“No, no, Bruce! There’s nothing you should be ashamed of! You survived through all these Hell; you defeated them! You should be proud of yourself as all of us!”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Clark was right to leave…”

Selina inhaled.

“You said that this was due to some control over him…He wouldn’t have done it otherwise and he’d be very sorry when the control is over…”
“But still it was the best for him to be detached from me…from all the filth, the disgust, the humiliation...” his eyes went blank for a few moments “I don’t want to look at anyone ever again unless the cowl is on my face and the lenses are my eyes… I should have killed off Bruce Wayne...” his friend bit her lip. “It would have been better if Batman only existed.”

Selina clenched her lip.

“No! Bruce Wayne inspires people…Bruce Wayne has made so many people happy: Mr. Petrou and Harvey; Billy and the other kids in the Haven; Falcone’s working girls; Jason’s mother without you would have been still struggling with addictions, selling drugs and ending up in jail leaving Jason completely exposed to the underworld.”

“Batman, Tony and Lucius could have taken care of these better than me.”

Selina now was crying.

“You want to kill my only friend?”

Bruce rubbed her back soothingly.

“Batman is your friend and he is strong and brave and nobody will ever look at him with pity.”

She shook her head.

“My Bruce is the strongest and bravest man in the whole fucking planet!” she growled and Hero caressed her with his paw.

“No, Sel: he is not” he pressed his lips. “I thought many times to kill myself back then...when the pain, the shame and the hunger were too much...It wasn’t difficult: I planned it every time. Stealing a knife from the kitchen drawers: no problem there...every day I was cleaning there...and then when alone in my cage, cutting my wrists, lying on the ground waiting...”

Selina’s cheeks were wet and sobs heaved her chest.

“Everything would end there: no more pain, no more humiliation, no more curses...I’d see my parents again – I’d be peaceful or at least I would not exist...I’d be nothing...” he gulped and met his friend’s eyes. “But then...every time...when I was ready to open the drawer and steal the knife...your image flashed before my eyes...” Bruce’s eyes sparkled wet in the semidarkness. “Every night behind the bin...the happiness in your eyes when you looked at me; our chat...I was thinking you waiting for me in the dirty light of the alley, behind our bin...waiting in vain...and then after some days realizing that I was not going to come again...that I was dead. I felt your pain...and my chest was clenched more...I knew I was the only person you had; your only loved one and I didn’t want to let you alone...sad...crying...for my shake...I don’t worth so much.”

Selina wrapped her arms around her friend minding his wounds and cuddled him tightly in her chest; her head nestling to his shoulder wetting his pajama shirt with her tears as he wetted her blouse with his.

“Thank you, Bruce; thank you for not making my nightmares reality...thank you for not leaving me...” she kissed his cheeks and swept his tears. “I’d be lost without you...”

Bruce smiled.

“No...you would have made it without me. You’re a great girl, Sel” he petted Hero that placed his one front leg on Bruce’s shoulder and the other on Selina’s.
Bruce felt his eyelids flickering and knew that the sedative was working; it took only a few moments before his eyes were defeated by exhaustion and the sedative and his head rested on Selina’s chest. She cupped it gently with both hands and placed it carefully to the pillow; then she cuddled him close to her chest, Hero settling on the blanket over their bodies.

“No nightmare will dare mess with me, sweetie!”
Dick had returned to his room an hour ago but still he couldn’t decide to recline. He was pacing the room without any other light than that coming from the garden’s lighting; his arms were crossed on his chest. There was no trace of sleepiness though he did feel tired.

Thoughts twirled in his mind. Thoughts about what he had witnessed tonight; about himself: doubts about his own stance. The image of Wayne in Stark’s arms kept coming to his mind: the man was exhausted, weak, suffering and though Dick hated him and even a few hours ago would say that he wanted him to suffer for the death of his family he caused, now his stomach was clenched.

For the first time, Dick was thinking that maybe he was unfair with Wayne…No, no. It wasn’t easy for him to accept that only because Wayne had a nightmare. But then…

The boy sighed because he had nightmares as well…not as horrific as Wayne’s but still he could understand a bit. It could be his conscience that bit him? Or just the incident? The upset he was experiencing?

He sat on the mattress and shook his head sighing. His eyes searched the room not knowing what he was looking for. Suddenly, he eyed his forgotten tablet on the nightstand. The need to open his heart to someone became urging: he needed to bring it out of his system.

He took the tablet and browsed his contacts stopping to Jason’s number. Dick was ready to call his best friend but the hour was late and though Jay used to sleep afterhours still he could be in his home and calling him would disturb his mother. He could speak with him tomorrow.

Tony’s number: yes, Tony would want him to call since it would help him feel better. He brushed the number and after two times the call was answered.

“Champ, what’s wrong?” Tony’s voice was filled with worry. “You should be sleeping.”

“I know, Tony but…I couldn’t sleep and I thought to call you to speak a bit…I hope I’m not bothering you or your wife.”

Zucco was heard sighing.

“Not at all, Dick, I told you to call me whenever you felt needing it. What happened? You sound troubled…”

“Wayne…”

Zucco huffed and then groaned.

“Don’t tell me he punished you again?”

“No, no” Dick interrupted him.

“Tell me he didn’t take out that video matter on you? Because if he did…”

Dick sighed: hearing Tony blaming Wayne for these things made him feel worse because Dick himself had fuelled those accusations – unfounded accusations.

“No, Tony, he didn’t do anything…”
“Then?”

Dick hesitated for a moment feeling that it was Wayne’s secret he had just come across uninvited but then it was Tony whom he trusted so the boy felt that he could share with him.

“I was crossing the corridor to go to the kitchen and I heard sounds from his room so I opened the door…”

“And?” eagerness was evident in his uncle’s voice and Dick’s embarrassment worsened realizing that his uncle imagined the worst things.

“He was wrestling in his sleep, sobbing and begging…and then I told Alfred and Stark…and Alfred found him in the bathroom but I didn’t see what happened there because I came later; but when Stark brought him in the bedroom Wayne looked disoriented like he was in a hallucination or something… He must have had a fit or something…and he had burnings from hot water.”

“And you were disturbed, my poor boy… Try to calm down, champ; and get some sleep: you have school tomorrow. Wayne’s problems is not yours, Dick; try to remember that. You have your own life to care about – Wayne is not your family and soon we’ll have the official decision for that.”

Dick pursed his lips thoughtful.

“Dick? Are you there?”

The boy mumbled something.

“I understand that you’re distressed from what you saw but think that in a few days we’ll be together and all these we’ll be forgotten. Don’t forget who Wayne is: the man who because of him your family was murdered and the one who forbids you from living with your uncle.”

Dick nodded; that was quite true but he still felt something that slightly resembled sympathy. The image of Wayne in the children’s hospital hugging the paraplegic girl flashed in his mind intensifying his feelings. Maybe he was wrong about the man and his granny and Jay was right? Maybe Wayne was a tormented man with that much kindness? Maybe he was so upset because Wayne indeed resembled Brian and seeing Wayne in suffering was like seeing his little brother?

“Dick, I understand that you feel sorry for this man. You pity him for the things he suffered and that because you are a great, generous, kind boy. Yet don’t let him take advantage of your kind feelings into ruining our common purpose. Champ? You remember our common purpose, right?”

Dick rubbed his palm on his eye.

“Of course I do, Tony. What happened today doesn’t change anything. I dream the day that you’ll be my guardian and I will come to live with you.”

Tony’s relieved smile was almost audible.

“You’re great, Dick! And I promise you that it is a matter of days before your troubles are over. You’ll be free, my boy.”

Dick inhaled deeply.

“Thank you, Tony.”

“Oh! It’s nothing, Dick…Now, promise me that you’ll get immediately to bed and sleep.”
“I will, Tony. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. We’ll see each other soon.”

Dick held his promise to his uncle and lay down immediately after they ended their dial. He hated that things got so perplexed all of a sudden: he preferred it when he just loathed Wayne. He didn’t want to see him as anything different than someone who entered his life causing him pain. He raised his eyes on the dark ceiling and sighed: why did his granny make him live with Wayne?

Thankfully, he was enough tired to sleep almost at once sparing himself from these tormenting and self-doubting thoughts…and feelings.

Luthor enjoyed a carefree half-drunk sleep in his king size bed, sprawled half naked among his maroon silken sheets. His face had a satisfied smirk left over of the day’s great entertainment. It was the same smile he had the entire hour he was watching the video of Falcone giving Wayne what he deserved.

He ordered Mercy to keep an eye on the case so that he’d send some flowers to the one that published that video. Oh! How he would like to see the face of Wayne or Stark’s…the arrogant bastard being ridiculed through his spoiled brat and Wayne remembering who he really was and waking from his illusion that people didn’t see beyond his façade of dignity: naked, spanked, screwed…sobbing, yelling, begging for mercy…

Also, his work with Mannheim’s machine was in good progress and Luthor was happy because the moment he wouldn’t have to bear the man’s presence was near. Of course, this was his mood while the mobster was away because when in his presence Luthor felt obliged to this man; grateful for serving him…serving…she serving someone?

However Luthor could oversee everything else for the top satisfaction of his enemies’ humiliation…Someone else took revenge for him till he was in position to make his own move.

Suddenly, even in his deep intoxicated sleep something felt off and Luthor stirred. Something was on him. He opened his eyes.

“Lights” he ordered and the huge, luxurious bedroom was flooded with light.

Luthor frowned seeing his smiling uninvited guest.

Natasha Romanov dressed in black skin tight leather had straddled him, sitting on his grown her juicy thighs pressing the mattress while her arms positioned on both sides of his torso trapped him. She slithered her torso over his bringing her face over his.

“Mercy!” he barked for his loyal bodyguard.

“It is still early to beg for that, Lex” she spat indifferent. However if you ask for your lap dog, be a good employer and let her sleep” she cocked an eyebrow “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of me?”

Luthor rolled his eyes.

“You’re a master assassin, of course I’m afraid.”

She chuckled.
“I’m with the good guys now so people who are innocent have nothing to fear…” she lolled slightly her head. “And you are innocent, right?”

Luthor blinked annoyed.

“What do you want, Romanov?”

“Actually, is Romanova” she cocked an eyebrow.

She cast a sideways glance to the nightstand where an empty bottle of champagne sat.

“I see you were celebrating, huh?”

“It’s none of your business!”

“I think it is!”

The Black Window clenched her jaw and grabbed the waistband of Luthor’s pyjama pants since he wasn’t wearing the shirt. She jumped off the bed dragging him with her and with fast movements brought him to the vast balcony pinning him to the wall. The night’s cold pierced Luthor’s naked torso causing him goose bumps for which the cold wasn’t the only responsible.

“I think I know what you celebrated, Luthor” she hissed in her heavy Russian accent “a hideous video; you enjoyed the pain of a tortured child.”

Luthor laughed.

“So what? What now, Romanov? You became Stark’s lackey?”

She hit him to the wall grounding her teeth.

“I hate pedophiles and those who distribute that sick material.”

“And what I have to do with that?”

“You had business with Falcone and you already allied with the League of Shadows to surrender Wayne to them…few days ago someone attacked him. You hate Bruce Wayne and Stark so you had the perfect motive and chance to succeed your purpose.”

“Exactly!”

A third voice was added and Luthor saw with a deep frown Ironman landing on his balcony and after him Captain America.

“What is that!?” he barked outraged. “You two are committing trespassing, and you, Romanov, broke into my penthouse! You can’t do this!”

Ironman marched at him fuming inside his face plate and Luthor grimaced enraged though admittedly Ironman approaching was a terrifying sight. Natasha sidestepped to leave the field empty for her comrade and Ironman clenched with one hand Luthor’s neck; the tycoon from Metropolis gritted his teeth hiding his terror with his equal hatred.

“Your filth this time surpassed any limit!” he hissed. “You’ll pay for all the pain you inflicted on Bruce…”

Luthor pursed his lips.
“This is a classic case of harassment and attack: you’re the criminal here, Stark!”

But Ironman clenched more.

“You’re a filthy motherfucker: who do you think will give a fuck about your allegations?!”

Luthor licked his bottom lip.

“Okay, I very much enjoyed the video for the humiliation it was for you and your brat” Luthor admitted cynically and Ironman growled. “Yet I wasn’t the one who published it. I didn’t know that Falcone was holding Wayne as a prisoner neither that he fucked him; moreover that he used to tape those sessions.”

“Do you expect him to believe you?” Steve spat. “Everyone knows that you’re capable of the worst immorality” he snorted haughtily. “Look at you! You laughed with Bruce’s suffering but look at you now: you stuttering excuses to save your hide.”

Luthor glared at Captain America.

“I’m not stuttering, you obsolete doughboy! I’m not afraid of your pathetic mob!”

“We know that you were behind the attack against Bruce few days ago” Natasha added.

Well, that wasn’t the truth, Tony thought. Bruce was sure that Mannheim was the mastermind yet it was handy for making Luthor completely lose it.

However the tycoon knew how to keep his cool.

“You’re not great detectives, aren’t you?” he asked sniggering but Ironman’s grip shut his laughter. “Alright! How could I have attacked Wayne since he has my Labs and the storages in his control?”

“You can have more labs in secret locations” Natasha offered having her arms crossed and her head slightly lolled to the side.

Luthor rolled his eyes.

“Then you would have found them by now and I’ll be in prison again. But you don’t! I had nothing to do with that attack though I wish I did. I enjoyed it as I enjoyed the leak of that video – but you can’t arrest me for that, can you? You don’t have any proof” he narrowed his eyes challenging.

Tony knew that he couldn’t arrest the sonovabitch: he indeed had no proof…yet. He opened his fingers and Luthor slumped on the floor caressing his bruised neck and glaring at Ironman who had taken off.

“Now, get out of my property” he barked hoarsely from the pressure his throat had endured though the Avengers had already left his rectangular balcony.

Ironman turned his head to him and his lenses flashed.

“Pray I don’t find you were behind this…because I’ll make you wish you were never born!”

Steve on his shield followed Ironman till they stopped on a rooftop; Natasha landing a few seconds later.

“I’m sorry, Tony, but you know we couldn’t arrest him.”
Ironman nodded.

“He is a motherfucker but…I believe him though I wish I didn’t.”

“What are you going to do now with Bruce?” Black Window asked him looking him in the eyes with her icy eyes shining with a shade of concern.

“Find a way to help him.”

The small, old grandfather clock on the oaken dresser showed 4 in the morning. In the semi-darkness of his bedroom Alfred cast a sideways glance to the beautiful carved clock; yet his focus was on the old paper he held above his elegant small, round shaped table at the center of his bedroom.

The classic table lamp on the nightstand was the only light in the room but the external lighting of the garden slithered also in the grim room so Alfred had no problem to read the paper he had in front of him caressing with his other hand the stuffed old toy that lay on the desk.

He sighed; his mind’s eyes travelled back, far back in his past.

Martha Wayne held his forearm and smiled to him looking him in the eyes. Thomas sat behind his desk in his study and read aloud the contents of the paper causing a shiver to his butler’s spine. Alfred wasn’t a coward but the prospect of what the paper described left him shaken.

“I know that we can trust you, Alfred…” Martha said smiling to him to ease his tension.

Alfred gulped and rimmed the rectangular glass with whiskey he had on the table. His eyes focused on the signatures on the perfectly preserved formal paper: the doctor-ish untidy signature of Thomas Wayne, the neat, calligraphic signature of Martha Wayne and his own.

Thomas stood and came out of his desk having tucked the paper in the desk’s first drawer that always kept locked. He placed his hand on the butler’s shoulder and gave a tight lips smile under his wife’s touched eyes.

“Bruce will be happy with you, Alfred. And we know that you will always protect him.”

“I am quite honoured by your trust, madam, Master Wayne…but I am praying that young Master Wayne will always be with you.”

Alfred massaged his brow and after a little thought he grabbed determined the glass and gulped the whiskey.

If only he had managed to protect the little boy as his parents had believed and hoped…But he disappointed them; he failed both his madam and his Master but most of all he failed young Master Bruce.

“Promise me that this time you’ll take me with you…” his young Master’s weak, tired voice whispered again to his neck and a shaking arm held tighter to him scared that the butler would leave him.

Alfred’s guts hurt from thousands unseen stabs and he took reverently the Tao-Tao stuffed toy, his eyes gazing at it tenderly; his eyes registered the neat sewing that kept the toy’s leg connected to its body: a tiny Master Bruce had begged him to help his toy refusing to dump the old, ripped toy to the garbage.
Alfred saw again Bruce’s eyes when he was walking out of Dolcetto leaving him to Falcone’s abusing hands… the butler’s eyes focusing on the small boy’s crippled arm… he had dumped the child who wouldn’t dump even an inanimate toy!

“Bloody Hell, Pennyworth!” he gritted his teeth.

He had to help Master Bruce even now after all the times he didn’t.

He dragged the tablet that was neglected on the other end of the table till it was in front of him. He didn’t like technology yet he knew how to use its products: he inhaled deeply to strengthen himself and brushed the screen until he found what he wanted.

Miss Peppers and Lucius had taken meticulous care to take down the file from the known sites yet unfortunately other, less known sites continued to host the file. He intended to send the link to Lucius but after he finished his job.

His head dropped to his chest: what he had decided to do weighed so much on his shoulders; it made his entire body shake from dread. He brought his palm to his mouth. He ought to be courageous as young Master Bruce always was… for the boy’s sake…

He gulped again, closed his eyes once again and brushed the arrow for playing…

The sound of the door opening suddenly fell like a thunder but Alfred didn’t move from his seat.

“Alfred, what are you doing?”

Alfred closed his eyes and brushed again the icon to stop the video.

“Leslie, I would most appreciate it if you left me alone.”

Yet his old friend wasn’t someone to fool; she walked to the table and looked at the tablet. Alfred didn’t bother trying to hide it; he was numb. Even when Leslie’s narrowed eyes stabbed him.

“You intended to watch the video?” her voice wasn’t accusing; it was astonished.

Alfred nodded collected.

“If Master Bruce endured it when he was 11 years old and again now then I can, as well…” he bit his bottom lip as these words brought back to him Martha the night Falcone sent them the tape with the bastards chopping the child’s toe; Master Thomas then had tried to turn the TV set off to spare his distraught wife.

“If Bruce suffered this, I will too!”

Leslie saw her friend’s eyes watering and brushed his upped arms.

“Why, Alfred? You don’t have to suffer that twisted product of Falcone’s cruelty.”

Alfred yanked his head proudly.

“I have to understand, Leslie; I have to see in order to understand what is going on inside Master Bruce. Maybe I can help him better this way because he won’t ever speak about this.”

Leslie closed her eyes; she could see Alfred’s point…

“Do you believe that witnessing the tortures Bruce suffered will make you able to help him more
than you do now?”

“That is exactly what I believe.”

“But then the way you look at him will change, Alfred. Every time your eyes will meet with Bruce’s you will see the tied, violated boy and Bruce will realize that you’re not seeing him the way you looked him before his parents’ murders. And you will lower your eyes every time…The way you look at Bruce now is a way for him to feel again innocent – he finds his lost innocence in your eyes, Alfred. If you see that video that innocence will die and that will be another heavy brow to Bruce.”

The Englishman showed her the stuffed toy.

“It is Master Bruce’s…It was rather old even when Master Bruce was just six and Tommy Elliot had ripped the toy’s leg… Master Bruce came to me crying with the little bear in his hands and asked me to help…I suggested that he should throw the toy because it was too old” he shook his head. “I was so insensitive…but Master Bruce wouldn’t dump his toy to be alone in the garbage…”

Leslie closed her eyes understanding how this memory increased her friend’s guilt.

“I never gave the toy back to him…”

Alfred’s head lowered and Leslie caressed his hair.

“You’re perfect as you are, Alfred; your presence is a great support for Bruce. He knows how much you love him and even if you don’t believe it he takes strength from you.”

“I failed his parents, Leslie…I failed the poor boy: I have abandoned him so many times…”

“You couldn’t have done anything else, Alfred; Bruce knows that and you know it deep inside: if you had tried to take Bruce from Falcone.”

“You didn’t see his eyes every time Falcone detached him away from me brutally and I stood there worthless, unable to help, to save him…”

Leslie pressed her lips.

“When you told me that Bruce was alive I was mad at you” she chuckled. “For letting me all these years to live with the pain of believing our boy dead” Alfred licked his lips. “But then thinking how it was for you to live all these years knowing that the child was held by Falcone, suffering the man’s cruelty; I imagined you enduring the dragging of the days aware of how much Bruce was suffering: every day, every hour, every minute, every second…” she gulped and shook her head. “I admire you, Alfred; I would have lost my sanity bearing that cross…”

Alfred’s eyes were still a bit blank and Leslie held his hand.

“You accuse yourself for letting his little hand slip of yours the moments he needed you but now, Alfred, it is your hand he holds…to be connected with his lost innocence, his parents. You do save him, Alfred, every day, every moment” she cast a furious glance at the video. “Don’t ruin that!”

Alfred pressed his lips and nodded. He brushed the option and the screen turned off.

Thor patted the hammer in his belt as his heavy footsteps echoed throughout the glistening, golden hall of Odin’s throne. The light blue crystal throne greeted him in its emptiness at the other end of the
His eyes regarded the golden-black round shaped endless columns that supported the enormous dome that depicted the starry sky. He smiled because this dazzling sight even now that he wasn’t the naughty toddler caught his eyes. However what always fascinated Thor more since his childhood lay on the right side of the throne hall: outside the arches that were the only thing that framed the hall from what was there: infinite, silent darkness and countless different sized spheres.

Spheres that twirled lazily around themselves floating in the endless darkness of the universe. They were so different that the young Thor goggled at them for hours: some plain brown, some red, some gray, some with multicolored rings around them; but one stood out with its uniqueness and beauty. A blue and green sphere… Thor’s legs had dragged him without realizing to the edge.

“I think that one planet holds your intellect captive” Odin’s deep, respectful voice echoed throughout the hall and Thor turned to regard the respectful figure of his father.

Odin crossed the central corridor leading to his throne only to divert and come to his son who was looking at him with pride. Thor always look up to his father: his gray, long hair, his neat gray beard, his clear blue eye, the black leather patch over his missing eye, a relic of the war with the icy giants.

They held each other’s forearms as a greeting and their eyes locked.

“Earth captures your eyes and your mind, son.”

Thor lolled slightly his head towards the universe that was lying idly and graciously a grasp away.

“The fate of this planet and of its inhabitants is deep in my heart but that doesn’t stop me from caring about Asgard’s affairs, as well.”

Odin grinned.

“Of course. You just returned from handling a serious issue after all.”

Thor frowned because his father’s voice had something different.

“And I imagine you are in a haste to return to Earth” Odin added.

“I’m not in a hurry. I always enjoy being with you, father. But eventually I need to go there: my comrades had a meeting which I missed so at some point I should be informed.”

Odin stretched his impressive body and bound his hands behind his back staring at the blue and green sphere.

“If the meeting is your concern, you don’t have to worry: the meeting was cancelled.”

Thor frowned; that wasn’t good news: only something important could cancel a meeting of the Avengers.

“I must contact Tony.”

Odin cocked an eyebrow.

“I don’t think that this is the proper moment to do that. Your human comrade has other problems.”

“Father, what happened? Your words make me worry more not only for the cancelling of the meeting but also for the plain fact that you turned your attention to Earth. I know that you always
believed that this planet would benefit me yet till now your stance was more distant.”

Odin pressed his lips.

“I do care for the mortals – not as much as you of course.”

“Father, what made the Avengers cancel their meeting?”

“Tony Stark had to return to Gotham.”

Thor’s eyes widened: Gotham and Tony’s haste meant one thing. Bruce was in trouble. Odin read his son’s face and nodded.

“A…” he searched for the human term “video was broadcasted showing a very young Bruce Wayne being abused.”

Now Thor’s eyes widened in horror and he moved forward but Odin held firmly his forearm. The younger god looked his father puzzled.

“Then, indeed, a human has captured my son’s intellect and heart.”

Thor frowned.

“What?”

“I mean the young man named Bruce Wayne; the Batman.”

“Father…”

“Your interest for him is too great, son.”

Thor locked eyes with his father.

“He saved me from the demon. And yes I’m honored by his friendship and alliance” he noticed the shadow over his father’s features. “I thought you respected him as much as I.”

Odin let his eyelids cover slightly his eye.

“My appreciation for him is unique for a mortal yet I ought to protect my son.”

Thor narrowed his eyes.

“Father, there is no need to protect me from anything; more so from Bruce.”

“I understand that this mortal’s charm is irresistible yet you must realize that a god can’t pursuit very intimate relationships with a mortal.”

The younger god shook his head exasperated from the turn their discussion had taken and from his father’s words.

“Intimate relationships? I have already befriended many mortals.”

Odin’s stare became firm.

“You know what I mean, Thor. You are infatuated with this mortal…and I’m afraid that you are in love with him.”
Thor inhaled deeply as realization dawned on him.

“You spoke with Loki?” he asked his father.

“I don’t understand what does this have to do with our discussion.”

“Loki spends a lot of time on Earth and he cooperates with a known mortal criminal. He harassed a couple of times Bruce because he detected my interest in him so he now attempts to bring you in his plans for upheaval.”

“Thor, Loki is your brother and cares for you and that’s the only reason he informed me.”

Thor shook his head and fumed frustrated.

“He wants to upset you planting ideas to you! He tried to do the same with me. Do you happen to know where his palace is right now?” Odin frowned. “He hides his palace and himself and that can only mean that he is up to something.”

“My son, Loki’s pranks don’t interest me. Your feelings about this mortal are that worry me. You must understand, Thor, that whenever a god was lured by a mortal’s charm the results were disastrous…”

Thor chuckled and took away his eyes.

“Nothing can be disastrous for me: I’m immortal.”

“But he is not” Odin placed his hand on his son’s shoulder. “And the pain of mortality is even worse for a god. Losing your love to the eternity of death is too much even for a god.”

“I’m bound with Bruce in mutual respect, alliance and friendship. You don’t need to worry: Bruce is from the special beings that love only once in their life. And I wasn’t the one who won his heart.”

Odin nodded.

“Superman…”

Thor crossed his arms.

“I see that Loki briefed you thoroughly.”

Odin placed both his hands on Thor’s shoulders.

“You owe to realize, son, that his destiny is pain and death.”

“There is no destiny for Bruce, father: he creates his destiny himself – he defeated his enemies, he neutralized Bagdana while I and Superman were rendered useless. So if there is some destiny for Bruce that is grandeur.”

The older god shook his head.

“No doubt the mortal is a great man but this doesn’t change the pain that resides in him: you wouldn’t want your life bound to so much pain. Superman did not and took his decision to part his life from the mortal’s.”

Thor yanked his head backwards.
“Superman’s decision was stupid and he eventually will be sorry… But Bruce is capable to give heavenly happiness to people – he isn’t just pain.”

“Yes, but he is still mortal, Thor! Now he is extraordinarily beautiful but this won’t last” Thor shook his head exasperated. “In a few decades his beauty will be weathered” he saw his son ready to retort and caught him “his body will start to collapse until death claims him forever “Odin noticed his son’s pressed breath. “And that if he is lucky enough and doesn’t die an unnatural, premature death in the prime of his physical beauty. Imagine the pain when you will hold his dead body in your arms… when his mortal loved ones put him to rot in a grave…when you'll realize that he is lost forever and he won’t ever come back for you to see him again…There is no physical pain that can compare with this, son” his voice became lower.

Thor closed his eyes.

“You speak as if you know…” he said bitterly and Odin gazed with blank eyes at Earth.

“Mortal love always lures Gods like an irresistible magnet…”

The younger god huffed.

“Why are you telling me all these? You don’t have to utter such things to keep me from doing something: Bruce is only my friend.”

Odin’s eyes sparkled.

“But you wish there was something more. Alright: the mortal is your friend but I want to protect you from escalating it to something more” his agonized eyes locked with his son’s “because I sense the flames in you…”

Thor clenched his jaw and nodded.

“Do not, fret, father: Bruce won’t let anything happen. He is adamant about reminding me the exact things you just did.”

“Then he is wise for his very young age.”

Thor nodded.

“He is. But he has suffered so much in his life without anyone of our powerful kind ever helping him so I want to offer my support even now. Is that wrong for you?”

Odin pressed his lips.

“No, it is noble and kind: what I always wanted for my son.”

Thor made a move forward.

“Then, excuse me but I have to leave immediately.”

Odin nodded but a second before his son vanished he opened his mouth.

“Be careful, son…”

“Up!” Falcone’s cruel voice roared to the trembling mass of the boy at his feet.
The boy's only working arm moved shaking trying to find support to the floor in order to lift his
trembling from pain body. Sobs and moans of pain made his weak body convulse so his skinny arm
bent sending him to collapse again.

The video stopped abruptly there…The first sick rays of dawn slipped into the silent vastness of
Tony’s penthouse yet the billionaire ignored them and the world around him. His eyes stayed glued
to the hologram screen in front of his minimal elliptic desk of titanium and glass.

Beside his fisted hand stood the half empty bottle of bourbon, his loyal companion during the last
hour. He didn’t need to turn his eyes to the bottle and it was handy because his eyes weren’t obeying
stuck in their tear fog: his hand moved on its own and grabbed the bottle bringing it rapidly to his
mouth to gulp a sufficient quantity. His hand was shaking as much as his entire body.

He smacked the bottle to the table: he was aware that his face had changed a lot of colors during the
last hour. Every shade of the sick yellow to the color of the ash to end up to the light green his skin
had right now…

Tony jerked up feeling the bile that till now besieged his mouth pushing to get out. He tried to keep it
inside but all the images he had seen the last hour kept coming out from every corner of his mind
stirring the contents of his stomach and making the pressure stronger.

So he stormed to his glistening bathroom which was quite far from the living room…damn! He had
to choose such an enormous penthouse? He hardly made it to the toilet before wrenching the
contents of his stomach having the image of the stretched, tied boy squirming from the pain, crying
desperately as the enormous dildo was pressed in and out of his ripping body... as the crop was
sinking in his tender flesh…the blood that was splashed everywhere…the specks of flesh…the
desperate crying as the small, stretched body twitched hopelessly to escape the horrible pain…the
cruel sniggers…

“It is odd how evil is drawn to purity…” he heard again Arrow’s voice and felt again Bruce’s
shaking body in his arms as he was taking him to the bedroom; the way his arm around his neck
wrapped with despair and trust…

When his stomach was emptied from the bourbon he had consumed, he flashed and stood carefully
rubbing his diaphragm. He wasn’t used to throw up: despite his heavy consumption of alcohol his
experience with booze had limited very much the hangover symptoms. Tony was used to watch
Bruce being convulsing upon a toilet not himself.

He moved slowly to the sink and splashed his face not only to wake himself up but also to push
away the cold tears that had stuck on his cheeks; he enjoyed the cool water. He didn’t cast a glance
to his reflection on the built-in frameless rectangular mirror. He was a mess, he was aware of that and
he didn’t need a confirmation, thank you very much.

Tony wiped his face with a towel and dragged his feet back to the desk. His eyes fell tenderly to the
boy on the hologram that had stayed on the floor. He pressed his lips and caressed him – actually, the
air - with his fingertips: his insides were clenched by invisible pinchers at once and his hand reached
the bottle that had still some liquid.

But then a gentle but firm hand touched his and Tony turned to see Peppers. He frowned because he
hadn’t heard her coming.

“You were in the bathroom when I left the lift…” she answered reading hi puzzlement.

He rubbed his eyes.
“When you arrived?”

“Just; the helipad on the roof is very handy” she cast a strict glance at the hologram. “You watched
that sick shit?! I though Lucius and I had done a good job vanishing it from everywhere.”

Tony shook his head cocking his eyebrow.

“When Einstein said that there are two things that are limitless: the universe and human stupidity. Well, I
must correct him” he said wisely “there are two more. Human cruelty” his voice slightly bent but he
hid it with a fake cough “…and the net. And when you’re Tony Stark and can easily access the dark
internet then you can find even vanished things or things you’d wish they didn’t exist.”

Pepper closed her eyes.

“You are drunk, Tony.”

He laughed and lifted his index finger.

“No, actually, I’m wasted…I needed to…” he gestured to the hologram and Pepper waved her hand
making the hologram disappear.

“Tony, why on Earth you had to do that? Why do you have to see that video?” she pressed her lips.

Tony took away his eyes and made to grab again the bottle but Pepper stopped him again.

“What?!” he snapped. “I need to wash my mouth after throwing up.”

Pepper stabbed him with her strict eyes.

“This isn’t a mouthwash; and if you insist on something to change the taste of vomit from your
mouth” she pulled off her pants pocket a chocolate, unwrapped it and broke a piece which she
shoved into Tony’s mouth. “It will help to get sober.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“Mmm…You’re planning to go juicy?”

But Pepper was looking at him sternly.

“Do you want Bruce knowing that you got drunk after watching this video?”

Tony jerked nervously and rubbed his eyes with both hands: if Bruce learnt that he had done that
then his friend would blame himself…

“There’s no reason for him to know – he has so much to fight…”

“If you care about Bruce not finding out you shouldn’t do that again” Tony just nodded and Pepper
growled pissed “Why, Tony?” she insisted and Tony ran his fingers through his messy raven locks.

He inhaled deeply.

“Because I wanted to share with Bruce; to understand; to know…so I can be more…more
helpful…”

Pepper licked her lips and caressed his locks.
“I know that nobody can understand what Bruce has been through enduring this cruelty but…I hoped…I hoped that sharing even through that cold video would make me more able to support him…”

Pepper sighed.

“Oh, Tony… I’m sure that Bruce is happy having you on his side whether you knew or not…Your presence is always a great support for him. Watching what Falcone did to him wasn’t necessary for helping him…as a matter of fact I think that Bruce wouldn’t want anyone to know what these people did to him – I mean apart from his testimony at Falcone’s trial.”

Tony nodded.

“But I needed to…”

“I believe you just wanted to punish yourself watching what Bruce suffered while everyone considered him dead. Because you blame yourself for biting that like everyone else.”

Tony closed his eyes.

“I tried masochism once with a blond mistress…” he made an attempt to cheer things up but it was lame – especially, when he just witnessed his friend being subjected to merciless sadism. “Yes!” he snapped at Peppers. “I wanted to see what these people did to Bruce so that I realize the size of my stupidity – my…my indifference. My corruption.”

He held Peppers’ upper arms and locked their eyes.

“It was my fault, Pep!” he licked his lips. “I was partying, drinking, fucking while my best friend, my baby friend was brutally tortured. I could have searched for him; I could have found and saved him…Oh, Pepper! Alfred found him in the bathroom, curled in the hydromassage cabin murmuring his favorite lullaby; he had the water turned on to the maximum pressure trying to rub their filth off his body” Pepper lowered her wet eyes. “He thought that he was still in that filthy bordel: the monsters whenever allowed him to shower was with cold water…so Bruce felt cold and had the water’s temperature too high” Pepper brought her palm to her mouth. “Thankfully, Alfred turned it off while no great damage was done. When I took him in my arms he whispered that he was sure I’d come and save him; he believed that he was still in that fucking building and I arrived saving him. You get it, Peps?! He waited and pleaded every day for me to come and save him; he hoped every second and every second he was disappointed and desperate…making excuses for my not coming…”

His eyes faucets opened and he didn’t want to persuade them to stop.

“Don’t blame yourself, Tony…” Peppers’ sympathy was evident “if you had suspected that Bruce was alive you’d have given your life to save him.”

Tony shook his head and looked at Peppers’ face; her cheeks were wet like his.

“Don’t make excuses for me, Peps.”

“I don’t…I’m just stating the facts. Bruce knows that. Watching him suffer that much makes you feel weak and you need to take it out somehow…so you punch yourself…”

“How should I help him, Peps?” he cupped her face with both hands.

“There is only one way; the best way, Tony; what Bruce wants the most: be yourself, the Tony he
loves.”

She kissed him on the forehead. Tony wrapped his arms around her and she held him tight till he felt a bit calm and let his head sink to her shoulder. Pepper caressed his locks feeling his exhaustion.

Bullock stormed outside Jim’s office and he barely made it to the restrooms at the end of the corridor. He threw up the coffees he had drunk watching the video.

In Jim’s office the other three remained at their seats watching the end. They might have not followed the rough lieutenant in the bathroom but their faces had the same paleness and shaken expression.

When the video ended Jim stood and turned it off immediately but nobody spoke.

Jim inhaled understanding his team’s emotional state but he had to break that shocked silence. He looked at them.

“Well, that video didn’t enlighten us about who might have acquired that video from Falcone.”

Robert shook his head still numb from his emotions.

“That bastard was too engrossed in what he was doing to mention anything useful” his voice was hoarse.

Montoya fist her hands.

“How someone – even a crime lord – can do such things to a small child?”

The door opened and Bullock came in with his face still a bit wet.

“Wayne was so skinny and fragile…” he said having heard the end of Montoya’s phrase. “It’s a miracle the boy survived…”

Jim arched his eyebrows.

“Falcone had a doctor to mend the boy’s injuries…he didn’t want to lose his trophy.”

Robert stood from his chair.

“The thing that matters now is that we must put Wayne through the affliction of answering our questions.”

Bullock shook his head and turned his sturdy figure towards the window; through its blinds the dawn was casting the first pale shades of light blue. Jim watched his toughest officer being bent from watching the child’s suffering.

“Fuck!” Bullock yelled. “Surely we can spare the man from this? I mean…it seems like cowardice to me…us being unable to make it on our own and forcing him to do the hard job for us…”

“It is not like that, Lieutenant” Robert answered walking to him. “I wish there was another way but it is standard procedure and it might help save other children if the man who had the video is in some child pornography net. Harvey’s father gave us some information but it’s not sufficient.”

Montoya stood as well.
“At least, let the man some hours of sleep before we interrogate him.”

“It is not interrogation, Detective” Robert retorted feeling like defending himself from something he felt awful to do.

“But that’s how it will seem to him! Damn those motherfuckers!” Bullock snapped turning abruptly to him.

“I wish I could do otherwise!” Robert answered offended.

Jim stood between them and raised his arms calming.

“Nobody wants to torment Mr. Wayne and we’ll do everything to make this as smooth as possible. Mr. Wayne is a very brave youth and will understand” he looked at Montoya whose face was gloom and she was watching grimly. “We will postpone our visit for some hours.”

Clark walked in the reporters’ floor at Daily Planet building, being welcomed by the familiar ruckus of typing and chat. His mood was in excellent state: the weather in Metropolis was sunny, quite warm for the season; also, it helped that he woke up with Diana curled to his body. Her flowery perfume was cleaning his system from any speck of disgust or ill feeling.

And of course…a broad grin formed over his face… she showed him once again her love giving him some great unblemished with guilt sex.

His pleasant feeling made even the approaching Lois seem something positive despite the fact she was frowned. He cocked an eyebrow: at least, she acknowledged his presence: that was a great improvement.

“What are you doing here? I thought you wouldn’t come today.”

Now it was his turn to frown puzzled.

“Why? I’m not ill…” he thought a bit and lowered his voice “not that this is a probability.”

Lois shook her head disappointed and clenched her waist with both hands before turning on her heels ready to leave him but Clark touched her upper arm.

“What is it, Lois?”

“I believed that you would have the sensitivity to be in Gotham right now, to comfort Bruce” she spat in a whisper.

Clark yanked his head exasperated.

“Why would I do that, Lois?! Are you serious? There’s nothing between him and me anymore: I am with Diana now!”

“That has nothing to do with whom you’re currently fucking” she said coldly arching her eyebrows. “I thought that you still cared about him as a friend and as a friend your place is with him.”

Clark huffed: Bruce his friend? The man had kicked him out; he had stabbed him with a knife; he tricked him into giving him insufficient vaccination.

“Lois, you’re attempting once again to set me up with him. There’s no way I’ll return to him. Diana
is the woman I love and I won’t risk my happiness with her for anything.”

Lois yanked her head and snorted.

“Clark Kent, you’re an asshole! You can stay with your stupid bimbo as long as you want: I was plainly speaking about being human…” she shook her head chuckling snidely “I forgot that this seems to bother you lately… be it… let’s change that: being considerate. After that video, Bruce will need every kind word he can’t get. Not only the blow was tremendous but also the ramifications will enhance the pain. They will definitely try to use this to take Richard Grayson from him.”

“Maybe that’s the best: the boy hates him…” Clark stated calmly.

Lois’s face contorted in rage.

“You’re deplorable!”

“No, I’m just saying the truth, Lois” but his friend crossed her arms on the chest and made to leave but he held her.

Clark felt his pleasant mood washing off and that pissed him. He closed his eyes because he didn’t want to quarrel with Lois again.

“If I had gone to him he’d have understood that I did it from… from feeling sorry and he would feel worse: he doesn’t like to be pitied.”

Lois nodded.

“Of course he is dignified! But a friend doesn’t support a friend from pity…” she shook her head “it is better you stay away if pity is the only thing you can feel about Bruce… That woman damaged everything inside you.”

Clark’s eyes flashed angry.

“Lois, that’s not true! Stop talking about her like that!” Lois’s lips pursed in disgust and no fear at all though she knew that in front of her was the most powerful being on Earth.

She shook her head and cocked an eyebrow.

“Have it your way then!” she sidestepped him directing to the exit.

Clark caught up with her fearing that she had some intelligence on Intergang’s movements and was going there.

“Where are you going? Remember that Intergang is my case too.”

Lois frowned; then registering what she had just heard rolled her eyes and snorted.

“Hardly! However, don’t be afraid. I’m going to Gotham: my priorities lie there right now: Bruce needs support from people who don’t pity him” she yanked her head proudly and left furious.

His eyelids didn’t want to uncover his eyes because this sleep was so sweet, so peaceful… he was blinded by the light. He felt as if he had the sun right in front of his eyes.

But then slowly he was able to see clearly: it was a person leaning above him smiling though his
beautiful blue topaz eyes were concerned.

“How do you feel?” the sun asked and his voice was sweeter than he had imagined.

As his vision focused more he identified who the stranger was and his heart gave several jolts that for once were from joy after all these years. His eyes bulged: it was the angel from TV; the one Sel told him that people called Superman. He was even more beautiful than on TV! So beautiful that Bruce was speechless…

However he registered the worried frown of the young man who definitely took the lack of answer as indication of illness.

“I…I’m fine, thank you…” and the truth was that most of his pain was gone though he still felt dull throbs from the places Falcone had wiped him and from his…anus. Only the thought of that part of his body made him blush.

The angel smiled and his smile made every pain run away.

“Then we’re good” the angel said.

“Where am I?” Bruce asked not that he had any problem with the place: it was warm, illuminated in light blue and despite the fact the crystal columns were an odd decoration he found it beautiful.

Superman narrowed his eyes.

“You don’t remember?”

Bruce looked at his hands though it was difficult to part with the sight of the beautiful angel. He noticed that his cripple arm was wrapped in a strange kind of cast that was almost transparent and vibrating. And for the first time after six years it didn’t pain.

Slowly the images from last night came back to him: what Falcone did to him… the crucifying pain from his master’s crop…and then the external wall crashing and the raven haired angel floating there clenching his waist, his red cape flapping. His beautiful eyes sparkled angrily. He regarded the scene for a second and then blew a wave of icy air and sent both Falcone and Chill to smash to the opposite wall.

Bruce remembered that he wanted to gaze at the young man but he was exhausted and in so much pain that his head didn’t last and dropped to the table.

The angel didn’t walk on the floor but still Bruce could hear him approaching and sighing with sympathy. And then his wrists and ankles stopped being painfully squeezed; Bruce knew from his father than when an area has been without blood much time when the blood flow starts again the pain was considerable – besides that was what happened every other time…

But not tonight because the angel knew that and blew frozen air to his members to not feel the pain. And then his body was lifted gently and something extremely soft and warm wrapped him meticulously.

Bruce had opened his eyes slightly seeing the red cape muffling his naked body; the angel took him in his arms carefully and flew away from Dolcetto and then from Gotham.

He was so tired and the cape was so warm and soft – not to mention, the angel’s arms – that Bruce fell asleep during the flight. However every now and then his eyelids flapped open for a second and he could see endless white, sparkling landscape underneath him and multicolored fluorescent waves
of light surrounding him. Then he thought that it was just a dream but now…

“The north pole!” Bruce yelled waking up from his recollection and the angel smiled.

“You’re a clever boy. Yes, we are in the North Pole. You’re safe here.”

Bruce nodded but immediately he fell silent and his eyes turned again to his hands. The angel worried took gently his chin and made him lock eyes with him.

“What troubles you?”

“Back in Gotham…Selina stayed there and she doesn’t have anyone else…and there’s Alfred too…Falcone will harm him if I escape…”

The angel’s face became touched but in the end he grinned.

“No need to worry: your friend Tony Stark and I are cleaning Gotham: Falcone and Chill are already in jail but it is better for you to stay here till we finish the job” and seeing that the boy wasn’t completely satisfied, he smiled “it will be only for a few days and you’ll have good company till then…”

He leaned to the floor and when erected his body he was holding something that made Bruce laugh.

“Hero!”

The angel let the one-eyed kitten on Bruce’s lap and the animal rushed to him licking his cheeks.

“Thank you!” he met the angel’s satisfied stare.

“Your eyes are like star sapphires” the angel said. “May I call you ‘Star’?”

Bruce opened his eyes that were heavy from the sedative and the first thing he saw was Selina’s beautiful face calm under sleep’s vale. He caressed carefully her hair and seeing Hero opening a lazy eye hushed him.

He looked at the clock on the nightstand: it was half past eight but the morning light was meticulously kept outside the room since Alfred had taken care to close the heavy curtains.

It was time for him to start the day; he looked around for his chair that had been forgotten at the middle of the room. Bruce was happy that Tony’s chair like Clark’s could take his mental orders. And move silently.

When the chair was to his bed he placed a soft kiss to Selina’s cheek and caressed Hero before slipping to the chair and wearing his robe.

Coming out to the corridor he heard the bell of the main entrance and hurried to the lift.

Leslie opened the door since Alfred had left to drive Richard to school. She frowned seeing Jim Gordon, Lieutenant Bullock and Detective Montoya along with the DA. Of course she understood immediately.

“Good morning, Dr. Thompkins” Jim greeted her. “I wonder if we can speak with Mr. Wayne.”

Leslie clenched her jaw.

“No, you can’t! He had a very rough night and the least he needs is you asking him questions
twisting the knife in his wounds. For fuck’s sake, Gordon!”

Jim licked his lips nervously.

“Dr. Thompkins, I assure you that I understand and I wish I could do otherwise but we must have a discussion with him.”

“Discussion?” she asked challengingly cocking an eyebrow.

Robert moved forward.

“Dr. Thompkins, we need Mr. Wayne’s testimony to found the culprit and bring him to justice.”

She smirked and shook her head.

“I’m afraid you can’t see him right now – give him some time, Jim!” she used his name, their old, underground partnership during Falcone’s reign resurfacing.

Gordon gulped and nodded respecting the strong woman’s wish.

“Alright, Leslie; we’ll come another time.”

“No need for that, Commissionaire” Bruce said strolling his wheelchair through the corridor and everyone looked at him.

Bruce had thought that from now on when people would look at him, he’d see in their eyes pity and disgust. But now this wasn’t the case; although he was aware that his appearance wasn’t impeccable his visitors looked at him with respect and even admiration…

“Since you did the distance here I can answer your questions…Unless…am I arrested for…? I don’t know…something?”

Jim smiled.

“Of course not, Mr. Wayne, just some questions about” his whim was to lower his gaze but this youth wouldn’t have liked that “that video.”

Bruce nodded and made an inviting gesture towards the grand salon.

Bullock elbowed Montoya.

“Have you seen a bravest man?”

Montoya smirked to her rough partner.

“No, but he is extremely pale and looks rugged. His night was definitely very difficult…”

Leslie rushed to Bruce.

“You haven’t eaten anything, Bruce…I’m sure this can wait.”

Bruce grinned and looked at Jim and Robert.

“No, it can’t.”

Robert licked his lips.
“It won’t take long.”

“Thank you” Bruce said “Would you like some coffee or tea?” he asked since Leslie didn’t have any intention on being a nice hostess.

“No, Mr. Wayne, thank you.”

“As you wish…Please, have a seat.”

“Mr. Wayne, it was the first time Falcone videotaped while abusing you?” Jim decided to get it over as soon as possible.

“I didn’t know that he was doing it even that time; so I don’t have the slightest idea whether he did it more times…”

Robert met Bruce’s eyes.

“Do you know of anyone having access to that video?”

Bruce lowered his head thinking.

“I admit that I had no recollection of what the video showed…you see” he inhaled “such things happened many times and were blend…but last night I had a flashback and I remember a night before what Falcone did to me…I was mopping near Falcone’s office and overheard him speaking with a friend of his…”

Gordon frowned.

“What they were saying?”

“This man was asking from Falcone to…to rent me for one time…” he hesitated “you understand for what…but Falcone refused and then the man told him to give him a refund…a video…”

“So this video was made for that man?” Robert asked hiding his disgust.

Bruce nodded.

“I think so…You see, when Falcone ordered Chill to take me back to my cage he asked him to give a DVD disk to someone.”

Montoya leaned forward making eye contact with Bruce.

“Did you happen to hear some name?”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I think Falcone called him Roth…”

Robert frowned.

“Roth Pielser?” he asked but Bruce shrugged.

The DA turned to Jim who looked thoughtful too.

“I know that name” the Commissionaire said.

Robert nodded.
“It was a federal case. I remember that FBI was investigating trying to find evidence to bust him. He is one of the worst pedophiles and he led the widest network of child pornography” Bruce’s breath became harder and Robert hurried to change the subject. “The office eventually had managed to arrest and convict him: he is now at the Federal Prison in Washington. Mr. Wayne, if we showed you a picture of him would be able to recognize him?”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“I don’t know…I…I think so…”

“Brave boy…” Bullock didn’t manage to stop his comment and Montoya elbowed him.

“Tons of material was confiscated but not that video” Robert diverted the attention from Bullock but the tough lieutenant pressed his lips and spoke.

“Either he had hidden it somewhere safe or given it to someone else.”

Bruce clenched the edges of his armrests: though he knew that the one who published that video had personal conflicts with him, still the prospect of more people having seen that content sickened him. Which was stupid now that millions of people had already seen it.

The main entrance opened suddenly and closed with a bang making everyone to look there. Bruce saw Tony storming enraged at Jim.

“How could you, Jim?! I expected better from you than tormenting Bruce!”
Despite the fact he had an enraged Tony Stark in front of him, the always composed Commissionaire was seeing behind him to their young host. Bruce Wayne was still in his robe, confined in a modern first seen wheelchair, pale and with bloodshot eyes which were a sign of how hard the previous night was for him. However, Bruce Wayne’s stare was determined, strong only with a flicker of upset now that his friend stormed at Jim.

“Tony, please” Bruce said moving his wheelchair towards him.

But Tony raised his palm to silence him.

“Bruce, stay out of this. Gordon, okay, with everyone else doing this but you? I thought you’d have the minimum of empathy and sympathy to leave Bruce alone and not pestering him right now.”

Jim stood up and looked calm at the billionaire.

“Mr. Stark, I assure you that if I had an option I wouldn’t be here right now. I’m terribly sorry for disturbing Mr. Wayne and you but the matter is urgent and our effort is to get the most information we can so that the culprit behind this deed is brought to justice.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“You could do that without forcing Bruce to re-experience all these. He had a horrible night because of that motherfucker and now you’re twitching the knife in his wounds! If you want to catch the bastard, investigate or squeeze that bastard into telling you who sent him the video!” he yanked his head pointing his chin.

Gordon didn’t lower his eyes which didn’t follow Tony in his angry attitude.

“We do investigate, Mr. Stark, yet, I’m afraid that the investigation can’t be effective without Mr. Wayne’s contribution.”

Bruce moved forward.

“Exactly, Tony. They are only doing their jobs; nothing of what we spoke about till now made feel bad.”

Tony lolled his head to him crossing his arms.

“Stop being so stupidly selfless! You haven’t even dressed yet and I bet you didn’t have the time to eat something.”

“We are sorry for that” Robert made a move towards them. “But we must act rapidly.”

Tony smirked and stabbed a jeering stare to the DA who frowned.

“I’m tired of ‘buts’, Mr. DA.”

Bruce understood that he had to intervene.

“Tony, it was I that insisted on them staying and doing the questioning.”

Tony locked eyes with his friend fuming.
“I think that we are finished, Mr. Wayne” Gordon said looking at Robert who nodded. “Your help is much appreciated” he gave his hand for a handshake and Bruce took it.

Robert did the same.

“I’m terribly sorry for upsetting you; I wish there was another way” the DA said casting a pointed glance at Tony who groaned.

“Not at all” Bruce asked. “If that helps you find and arrest someone dangerous then I’m satisfied. And of course if you need to, I’ll be at your disposal for anything you want to ask.”

Robert smiled.

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne: we’ll find the culprit and bring him to justice.”

“I’m sure” Bruce replied causing Tony’s snort.

“Mr. Stark” Jim nodded courtly to the billionaire in his trademark tranquil demeanor and followed Leslie who came to lead them to the door.

As he was the last of the company to leave the salon Bullock cast a glance to Bruce and then at Tony with sympathy flickering in his hardened eyes: even though till now he didn’t have the best of opinions about him, he couldn’t blame Stark for being so protective of his friend. Montoya stopped, looking at her partner and cleared her throat which made Bullock hasten to catch them.

Tony remained in his position with his hands clenching his waist and listened as the police car left the grounds. Only then he moved to his friend.

“Tony, that was really unnecessary” Bruce said. “You know that they are just doing their jobs and no harm was done by their questions.”

Tony opened his mouth ready to say something still pissed for his friend’s intervention when he was speaking with Gordon. However the images from that video flooded in a second his mind and he closed his mouth running his hand to his hair.

“Sometimes I wish you were not so selflessly brave, littl’ guy” he replied calm. “But you had an awful night and the least they could do was leaving the matter for one or two days. Reporters are lurking outside like hungry wolves and interrogation could have been avoided right now.”

Bruce huffed.

“Tony, I’m not so fragile. I know that last night I scared you and I’m sorry…I shouldn’t have lost control” Tony shook his head. “But now it’s another day.”

Tony kneeled before him and cupped his friend’s face under Bruce’s puzzled eyes.

“I hate it that people keep hurting you and you…” he sighed. “Sacrificing yourself for the others hiding your suffering…” he touched his forehead to Bruce’s and the younger man pressed his lips sensing Tony’s torment. “And, listen to me, don’t be sorry for anything, okay?”

Bruce frowned.

“Tony, have you been drinking?” he asked calmly and Tony let out a surrendered chuckle closing his eyes.

“No, littl’ guy” he lied because he didn’t want Bruce feel guilty about his own stupidity.
However Bruce wasn’t completely convinced.

“I can confirm that too” a nonchalant voice came from the corridor that led there from the main entrance and Bruce saw Pepper walking in with Leslie.

Tony hearing his girlfriend’s voice stood up and Pepper found the opportunity to hug Bruce.

“How are you, Bruce?” she asked him with a peck to the cheek.

He smiled.

“Though my appearance says otherwise, I’m fine.”

“Despite the fact he does everything to torture himself” Tony grouched.

“Is that so? A girl cannot sleep without bad things happening?”

Selina was descending the grand stair with Hero perched to her chest.

“Why are you up so early, Bruce?” she demanded frowned as soon as reached her friend. “You sneaked of me, bad boy…And why you’re still in your pajamas?”

Bruce chuckled.

“Now that’s what I call a third degree interrogation” he winked to Tony.

“Police were here” Leslie said gloom. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, to the kitchen for breakfast.”

“You cooked?” Tony asked under a deep, suspicious frown and Leslie chuckled.

“Of course not! I want to preserve my patients’ health…Alfred took care of everything before taking Richard to school.”

Hero jumped from Selina’s chest and ran first towards the kitchen causing Bruce’s light hearted laugh. Tony looked at his friend sad and Pepper elbowed him casting him a reprimanding glare when he met her eyes.

“Why do you have to give them all these information?” Tony asked Bruce exasperated sitting on the stool next to him at the kitchen island. You should have told to me about that pervert and I’d have persuaded the bastard to sing.”

Bruce took a bite from his cupcake and stared at him calm.

“Exactly. It is better if police handles that, Tony.”

Tony jerked in his stool.

“What?!”

Bruce sipped from his milk.

“You don’t trust me?” Tony insisted and Pepper looked at him disapprovingly.

“Of course I do, Tony. But it is too personal and I don’t want you to test your limits…in a revenge quest” he met his friend’s pissed eyes. “Besides there are more important things to focus our efforts.”

Selina frowned.
“More important? There is nothing more important than you, Bruce” Tony looked at her with arched eyebrows and nodded his approval.

“And I want to catch this motherfucker ASAP” Tony said determined “to show him the amount of pain he caused!”

Bruce licked his lips and met Leslie’s eyes; the doctor sat opposite him with her arms crossed on her chest watching him as if evaluating his health which probably was what she really did.

“Tony, let the police find and give him what he deserves” he replied adamant. “Last night I had that…fit but everything is alright. He didn’t manage what he wanted and this will be the worst punishment for him. Now, let’s leave this aside and return to our job.”

Tony couldn’t stop his eyes from rolling.

“Which is?”

“Zucco, Joker…He managed to escape last night.”

Tony shook his head.

“You know that you shouldn’t have been there at all? Now you mention it, I’m still pissed with you.”

Leslie looked at Bruce frowned.

“You were out last night?”

Bruce huffed.

“I had to…”

Leslie pressed her lips.

“What were you thinking, young man?” she scolded Bruce.

“Leslie, I’m well protected with the armor and I’m very careful.”

Leslie growled and Tony smiled satisfied.

“Maybe we must chain you?” she spat.

“He will escape…” Tony cocked an eyebrow. “Ra’s Al Ghul taught him many tricks.”

“Speaking of Zucco” Pepper intervened to change the subject “he could have mailed the video to that hacker wanting to damage your image now that the hearing is in progress.”

Bruce shook his head.

“He could have done anything to achieve his purpose yet he was away from Gotham for years and I don’t think he had access to that video.”

“What about Joker?” Selina asked. “He tortured Falcone so maybe the bastard revealed to him the existence of that video and its location. Knowing how much Joker likes to play why not broadcasting that video to bring a reaction out of you?”
Tony scratched his head.

“Joker was there when I got that scum who hacked GCN’s signal” he didn’t mention all the details. “He was very angry and wanted to punish himself the guy.”

Selina shrugged and twisted her lips.

“Joker’s games…”

“I don’t think that he did this; it’s not Joker’s style: he likes to show off; he’d have presented the video himself making some statement” Bruce commented.

But Selina shook her head chewing her covered with jam slice of bread.

“We’re talking about Joker: he likes to break patterns even if those patterns were made by him.”

“You have a point” Bruce replied. “Yet even if Falcone had told him about the video, he couldn’t know where the video was at the time since he had given it to Pielser.”

Tony gulped.

“He shot that video to sell it?” his face was distorted with disgust.

Bruce’s face on the other hand was completely emotionless.

“Actually, it was a gift. Pielser is a pedophile and he was one of Falcone’s partners. He saw me once in Dolcetto and asked from Falcone to rent me for one time” Bruce realized that everyone was staring at him distraught and hurried to conclude. “Falcone refused and then Pielser asked him at least a video of…” his voice was almost indifferent as if all these referred to someone else “what he wouldn’t have the chance to do himself.”

“You re-experienced all these to last night’s flashback?” Selina asked in a low but steady voice.

Bruce nodded and to break the touched atmosphere continued keeping his composure.

“Therefore Joker couldn’t have access to that video because if he had taken it from the pedophile it would have become news: Pielser is in a federal jail.”

Tony pursed his lips and Bruce cleared his throat.

“So we leave that case to the Police; we have Mannheim, Luthor and what are they up to with those strange artifacts.”

Tony snorted twisting his lips. He didn’t give a damn about Mannheim and those fucking items.

“I knew it…Sure thing, our friend Luthor yesterday had only one thing in his mind and that wasn’t Mannheim or the stupid objects…”

Bruce nodded and his eyes fell on Hero who was kicking between his paws a chunk of food he threw out of his bawl.

“I know…he called me.”

Tony clenched his fist and hit the granite island.

“That sonov…If I knew that, I’d have broken his stupid nose last night!”
“You went to Luthor last night?”

Tony licked his lips.

“Yeah with Steve…Natasha was already there…We wanted him to confess that he gave the video but it seems that he isn’t the culprit.”

Bruce rubbed his forehead.

“Tony, that was…” he huffed. “He can sue you – I mean all of you – for assault” he shook his head.

“He won’t dare.”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Thank you – all of you but…”

“We are here to serve justice, Bruce; the fact you were the victim this time doesn’t change our role.”

Pepper bit her lip and the other two women looked at Tony with narrowed eyes. However Bruce didn’t comment on that.

“I hope you changed your mind about that court and call Collins to as for an adjournment” Tony continued.

“Not at all” Bruce replied a bit down hearted about Tony calling him ‘a victim’. “The hearing will take place as scheduled; there’s no reason to cancel it. On the contrary…”

He stopped abruptly his phrase as Alfred came in from the kitchen’s door.

“Bloody Hell!” he said unaware that his young Master was speaking. “Those reporters are swarming the Palisades! I had to come from the back road.”

Tony lolled his head towards Alfred locking eyes with Bruce pointedly.

“You see? They are going to eat you alive!” Tony said. “I think you should stay away from them.”

Bruce frowned: Tony was always overprotective but now…He recollected what happened last night, the way his friend carried him in his arms deluded and scared. He felt sweat spurting all over his body from shame.

“On the contrary, Tony, facing the reporters will definitely ruin it for the culprit: he’ll realize that he failed to break me. Also, better me than Dick.”

Selina took Hero from the floor and petted him.

“What about you, Bruce?” Selina asked. “You are exhausted after the last night: facing that lot isn’t the better thing…”

Bruce nodded.
“I’m alright now, Sel: believe me, facing reporters isn’t that bad.”

Leslie stood.

“Before anything else, young man, I want to examine you. Do you feel any pain? You forced yourself to walk last night and fell, not to mention the burnings.”

Tony stared at Bruce with raised eyebrows, his face was filled with worry and demand; the younger man didn’t want any more distress to his friends. He nodded.

“Though I don’t feel any pain, you can examine me.”

Mr. Collins was waiting in front of the hearing hall and he hurried to shake Bruce’s hand as soon as he saw him coming this time not from the lift of the back side of the corridor but the opposite one that was coming from the front of the building.

The veteran attorney examined his employer’s presence. The young man was impeccably dressed as always, clean shaven, perfectly groomed and his face although a bit pale was calm and determined.

Bruce smiled to him.

“Good morning, Mr. Collins.”

“Good morning, Mr. Wayne, though I’m sure that the hungry pack of reporters outside the court house gave you a hard time. Maybe it would have been better if you had chosen the back entrance as the previous times?”

The younger man shook his head.

“Not today but there’s no problem, Mr. Collins, I’m used to the reporters” Bruce had thought of it and decided that it was better to tell everything to his lawyer so he didn’t hesitate at all. “Mr. Collins, last night I had a nightmare – actually, a flashback – and I woke up believing that I was still in Falcone’s cabaret, still his prisoner…I’ he inhaled “I had lost my connection to reality.”

“I’m terribly sorry for that, Mr. Wayne: you could have called me to ask to postpone the hearing but even now we can ask Judge Moot…” Bruce was shaking his head in denial.

“No need for that: I’m perfectly fine now but last night my loved ones were upset and distraught because I was a bit delusional. And Dick witnessed all that…”

Mr. Collins nodded.

“I wanted you to know…Can this harm our case?”

“In a hearing of guardianship everything can affect things” Bruce nodded appreciating Mr. Collins’ honesty. “The other side doesn’t know about this but even if they found out the fact that you decided to attend the hearing even after that incident will show how much you care about the boy.”

The experienced lawyer patted the younger man’s shoulder and smiled to him.

“Do not feel bad, Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce nodded and they moved inside where Zucco and his lawyer were already seated to their table. However Bruce instantly noticed a woman sitting at the spectators’ seats behind Zucco: it was a
woman approximately at the same age with Zucco with short brown hair and big hazel eyes.

And Bruce knew her. He was pressing his memory to remember as he approached their table and made a mental note to ask the constable that was in the room: for being allowed to the hall she must have some relation to the case. The moment he was passing by their opponents’ table Magnie greeted him in his cordial way that was at the same time creepy coming from the opponent’s attorney.

Bruce shook the hand Magnie offered once again to him.

“I’m honestly sorry about what happened yesterday, Mr. Wayne” Bruce frowned internally with this reference that could mean both the video and his fit but didn’t show anything in case this was just bait. “The broadcasting of that video was disgusting and I hope the police arrests the culprit soon.”

Bruce sighed inside relieved that Magnie meant the video.

“Thank you, Mr. Magnie; I really appreciate that.”

Magnie smiled and Bruce guided his wheelchair to take his position. Judge Moot entered the courtroom two minutes later.

“Your Honor, I think that everyone knows about the broadcasting of a hideous video that took place yesterday; I would like this video to be projected” Magnie raised his hand that held a DVD disc towards the court’s clerk.

Bruce inhaled sharply and his sparkling eyes turned rapidly to Mr. Collins who had already jerked up.

“Objection, Your Honor! This is really deplorable!”

Judge Moot hit his hammer on the shining wood of his bench; his face was distorted in anger.

“Mr. Magnie, I cannot understand how did you thought to bring this piece of junk to my court! There is no chance this court use this video for any purpose!”

Bruce had pressed his lips without looking at anyone however with the corner of his eyes he was eying Magnie and his client. Zucco hardly hid his displeasure for the Judge’s reprimand while Bruce could detect in Magnie’s immobile eyes that he wasn’t in any way affected by that stern scolding.

“I do sincerely apologize, Your Honor but the mere existence and publication of this video is very important to this sensitive guardianship case. I also ask from Mr. Wayne to forgive me for the distress I’m causing to him” Bruce rolled his eyes inside “yet we are here to decide what the best for a child is.”

Judge Moot hadn’t completely forgotten his wrath yet looked at Magnie and waved his hand.

“Continue but without any reference to the content of this video. And, Mr. Magnie, be extra careful otherwise I will charge you for contempt.”

“I will, Your Honor” he said grinning. “What I wanted to stress out is that unfortunate incidents like that can have a tremendous effect to an adolescent who is at the most sensitive stages of his personality formation. Such incidents can be very stressful for a child at Mr. Grayson’s age: socialization is very important at this age and we know how cruel sometimes children and young teens can become when such revelations take place for one of their peer’s parent or guardian.”
“Objection, Your Honor” Collins said calmly. “Mr. Wayne hasn’t done anything for which a child should be ashamed.”

“Mr. Wayne certainly hasn’t done” Magnie replied “and he is admirable yet we know how cruel our society is and especially the teens who still don’t understand many things.”

Collins cast a sideways glance to his colleague.

“According to your reasoning, Mr. Magnie, every individual who has suffered a sexual assault should lose the guardianship of their children because of some people’s lack of understanding. In your logic, the state should furthermore punish the people who were subjected to violence because some members of our society are insensitive.”

“Mr. Collins has a great point, Mr. Magnie” the Judge remarked.

Magnie licked his lips.

“Howevers you cannot deny that young Richard would be subjected to stress due to Mr. Wayne’s past and presence. I’m sure that you have noticed how reporters swarm the courthouse: today even more than the previous days. The most unfortunate thing is that this publicity isn’t due to some great achievement of Mr. Wayne but due to the mere fact that he was abused” Collins made to retort but Magnie made an appeasing gesture. “However what that video made obvious is that Mr. Wayne’s psychological state can’t be trusted for…”

“Objection!” Mr. Collins stood up. “Mr. Magnie’s assumptions are unfounded and insulting: my client was psychologically evaluated recently and the experts found him absolutely capable of…”

“Testifying in a court case against a crime lord which is completely different from raising a child” Magnie completed the phrase cocking an eyebrow.

Judge Moot eyed Magnie above his small round glasses.

“Mr. Magnie, let me remind you that Mr. Wayne isn’t the accused here so I suggest you be more careful of your insinuations. The court already has Mr. Wayne’s evaluation.”

“That evaluation is almost one year old, Your Honor. Since then unfortunately Mr. Wayne became the subject of many tragic incidents specifically a crazy criminal’s attacks and captivity from a hideous terroristic group during which he was the subject of experimentation with psychotropic drugs and such horrific tortures that rendered him paraplegic.”

Mr. Collins looked at Bruce concerned.

“Are you alright?”

Bruce grinned.

“Don’t worry about me, Mr. Collins.”

“I think that an updated evaluation is needed so that the court gets a proper idea” Magnie added.

“There is nothing in my client’s behavior that points to that need as you name it.”

Bruce felt a knot in his stomach and sensed Zucco’s jeering glare.

“I think there is, Mr. Collins” Magnie said almost triumphant and Judge Moot frowned. “Last night Mr. Wayne experienced a horrific flashback which made him delirious to the point of being unable to
distinguish reality from nightmare; his mental stability was so badly affected that his senses were distorted resulting in causing burnings to himself with hot water. Richard witnessed all these…”

Zucco jerked to his feet.

“And my nephew was very upset and distraught! He couldn’t calm down and sleep; he called me at 4 o’clock in the morning trembling. This isn’t the proper environment for a child!”

Hammers began hitting Bruce’s head: Dick said everything to Zucco – he thought of that yet he didn’t want to believe it.

“Every family has such incidents” Mr. Collins replied tranquil thanks to his long experience. “Almost in every household children grow up with an adult who has a health condition; some of these conditions are chronic with daily incidents but children learn from that and become more responsible adults. Richard wasn’t in danger during this incident which after all was something very rare for Mr. Wayne – even a person without Mr. Wayne’s past could have a reaction like this to a highly stressful event as the broadcasting of that video.”

Magnie looked at his older colleague.

“Perhaps it would be useful if Richard testified everything he saw” he cocked an eyebrow “in case there is a doubt about that incident really happening.”

Mr. Collins was ready to reply but Bruce caught him to that.

“No, Mr. Magnie: nobody will doubt that incident: Richard told the truth. I had a flashback and I was disoriented for some minutes.”

Bruce waited for Mr. Collins to a secluded corner of the court house: he had asked from his lawyer to find who the woman spectator was – he didn’t want to show his personal interest.

After the two hours the hearing lasted he was a bit dizzy and his breath had become faster. Bruce had hidden it from everyone but now that he was alone, hidden from the hasty bystanders that crossed the court house’s corridors, he didn’t need to keep doing that. Besides now it was worse: his head was throbbing from the hammers of a bad migraine and images from last night’s flashback returned giving him punches from everywhere.

He wished he could wear Batman’s cowl right now chasing away Bruce’s traumas; Bruce’s weakness; he recalled the sense of the icy air of midnight Gotham; the sense of danger; the sense of freedom those nights he escaped from Falcone’s jail to sabotage him…

“I order you to cum for me, ya useless sonovabitch!” the crime lord roared to him.

Bruce could see himself lying on his back at the king size bed in the Falcone’s Manor master’s bedroom. The mobster had his wrists bound on the headboard and was thrusting in him with all his strength and rage.

“I want ya prick fly, ya bastard!” he barked pumping crudely his unresponsive length.

It was pain as his wrists were crushed in the leather, his body was impaled and his length was brutally abused. Yet the worse was the shame, besides he had learnt to endure the pain of the body.

But the really unbearable was that this came hours after his latest escapee as Batman; he had
beaten to a pulp a pack of Falcone’s henchmen and it had felt so great as if he was free and wouldn’t have to go back. As if he wasn’t himself but someone else… Yet as soon as he took off the armor he was the same slave; he did come back because it was the only way and now he was enduring Falcone’s violent penetration; the humiliation…

Batman was roaring in his head demanding from him to stop taking that; the bat was staring at him with contempt, with pity…

The ring of his Cosmos brought him out of his reverie. It was Ms. Kent.

“How are you, dear? I heard what happened. I’m terribly sorry, sweetheart – they are monsters! If I had them here I’d smash his head.”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose and chuckled.

“I’m fine, Martha.”

“You are such a brave young man…Did Clark call you?”

Bruce licked his lips.

“No but it is better that way, Martha” he heard the woman’s angry intake of air “Please, do not say anything to him about not calling.”

“But…”

“Promise me, Martha.”

“As you wish, dear…Do you want me to come there?”

Bruce smiled.

“Thank you, Martha, you are wonderful. But you don’t have to make the trip here. I had much worse…”

“Certainly you did, dear” she sighed. “Remember that if you need anything you can call me.”

“I will, Martha…”

He bit his lip and his mind went to Clark…he never blamed him for choosing Diana – even if she was a fake – but now even more than before he was seeing that Clark was right to leave him. It was his mistake that their relationship even began; he knew that it wouldn’t go anywhere…

Of course there was the control that the fake Diana put on him that accelerated things…Maybe it was for the best; weren’t for the effect Clark would have realized that this relationship was wrong but would have postponed the end afraid of hurting him. Because Clark was so good and kind; he would slowly wither inside their relationship but would bit his lips and stay with him even if that made Clark miserable…

Even though he was absorbed in his thoughts he heard someone coming towards him but he didn’t show anything till the footsteps were near him.

“Mr. Wayne!”

Bruce smiled.
“Miss Lane, what a nice surprise.”
She gave him her hand for a handshake.
“Please call me Lois.”
“Only if you call me Bruce.”
“Fair enough!”
“I guess you are here to cover the latest events?” he asked nonchalant.
“No, I’m not here as reporter but as a friend…” she locked eyes with him. “I’m so sorry for what happened…”
“Thank you. It means so much for me.”
Lois cleared her throat.
“Clark is also very sorry” she added and Bruce cocked an eyebrow. “He sends his greetings.”
Bruce smiled.
“Lois, you don’t have to…” he shook his hand because he didn’t want to tell her that she was lying. “I know that Clark is a wonderful man and still cares …but…” he lolled his head.
Lois pursed her lips.
“I don’t know what is wrong with him.”
“He is still the great man we know; please, Lois, remember that.”
“It’s very hard to do that, Bruce: he seems the same but there are those changes...subtle but important” Bruce’s eyes flashed – Lois knew Clark better than he did and so she was able to notice the differences; Lois huffed “And you, my precious boy? How are you? You look pale…”
Bruce smiled.
“Nothing serious; I just didn’t sleep well last night.”
Lois pressed her lips.
“Flashbacks?” she asked sad and smiled to Bruce’s puzzled look “I read some psychology… I bet the hearing wasn’t the best medicine for that, huh?” Bruce shook his head. “I won’t ask for details” she chuckled “though the occupational curiosity itches me…It was very brave coming here today and facing all those reporters out there…ugh! Gotham’s reporters drive me mad!”

Another pair echoed coming slowly to their spot; Bruce was able to see Vicky Vale but Lois had to turn around.
“Hello, Mr. Wayne. Hello, Lois” she greeted them.
“How are you, Miss Vale?” Bruce asked.
“I am the one who should ask that” she said. “Mr. Wayne, I want you to know how sorry I am that this video was broadcasted through my show.”
“But thanks to you the broadcasting stopped” Lois pointed out and Vicky looked at her perplexed because till then Lois never hid her detest for the Gothamite.

“That is true and I’d like to thank you” Bruce added “you were fired for my sake.”

Vicky smirked.

“Actually I resigned. To tell you the truth I was bored and tired by this show. I always wanted something else; something better. And that pig Wizzie always made me sick. Well, I do realize that I was no better…” she twitched her eyebrows “I was too rude to you.”

“Don’t mention that.”

Lois drummed her index finger to her lips.

“If you want a job I can speak to Perry. Daily Planet needs dignified reporters.”

“Thank you for the dignified; I know you didn’t think much of me and I don’t blame you. Your proposition honors me but Gotham is my city and I’ll try to find something here.”

“I think that you will manage: you acted very bravely” Bruce said “and many editors will want to their staff the reporter who will take Bruce Wayne’s first interview.”

Vale’s eyes widened.

“Are you sure?”

“I know that you were one of the few reporters that weren’t in Falcone’s payroll and that says a lot for me; also, very few people have the guts to do what you did causing a small explosion to save a stranger’s dignity: this proves your high morals, Miss Vale.”

“I wanted this interview for myself” Lois said smiling “yet I think that you’ve made the right choice, Bruce.”

Superman flew over Metropolis enjoying the cool air of the night. He was keeping his ears and eyes open not only for anyone in need of help but also for signs of Intergang. Lois had dropped everything and ran to Gotham at Bruce’s side.

He licked his lips. She had reprimanded him for not doing the same but Lois couldn’t understand. Superman could have gone there yet it would have been fake: that old effect dragging his body there.

However that effect wasn’t there anymore: Bruce’s trick had failed and Superman had managed to fight off the initial urge to run to his side. The inoculation Jor El administered him was effective so his strength of will.

And now he felt free to dive into what he had with Diana…

Mr. Collins had informed Bruce that the woman in the court room was Zucco’s wife, Rebecca Irwin. However Bruce knew that she was more than that; he was sure that he had seen her again somewhere and now at his study was perusing his archives for the Zucco case on his Cosmos. He was glancing at Hero who was curled on the thick carpet and played with one of his fluffy toys; that was enough to make him smile and return to his work.
He nodded: exactly. Looking at the newspapers of the time John Grayson died he soon fell upon the picture of the same woman: she was the head of the ‘Build & Fit’ technicians that carried through the city gym’s renovation. She was brought in GCPD for questioning but naturally no charges were made against her and she was free.

However just the fact that the same woman appeared again as Zucco’s wife was enough to indicate that there was a connection between John Grayson’s death and Zucco especially since the company belonged to Zucco and Mr. Breizic had given him the tampered bolt. So this could be a good start for reopening the case: he had the paperwork that proved that Zucco was the owner of that company.

“Master Richard, please do wait…”

The door burst open and Bruce having heard Alfred’s voice managed to hide his Cosmos tablet under a pile of papers. Hero surprised, stood and stretched his agile body.

Dick stormed in the room and stood before his desk; the boy was upset and panting. His eyes were flashing. Bruce frowned.

“Richard, are you alright?”

Alfred came to the room, some panting coloring his breath.

“I am deeply sorry, Master Bruce.”

Bruce smiled.

“It’s okay, Alfred, thank you. Can you leave us alone?”

Alfred gave a courteous nod.

“As you wish, sir.”

As soon as the door closed the flushed boy unleashed the storm he had inside him.

“No, I’m not! Is that what you wanted?!”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I don’t understand.”

Dick clenched his waist with both hands.

“Till now my classmates respected and admired me for my father but now…” he huffed exasperated. “They sneer at me! I became a laughing stock!”

The boy’s voice was filled with rage but Bruce could discern his bitterness and sadness so he steered his wheelchair out of the desk and approached him.

“What happened, Richard?”

Dick snorted and slapped his own face.

“You pretend that you don’t understand?! Okay, I’ll make it clear! People were laughing behind my back and jeered me because of that video…’cause my guardian was fucked right to the ass!”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed.
“Do not use such vulgar language” he commented calmly.

“Why?” Dick snapped. “You don’t like to hear the truth?! That’s the truth! You were Falcone’s whore! A pussy!”

Bruce’s face lost its color but still he met the boy’s eyes calm.

“Is that your words or what you heard from your peers?”

Dick stayed speechless for a second; he waved his hands and frowned.

“That’s your problem? That’s bullshit! What counts is that it’s the truth: you’re what they say and everyone saw and knows every detail and they jeer and laugh…Why did you take me in your custody when you are what people are saying? To punish me for hating you?”

Bruce rubbed his forehead.

“I never wanted to punish you, Richard and…”

Dick leaned to him.

“Stop playing the victim, okay? Stop trying to make me pity you!”

Bruce’s eyes became blank: it was the second time that day that the word victim was addressed to him, this time coupled with pity and it hurt.

“Or since you are a victim stop pretending my father! My father was pride and nobody pitied him! And I feel proud for him! Till now I was an orphan; I didn’t have anything but I had my pride – my father’s name; I never felt ashamed. From the moment you forced me to live with you ruined my life but I had still my dignity – now you made me lost that as well! I feel ashamed because of you and I don’t want to go back to that school! Are you happy that you mucked me up with your shame?”

Bruce felt hammers drumming in his skull yet he didn’t show it to the boy.

“I never wanted anything like that, Dick…I’m sorry for what you suffered because of me but it is your school and it is your life so you must not let some people make you run away. Your father would never want you to be upset by these people…”

Dick grabbed the armrests and brought his face in front of Bruce’s.

“Quit from my guardianship! If you care for me as you brag prove it! quit and let me go!”

Bruce locked eyes with him.

“Is that why you told your uncle what happened yesterday?” he asked without any trace of accusation.

Dick’s eyes trembled puzzled and suddenly his rage evaporated.

“What?” he asked letting go of the armrests. “How do you know? Someone eavesdropped on me?”

Bruce shook his head.

“Of course not. Your uncle brought that up in the court as a proof of my inappropriateness.”

Dick widened his eyes and shook his head: no, that was…His uncle couldn’t have done that; Dick
didn’t want him to.

“I… I didn’t tell him what happened to use it in the court… I just… I was… I just wanted to speak with someone.”

Bruce inhaled deeply.

“And he judged that the end justifies the means…”

“No! I didn’t want anyone to learn about last night; I knew it was your secret and that it’d be a devious blow!”

Bruce nodded appreciatively.

“I know you’re a good boy, Richard.”

But the boy shook his head.

“He shouldn’t say that! I didn’t want him to.”

“You told him so?”

“No, but Tony… Tony understands me and I’m sure he’d never do anything I wouldn’t want.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be so sure” the boy lifted his eyes to Bruce’s pale face. “Maybe your wants don’t coincide with his.”

Dick closed his eyes and then looked at Bruce.

“What… what happened?”

Bruce grinned.

“The court ordered that I be assessed. If I want to sustain your guardianship.”

Dick gulped: he could imagine the impact when the reporters found out about Wayne’s psychiatric assessment.

“And what would you do?”

“Visit the psychiatrist the court will suggest.”

Dick couldn’t understand; he licked his lips.

“Why? Why are you enduring all these? You know that I hate you. From the moment I came here I’m giving you Hell; I’m constantly telling you off. Why accepting to be subjected to this while you easily can quit? I’m not your problem.”

Bruce lolled his head.

“Your grandmother trusted me with your well being and I won’t betray her trust whatever I have to go through. She believed that I would protect you and I’ll do that. And even if you hate me… I care about you and understand what you’ve been through – even your hatred” he inhaled “and I don’t trust that man to take you under his authority. Believe me, Richard, it is not stubbornness: the moment your grandmother is back you will never have to see me again but till then I won’t let this man hurt you.”
Dick looked at Bruce determined.

“I’ll come to the court and say that I lied.”

Bruce shook his head and grinned.

“You won’t do that: I admitted that I had that fit. You’re not a liar, Richard and I won’t let anyone call you that.”

Dick pressed his lips; he made to say something but after two attempts he turned and left running.

Bruce hid his face in his palms and then ran his fingers through his hair huffing.

Alfred entered hesitant the study and Bruce looked at him.

“Master Bruce…”

The younger man shook his head.

“Maybe I was wrong, Alfred…”

“No, Master Bruce.”

But Bruce steered his wheelchair towards the door and Alfred made to follow him.

“No, Alfred, stay here” Bruce smiled with pressed lips to him and patted his wrinkled hand.

“As you wish, sir…” Alfred mumbled sad watching his young master leaving.

Bruce ended up to the back salon and then to the garden that was cast under the early night’s light dark colors. The cold air was refreshing but it couldn’t cool his mind where thousands thoughts boiled deteriorating the drumming of a full migraine. The beauty and peace of the night; the tranquility of the perfectly groomed garden made the last 48 hours’ exhaustion sink deeply in his bones and flesh.

His body throbbed and made the burnings hurt more; his back ached reminding him that he was still healing; weak and fragile.

_Falcone’s whore! A pussy! Everyone laughed…_  

Hero had followed him and meowed drawing his attention. The kitten was sitting on the marble floor, at the side of his wheelchair and was staring at him with sparkling eyes.

Bruce gave him a faint smile and took him on his lap only for the kitten to stand on his back legs and perch to his chest. The human caressed his head.

“Hero” he sighed.

He was ready to speak but he heard something and looked at the star flooded horizon. Thor landed softly before him.

“Am I intruding?”

“Of course not” Bruce answered. “Welcome back.”
They grabbed each other’s forearms; the warriors’ greeting.

“I heard about the video” the blond said not wanting to lie and Bruce nodded.

“I appreciate your honesty, Thor.”

Thor kneeled before him and Hero looked at the god puzzled.

“I’m sorry, Bruce…that was monstrous! Preposterous! Horrible! What kind of a sick mind could do such a think? Have you any idea of the scum’s identity?”

Bruce tranquility petted Hero.

“I just know who didn’t do it…but I leave that to police…”

Thor lolled his head to the side and pressed his lips; his eyes were sparkling ready to water.

“You’re so tired…exhausted…and you suffer not only physically” he touched Bruce’s right forearm; he had noticed how the human was holding awkwardly that limb and Bruce twitched with the gentle touch. “I’m sorry; I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Don’t…it’s not real pain…my mind sometimes…”

“I was…I was in Gotham all day” he mumbled “I wanted to talk to you, to say…” he shrugged and smiled uncomfortable “what I’m saying now. But you were busy…I mean, you should have been resting but you…” he shook his head “so strong, so brave; never stopping fighting; never hiding…”

Bruce looked at Hero and tapped his pink nose.

“It’s not bravery or strength…” he shrugged. “I’m not ill…so, no reason to stay at home.”

Thor nodded.

“Not brave? With all these reporters attacking you with questions…I wanted to appear and chase them away but I knew you didn’t want that. The truth is I didn’t find the…” he chuckled “the courage to speak to you…during all these hours: I didn’t know what to say to someone great as you…Sad? Angry? I was afraid that whatever I might have told you would be unworthy of you…”

Bruce closed his eyes feeling exhaustion eroding the healthy part of his spine. He didn’t know what to answer to this; he didn’t want to hurt the god: he had hurt enough people.

“I felt that someone was watching” he said instead.

“I feel like a prowler…”

“You’re not…”

“You must be disappointed now you learnt that the one who had his eyes on you wasn’t… Superman.”

Bruce smiled.

“I knew it wasn’t Superman” Thor frowned and Bruce blinked. “I can feel his presence.”

Thor nodded.
“Of course…” he smiled “did he…”

Bruce shook his head.

“No and he shouldn’t. He did the right thing not calling” he said determined.

Thor shook his head and huffed exasperated.

“I feel disgusted that someone of our kind treated you like this” Bruce narrowed his eyes. “Bruce, I wish you stopped making excuses for Superman.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I’m a realist, Thor; I see things clear. There is darkness inside me; darkness that absorbs every light cast on it. Beings like Superman or you are made for the light; you’re bright as suns” he smiled. “But my darkness can’t be lighted by anything; it’s like a black hole: swallows every light. Do you know why? Because your light is not compatible with a creature of darkness like me. Bats can’t live under the sun’s light. Eventually I’d have put off Superman’s pure light. So, yes, I’m happy he saved himself from me and he is indifferent to anything that happens to me” his breath was a bit fast and Hero rubbed to his neck purring.

Thor couldn’t fight the urge and cupped the human’s face with both hands locking their eyes but Bruce yanked his head and Thor detached his hands blushing. The god stood up realizing he had made something he shouldn’t have.

“I’m sorry…it was nothing more than a friendly gesture: I swear.”

Bruce nodded and settled Hero to his lap.

“Do not feel bad, Thor…I know you are kind and noble but you have to understand Superman…don’t blame him and try to see the truth about me…If you had seen that video you’d have realized that my past will haunt me forever: I don’t let that past determine my life but I won’t make again the mistake to bring another person in my darkness” Thor gulped. “I love my darkness; this darkness kept me alive all these years; I’m used to living in that darkness but I won’t impose my darkness to anyone else even if that person believes mistakenly that wants to share it.”

He stabbed Thor with his eyes and the blond felt thunders running his spine.

“Your darkness is brighter than any other light I ever lay eyes upon…” the god said with conviction.
“Mr. Wayne!”

“Mr. Wayne!”

The ruckus from the reporter group that swarmed the street outside Gotham’s courthouse was really confusing however Bruce Wayne was eyeing them completely calm though his wheelchair was trapped among people pointing their microphones like guns to him. Not to mention the cascade of flashes from the cameras all over.

“You saw the video?”

Bruce smiled.

“I know about the broadcasting but there was no need for me to see the content…”

He made to brush the control screen on the chair’s armrest to move ahead but seeing that the mob didn’t have any intention to withdraw he let his hand fall on his lap.

“How do you feel, Mr. Wayne?”

Bruce looked at the man who had asked and raised his eyebrows.

“I think there can’t be much originality in that.”

“He made to brush the control screen on the chair’s armrest to move ahead but seeing that the mob didn’t have any intention to withdraw he let his hand fall on his lap.

“How do you feel, Mr. Wayne?”

Bruce looked at the man who had asked and raised his eyebrows.

“I think there can’t be much originality in that.”

“Police located and arrested the man that hacked GCN’s signal.”

Bruce nodded.

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

“Police says that the hacker was just a pawn and the culprit was someone else.”

“Do you suspect someone?” a young reporter asked.

“I’m not a detective” Bruce smiled though his smile was faint and looked at the one who asked him “do you?”

The man’s colleagues laughed as constables from the building’s security rushed there pushing away the reporters and forming a corridor for Bruce to approach the ramp leading inside the building.

“Are you afraid that this video would lose you the court?”

The young billionaire continued his path.

“Have you anything to say to the one who publicized that video?”

Bruce stopped, looked at the woman who asked and yanked slightly his head.

“That distributing child pornography material is a federal offence.”

He drove his wheelchair fast through the ramp ignoring the rest of the buzzing questions that were launched at him.
The screen split in two, one part showing Bruce moving into the court house and the other showing the newscaster from the studio.

“Despite Mr. Wayne’s collected demeanor this morning it became known that the said video caused him a serious fit last night which was mentioned in the court and created major questions about Mr. Wayne’s stability and thus suitability for the role of guardian – Judge Moot ordered for the young billionaire to be evaluated by a mental health professional. Meanwhile, Gotham is shocked from the revelation of eye witnesses that Mr. Wizze, the president of GTV, didn’t have in fact no intention to stop the broadcasting of the video which was eventually stopped when Vicky Vale caused a serious blackout to the station…”

“Wayne has a crazy, pathological need to attract attention” Diana’s haughty voice startled Superman whose focus was on the TV screen in Diana’s living room; that was the reason he didn’t hear her coming.

When he arrived, half an hour ago, the Amazon Princess wasn’t there so Superman didn’t have anything to keep him from watching the evening news and specifically the footage from Bruce’s arrival at the courthouse this morning.

He closed the TV and smiled at her. The long rectangular window was slowly closing after Diana’s entrance. Superman really gaped on her proud, imposing figure: beauty and strength bound together in harmony and her minimal attire made his body scream from longing: her dynamic presence as she stared with contempt at the closed now TV screen, her naked muscle bound arms adorned only with the wide golden bracelets were folded over her rich breasts that seemed ready to pop out of the corset.

He stood and hugged her capturing her hot, ruby red lips thirsty for her perfume; for her velvet flesh. “It’s pathetic!” she exclaimed and Superman scratched his head uncomfortable.

“My kiss?” he chuckled and she caressed his cheek.

“Of course not, Kal El. I just came from rescuing a sinking ship’s crew” Superman frowned because he hadn’t heard any SOS signal. “Those humans are so weak that makes me sick” she smiled “yet we have to take care of them, huh? We want to save them.”

Superman smiled and nodded.

“It is the meaning of our existence.”

She smirked and caressed his hair sending goose bumps to his body.

“However some of them are really pathetic to look…” her eyes looked at the closed now TV. “Wayne…he uses his disgrace to gain people’s attention…and yours.”

Superman’s smile vanished.

“Bruce doesn’t like attention on him.”

She chuckled and shook her head.

“I just saw that…” she remarked snidely “he could have used the back entrance of that building. That creature is so devious: he certainly knows that you were touched by his new adventure and showed off to draw your attention to him.”
Superman shook his head.

“I don’t think that’s the case, Diana; he doesn’t have any reason to believe that I care about his… misfortune” his eyes dropped because suddenly the fact that he didn’t even called him nudged him bad. “On the contrary, what he did was a message to the person that orchestrated the broadcasting: Bruce is spitting at his face his bravery manifesting that the culprit didn’t manage to break or make him hide.”

The pride in his voice didn’t escape his attention and neither Diana’s who arched an eyebrow.

“You’re really proud of him?!” puzzlement, exasperation and irony blended in her voice. “I don’t think that it is either brave or honorable to show yourself after the revelation of your total disgrace. He should have hidden himself and his disgrace and not parading proud of that!”

Superman frowned and crossed his arms over the chest.

“Why do you hate him so much?” he asked with true wonder. “I didn’t consider you able of such hatred.”

Diana yanked her head proud but her face was turned into stone from offense.

“It is not hatred; it is plain contempt and scorn for a man who took advantage of your generosity and kindness to drag you into his disgrace” she cocked her eyebrows. “He knew that he wasn’t the proper one for you but still trapped you: and why not? Years and years he was witnessing whores doing exactly the same and when he had the chance to trap the greatest being of this planet he used everything he was taught. He shouldn’t have dragged you into a situation that was certain that would be detrimental for your status.”

Superman grinned and his eyes became blank.

“Actually, Bruce tried hard to keep me at a distance; he insisted that I shouldn’t engage to a relationship with him. It was his concern for my best interest that kept our relationship secret.”

Diana shook her head annoyed from him defending Bruce yet she smiled snidely.

“Not for your interest, Kal El…” she said slyly. “He just was scared that he might get targeted by your enemies” she chuckled “and the attack in Thassos made that worse: it’s not accidental that he became so bad to you after those creatures attacked him…I bet he was scared shitless…”

Superman felt a surge of anger that he was aware that it was irrational.

“It wasn’t fear that made Bruce want our relationship secret and he didn’t become bad to me: I was bad to him!”

The Amazon frowned.

“Are you defending him?!” she demanded exasperated. “You forgot Thor? I bet your human angel considered him safer than you so played with him while being with you: it is better to have two gods guarding you instead of one, right?”

Superman shook his head. The thought of Thor with Bruce still made his insights clench.

“I was the one with the parallel affair if you remember: Bruce didn’t have anything with anyone.”

Diana yanked her head backwards and sniggered with half closed eyes.
“I love your naivety! He really learned all the tricks, didn’t he? I bet Thor last night was comforting the human – keeping him busy in his bed… I don’t believe we are quarrelling for his sake! It makes me feel inferior: I’m an Amazon, Kal El: it is beyond me to argue for my mate’s ex. So if you feel the carnal longing for him you’re free to go and relief yourself.”

Superman remembered that night on a Metropolis rooftop: Bruce would never accept that role. And Diana was upset by this discussion. Diana was giving him so much; she made him happy; he couldn’t imagine his life without her and wouldn’t let the leftovers of a dirty effect ruin that. So he smiled.

“I didn’t go to him: I’m here with you and I won’t change that for anything.”

Diana smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck slithering her rich lips through his neck line causing Superman close his eyes and glue her body on his. Their eyes locked.

“You are the only one for me, Diana…” he said and his hands pushed down her corset to free her erect breasts. “The sunshine in my life…”

His voice sounded much too exhilarated which made Dick angrier.

“Dick! How great you called!”

Dick gritted his teeth.

“I don’t think so, Tony!” he snarled.

“Dick, what’s wrong, champ? Did Wayne make your life difficult again?” he asked with a deep frown in his voice.

Dick rolled his eyes which shone slyly.

“Why? Something happened that would make him angry with me?”

A long pause as the adult was thinking hard the proper answer.

“He doesn’t need something specific to be mean to you. And now with the court…”

Dick chuckled loud enough for his uncle to hear.

“Actually, I’m mean to him all the time… So you say that the court is going badly for him?”

“From the start, buddy; he has no chance.”

Now Dick couldn’t hold his anger anymore: Tony not only used something he had confided in him but also didn’t have the decency to say it openly.

“Tony, you had no right to do that!”

“What do you mean, Dick? And why are you so upset? I know that the video with Wayne might have caused problems to your school life but…”

“Tony, cut the crap! And why you don’t say the truth?”

“Wait, wait… Are you calling me a liar?” his voice was hurt but Dick could discern some anger well
“Not only liar, Tony… And since you won’t admit what you did I’ll help you. You had no right to use in the court what I confided in you last night!” he almost growled. “Wayne was down and as much as I dislike the guy I don’t kick someone already down!

Zucco cleared his throat.

“Look, champ…”

“No, Tony, that was…”

“It was for your own good, Dick: you’re too young to understand how this world works…”

Wayne’s words came back to Dick:

*And he judged that the end justifies the means…*

“I don’t believe that the end justifies the means, Tony!”

Zucco sighed from the other side of the line.

“He whined to you? How predictable!”

“Stop doing that! Wayne didn’t whine! We are talking about you now, Tony! I trusted you and you betrayed my trust in the worst way!”

“Calm down, Dick; I didn’t betray your trust” he retorted sighing. “You didn’t say anything about keeping it a secret, remember?”

Dick growled frustrated and yanked his head backwards.

“Is this really your excuse?! Oh, Tony! You could have asked me! You made me look like a monster!”

“Dick, you’re giving much value to Wayne…You forgot what he has done to you?”

Dick licked his lips and gulped recalling the past months he knew Wayne.

*Your family was murdered because of him, remember? He accepted to become your guardian while he knew your feelings but he didn’t care, did he? He knows that you want to be with me but still pursuit this court to keep you against your will. I’m sorry, champ but I thought that you saw through the big chance before us: we have many odds to win this now that judge knows how unstable Wayne is.”*

“He isn’t unstable…But this shit video was too much for someone who suffered such shit. You were ready to bring me to court to testify what I saw without giving a shit about what I wanted or what people would think about me…I offered Wayne to come and say that I lied.”

“What?!” Zucco’s rage distorted his voice before he realized and calmed down. “Who’s the one betraying the other now? Are you nuts, Dick?!”

Dick frowned hearing that voice.

“No but I wanted to do the right thing!”
“You’re gonna ruin everything, Dick! You don’t understand that Wayne plays you for a fool? He knows that you’re a good boy and takes advantage of you playing the victim. Dick, you can’t do that!”

Dick closed his eyes and shook his head.

“He didn’t play the victim…the opposite.”

Zucco growled frustrated.

“So you betray our common goal? C’m on, Dick; you can’t testify that you lied.”

Dick shook his head.

“I won’t testify.”

A big sigh of relief from the other end of the line.

“I’m glad you got your senses…”

“I won’t testify because Wayne doesn’t want people think that I’m a liar: he prefers everyone to believe him unstable than have me go through trial and being scowled for lying…He…”it was difficult to say it out loud “he wants to protect even though I…”

Zucco couldn’t tolerate the boy’s remorse and the consequences this might have.

“Dick, don’t fall for that! This is his game: you know that the one who really cares for you is me.”

“Goodnight, Tony.”

“Dick, I’m sorry, alright?” he lowered his tone and changed his voice to sound regretful. “I was carried away from my concern about your well being and my agony to help you get free. Did you change your mind about being with me?”

Dick yanked his head backwards and closed his eyes.

“No, I didn’t. Bye…”

He brushed the scene to end the dial and collapsed to his mattress sighing dropping his Smart Phone. He ran his hands through his hair; his mind was in a storm of thoughts battling against each other.

The knocks on his door startled him.

“Come” he was expecting Alfred so it was a surprise seeing Jason marching inside. “I was gonna call you…”

Jason jumped to the bed, sprawled and bound his hands under the back of his neck.

“Big minds think alike, huh? I thought ya wanna yar buddy after everythin’ today – I know what scum us kids are …”

“Did you find a way to break into the Manor?” he thought that his friend had sneaked to him.

Jason pursed his lips.

“Yup! The best! I pressed the bell button – ya know, that ancient lookin’ one? - an’ Alfie opened –
he’ll brin’ us biscuits an’ hot chocolate. So what’s up, man? They gave ya a hard time, huh? I can come to yar school an’ teach one or two things…”

Dick sighed and lied down beside him.

“I don’t care ‘bout these motherfuckers anymore…”

Jason goggled at him mock awed.

“Wow! ‘Motherfuckers’! Ya’re really takin’ the bad road, huh?”

Dick rolled his eyes.

“You’re right…’bout the bad road but not for the ‘motherfuckers’. You saw Wayne?”

“Nope, why the sudden interest?”

Dick inhaled.

“Last night Wayne had a nasty nightmare ‘bout what that video showed…and then he had a fit or something and I saw everything…and then I was so shaken that I called Tony and told him…”

Jason nodded; he could imagine that this wasn’t the best choice.

“So?”

“I told him what happened and he used it in the court…”

Jason pouted.

“So? You hate Wayne…” he shrugged.

Dick grabbed the pillow and hit Jason with that.

“I might hate him but I didn’t want his suffering to be used against him!”

Jason cocked his eyebrows and pouted.

“Nor the news make a party ‘bout that, huh?” Dick widened his eyes and Jason nodded mutter-of-fact “yup! They rave! Ya told everythin’ to Zucco…what did ya expect?”

Dick shook his head.

“I never expected him to do that…I thought he would think like me…that he wouldn’t…I’m pissed, Jay! He made me seem like a heartless asshole!”

“Maybe Zucco doesn’t care about yar image, pal…”

“I’m so confused, Jay…I feel awful for what was done to Wayne ‘cause of me…and when I returned from practice I told him off ‘bout kids jeering me…I didn’t know…but…later when I heard what Tony did I offered to go to the court and say that I lied…but Wayne didn’t accept.”

Jason widened his eyes.

“Why?”

Dick pressed his lips and lowered his head.
“He didn’t want to expose me…he didn’t want people to speak ill of me…that I’m a liar…”

Jason pouted and scratched his head.

“I told ya that the man wasn’t as bad as ya thought him…” Dick didn’t answer in any way. “An’ now?”

“He is going to be assessed by a shrink to see if he’s stable enough to be my guardian…”

“Fuck!”

“I prefer to be with Tony any time yet after this…I’m so confused…I mean, I still…hate Wayne but” he sighed “I also feel bad for him.”

Jason rolled his eyes.

“Maybe ya need to go to that shrink as well?” Dic hit him again with the pillow. “I told ya I don’t like Zucco an’ ya saw: he made ya seem like a brat while Wayne preferred being called loony than have ya called liar: he coulda claim that ya lied in the first place but he didna.”

Dick huffed.

“I feel shit…like I ashamed my loved ones…”

“It’s not yar fault, man…ya didna do anythin’. Ya offered to correct yar mistake.”

“Still…it’s not enough, Jay…” he growled frustrated and punched the mattress.

Bruce was lying to his bed feeling relieved for that: those two days seemed endless and though he wouldn’t admit to anyone he felt exhausted.

His bedroom was cast in deep dark except for the warm light of the lazily dancing flames inside the fireplace.

This time he had taken Leslie’s sedative without anyone pressing him because he needed the deep, dreamless sleep it could provide. And sleep came really fast with Hero’s relaxing purring on his side – he had reassured Selina that he would take the sedative so she didn’t have to worry for him. Bruce didn’t want her to lose precious moments with Steve for his sake.

Even though his sleep was deep and undisturbed thoughts swirled like ghosts in his mind: Dick’s rage when he learnt his uncle’s deed, Vicky Vale losing her job to protect him, Lois’ rush to come see him, Martha’s concern and love, Clark’s indifference – Thor’s baby eyes looking at him with so much sympathy. He wished it was only sympathy…

He didn’t want anything else for the kind god… Bruce twisted a bit under the blankets. No more of that… Thor like Clark was different than him…they had nothing to do with him. They were light and he was darkness…He was pain.

He heard a slow, content breath near his face; Bruce knew that it was Oliver Queen who watched him sleeping on the bed of that hotel’s suite. And then he saw the man putting the shoes to Bruce’s feet.

The ablaze green of Queen’s eyes was on him:
“I think you know that I understand you more than anyone other...because I feel the same” his cheek had almost touched Bruce’s and he felt Queen shivering. “Some people don’t have to know each other much: it’s like being together for an eternity. I know the darkness you live in and nobody else could understand...”

Wizze was inside the lift that took him to his luxurious penthouse. He was living alone three years now after his divorce – his wife had demanded a fortune to give it to him.

He was infuriated and was huffing through the ascending. He had stayed 24 hours in jail before that idiot lawyer managed to bail him out. At the same time, GTV was still black due to the damage that bimbo Vale caused and that led to losses of millions! Not to mention the sue from Wayne Enterprises since Vale took care of informing everyone that he had no intention of stopping the signal.

He kicked the lift’s doors before they opened and walked to his door cursing. He got inside and headed to the vast living room without turning any light on.

Suddenly, all lights opened and clowns jumped from everywhere with firearms; they withdraw and the Prince of Clowns walked forward with a hand camera on his shoulder his eye on the lens.

“Heeeeeello, Mister Wiiiizzzzzzzze! Smiiiiile! You’re on Can--did Camera!”

Wizze gulped and cold sweat covered his body and face: he had forgotten Joker and his ridiculous love for Wayne.

“I… I didn’t do anything, Mr. Joker” Joker lolled his head to the side along with the camera. “They hacked my signal; I couldn’t stop it!”

Joker touched his finger to his lip thoughtful and suddenly threw the camera to one of his goons and conjured a blade which the next second was touching Wizze’s lips.

“Mmm... I seeee you’re a clever boyyyyy... right to the point!” he narrowed his eyes “Yar lips are a bit pale for the screen... need some color, my friend... Reeeeeed...” the blade flashed and blood splattered allover Wizze’s mouth.

The GTV president yelled and moved his hands to touch his injured lips only for Joker to kick him in the groin sending him on his knees. The man began crying.

“It wasn’t my fault! Please!”

Joker leaned over him and brought his mouth close to his ear.

“You humiliated my Brucie... You hurt him... Nobody had the right to see him like this... Cops might have released you but Joker is the ultimate Judge here” hearing Joker speaking without dragging the words was terrorizing.

A second blade appeared to his other hand and both blades flashed in the air and became hot as they attacked the kneeled man’s clothes scratching flesh. Wizze’s scared cries were melody for Joker.

When the jester stopped with a manic but determined glint in his eyes Wizze was completely naked
and his body was covered with superficial but painful scratches. The man had literary pissed himself and was sobbing.

“Do you like being naked, Wiiiizzeee boy?”

“He writes on camera, Boss!” the goon with the camera exclaimed thrilled. Joker lollled his head to him and shook his head.

“I’m the GOooooAT director, baaaby – know a talent when I see it…” Wizzie’s sobs had subsided a bit from Joker’s change in attention but then without even seeing it a hand slapped him twice sending him to the thick carpet. “You like slaps? You enjoyed seeing Brucie being slapped?” He circled him cleaning his nails with the blade and then suddenly kicked him in his plumb belly causing a new round of sobs.

“Since you liked so much that video I say we make a reeeeeemake with you as the star – HEHEHE! I bet many channels will want that blockbuster. The cam is already rooooling!”

“Nooo, no, please!” Joker fisted Wizzie’s head and yanked it to lock eyes with him.

“Why? Since you think that having a stiiiick drilling your ass makes millions let’s do it…I’m sure your fat ass will make money; tooooooo bad you won’t take any…HEHEHEHEHEHEHE! Poetic irony – my favorite joke ever! Bring the proooooops!”

Two of his goons brought in a table and a third one dragged a machine with a dildo attached: it was the biggest dildo Wizze ever saw and he began sobbing.

“Help! Help please!” he shrieked desperately panicked because he knew that the damned penthouse was soundproof.

Joker lolled his head to the side and eyed him curious.

“You enjoyed seeing petit Bruce being ripped by a monstrous stick; time you seeeeee how funny it really is” he clenched his jaw and kicked the man’s exposed length making the man slump. “Tie him spread eagled!”

“No, no, please, no!” he yelled as goons grabbed him. “Please!”

Joker brought his face to the man’s.

“Brucie was crying and begging and you made it a show…”

“Not me…not me, Mr. Joker…that fucking hacker!” Joker breathed like an angry beast.

“He’ll have his 15 minutes fame too but someone gave him that video…Why not you?”

“Pleaaaaaseeee!”

“Boys, boys, boys, I think you’re a bit hasty…” Everyone turned to rectangular frame leading there from the bedroom; Catwoman stood there
holding her whip.

Joker licked his fingers and groomed his hair walking towards her.

“Whataaaaat’s new, pussycat?” he began singing the famous song and Catwoman snorted. “Wooooo, woooo…” he cleared his throat and got serious “How may I help you?”

“That bug of shit is mine!”

Joker giggled and then hiccuped.

“Youuuuu’re too popular, Wizzeee! I have unsettled business with him – he played with my wife’s honor” he winked to her “aaaaand, c’mon, Kitty: I know that women get desperate sometimes buuuuuuut you caaaan fiiiiind better than him” he twitched his eyebrows suggestively and fixed his jacket’s lapels “gorgeous, family men clowns active in every field?”

She cocked an eyebrow and snorted.

“Keep dreaming, handsome!”

Joker cast a sideways glance to his goons.

“Handsome... She fancies me, booooyyyyyy!” but suddenly his face became dead serious “Are you connected with Brucie as well?” he asked wickedly.

Catwoman shook her head smiling.

“No, I’m pissed he fired Vale: her show was my favorite…”

“HUHUHUHUHUUUUUU! Wanna play him in cards?” he pulled out of his pocket a deck but as he shuffled them every card had his face on. “Oooooops! It’s marked! Ts…ts…ts…Well, youuuu liiiike strip poker?” he twitched his eyebrows pointedly.

Catwoman rolled her eyes.

“Sorry, handsome, not my game…”

She slashed her whip to the air smashing the lamps casting the entire room into darkness. Exclamations of puzzlement filled the space as Catwoman enabled her night vision. She stormed at the confused goons who held Wizze and with a kick sent both flying to the opposite wall.

“Stop her!” Joker cried figuring out her plan.

However Catwoman had already grabbed her pray and crashed on the whole wall window landing on the balcony of the next floor; Selina had studied the building and knew where her dive would lead but Wizze howled scared.

She jerked her whip and hooked it around the fire escape of the opposite alley. Then she jumped keeping him on her with one arm– something that disgusted her but she ignored the nausea for her goal’s sake.

As soon as she landed on the filthy cement dropped the scared man. He collapsed like a sack of potatoes; he was naked and the cold pierced him so he was trembling but Selina knew that terror was the main reason.

“You’re not feeling so strong now, huh?” she jeered him.
Wizze relieved that he was safe from Joker raised his head.

“Th…thank you for saving me…I’ll give you whatever you… you want…”

She rolled her eyes and snorted.

“Maybe a show for cats?!” she spat his face “I didn’t save you, asshole! I just wanted you for myself!”

Wizze’s eyes widened shocked; shock that became terror seeing Catwoman stretching her fingers and sharp 3 inches nails popping up from the tips: the razor like nails flashed to the dim light coming from the distant public lamps. Selina was grateful to Tony for adding that small detail to her costume:

“What’s a cat without sharp nails?” he had said playfully winking.

“Wait, wait! Why are you doing this? I’m sorry if I did something…”

She shook her head and smiled devilishly.

“Cats like to play with dirty rats!”

Her nails flashed to the half darkness and Wizze cried as his face was grazed savagely; Selina’s eyes were still, flashing like lightnings seeing again Bruce sleeping in her hug still shaking a bit in his sleep despite the sedative Leslie had given him: his beautiful face was so pale and drained… Tony had told her how they had found him in the bathroom and every phrase Tony had said pushed her fingers to the man’s flesh.

She was ready to rip his throat.

“Stop!” a voice she knew came from the alley’s entrance and she closed her eyes frustrated.

“It’s none of your business!” she changed her voice realizing why Bruce always did that while in armor.

Confident strides approached her and a respiration so familiar.

“You’re ready to kill a defenseless man: it is my business.”

She was sniffing from rage.

“Gotham is not your city and you can’t understand its rules: clear off!”

The footsteps stopped right next to her and her body reacted the way it was used to.

“I won’t: first of all, because Bruce is my friend and will be distraught knowing that someone died because of him and second because Catwoman isn’t a murderer.”

She snorted.

“This has nothing to do with your friend – I have my own issues with the man” if she told him that she was there to take revenge for Bruce he would understand who she was.

Steve walked in front of her meeting her eyes.

“He is going to be tried and punished according to the law for everything he has done: you don’t have to dirt your hands with him.”
She lolled her head and crooked her lips.

“Cut the fairytale with me! And believe me if I don’t do it Joker will…”

“Police will guard him.”

She arched her eyebrows.

“Great use of citizens’ taxes!”

“We are not here to judge.”

“What do you know, you obsolete soldier?!” she made to attack Wizze again but Steve held her wrists and their faces came close. Her enraged pants blended with his calm ones. “You don’t have a girlfriend, big guy?” she asked slyly “’cause you seem a bit horny…”

Steve flashed.

“I do; a very special girl whom I love.”

“Then go to her and let me finish my job!” she growled and jerked her hands to free them but he insisted.

“I won’t let you kill someone even him!”

Catwoman jerked her knee and hit his groin; his surprise and pain was perfect for her to use the whip to launch herself to the rooftop.

“Asshole!” she shouted before vanishing leaving Steve shaking his head and trying to catch his pained breath.

Tony watched the railing of the lift as it brought him down to the cave. He hardly contained his frustration huffing every now and then. As the lift slowed to stop Tony saw Bruce in front of his working bench watching the flow of data in the five screens. A few feet away Hero was curled on the Tumbler’s hood and stared at the hanging bats waiting patiently to make his attack.

Tony smiled and walked towards his friend who turned his head.

“Good morning, Tony.”

“Morning. The fur ball is not going to make peace with your flying mates…” Bruce chuckled. “He reminds me of Tom with Jerry…He grew up, huh?”

Bruce smiled fondly.

“He did; he is a husky kitten.”

Tony looked at the screens.

“Zucco, reports on possible Joker and Crane sightings, Intergang…” he counted cocking an eyebrow. “You should be resting, you know…after everything that happened and definitely not being in that cold and humid place.”

Bruce pressed his lips: it was obvious that Tony had no intention to give up his over protectiveness.
“I’m fine, Tony: Leslie examined me and two days have passed already. I’m made of rough material, you know.”

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head.

“I heard that Zucco’s lawyer said everything about that incident in the court. That brat spilled everything, huh?” he huffed. “I wonder why you put up with this…and you accepted to get evaluated by psychiatrist?”

Bruce nodded though he could read his friend’s distaste and anger.

“For his sake?! Mercy, Bruce! He witnessed your suffering and used it to humiliate you even more! The boy doesn’t have the minimum of decency to respect someone’s pain! And you agreed to see a psychiatrist? What were you thinking?”

“I was evaluated for Falcone’s trial as well” he answered calmly.

“Yes but it wasn’t like this! And this brat doesn’t worth it!”

Bruce would like to be able to stand but instead he fixed his eyes on Tony’s.

“Let me decide that, Tony. I’ve spoken with Dick and he did speak to his uncle but he didn’t want that incident to be revealed.”

Tony huffed and shook his head.

“Yeah…sure. And you believed him?”

“He had no reason to lie: if he had done it with that purpose he’d have bragged about…he hates me after all. And I saw in his eyes that he was honest.”

“As Superman was?” Bruce’s eyes fell before regaining their indifference. “You were saying the same for him, remember? Defending him all the time…and what he did? Betrayed you with that bimbo Amazon and now doesn’t give a shit about you…”

“Are you watching the stolen objects?” Bruce preferred to change the subject and Tony yanked his head ruffling his hair with both hands.

“I’m sorry…” he said regretting his outburst.

Bruce shook his head.

“You didn’t do anything…so is there anything new on Luthor?”

“He is definitely assembling a machine with the items – a really bizarre machine following a code or something that doesn’t match anything we know. Luthor seems to be in a hurry.”

“I think that this machine is crucial for what they are planning.”

“Mannheim…”

“And his allies.”

Tony snorted.

“We can take anyone” he said and Bruce pressed his lips. “What? Is this your pessimism, or you use
“This doubt as an excuse to work your ass off?”

“I don’t need an excuse, Tony: if I needed rest I’d be resting.”

Tony held his shoulder and locked eyes with him.

“I’m worried, Bruce; that night I realized how fragile you are…”

Bruce closed his eyes and huffed exasperated.

““Tony, that night I had a moment of weakness – every human being has such moments…I’m not the weak, broken kid, Tony. Remember that I was Batman even when I was still under Falcone’s captivity?” Tony nodded. “They can’t break me, Tony! Not anymore.”

Tony lowered his eyes; he could still hear the cries and the sobs of that tortured boy; his beautiful wet eyes were stamped in his mind. He smiled.

“Of course…they can’t.”

Bruce grinned.

“Tony, I want a favor.”

“Go ahead.”

“I want you to give Jim the evidence I gathered for Zucco: I think they are enough for reopening the case and eventually convict Zucco.”

“Why isn’t Batman doing that? I mean you use the armor to more dangerous activities so I don’t think that you wouldn’t use it for paying your ally a visit” he crooked his mouth slyly.

“You’re right. I don’t want Batman do this, because if Batman shows he is interested in that case then Jim would make the connection between Bruce Wayne’s interest and Batman’s. It’d be strange if Batman and Bruce Wayne are so interested in Zucco more so in the same time.”

Tony smiled.

“However if Tony Stark” he said pointing at himself “appears with evidence for an old case concerning the man who wants to get his friend’s ward it won’t be suspicious because obviously his friend’s worries made him investigate the man’s past.”

“Exactly! It would be more natural if Iron Man learnt from Bruce Wayne about the tampered bolt Mr. Breizic gave him and Ms. Turner’s suspicions. Iron Man is Bruce Wayne’s friend so he can have access to Bruce Wayne’s information but Batman can’t and would be too suspicious if he came out with this information.”

Tony forgot all his dark thoughts and laughed light hearted.

“Very clever, littl’ guy!”

“Practical” Bruce said modest.

Jim watched Robert Hatchet pacing the interrogation room: the temporary DA was always calm yet in this case his upset was evident. And was evident throughout their flight from Gotham to
Washington: Robert had asked permission to interrogate Roth Pielser and through his associations in the bureau and the importance of the case his request was approved very fast.

“You need to calm, Robert” Jim told him.

Robert stopped abruptly and nodded.

“You are right but this case…”

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose massaging the tension.

“I know but we’ll catch the culprit.”

Two guards entered bringing inside Pielser dressed in the orange suit of the convicts. He had an annoying smirk all over his thin face that tried Jim’s infamous tranquility.

It was obvious that the guards detested the man and they dropped him in the seat rather unceremoniously.

“Thank you” Robert said to the guards. “Leave us.”

“Let me guess” the man said as soon as the guards left “you’re coming from Gotham so this must have to do with the video of the gorgeous Prince of Gotham” he smiled reminiscently. “I see that the cutie still remembers me…” he shook his head “I wish Falcone wasn’t so selfish and had shared his little treasure…”

Jim saw Robert clenching his jaw but cast him a warning glance though he felt himself a fire bulging inside him.

“I’m glad we all aware of the issue” Robert said calm but stern “we know that the video was in your hands.”

Pielser nodded.

“Bruce told you; nobody else could have known that. I made an impression to the little angel after all.”

Jim struggled with himself to keep his calm.

“It’s Mr. Wayne” he said dryly.

Pielser smiled.

“I spent too many hot nights watching his delicious small body in such intriguing poses and manifestations that I feel too connected – till now I didn’t have a name but now I do…well, you can’t expect me to use that cold ‘Mr. Wayne’ for that squirming hot child.”

Jim jerked up from his seat and slapped his hands on the metallic table between him and Pielser.

“Stop that! For your own good, Pielser! Mind your words about Mr. Wayne!”

Pielser pursed his lips and drummed his fingers on the table.

“Okay, okay… Cool down, man! When I saw that dirty, beautiful boy in Falcone’s cabaret I couldn’t imagine he was the lost Prince of Gotham.”
“Every child is a little Prince or Princess” Robert said “and you damaged hundreds of innocent souls: I wish they had fried you!”

Pielser lolled his head towards Jim.

“Not the best way to contact an interrogation.”

“Is the best for a scum like you” Jim answered nonchalant. “We know you didn’t send anything to the hacker from here: so either you sent it through someone else or the video had passed to another person and that person did it.”

Robert leaned above him.

“To whom you gave the video?”

Pielser rolled his eyes.

“Why should I help you? What is there for me to gain?”

Robert gritted his teeth.

“Let’s say that if you don’t help us we will take care for you to be transferred to the high security section” he widened his eyes seeing Pielser’s wary expression. “You know, with the dangerous criminals who hate pedophiles?”

Some sweat drops appeared to Pielser’s face.

“Or” Jim added “we can arrange things for you to be chemically castrated. Huh?” he cocked his eyebrows.

“Police confiscated all the material in my home and my facilities.”

“The video was never found” Robert replied.

“Some police officer took it for his own entertainment.”

Jim walked to him.

“You know that this is not true…so how you sent the video to the hacker?”

“I didn’t! How would I know that hacker? I learnt about that boy’s true identity when I was already in jail: If I knew sooner I’d have made a fortune selling the porn video where Bruce Wayne stars: many people would pay millions to see that babe losing his virginity” he cackled.

It was enough! Jim stormed to him and grabbed him from the lapels lifting him up.

“Shut the fuck up! Open your mouth only to answer our questions or else the high security sector will have a party tonight!”

Robert approached.

“I think that you did exactly that” he whispered to Pielser’s ear. “You sold that video after you learnt that Bruce Wayne was the boy that Falcone had in his cabaret – to the highest bidder.”

Pielser sweating and panting in Jim’s hands gulped.
“I don’t know his identity, I swear…the transaction was made through my lawyer but he also didn’t know who bought it. These things are arranged anonymously.”

“We’ll see what he’ll tell us” Jim spat letting him slump on the plastic seat.

Pielser breathed easier but shook his head.

“My lawyer died in a car accident one month ago…”

“How convenient!” Jim said yanking his head and turned to the door.

“Wish that we’ll find that sonovabitch or else you’ll be considered the culprit and then the high security sector will look like heaven in comparison!”

It was afternoon. The quiet slithering was the only thing that accompanied him. The silence was creepy and although he had been through a lot worse situations still this had an impact on him as if the air had something bizarre on its own. The lighting was normal yet he felt as if being watched.

The building had been renovated in a modern state and it was odd that it still retained his gothic character and atmosphere even though every relic of its legendary owners had been transferred to the ward that was turned into a museum.

The nurse at the information desk in the entrance of the building had given him directions.

Bruce couldn’t understand why his assessment should take place there. Arkham Asylum was a closed institution with many dangerous inmates. Normally, cases of evaluation shouldn’t be examined there. Moreover since the psychiatrist appointed by the court was only an associate to the asylum.

And as he was slithering his way inner he felt like Clarice in the Silence of the Lambs going to meet Dr. Lecter; he smiled amused. Tony and his choices of movies!

“Mr. Wayne!”

He had heard the light footsteps coming behind him in the narrow corridor yet he feigned that the addressing took him by surprise. He stopped the wheelchair and turned to see Dr. Quinzel coming to him; Bruce knew that she had a soft spot for Joker but his surveillance hadn’t reveal anything bad enough except than that incident during New Year’s Eve when Joker broke into her apartment.

She offered her hand and Bruce took it for a handshake.

“To what do we owe the honor of your presence here? I haven’t been informed.”

“Really? I’m here to visit Dr. Hugo Strange.”

She frowned but she didn’t express her puzzlement though Bruce understood that she was thinking the same with him.

“Someone should have come with you” she said.

“An orderly offered to but I didn’t think that it would be so difficult…” his eyes became wary. “Do you think that I could be in danger?” he looked around cautious.

Harleen smiled and remembered Joker; well, if he was here then Mr. Waynesh would have to be
afraid.

“Not at all, Mr. Wayne: the doctors’ offices are in a section where the patients have no access unless for their sessions” of course Bruce knew that already since he had studied the ancient building’s blueprints. “Allow me to escort you to Dr. Strange’s office.”

Bruce smiled.

“Gladly, Dr. Quinzel.”

She made an inviting gesture but Bruce let her pass first.

“I heard about that video” she said casually. “It is a happy coincidence I don’t like TV. I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Wayne; it was really hideous what happened. How are you coping?”

Bruce shrugged.

“It’s not the best thing when a horrible experience of your life becomes a show for everyone” Quinzel pressed her lips. “The worst of this is the ramifications on my loved ones” he inhaled. “I have passed it; it still hurts more when it is shoved like this to my face but it isn’t new to me while for my loved ones is and hurts them more.”

Quinzel smiled with sympathy.

“I believe that your loved ones are as strong as you and get inspiration from your courageous stance.”

Bruce didn’t answer and Harleen gestured to a heavy old fashioned dark brown door at the end of the corridor.

“Here we are! Now would you excuse me? I have a session; it was a pleasure seeing you again.”

“For me too, Dr. Quinzel.”

He steered his wheelchair to the door waiting for Quinzel’s footsteps to faint. He saw the yellow gold label reading ‘DR. HUGO STRANGE’ and knocked.

Two minutes later the door opened revealing a man around 50 with average height and weight. He was bald and his eyes were big and round like lamps, gray with a shine of cleverness and sympathy that for Bruce was evident that was pretentious.

“Mr. Wayne! Why they didn’t inform me that you came; I would have escorted you myself.”

Bruce waved that off.

“Dr. Quinzel was kind enough to show me the way.”

Dr. Strange arched his eyebrows.

“Very kind of her indeed; I shall thank her. Please, do come in” he said cordially opening more the door and gesturing invitingly.

“Thank you.”

The room was dimly lit: the chandelier was lit but so low that the main light in the room came from the desk’s lamp. The decoration was classic with nothing personal: a whole wall book library behind
the big, old desk; a leather armchair in front of the desk that had been moved a bit because Strange certainly considered his client’s wheelchair.

The psychiatrist walked behind his desk and sat. He glanced around.

“It is the custom office of the Asylum: as an associate I have no interest to change something. Do you like the lights like this or do you want me to make it stronger?”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, it’s alright.”

Strange smiled.

“So we can start. We are here to assess your suitability to be the surrogate father of young mister Grayson.”

Bruce nodded and Dr. Strange knitted his fingers on the desk.

“Mr. Wayne, first of all I would like you to relax. You seem a bit nervous.”

Bruce grinned.

“I’m quite relaxed as for the nervousness I think that most people would be nervous being in the notorious Arkham Asylum even for an evaluation.”

“There is a point in that and I apologize for bringing you here but my private office is not yet ready and my office in the University isn’t ideal for keeping the necessary confidentiality.”

Bruce nodded.

“I see…Well, can we begin?”

Dr. Strange raised an eyebrow.

“Determination…Certainly, a prominent quality of yours that allowed you not only to survive all these years but also to come out victorious over your captor.”

Bruce looked at him calmly.

“I was rescued, Dr. Strange; it wasn’t my victory at all.”

“I see…So how do you feel about your liberation from captivity not being your achievement?”

“Dr. Strange, I’m here for assessment and not analysis.”

Dr. Strange smiled friendly.

“I do remember that, Mr. Wayne. Is there something that troubles you?”

“I don’t see any test…Last year I was assessed for Falcone’s trial and I was administered many tests.”

Dr. Strange smiled confidently.

“I understand. However, Mr. Wayne” he cocked his eyebrows “there is an unwritten law in assessments: the less competent a professional the more tests he/she uses; to cover his/her
insecurities.”

Bruce shook his head.

“He hadn’t seemed incompetent to me.”

“Every professional chooses his own method and mine is quite independent of cold and mechanical tests. I prefer a more direct and personal approach.”

Bruce lolled his head.

“I’d prefer the tests…”

Dr. Strange smiled friendly.

“What is it that makes you feel threatened?”

“I don’t feel threatened, Dr. Strange; I just don’t like this approach.”

“At first; as soon as you loosen up you’ll feel better. Mr. Wayne. I do understand that after the brutal broadcasting of the video of your abuse you have raised all your shields. However, in this office you are quite safe: everything you say it is protected by confidentiality.”

“I see” Bruce said pretending uneasiness.

“I would like you to talk to me about the video that was broadcasted two days ago: you did have a really intense flashback, let us start with your feelings.”

Bruce felt an invisible wall of granite built around him at once; he would have leave that office at once yet he had to stay there and go through that in order to keep Richard’s guardianship.

“I was numb at first and then it was as if ice had covered everything inside me…”

Dr. Strange felt the cold barriers the young man built around him but it was content that he was speaking.

“And the flashback?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“It occurred while I was asleep and then, as you already know, I woke up thinking that I was still in the cabaret. I felt scared and dirty…and I used my wheelchair to get to the shower” of course there was no chance he’d tell Strange that he used his legs.

But the psychiatrist looked at him interested.

“You were in a hallucination but still you used the wheelchair?”

Bruce shrugged.

“It seems that some learnt things overcome the hallucination…”

“Indeed. Please, continue.”

“There’s not much to add: Alfred and Tony found me and took me back to my bed.”

Dr. Strange nodded.
“Alfred is your parents’ butler and as I understand you have a very warm relationship.”

“That’s true.”

“Something like a second father…”

“Alfred is very special to me…”

“Talk to me about the night of your parents’ murder.”

Bruce made his eyes widen.

“What has this to do with my assessment?” he said making his voice tremble a bit.

Dr. Strange raised slightly his eyebrows.

“Everything has to do with that, Mr. Wayne.”

“Falcone lured them there” he inhaled deeply “supposedly to exchange me with the papers that gave him my father’s fortune but eventually they killed them.”

“Please, go back to that night and describe your feelings.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Can we talk about something else?”

Dr. Strange pressed his lips; his eyes were filled with understanding.

“Believe me, Mr. Wayne, it isn’t my intention to torment you. I understand that you care for that child’s welfare and you want to be a real suitable guardian for him. Your recent flashback manifests that you face symptoms of untreated PTSD so if you want the best for your ward you must help me evaluate accurately your condition.”

“I haven’t experienced a flashback for many months.”

Dr. Strange nodded.

“I’m glad to hear that yet we must touch your past, Mr. Wayne in order to stop it from upsetting your present life” Bruce didn’t answer and Dr. Strange opened the first drawer of his desk.

Bruce frowned inside but made his eyes widen seeing the psychiatrist placing on his desk a small vial and a syringe. He acted as if being panicked by the sight but keeping a brave face. Dr. Strange was eyeing him like X-raying.

“This is amitali, a substance that is totally safe and scientifically approved for use with people suffering from extreme anxiety disorders like the Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder. It helps the individual to relax and speak about his/her experiences releasing the tension that intervenes in their life; this substance loosens the boundaries that don’t allow you get rid of all the things that erode you from inside.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No; I won’t accept being injected with that.”

Dr. Strange looked at him with empathy.
“I see that your experience with Dr. Crane’s experimentation has let its marks on you. Dr. Thompkins informed me about the nature of his treatment asking for my professional opinion: your personal doctor and friend trusted me, maybe you should do the same? The substances Dr. Crane used might have distorted your conscious memories: amitali will help us evaluate not only your emotional state but also the damage he had caused.”

Bruce could understand the reason Leslie and Tony had sought his advice few months ago but still didn’t like it. At least, Tony had informed him so Strange’s mentions didn’t find him unprepared.

“I am not Dr. Crane, Mr. Wayne. I understand that your experience with him still influences the way you act in your present life.”

“I think that this goes for everyone not only me: everyone’s experiences influence the way he/she acts.”

Dr. Strange placed his palms on the desk.

“That is true but in some cases it can become a serious obstacle. Mr. Wayne, you understand that if I’m not able to contact the assessment in the proper way I’d have to testify that to the court. And it won’t create the best impressions.”

Bruce frowned.

“This sounded like blackmail: you can’t force me do something I don’t want: what you are talking about is not assessment but treatment and the court appointed you to assess me. I’m sure that a brilliant psychiatrist like you can find another way.”

Dr. Strange smiled.

“Well, how about ending our meeting for today so that you can calm and think about it till tomorrow when we will have our next session.”

Bruce eyed the psychiatrist: he could have denied yet Dick’s well being was more important. He wouldn’t accept being subjected to a psychotropic drug again even if it was scientifically approved. He couldn’t risk losing control and Crane’s previous treatment could complicate the amitali’s effects: in which case Batman’s secret would be compromised and that Bruce couldn’t allow. Yet a blatant refusal would lead to Strange’s negative report in the court. So he should buy some time.

“Thank you, Dr. Strange” he steered his wheelchair towards the door and Strange stood and followed him.

He opened politely and let Bruce come out.

“Please, allow me to come with you till the exit.”

“As you wish.”

“Mr. Wayne, I must remind you once again that our meetings are bound by the patient-doctor confidentiality. You can read my file and you will see that I never had any issue with the morality code of my science. You can trust me, Mr. Wayne. I wish to offer you my services into helping you have a better life. You have suffered enough to have the rest of your life marred by those horrors. You had achieved tremendous things that – I’ll be entirely honest with you – have me impressed. I totally respect and admire you which urge me to assist you in your course through life.”

Bruce raised his eyes to him.
“Thank you, Doctor.”

The older man smiled benevolently and nodded. They had reached the information desk at the building’s foyer.

“George” the psychiatrist addressed an orderly that stood guard in the door leading to the interior “can you please escort Mr. Wayne to his car?”

Bruce shook his head.

“That won’t be needed, thank you.”

“Fine then” Dr. Strange smiled with his benevolent but still odd smile and gave his hand to Bruce who shook it. “Have a nice, uneventful evening, Mr. Wayne.”

“Good evening, Doctor” Bruce answered and moved his wheelchair outside the building and down the ramp that had been added parallel to the old marble stair in the front of the ancient majestic gothic building. Even when he had his back turned moving towards his parked car, Bruce could sense the psychiatrist’s eyes on him.

“Aren’t you afraid of your dear brother?” Joker asked exaggerating his nasal voice.

Loki stood at the rooftop’s ledge on the other side with his back on Joker gazing at the night Gotham. He lolled his head casting a sideways glance at the jester and smiled. Then he turned and walked to him.

“Thor can’t see through the magic I cast on this rooftop exactly as with your safehouse…he might be the god of thunders but I’m better than him in every aspect” he cocked his eyebrows and gestured to himself “isn’t that obvious from my looks?”

Joker lolled his head inspecting him carefully and then began laughing with hysterics pointing his finger at his ally. Loki pissed narrowed his eyes and slowly raised his hand ready to snap his fingers.

That movement was enough for Joker to stop laughing because he definitely wouldn’t want to be subject to Loki’s humor – not that Joker wouldn’t laugh but he didn’t like this petty god’s arrogance. He was panting and weeping imaginary tears.

“I don’t wanna…uuuu… cooooompliment you, Loki but beeeeetter not mention looks, hehe! The bloooond is a hunk.”

Loki twisted his mouth.

“Then you won’t be pissed knowing that he screws your Brucie…” he retorted snidely enjoying the way Joker’s eyebrows frowned. “Looks aren’t in your favor either…”

Joker bound his hands behind the back and made circles around Loki who cocked his eyebrows.

“Bruuuuuucie isn’t like this.”

Loki clapped.

“That’s a spouse faith! Concerning that Brucie was fucking around with Supes…By the way, I’d expect you to at least have killed those who humiliated your…wife but it seems that you’ve lost your touch.”
Joer leaned his head over Loki’s shoulder.

“Doooooon’t worry…Joker has everything under control” he scratched his head “wait! I haaaaate control…”

It was Loki’s turn to laugh.

“You have the control? As with Batman? Weren’t for me you’d be in prison now…”

“Prison isn’t sooooo bad…” suddenly he began giggling and Loki rolled his eyes. “A sedative batarang to my buttcheek – HEHEHEHEHEHAHAAHAHAA! – oh! I aaaaalways knew Bats has humor – HEHEHEHEHEHUHUHUHU!”

Loki shook his head exasperated and all of a sudden Joker’s scars became a zipped fly much to the jester’s amusement.

“That’s what I call useful magic!” Loki exclaimed. “Now you would listen for a change: enough waiting, I want to make my movement soon – I’m bored; I want some fun” he drummed his fingers on Joker’s chest. “Understood?”

Joker began moving his hands mimicking the movements of sign language and Loki blinked bored removing the fly.

“HEHEHEHEHEHEEEEEEE! Wow! Youuuuuu definitely impressed me with that, Lok – I also know some spells for silence buuuuut with blades…UHUHUHUUUU!”

“Understood?” Loki demanded.

Joker lolled his head to the side.

“You doooooo remember that we don’t have a cont----ract?”

“Yes but we have common interests…”

Joker licked his lips.

“Now you’re talking, Lok.”

The melody from ‘Muppet Show’ echoed suddenly and Loki stared at Joker who pulled off his inner pocket his old-fashioned cell that it had his face painted on the back side; the god rolled his eyes.

“Heeeelloooooo, Dr. Harlequin!” the jester exclaimed ignoring Loki’s reaction. “Ooooooooh…” his voice became heavily nasal “that’s veery interesting…”

Loki frowned.

“So0000o Brucie visits our beloo00oved establishment, huh? He could have done that while his husband was there!” he snapped pissed. “We would have our honey moooooon in that idyyyyllic environment… Anyway, thaaaaanks, Harlequin!”

He shoved his cell back to his pocket and lolled his head to the side grinning with his Cheshire smile.

“Thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked Loki.

The god rolled his eyes and snorted.
“I wouldn’t call ‘thinking’ what takes place in that thing you call head…” he commented since monitoring Joker’s mind was really like being swimming in a stormy sea.

“HEHEHE!” he patted Loki’s back. “Gooooooood point…”
Steve opened hesitantly the door of Selina’s apartment; since last night he was feeling that something had changed between them in the wrong way.

After his confrontation with Catwoman he secured Wizze in MCU and returned to Selina’s apartment. Steve knew that she would be there tonight since Bruce had reassured her that he would be alright so she chose to sleep at her apartment.

He had come eager to speak with her; eat and...well, what other things do a couple in love? But the apartment was dark and when he reached her bedroom he found her deep asleep. She was tired both physically and emotionally from everything that happened after that video’s broadcasting so Steve didn’t want to disturb her sleep. He undressed, wore his pajamas, kissed her cheek and lay beside her.

The morning when he woke up she was gone...as if she was avoiding him. So Steve came tonight to her apartment after much thought expecting everything even a changed lock but fortunately his key worked.

Getting inside he was met with darkness...again but as he turned towards the bedroom a cough stopped him. He frowned and instead moved towards the living room that was one with the kitchen. He clenched his fists and set his senses in vigilance to face everything.

“Easy, handsome...” the same sensual voice from last night welcomed him and at the same time the room got lighted.

Steve narrowed his eyes on the sight before him: Catwoman sat on the kitchen island one long shapely leg on the other.

“What are you doing here?” he asked and walked closer.

She stood up, stretched her body and minced to meet him.

“I live here” she said casually in her true voice and Steve’s eyes bulged.

“Selina?”

“You see, darling?” she lolled her head to the side. “You finally saw the light.”

Steve clenched his waist and licked his lips shocked.

“The jewelry thief?”

“Among other things...A girl has needs and in Falcone’s Gotham stealing from his rich friends was an act of resistance and defiance.”

Steve nodded: during Falcone’s reign Gotham’s aristocracy included merely rich guys who collaborated with him. Suddenly, he remembered something else.

“The stolen jewels that were return to the police these last months was your doing?”

She smiled.

“Not much of a challenge but someone had to do it.”
“Bruce knows?”

“I wouldn’t keep it secret from my sweetie…”

It was so many the things Steve had heard about Catwoman that they popped up one after another.

“And you helped Batman bring down Falcone.”

“I wanted to liberate Bruce and my purpose matched the Bats’ so I gave him my allegiance” she said casually cocking her eyebrows.

Steve nodded.

“You didn’t tell me before…”

“I didn’t know then if I could trust you with that…and I like my secrets.”

“And now?” he came closer to her locking eyes with her. “You don’t like your secrets anymore?”

Selina wrapped her arms around his neck bringing her lips close to his.

“I like you more…” she said in a deep sensual voice and captured his lips hungrily; he followed rubbing her leather clad back with logging. “Do you like cats in leather, handsome?”

Steve grabbed her, glued her body to his and Selina wrapped her legs around his hips.

“Let me show you how much…” he twirled her around and sat her at the island’s edge never letting her lips.

His hands fumbled with her suit as Selina grabbed his shirt’s lapels and opened the cloth with an abrupt movement that ripped every button; she pushed the fabric to his arms revealing his perfectly toned torso and moaned appreciatively when Steve pulled down the zip in the middle of her chest freeing her sweaty breasts.

Their bodies were rubbing on each other as Steve trailed sucking her bent backwards neck and she rubbed her groin on his aroused length demanding more, her hands hastily unzipping his jeans.

“I like old-fashioned boys” she said eyeing his blue briefs that revealed his hungry erection and pushed the underwear down to follow his jeans.

“I’m so relieved” he replied rolling her suit off her arms and then down her hips till her hot body was completely naked but for her Catwoman mask.

He slipped his erection into her and she moaned clenching her legs more around his hips.

“I think that this mask will become my fetish…” Steve whispered in her ear beginning to thrust in her.

“Careful, handsome: you don’t want me suspect that you fancy Catwoman more than Selina…”

Steve chuckled but Selina pushed his hips to urge him to continue.

“If you like my mask perhaps you like my whip too?” she slurred. “Now, don’t slack off, soldier!”
Oliver Queen stood before the breathtaking view of Gotham’s skyline through the whole wall window of the Wayne Tower’s board room at the top floor. The fact that it was morning didn’t take anything from the city’s mystery.

Behind him, over the large elliptic glass table the legal departments’ heads of Wayne Enterprises and Queen Consolidate were discussing the latest details of the deals and the contracts that lay before them ready to be signed; all these under Lucius Fox’s vigilant eye. On the contrary, the billion from Star city didn’t seem to care in the least about the deal and that was the truth; his face was thoughtful and his hands behind his back.

“You must like our city very much, Mr. Queen” Lucius interrupted Queen’s reverie having approached quietly. “If I may make a judgement from your prolonged stay in Gotham – this is most flattering for a city with Gotham’s less than stellar fame.”

Queen’s eyes turned to the grinning man and nodded.

“I like Gotham and if my staying contributes in changing that fame I’m satisfied. Mr. Fox, did Mr. Wayne reaffirm his presence at the meeting? I mean, after what happened two days ago with that dreadful video…”

Lucius shook his head.

“Of course he did; otherwise I would have informed you. Both he and I know how important Mr. Wayne’s presence was for the signing of this deal.”

Queen’s face was serious when he nodded yet Lucius didn’t see the satisfaction that certainly the man should have felt.

“I’d expect that Bruce would have chosen this floor to set his office” Queen chose to change the subject “Taking into account his love for the city only the view from the top floor would be enough for him. So it is odd that he chosen the 46th floor for his office.”

Lucius gazed at the city.

“The 46th floor has a nice view as well. Mr. Wayne chose to have the same office his father had” Queen watched intrigued. “Both Thomas and Bruce had in mind something more important than the view: they wanted to be at the heart of their Tower; among their employees and not on top of them.”

Queen cocked his eyebrows impressed and pursed his lips.

“Interesting…”

The discreet sound of the wheelchair was enough for Queen to turn at the open door. Bruce greeted Mr. Collins and his colleague, Tommy Merlin and moved towards Lucius and Oliver who walked to meet him.

Oliver hastened to give his hand to Bruce for a shake.

“I’m glad to see you again, Bruce” he said stilling his gaze in Bruce’s eyes.

“The same, Mr. Queen” Bruce replied politely but detached shaking his hand and Queen pressed his lips.

“We could have postponed the sign of the deal” the older man continued. “After the recent events I’d understand.”
Bruce smiled.

“I can’t see the reason…As I think you already know I continue my activities normally after the recent events so why postponing this one?”

“Unlike the rest of your obligations, after all, I’d like you to not consider me another obligation; I could have waited…” Bruce felt ‘for an eternity’ hovering.

Bruce answered with a serious expression.

“I’m fine” he looked up at his loyal scientist “Lucius, how are you?”

Lucius twitched his eyebrows and grinned.

“Fine, Mr. Wayne” he gestured to the table “we can start.”

Bruce was listening carefully to both lawyers explaining the details of the deal but his attention was on Queen as discreetly as possible.

In the end, Mr. Collins laid the contract in front of Queen while Mr. Merlin did the same with the second copy of the contract for Bruce who perused one last time the document under Queen’s amused smile.

“So careful! I assure you, Bruce: I would never even think to fool you. And as a proof I sign without further reading…”

Bruce smiled and in Queen’s eyes he discerned a sparkle of pleasure.

“It is not a matter of mistrust…I just have to justify my role as Wayne Enterprises’ President…”

Oliver chuckled shaking his head and pulled off of the inner pocket of his jacket an ancient and priceless looking golden pen. He cast a pointed glance at Bruce cocking an eyebrow and moved to sign. Using his left hand: Bruce’s eyes fixed on the ease with which Queen used his left hand to write. Activity which prior to the shipwreck Queen did only with his right hand.

Suddenly, Queen coughed and lifted his eyes to meet Bruce’s glance. He smiled uncomfortably and moved the pen to his right hand.

“Sometimes after the shipwreck I switch hands unconsciously…I had injured my right hand in the island and for some time I was using mainly the left yet still my right hand is my good hand.”

Bruce grinned and nodded.

“As someone who spent six years with his good hand destroyed I certainly understand you; my right hand never recovered fully so my left hand does most of the complex work.”

Queen seemed relieved but Bruce noticed his lawyer’s odd look and kept watching the man while signing the same papers Queen just did.

After the signing, the details and the prospects of the cooperation were put in discussion at which point Mr. Collins found the opportunity to take Bruce from the table.

“How was your first session with Dr. Strange?”

Bruce shrugged.
“I can’t answer that with certainty but I’ll meet him again today.”

“Was there anything that made you feel uncomfortable?” the experienced lawyer said eyeing carefully his employer. “If that’s the case I want you to remember that we can always ask for a different psychiatrist. You have that right, Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce grinned and nodded.

“Thank you, Mr. Collins; I’ll remember that.”

A small reception was prepared to celebrate the collaboration of the two companies in the reception hall of the Tower and Lucius suggested that it was time to go there which was gladly accepted since everything concerning the deal was settled.

Yet Bruce remained in the room bringing his wheelchair in front of the whole wall window mesmerized from the breathtaking view it offered. He enjoyed the loneliness yet soon his peace was disrupted when he heard footsteps which he knew that belonged to Oliver Queen or…The Arrow. Bruce didn’t intend to show to him that he was aware of his secret identity because there were more about the man that needed to be deciphered. Besides, the Arrow knew Bruce’s secret identity too and he wanted to learn how.

He felt his insides clench when the man stood beside him.

“Beautiful view” Queen said.

“For me it is…”

Queen looked straight in Bruce’s eyes.

“I’m honestly sorry about what they did to you…”

Bruce frowned.

“Meaning?”

“The broadcasting of that video; and what Falcone did to you.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“You realize now that my darkness has nothing to do with yours?” he smiled. “You still insist that you understand me? Because it is quite obvious that we don’t share anything.”

Queen’s face became dead serious and his green eyes gave the impression of slowly burning fires.

“On the contrary, I feel closer to you now…Those smugglers in that island almost killed me and if Princess Diana hadn’t intervened I would be dead” Bruce shook his head hearing about the supposed Amazon. “However, you’re right; my experiences weren’t anything like yours yet your pain is mine, too. The hours that passed since that video was shown I was in turmoil: I wanted to run to you; to express my feelings; to offer everything I could offer…yet” he pressed his lips “I knew that you’d feel me like an intruder; that my presence would be pressing and disturbing for you. And that you’d feel better only with your loved ones…”

Bruce was watching him with interest.

“I wish I was one of these fortunate people…” Queen added in a husky voice.
Bruce turned his head away to the view.

“They are not fortunate” he retorted with conviction.

Queen squatted in front of him and held his shoulders.

“Bruce” the younger man turned his head and looked at him with a deep frowning. “If only you were willing to give me a chance to become one of your friends…” his eyes were filled with warmth, with pure pleading and Bruce felt uncomfortable as goose bumps ran his spine.

“Are you not coming?”

Lucius’ cheerful voice broke the tension; the Afro-American stood at the door and Bruce looked at him grateful for his intervention. The scientist frowned the tiniest bit but didn’t express his disapproval for Queen’s intimacy in favor of diplomacy and smiled.

“Shall we? Our attorneys are waiting” Bruce said.

Queen stood, letting Bruce’s shoulders too reluctantly and walked towards the exit nodding to Lucius.

“Mr. Queen is very fortunate to have such a loyal associate as you” Bruce said to Mr. Merlin steering his wheelchair to the corner where the man stood detached from the guests in the reception hall.

Lucius, Collins and Queen were avidly talking thus Bruce found the opportunity to ‘interrogate’ the man.

“I’m with Queen family many years. I owe them much.”

“You were one of the few who didn’t cooperate to the illegal acquiring of the Consolidate, much as Lucius did for me.”

The man smiled.

“I couldn’t betray them: I worked decades for Richard and I know Oliver since he was born.”

Bruce hoped to that.

“I imagine your delight when he appeared in that event…seeing again someone you considered dead.”

Tommy shook his head thoughtful.

“Yes, certainly…yet…”

“Yet?”

The man cast a glance at his employer.

“What happened those months changed Oliver” he said.

Bruce nodded.

“Such experiences do have a great impact on people.”
Merlin took a sip from his red wine looking at Queen.

“Oliver was… Oliver was always an open character, a playful youth, a playboy; very sociable… now he is cold and detached even when he discusses with me or his other associates. I can’t explain it: it’s in his eyes, in his demeanor.”

“The use of his left hand…”

“Oliver is right handed: even after he returned he uses his right hand all the time – today was the first time I saw him using his left hand.”

“Once we meet one of his old classmates and he said that Mr. Queen was a great athlete in every sport.”

Merlin smiled.

“Except than archery and that was” he chuckled “a blow because in childhood Robin Hood was his favorite hero.”

Bruce smiled too.

“Does he ever speak about his experiences in the island?”

Tommy shook his head.

“Mr. Wayne, if Oliver was to speak to someone about that this would be you. Since he came back Oliver spends most of his time with you or around you… In Gotham… Oliver he always said that he would never set foot in Gotham no matter what.”

Bruce saw Queen approaching with a glass in his head and his usual smugness back; he patted his lawyer’s back.

“What are you two talking about? Tommy, you shouldn’t monopolize Bruce.”

The lawyer shook his head.

“We were discussing about the new prospects that our cooperation opens” Bruce said to save the lawyer from the uneasiness and Queen smirked.

“So the culprit can be anyone” Bullock gritted his teeth.

Jim was pacing at his office in MCU building; he had arrived back in Gotham only a couple of hours ago and was briefing his trustees about Pielser’s interrogation.

He cocked his eyebrows.

“I’m afraid so… The bastard advertised in the proper sites that he had in his hands the video with young Wayne being molested and a bid competition began” he huffed eyeing his partners’ disgusted looks. “The higher bidder took the video and of course the whole transaction evolved anonymously through Pielser’s lawyer who was killed in a car accident a month ago” he shook his head.

Montoya waved her hand.

“If the bidder had kept the video for himself it could be anyone yet the bidder publicized the video
clearly wanting to humiliate and break Mr. Wayne.”

Bullock shook his head chuckling.

“I’d give anythin’ to see his shit face now that Wayne showed that he wasn’t broken by this and he failed! So we’re lookin’ for someone who hates Wayne.” He pursed his lips. “Luthor is one candidate: he had cooperated with the League to capture Wayne for which he ended up in the joint an’ then Wayne managed to buy his Labs and a nice percentage of his company. Recently they had a face off in LexCorp annual meeting.”

Montoya nodded but Gordon shook his head.

“Luthor was in jail the time the auction for the video took place; also, his accounts were frozen all this time so although I’m sure he enjoyed what happened he wasn’t the culprit.”

“Then we have Dagget: he had expressed his hatred for Wayne in several occasions and he was Luthor’s ally to bring down Wayne” Montoya pointed.

“But he is also in the joint” Bullock said standing from the chair he was slumped and looked out of the small window.

“Earl is also in jail” Montoya continued counting Bruce’s enemies.

Jim rubbed his chin with his hand.

“Could be some member of the League of Shadows who escaped arrest – maybe that Talia Al Ghul herself: we never had something concrete about her death. The League knew much about Falcone, so they could know about that video as well and when Pielser came out to find a buyer they rushed for the chance.”

Both his trustees looked at him with flashing eyes. Bullock nodded.

“That actually makes sense, chief.”

Montoya detached from the desk she was leaning.

“Looking for hair in a stuck…that group was hard to find when in power not now that they are injured and hide…”

Jim pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows.

“That’s true…unfortunately” he admitted.

Bullock clenched his waist.

“The hackin’ of the signal brings in mind Joker” he lolled his head. “Why not him?”

“It’s not his style: he’d have made a show and he wanted to kill the hacker” Jim answered.

Montoya shook her head.

“He could have done that to fool us…”

“He doesn’t give a damn about us” Jim remarked. “No, it must be someone else…”

Suddenly, a ruckus came from outside and the Commissioner frowned. Without a second thought he
stormed outside, his lieutenants following suit.

Jim closed his eyes exasperated and relieved from the sight.

Tony Stark impeccably dressed in a tailored expensive gray suit beamed to the police officers – mostly female – that had gathered around him. Jim ran his hands to his hair seeing Ironman signing autographs to his officers.

Tony realized Jim’s presence and yanked his head.

“Hi, Jim! You’re the man I was looking for.”

Jim shook his head and cast a glare to the clustered officers who reluctantly dispersed; Tony marched towards Jim and his lieutenants smiling and Jim noticed that he was caring a red and gold briefcase.

“How come an’ ya haven’t printed Ironman on it?” Bullock asked jeeringly cocking an eyebrow.

Tony smirked and patted him on the shoulder causing a glare from the rough lieutenant who hadn’t forgotten the incident in Wayne Manor.

“Brilliant idea, lieutenant!”

Jim met the billionaire’s eyes with seriousness.

“I’m glad to see you found your mood, Mr. Stark.”

Tony lolled his head on the side.

“C’mon, Jim: I told you to call me ‘Tony’; as for the incident in the Manor, I was distraught – no hard feelings, huh?” he winked grinning friendly.

He offered his hand and Jim took it.

“I didn’t know that I had so many fans in Gotham MCU!” Tony said smugly casting playful glances to the female officers who were staring at them.

“Our local attraction prefers rooftops and doesn’t give live performances…” Bullock growled snidely and Montoya chuckled.

Tony grinned.

“I like cops with sense of humor…”

“Who’s joking?” Montoya asked shrugging.

“Jim, can we speak in private?” Tony asked passing abruptly from lightness to seriousness.

Jim nodded.

“Of course, Tony” he gestured invitingly “please come in” he closed the door behind Tony dismissing his trustees with a glance. “Have a seat.”

Tony sat at the cheap armchair elegantly and crossed his legs.

“I want to talk to you about something important.”

Jim sat behind his desk and nodded.
“Of course. I’m listening.”

Tony touched his thumb on an invisible receptor in the corner of the briefcase which opened with a hissing sound. He put the briefcase on the desk pushing it slowly towards Jim.

The police commissioner began immediately examining the documents inside: old police reports, listings of accounts, reports about companies; printed pieces of old newspapers. He frowned and looked up at Tony’s sparkling black eyes which were estimating Gordon’s reaction.

“John Grayson’s case…” Jim said shaking his head.

“Exactly” Tony answered.

“The case had been closed rather fast attributing the death to accident – there were suspicions about sabotage but they were never proved” Jim coughed. “Police those days was deep in corruption, carelessness and laziness.”

Tony leaned to the desk and took from the bottom of the briefcase a forensic case containing a bolt.

“I think we have strong evidence here.”

Jim took it and studied it.

“Built & Fit” he read the small inscription on the metal.

“The company that was appointed with the gym’s renovation.”

“There are signs of tampering” Jim murmured examining the bolt. “Where did you find that bolt, Tony?”

Tony leaned back to the armchair.

“I didn’t. Bruce did” and seeing Jim’s frowning he smiled. “You know that Bruce is Dick Grayson’s guardian” Jim nodded. “Well, one of Dick’s trainers is Trevor. Breizic who was also John Grayson’s trainer the time he was killed. Breizic had found that bolt then but police didn’t even examine it; however the man kept it all this time and gave it to Bruce.”

“And he to you.”

Tony grinned.

“That’s right. Bruce confided in me Breizic’s concerns about his former athlete’s death not being an accident and showed me the bolt which I examined. Also, Ms. Turner before disappearing had also expressed the same concerns. So I decided to make some digging.”

Jim held two different papers with reports about companies.

“Agillex …I remember that company: many years ago a major scandal had shaken the Falcone reigned Gotham when that company bankrupted and people lost their savings. The company was a meteor; appeared suddenly, its shares went rocket high making people invest frantically and then equally suddenly its shares went to the bottom leading the company to bankruptcy and investors to despair.”

Tony nodded: Bruce had tutored him perfectly.

“John Grayson had invested too in that company and lost all his savings: according to Ms. Turner
and Breizic he did that following his trainer’s suggestions: then his trainer was his cousin, Tony Zucco. However if you look at Tony Zucco’s accounts he didn’t lose any money.”

Jim looked at Tony over his glasses.

“Mr. Zucco isn’t the one who claims Richard Grayson’s guardianship from Mr. Wayne?”

Tony smiled and nodded.

“You’re well informed, Jim.”

“This is my job” he looked at the second paper. “This is about Build & Fit the company that made the renovation a couple of days before Grayson’s accident” Tony nodded. “Here it is clear that Agiltex and Build & Fit are the same company; even the off shore account where their revenue ended up is the same.” he took another paper and his eyebrows knitted. “The off shore account belongs to…” He met Tony’s eyes “Tony Zucco?”

“That’s right. He made the fraud with Agiltex and after a few years he created a new company – hiding in the shadows again. First, he convinced John Grayson to invest all his money to Agiltex – his company - and then committed fraud to get his money. John didn’t know that Zucco not only didn’t lose his money but also orchestrated all this to get his money, so their close relationship continued. However, when Grayson’s sport’s career declined there was tension and then the doping scandal made things worse between them: Grayson took back Breizic as his trainer and pushed away Zucco. Then all of a sudden a new company appears which was appointed the renovation of the gym without any competition. Just a day after that John Grayson died falling from the parallel bars.”

He tapped the case with the tampered bolt.

“The organ was sabotaged. Build & Fit was made in one night with one purpose: John Grayson’s death. After that the company disappeared as sudden as it appeared.”

“You say that Zucco orchestrated Grayson’s death?”

“Mr. Breizic and Ms. Turner had the same suspicions but they didn’t have enough evidence. And…” he searched through the paperwork and found the picture of a woman “Rebecca Irwin; she was the head technician of the renovation.”

Jim nodded.

“Yes, she was questioned about the accident.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“Now she is Zucco’s wife.”

Jim met his eyes interested.

“Quite the coincidence, don’t you think?” Tony asked winking. “Not to mention that Sandrey Felix, the supposed president of Agiltex was killed in a car accident two years after the big fraud.”

Jim nodded.

“This case certainly needs to be reopened…”

Tony wanted to smile broadly yet looked at Jim serious.
“I’d like to ask you to handle the matter discreetly: I wouldn’t want this to create the impression that was a scheme for influencing the judge’s decision about Richard’s guardianship.”

“You can rest assured, Tony; nothing will be announced before we make our investigation in collaboration with DA’s office.”

“Thank you, Jim. From the moment I told Bruce about my findings he is worried about his ward: he is afraid that Zucco might want Dick’s guardianship to harm the boy, you see…” Tony pressed his lips “between you and me Bruce bought an apartment in the boy’s name and has established a fund with a very tempting amount of money so his fear is that the money brought Zucco back in Gotham and he wants the boy only to get the money.”

Jim rubbed his chin thoughtful.

“We won’t let anything bad happen to the boy: we’ll reopen the case, review the facts, make inquiries and press charges to those responsible. Secretly and as fast as possible. He can be responsible for Ms. Turner’s disappearance too: he is the only relative so he believed that when the grandmother would be gone he would take the boy: he didn’t expect that Ms. Turner had given the guardianship to Mr. Wayne.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“I can’t say that…everything is possible.”

Jim pursed his lips and eyed Tony.

“The DA and I went to Washington’s federal prison: we spoke with Pielser. He sold the video a couple of months ago: he organized an auction...”

Tony’s eyebrows knitted: Bruce’s torture had become an auction item!

“To whom?” he asked grimly.

“The transaction took place in complete secrecy.”

“Damn!” Tony slapped his hand to the desk.

“We’ll find him, Tony and maybe with your impressive detective skills you’ll help us.”

“I’m afraid that from now on I’d be devoted to preparing Bruce’s surgery and between that and the S.H.I.E.L.D. my time will be very limited. Yet I’ll do my best and I’ll be happy to offer you any assistance.”

“Mission accomplished!” Tony said as soon as he entered the study at the Manor’s first floor.

Bruce behind the classic desk was working in his Cosmos and Selina was also there leaning over Bruce’s shoulder obviously interested about what her friend was searching.

“By the way, I’m sexier than Tom Cruise, don’t you think?” Tony chirped. “And way younger…”

Bruce raised his eyes from the tablet and smiled while Selina rolled her eyes.

“Certainly; I think he must be very jealous of you…” the young woman said slyly.
“Poor thing!” he made a spectacular dive to the armchair before the desk and jerked startled as Hero climbed rapidly on his lap having left his perch before the fireplace. “And here’s the biggest proof” he glanced at the kitten. “By the way, fur buddy: why all this sudden show of affection?”

“What did Jim say?” Bruce asked.

“That the evidence is sufficient to reopen the case and possibly press charges – I also made clear that nothing should be made known during the trial.”

Bruce nodded and made to return to his work.

“I love to be praised…” Tony said.

“No, kidding…” Selina snidely remarked and Tony winked playfully.

“…yet I don’t like getting credit for your work, Bruce.”

“Zucco in jail will be the best credit for me” he answered and began scrolling the contents in his screen.

“Jim said that Pielser had organized an auction for that video and sold it to the highest bidder.”

Bruce didn’t react but his eyes went blank for a second.

“However Pielser didn’t know the buyer’s identity and his lawyer was killed in a car accident a month ago. Don’t you think that we could use your brilliant detective skills in that too?”

The younger man lifted his head.

“There are things more urgent than that” and before Tony retorting something “yesterday when I was in Arkham I met Quinzel: I’m sure that she will inform Joker. And given that today I will go again to Strange Joker will make his move.”

Tony sat straight in the armchair.

“You won’t go: let me and the police handle that.”

Selina sat with an elegant move on Bruce’s desk.

“Count also Catwoman…” she met Bruce’s eyes.

Tony lolled his head and pursed his lips thoughtful.

“I don’t know…wouldn’t this make Steve suspicious that his darling is Catwoman with Catwoman being constantly involved in things concerning Bruce? He is old-fashioned, you know, but he isn’t stupid.”

Selina took a pen and tapped her lips.

“As I told Bruce earlier…I revealed everything to Steve…”

Tony widened his eyes awed.

“And?”

Selina smirked slyly.
“A lady doesn’t speak about things happening in her bedroom…or living room…or kitchen” Tony’s eyes bulged and Bruce chuckled. “It seems that Captain America has a soft spot for cats dressed in leather…”

Tony shook his head and pouted.

“I don’t blame him…”

“Sorry for spoiling your chat” Bruce said “but I must go to Arkham Asylum.”

Tony nodded frustrated.

“Yadda, Yadda, Yadda…because Batman has to make his appearance, huh? Or else it’d be suspicious.”

“Right.”

Tony huffed.

“Forget it, pal! There’s no chance you’d wear that armor and face that madman!”

Bruce smiled cunningly and Tony frowned.

“I won’t wear the armor – you will.”

Tony jerked up and Hero jumped from his lap.

“But I still have to go there: first because Joker might not appear if he doesn’t see me there.”

“He has already many of his goons inside Arkham and given that Quinzel is his ally they will be ready to take action” Selina commented “whether you go there or not”.

Bruce nodded.

“They are inside but Joker isn’t so if I don’t appear Joker won’t show up or order them to attack. And second, it is crucial that Batman and Bruce Wayne are both there – I mean, separately – so that Joker gets convinced that we’re not the same person.”

“Arresting him is not enough, huh?” Tony asked glum.

Bruce shook his head.

“No; I want him to stop believing that Wayne and Batman is the same person.”

Selina lolled her head on the side.

“Joker might be a nutcase but he is clever: he’ll notice the difference – he did when…” she halted abruptly hesitant to utter Superman’s name but Bruce prompted her to continue with his eyes “Superman pretended to be Batman.”

“Tony will remain in the shadows.”

“What about the patients and the doctors?” Selina asked. “Won’t be in danger?”

“The Asylum’s newest security addition locks up the patients’ and doctors’ areas as soon as a breach is detected.”
Tony stood up: above all, Bruce’s safety was what bothered him.

“It’s very dangerous, littl’ guy: having to act through the shadows avoiding much impact with Joker. My hands will be tied and he might find the chance to hurt you.”

Bruce smiled.

“You will stun him in the first chance, Tony.”

However Tony shook his head not persuaded at all.

“That man is completely unpredictable – I don’t want you there, Bruce” the billionaire from Malibu said exasperated.

“Tony…”

“Don’t ‘Tony’ me, Bruce! Enough with you getting yourself in danger” Bruce closed his eyes.

“Lucius and I have everything ready for your operation but you seem to care for everything else than your operation.”

“That’s not true, Tony!”

Tony slapped his hands on the desk and leaned to look in Bruce’s eyes.

“You should be resting, gathering your strength, relaxing but instead you work harder than ever – not relaxing at all, barely sleeping...Do you realize that we talk about one of the most perplexed operations ever? You will be in that table more than ten hours and your body is already spent…” he stopped to catch his breath.

“The fact I work as I used to, doesn’t mean that I’m not prepared for the operation: I follow the instructions Leslie and Matt give me” Tony rolled his eyes in a ‘yeah, sure…” expression “I never cancelled my physiotherapy sessions; I take my medication…I’m meditating…” Bruce locked eyes with his friend “I won’t die on that table, Tony…” he said with conviction.

But Tony froze: the mention of ‘table’ brought like a flash in his mind the image of that skinny boy convulsing from pain on Falcone’s table with a huge dildo ripping his insides; the blood dripping from the crying boy’s body.

Bruce noticed his friend’s sudden change and Selina as well.

“Tony, are you alr…” the deep worry in Bruce’s voice shook up Tony who smiled.

“Of course you won’t die…” he said. “Mmm…what you two were looking at that tablet? By the way, you know that the Cosmos gadget has broken Starcell’s record in pre-orders?”

Bruce nodded.

“Lucius told me.”

“Don’t worry though: I’m gonna retaliate…Now since that is settled: what were you looking there?” Tony pointed with his eyes at the tablet hasty.

Bruce turned the tablet for Tony to see the screen. The screen was covered with squares showing old newspaper articles.

“Old fraud cases…” Tony said. “What are you looking for?”
You had told me that the fake Diana’s apartment was filled with pots with plants and flowers; also, that there was a beautiful, heavy perfume in the air. Vivian in her room at Dolcetto was also swarmed with plants and there was a heavy intoxicating perfume. So taking into account that Vivian isn’t in any public record I thought to look for any mention of peculiar plants and perfumes – maybe the plants and the perfume lead us to the real person since they seem to be very important to her.”

“And?”
Bruce lifted his eyebrows.

“There are too many results about plants and perfumes that are irrelevant so I programmed the processor to cross these results with police reports but it will take time.”

“Why is so important to find who she really is?” Selina asked. “We know she isn’t the Amazon Princess – that should be enough.”

“I want to know with whom I’m dealing.”
Tony crossed his arms over the chest.

“And having proofs of who she really is you’ll persuade easier Superman.”
Bruce’s face became grim.

“I don’t think that he will believe me even if I present him with proofs.”
Selina could discern a deep sadness in Bruce though his voice was cool and indifferent.

“How did it go with Queen?” Tony changed the subject.

“We signed the deal…”

“You seem troubled” Tony remarked.

“The man is complicated; there are things that…”
The polite knock on the door interrupted him.

“Master Bruce, Mr. Leench is here; he is waiting for you at the gym.”

“Thank you, Alfred” he turned to his friends. “I have to go, make my physiotherapy and then I have to get ready for my session with Strange.”

Tony was ready to start an argument but he swallowed it as Bruce moved his chair out of his desk.

“I’ll see you later” he grinned before closing the door.

Tony sighed and sank into the leather armchair running his hands to his hair.

“I’m not convinced you’re going to let him go to Arkham…” Selina said standing from the desk and walking to him.

“I won’t.”

Selina chuckled.

“You know how stubborn our friend is…”
“There’s no way I let him expose himself like this to Joker: I won’t risk him getting injured or worse. And I’m more stubborn than him.”

Selina frowned.

“What are you going to do?”

Tony slapped his face with both palms.

“Why you didn’t kill Joker that night with Wizze?”

Her face became grim.

“Steve told you…” Tony nodded. “My mind was on getting Wizze: he was my primary target – it was a mistake I should have killed them both!” Tony saw the murderous shine of her eyes – she shook her head. “It’s never too late for that…”

“Bruce knows about Joker, Wizze etc, etc?” he waved his hand.

“NO, you know how he feels about killings…” she cocked her eyebrows. “Especially when one of us does that…Steve had taken that bastard Wizze at MCU but at some point he left: he probably got the Hell out of Gotham – he is more scared of me and Joker than the police.”

“We must end with Joker today: I’m sick of this nutcase threatening Bruce.”

Selina nodded.

“I’ll be there too. If he makes a move we’ll get him.”

Dick had just worn his training uniform and was walking to meet Jeffrey at the main hall to start practice when Jason bumped on him at the corridor.

“What’s yar step, man!” the younger boy exclaimed before seeing that he had collided with his friend. “Oh! Dick, I was looking for ya.”

Dick lolled his head; his mood was still bad.

“What do you want, Jay?” he snapped.

“Why ya had yar cell closed all day?”

Dick closed his eyes.

“Jay, say what ya want: I don’t have time - Jeff is waiting.”

Jason rolled his eyes.

“Okay” he glanced suspiciously at an athlete who passed them and dragged Dick to a corner. “Last night I was out…”

“What you snatched?” Dick asked bored.

Jason shook his head.

“Scratch that…I was strollin’ the Narrows an’ I heard somethin’ really interestin’…”
“Some new curseword?” Dick snorted and Jason growled impatient.

“I heard two guys speakin’: they were talkin’ ‘bout their boss an’ his fixation with Wayne” he met Dick’s eyes widening his with emphasis.

Dick nodded.

“You think they were Joker’s goons?”

Jayson blinked frustrated.

“The way they’re talkin’ showed they weren’t the cleverest blocks in town; an’ at some point they even threw up Joker’s name.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

Jason sighed exasperated.

“Do ya know me to like cops? Not to mention that I’d be in deep shit myself.”

“Well?”

“They said that Joker will attack Arkham today when Wayne will go there to his shrink.”

Dick’s eyes bulged.

“That’s in afternoon: yesterday Wayne went there at this time. Why didn’t you inform Wayne?”

Jason shook his head impatient snorting.

“That’s the reason I was lookin’ for ya all time, ya dork! I thought that if ya informed him ‘bout that ya’ll redeem yarself an’ feel better.”

“And how on earth I’ll explain that I know that?”

“Ya’ll say that ya heard them.”

Jason frowned seeing his friend’s eyes blank.

“Well, open yar fuckin’ phone an’ call ‘im!”

But Dick stormed back in the locker room and began taking off hastily his gym uniform to wear his normal clothes. Jason followed him jerking his hands exasperated.

“What are ya doin’?”

“I have a better idea…”

Jason shook his head.

“I’m not gonna like what I’ll hear…”

Dick met his friend’s eyes standing up.

“I’m gonna kill the asshole today!”

Jason widened his eyes.
“Are ya nuts? We’re talkin’ ‘bout Joker!” he exclaimed lowering his voice as he mentioned the name.

“If you’re afraid stay here!”

“Jason Todd isn’t afraid of anyone – much more a fuckin’ clown!”

Dick smiled and cocked an eyebrow.

“Let’s go then! We’ll be there when Joker makes his move.”

Alfred caught up with Bruce as the young man was discussing with Tony in the salon. Bruce was already dressed for his session with Dr. Strange and Tony was trying to talk him out of this even now having Hero rubbing at his feet.

“Do you think your fur buddy is in heat and takes me for a cat?” Tony reinforced his persuasion efforts recruiting his humor to add some charm.

Bruce chuckled.

“He is still too young for that and you don’t look like a cat…”

“More like a mutt…” he changed the playful tone for seriousness “listen, Bruce…”

“Master Bruce, Mr. Laurie called: Master Richard isn’t at the gym…”

“What?” Bruce clenched the armrests.

Tony yanked his head backwards.

“Not again! We have so many things going on and the brat staged another show to undermine your guardianship! This time I’m gonna spank the little bastard!”

Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose feeling the throb of a starting migraine and took his Cosmos out of the pocket of his jacket.

“I’m calling Jim – we must find Richard” he looked at Tony calm.

Tony shook his head with his friend’s patience but then compassion won and he placed his hand on Bruce’s shoulder.

“Are you alright, littl’ guy?”

Bruce nodded and brushed the screen calling Jim but then he noticed Tony’s forearm glowing. His friend had activated the forearm part of his Ironman armor to be constantly updated by Jarvis that had gained access to Arkham’s surveillance cameras. Bruce ended the call before been made and watched Tony speaking to his AI.

“Master Anthony, Joker is already inside Arkham Asylum.”

The AI projected a hologram in the salon transmitting footage from the Asylum’s interior showing the jester hopping at the corridor his scars forming a wide Cheshire smile.

Tony smiled to Bruce.
“Now you don’t have to go there to lure Joker” Bruce opened his mouth to retort but Tony raised his palm cutting him “I’m not hearing anything: I’m going downstairs to dress up.”

Bruce’s phone rang with Selina’s melody. Bruce frowned and Tony gulped: this wasn’t good.

“Sel, what you got?”

“An’ how are ya gonna kill Joker, big guy?” Jason jeered his friend as he stopped his bike to an alley behind the imposing gothic building. “With telepathy?”

Dick frowned but shook his head.

“I’ll think something…”

Jason rolled his eyes and snorted. He leaned and opened a leather case at his bike’s side.

“What’s this?!” Dick asked gaping and Jason sniggered.

“A fuckin’ lollipop! Isn’t obvious, hit man?” he brushed the G43 handgun.

“You have a gun?”

“’Course, man – I’m strollin’ Gotham’s mean streets, I need some reassurance.”

Dick snatched the gun and dismounted.

“Let’s go!”

“How are we gonna pass the guards?” Jason asked hooking their helmets to the bike’s handles.

“We’ll climb the fence from the back and we’ll see…”

Jason rolled his eyes.

“Great plan, man…” he stared at the imposing building that under the dim lights of the twilight looked like taken from a horror movie; a shiver ran his spine. “This place is spooky, man…it’s like those haunted houses in the movies.”

Dick rolled his eyes exasperated trying to control the same fear that had spurt in him seeing the legendary building: every Gothamite kid had been raised with stories for ghosts strolling at the Manor’s corridors.

“Stop that!”

“What if the fence is wired?” Jason asked following his friend bent. “At least, is darkening and they won’t see us…”

Jason’s fears evaporated when the two boys reached the fence; the back entrance to the yard was open with no guards. Dick turned to him smiling.

“You see? You don’t need to worry: we’re lucky!”

Jason shook his head.

“Bullshit! We’re not lucky: Joker is already inside, man!”
Dick’s eyes flashed determined and the boy pressed his lips.

“Let’s go!”

“Bruce, Dick and Jason are here!” Selina’s voice was calm but a flickering of worry blended with rage was audible.

Tony saw panicked Bruce’s face paling; Alfred came closer to his master worried.

“Master Bruce?”

Bruce rubbed his temple.

“Jarvis, give me image from inside. Every available camera!”

Tony wished he had told Jarvis to not obey any order Bruce gave him but it was too late.

Image from different spots of the building began appearing one after another.

“Stop!” Bruce ordered.

Two small figures walked in the brightly lit corridor that Bruce recognized as the corridor leading from the back entrance to the lounge room. Suddenly, Jason registered the camera and elbowed his friend pointing there with his eyes. The two boys hurried to move to a sideways corridor out of the camera’s range but Bruce spotted what Dick held: a small handgun.

“Fuck!” Bruce shouted so much unlike himself and Tony narrowed his eyes seeing sweat drops on his friend’s face. “He is going after Joker!”

“Stupid brats!” Tony exploded because now Bruce wasn’t going to stay behind.

And to confirm his fears Bruce steered his chair towards the lift but Tony stood determined before him blocking his way. Bruce frowned.

“Tony, get out of my way! I’m going there!”

“Not this time, buddy!” Tony’s eyes flashed colliding with his friends’ in a staring battle. “You’re in no condition for that!”

Alfred was watching holding his breath, even Hero stood there confused.

And then Bruce grabbed the armrests and stood on his feet towering his friend.

“I’m perfectly able, Tony.”

“Bruce, stop that nonsense: you know that you shouldn’t force your legs to do that! And this time you’ll stay here!”

Bruce’s eyes were completely still and his breath a growl. The determined flash in his irises frightened Alfred as much as seeing his young master exerting himself standing.

“The boys are in danger; I’m going there and you can’t stop me!”

Alfred sensed that something really bad was going to happen – Master Anthony’s eyes were icy.
“Master Bruce, Master Anthony…” he tried to intervene but nobody listened to him.

Tony knew that it was now or never: he wasn’t going to let anyone ever again tie his friend and abuse him. He yanked his head.

“I can, Bruce…”

Bruce barely managed to narrow his eyes in realization of what his friend had done before collapsing in Tony’s waiting arms –. Tony hugged his friend carefully.

Alfred rushed to him upset for what Tony had done.

“Master Anthony!” he began feeling Bruce.

“He is fine, Alfred, just sleeping. I used Ironman’s stunning beam” he showed him the forearm part of Ironman’s armor that was returning to its previous state after shooting the stunning beam.

However, Alfred’s eyes remained widened and Tony inhaled determined and lifted his friend’s unconscious body in bridal style.

“He saved my life, Alfred and he is my best friend: I’d rather face his wrath than his death, Alfred” he activated his Ironman boots and flew to the upper floor.

He wouldn’t waste time explaining his decision to Alfred; the butler would have done the same if he could.

Tony opened the door to the Master’s bedroom and placed his friend tenderly on the mattress. He stared at his sleeping face and caressed his cheek.

“It’s for your own good, littl’ guy…” he placed a soft kiss on his forehead as Alfred and Hero rushed inside.

Alfred reached the bed and Hero climbed the bed and cuddled on Bruce’s chest as Tony turned to leave.

“I’m gonna end this Joker business once and for all” he said placing his hand on the butler’s shoulder.

Alfred met his gaze and Tony’s stubbornness was shaken but the billionaire choked any doubt.

“He’ll be safe here, Alfred.”

Dick was leading the way through the empty corridors of Arkham; both boys were walking hunched in order to not be caught by the cameras.

“Don’t ya think that somethin’ very bizarre takes place her’?”

Dick turned his head to him.

“We’re in Arkham Asylum: what did you expect?”

“I mean, it’s like there’s no life in her’, man…No guards, no doctors, no loonies, not even goons… It’s creepy, man…”
Dick chuckled to hide his own fear.

“Maybe we’ll see a ghost in the next corner…” he snorted.

Suddenly, both boys stopped on their heels.

“Voices…” Dick whispered and gestured to Jason to go closer.

It was the lounge room: a huge space consisted of the cafeteria and the recreation room where the built-in TV was open broadcasting cartoons. The boys squatted under the big window on the side wall and looked carefully inside; Jason chuckled seeing the cartoons but Dick hushed him.

Joker stood there among his goons some of them wore the orange uniforms of the asylum’s inmates while others wore custom clothes and clown masks. Dick gritted his teeth and clenched the gun ready to burst inside but Jason held his upper arm determined.

“They’ll catch ya if ya go now…it’s better to wait for the party to begin; in the fuss ya’ll go unnoticed.”

Dick nodded and relaxed turning to look inside.

Suddenly, another person appeared in the room in front of Joker causing the goons’ panic and their leader’s wicked smirk.

Dick and Jason exchanged surprised looks.

“Thor!” Dick whispered and Jason lolled his head.

“It seems ya won’t get yar chance after all, mate…”

“Thoooooor, hoooooo niieee you decided to hooooonor us with your presence.”

The blond god’s face was tense; his jaw clenched so much unlike his usual mild demeanor. He fist his hammer which was emitting sparkles reflecting its master’s mood.

“Cut the crap! I know who you really are…What are you up to, Loki?”

The goons looked at their leader and despite the fact they had the masks on it was easy to tell that they were goggling. Joker burst into laughter that was like a cackle and not Joker’s usual giggle.

“Boss?” one of the goons asked confused.

And then Joker snapped his fingers and the goons collapsed to the floor.

Dick and Jayson goggled as Joker became someone else: a man with long black straight hair that fell around his thin face; he had slightly pointy ears and nose and he was staring intensely at Thor with a sarcastic glint. He was dressed in dark green leather stockings and a dark green long vest.

“What the fuck?!” Jason exclaimed before Dick hushed him hastily. “Elves go for Gotham now?!” he continued in a exasperated whisper.

“Shssssssss!”

Thor narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

“Finally I got you!” the blond god said.
“Sel, I see the Asylum – in less than a minute I’m in” Tony in Ironman’s armor informed Selina. “And police is on the way.”

He had decided that he needed the speed of his own armor if he wanted to get Joker. Enough with Bruce’s obsession with secrecy games.

Selina frowned.

“What about Bruce?”

“He is safe…” he said cold as he began descending to the Asylum’s eerily quiet yard.

“I’m coming” Selina said, feeling that something serious had happened but now wasn’t the time to discuss it.

“You, brother? Got me?” the raven haired god chuckled shaking his head. “You were always so arrogant, Thor!” he said strutting around him with his hands behind his back.

“What are you up to taking Joker’s form? Where is he?”

Loki touched his ear the way newscasters did when hearing something from the control room.

“Control room just informs me…Oh! How touching! Ironman is here!” he smirked fixing his wickedly glimmering eyes on Thor whose face tensed in suspicion.

“You brought your people here? What have you done this time, Loki?”

Loki stretched his arms horizontally and yanked his head upwards.

“You and your genius” he uttered sarcastically the ‘genius’ ‘friend are so predictable” he sniggered. “Even a lunatic like Joker knows your every movement.”

Dick and Jason were gaping at the scene holding their breaths.

Thor was fuming and his hand grabbed his hammer; Loki chuckled amused.

“You know, brother: strength is soooooo weak before wits…” he lollled his head on the side. “Where can Joker be when his darling, Bruce is not here?”

Thor’s eyes bulged.

“Joker is going to attack the Manor!” he exclaimed as Ironman entered the room having opened the window breaching its codes.

Dick and Jason exchanged horrified looks.

Tony was astonished by Loki’s presence there yet as soon as he heard Thor saying those few words everything became a fog around him: Bruce was unconscious in the Manor and Joker had again Loki’s help – those two had attacked the Avengers’ Tower, they could do the same with the Manor.

“Jarvis, call Alfred!” he barked already turning towards the window to take off back to the Manor.
“I’m sorry, sir; I can’t connect with the Manor.”

AI’s reply came exactly at the moment Tony saw that the window had closed.

“Find Steve!” he shouted fuming as Loki laughed with his agonizing efforts.

Thor however didn’t stand to watch; he turned towards the window ready to fly to the Manor only to collide hard on an invisible and unyielding wall.

“Watch where your step, bro!” Loki cackled and Thor stormed at him catching only thin air as the mischievous god vanished reappearing sat on the cafeteria buffet.

“I’m afraid, sir, that I can’t find Mr. Rogers – something blocks my calls.”

Loki whistled to the air playing the innocent.

“I block the calls; you can’t defeat my magic, Stark – neither do you, bro” his smirk and his gaze leaked triumph and irony.

Dick turned to Jason.

“They can’t get out of the room – we must warn Wayne!”

Jason nodded and they began running towards the back exit from where they had come in. Suddenly as they turned the curve to the door they bumped on something and Dick panicked remembered the gun he was still holding. He pointed at their obstacle only to be kicked in the hand losing the gun.

“You shouldn’t play with such toys, boy…” a sly sensual voice told him.

Dick and Jason goggled at the gorgeous leather clad body of Catwoman who was frowning at them.

“This isn’t a place for puppies! Beat it before I spank you!”

Jason slapped his face to wake his numb mind.

“Joker isn’t her!” he pointed with his hand at the lounge room. “Joker’s gonna attack the Manor!”

Catwoman’s eyes widened and she felt sweat showering her body.

“What?!”

Dick rubbed unconsciously his hand realizing that the kick wasn’t as strong as Catwoman could hit.

“Some Loki guy is there with Thor and Stark and has the room locked with magic or something… He told them that Joker…” Dick said with one breath.

But Catwoman didn’t need to hear more.

“Let’s go!” she said and ran to the exit as police sirens get closer.

Thor lifted his Mjolnir threateningly; his teeth were gritted as he glared at his brother.

“Loki, this isn’t funny…” he hissed.

Loki placed his hands on his open knees and looked his brother in the eyes.
“For once I agree with you, bro…This isn’t funny – real fun is on the way!”

Tony’s heart was drumming in his head and he just couldn’t stand that fucking god throwing up bullshit while Bruce was exposed to Joker. He clenched his jaw and stormed at him using the momentum from his boots.

Loki pouted and feigned the scared but at the last second before Ironman grabbed his neck he vanished with a puff leaving only his snigger echoing in the empty space.

“See ya, suckers!” he exclaimed and a hand giving the finger appeared in the air.

“Fuck you, sonovabitch!” Tony roared. “Jarvis, can you overcome whatever the motherfucker did? I want to get out, damn it!”

“I’m trying, sir; I also try to contact the Manor or Mr. Rogers.”

Thor was throwing himself to the wall trying to break it, growling.

“Move over!” Ironman spat and as soon as the god obeyed he launched every weapon he had on the wall. To no avail. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” he shouted with increased volume as his despair mounted.

Thor grabbed his comrade’s stretched hand.

“Tony, stop! It’s no use…we have to wait. Tony jerked his hand.

“I can’t wait!” Ironman spat.

“Do not panic: Bruce can defend himself and the Manor is his castle.”

Tony deactivated his face plate to take some air feeling choking; he ran his fingers in his wet hair.

“He is unconscious, Thor” the god’s eyes widened and Tony licked his lips. “I stunned him to stop him from coming here thinking that I was protecting him!”

Thor stared at the floor in loss for words…what had Tony done? He still couldn’t believe it yet he couldn’t let his friend blaming only himself.

“Tony, do not blame yourself: it’s my fault Loki did this – if haven’t shown interest in Bruce Loki wouldn’t…”

“Stop the consoling, okay!”

Alfred was in the kitchen preparing some soup for the dinner. Master Bruce would certainly need some after the effect of Master Anthony’s stunning beam was over. However he doubted that the young man would have any mood for food after that.

He sighed and turned his eyes to the ceiling: he didn’t want to imagine the ramifications of what Master Anthony did to their friendship. He just hoped that everything would go as planned and then the two youths would find a way to overcome this.

The phone in the salon rang and Alfred wiped his hands in a towel and pressed the button in the square shaped panel on the wall next to the built in black fridge to answer.

“Wayne Manor, may I help you?”
"Alfred…"

The butler recognized Master Richard’s voice: the boy sounded upset, in agony, out of breath; also, he could hear what seemed like the roaring of a running motorcycle.

"Master Richard, where are you? Master Bruce is worried."

"Alfred, Joker is coming…We called the police…” he had seen Catwoman trying to call someone else but he hadn’t made out whom and from her frustration Dic could tell that she didn’t find him/her.

Suddenly, a deafening bang shook the building and Alfred’s eyes widened as his legs already headed out of the kitchen forgetting to end the dial.

"Master Bruce…"

"Sir, I think that now the wall will subside."

Tony pointed the inside of his palm to the wall and Thor did the same with the Mjolnir; the blow was deafening but the wall finally collapsed. The two Avengers took off flying desperately towards the Palisades as police officers stormed inside the building – Tony knew already that doctors and patients were safely locked in their sections.

"Master Anthony” Jarvis’ voice was a bit upset and that was bad news “Avengers’ Tower is under attack…”

“Again?!” Tony growled and Thor stopped in midair looking at him perplexed.

“Actually, the entire New York city downtown is under attack. Mr. Fury has already called the Avengers: Dr. Banner is on his way; Captain America and Ms. Romanov too.”

Tony felt his blood drumming throughout his body.

“Go!” He said to Thor. “I’ll go to Bruce.”

“No! If Loki’s magic helps Joker you’ll need me.”

"Master Anthony, Wayne Manor is breached."
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

No animal was abused during the writing of this chapter...

A huge hole stood where the big rectangular window of the master’s bedroom used to be; dust and particles of debris hovered thick in the air around.

Hero stood from his perch on Bruce’s chest and arched his back in defensive-aggressive stance; his hairs were stretched and his tail erect.

“Iiiiiit’s great to haaaave the right pals!”

Among the dust cloud a form was distinct baring an arrogant stance but then his foot found a piece of debris and he slipped a bit.

“Stuuuuupid brick!” he snapped and regained his posture fixing his hair and slipping his hand inside his chest in an imitation of Napoleon. “I came, I saw, I conquered!” he said gruffly but then pulled his Napoleon hand out and scratched his hair. “Thaaaaat was Julius Caesar” he shook his head. “Never mind…” he waved that off.

He walked away from the pile of dusty debris shaking his head in frustration and stretching his arms.

“Wheeeere’s my weeeeelcome committee? Such a dramatic entrance and nooooo applause?” he lolled his head and rolled his eyes.

But then his eyes fell on the bed and widened seeing Bruce sleeping peacefully; he rushed there his purple jacket waving behind him.

“Noooooow…this is the beeeeeeest welcome!” he licked his lips like a hungry wolf travelling Bruce’s body with his eyes.

Hero’s eyes flashed seeing the man goggling at his human and he hissed angrier than ever in his life.

Joker lolled his head and looked at the kitten intrigued.

“Brucie’s kitten? Brucie’s husband – niiiiice to meet you” he stretched his hand for a handshake but the kitten hissed again and jumped on him digging its nails to his cheek.

Joker grabbed the kitten and after much struggle and several scratches held him in front of him smiling.

“New scaaaaaars? Thank youuuuu, pal! But now I must reunite with my wife…”

He let the animal on the floor but Hero instantly climbed the bed and hissed at Joker who had just sat on the chair beside the bed. The jester rolled his eyes and shook his head which was the only thing he managed to do before the kitten attacked his neck stabbing his claws.

“Take that beast ooooooff me!” he shouted angrily and his goons who just entered through the hole
in the wall rushed to him.

Hero wasn’t willing to let the jester and the goons struggled to take him from their boss; once they managed to detach him the animal attacked them with his claws ripping their clown masks.

Joker giggled touching the deep bleeding wounds on his neck.

“Heheheheheeeeee! The littl’ one is touuuugh!” his eyes fell on Bruce “how fitting…”

“Boss, ya want me to kill it?” Bags Bunny asked Joker pointing his gun at the kitten that hissed and struggled in the hands of a third goon.

Joker smirked.

“Only if youuuuu want to die next… I never kill animals…” he lollled his head on the side thoughtful “except than those bats buuuuuut they were defiling Gotham’s sky”. Then he became dead serious “and this fella is Brucie’s kitten… Put him in the bathroom and close the door before he eats you alive – HEHEHEHEHEEEEE!” the goon moved towards the bathroom fighting to avoid Hero’s sharp claws and teeth. “Now sooooome prriiiiiivacy, boys… Clooooose your eyes” he stared at them shaking his index finger warningly “nooooooo cheatin’ – I can seeeeeee under the mask…” he couldn’t but his lads were so stupid that would believe that.

He sat again and gazed at Bruce’s calm, peaceful face admiring the way the air left so feathery his lips.

“My Sleeping Beauty… an’ I’m your Priiiiiiince Charming…” he giggled. “I was wrong ‘bout goooooood ooool’ Tony: he wanted us together all along… Heheheheeeeee!”

He leaned above Bruce’s face and brought his lips a breath away from Bruce’s.

“Mmm… Cinnamon… Ugh!” he jerked his head nervously. “I missed that smell sooooo much! Grrrrrrrr!”

He surged at Bruce’s lips and captured them greedily.

“Get away from him!”

Joker half closed his eyes frustrated and turned towards the door from where the voice was heard. He licked his lips and lollled his head on the side eyeing Bruce’s butler who was holding a silver handgun that shone in the twilight; he was pointing at him with his finger tight around the trigger.

“You’re mmm… inter—rupting – I forgot to put the ‘doooon’t disturuurb’ sign on the door, huh?” Joker said calm but suddenly lollled his head on the side “what do ya use to pooolish your guuun – my blaaades need some of thatttt…” he yanked his head “youuuu see we’re in a tender moment here: where’s your English manners?”

Alfred gritted his teeth.

“Kept for gentlemen! Your hands off of Master Bruce!”

Joker pouted and cocked an eyebrow sighing.

“That’s a baaaaad father in law! Ugh! The dangers of marriage life…” he cast a glare at Alfred “you want me to believe that you will risk Brucie’s life by shooting me?”

The goons were watching agitated.
Alfred’s blue eyes were completely still in icy determination. He pressed smoothly the trigger and Joker jerked feeling a burning at his shoulder, the bullet sinking on the wall only an inch away from him. The jester whistled awed.

“Ohhhhhhh!” he exclaimed pursing his lips. “I think that myyyyy daddy has some skeletons in his closet…” his face stretched in a Cheshire smile among Hero’s bleeding scratches. “Eeeenough is enough though…”

Alfred barely saw the flash that was coming at him realizing that it was a blade only when it was too late to avoid it. It was obvious that the blade didn’t aim at his heart but he was ready for the pain. However he pressed the trigger again hoping that at least would hit the jester.

His surprise was overwhelming for two reasons simultaneously: his bullet bounced off Joker as if meeting an invisible barrier and the blade that was an inch from his upper arm was deflected with a clang. The butler followed the blade to the floor and saw an arrow having pierced the metal.

When he raised his eyes in front of the dusty pile of debris stood a man dressed like Robin Hood; his bow’s cord was still trembling from the arrows that after the one who hit the blade launched to hit the goons who had fallen on the floor screaming. Alfred felt encouraged.

“Away from him!” the green clad man said sharply to Joker.

But the jester giggled not afraid at all.

“Oh! Robin! How niiiiice you joined us! I knew it wasn’t going to be booooorrring” he shook his head “I expected Brucie-action but anyway…You think that you can scaaaaare me ooooff with your littl’ arrows?” he cackled. “By the way I kept your last one: great piece for my collection.”

Arrow’s goatteed jaw clenched in disgust and without any hesitation he let the arrow in his bow leave with a gracious motion aiming at the jester’s heart.

Alfred hated violence but in this case he was willing to forgive it since only a minute ago he had fired as well. His eyes bulged.

Arrow narrowed his eyes: there was no way this could happen…His arrow had bounced and landed on Joker’s feet who began hopping and gesturing as if he had scored in the pitch.

“I loooooooove it, babe! Nothin’ like a god proteeeectin’ you!” he stopped his bubbling abruptly taking a serious expression “Now, I love your company, guys, but I got to gooooo…” he leaned above Bruce and put his arms under his body.

“Don’t touch him!” the Arrow roared and a flood of arrows flew at Joker ending up on the carpet.

“No!” Alfred yelled understanding the jester’s intention.

Joker turned his head to them as the Arrow ground his teeth and surged at him – Alfred doing the same.

“Sorry, guys, I’d like to plaaaaay more but I have a honeymoon to atteeeend!”

The Arrow clashed with the invisible shield that protected Joker and felt the barrier yielding; he was ready to snap the clown’s neck but suddenly the jester vanished taking with him Bruce.

Tony and Thor landed in the room through the gaping hole; the billionaire had eyes for nothing except the bed where he laid his sedated friend. Thor despite his compassion for Tony and his own
sadness noticed Arrow’s presence. Although the man’s face was cast under the shadow of his hood his eyes flashed like lightning in rage and his jaw was clenched. It wasn’t difficult for Thor to understand that the man couldn’t accept the fact that he was defeated and what made his frustration greater was that Bruce was taken because of his failure.

Without looking at anyone Arrow rushed at the broken wall and outside to vanish into the twilight.

Tony aware of Alfred’s sad, blank eyes rushed to the empty bed; the face plate deactivated as he touched the still warm mattress.

“No…” he mumbled. “No!” he shouted furious with himself.

Fury was leaned above the central control panel of the Tower which covered the entire wall of the management room. His face was collected but his only eye shone with determination as he was watching the agents trying to regain control of the Tower’s complicated operational systems. Maria Hill was one of the agents who struggled to overcome the unknown factor that blocked their access.

His gaze went to the huge screen that was built-in to the wall at the right; footage from New York’s downtown was projected: people screaming and running trying to take cover in buildings and alleys; abandoned cars that had crashed on fireplugs creating columns of rushing water; other cars screamed trying to speed up to escape from the area.

It was odd that the person that took control of the Tower left the screen working; he smirked. Not that odd…The bastard wanted them to watch as green clad human-like creatures chased and attacked people in the city where the Avengers had their headquarters.

Fury was consoled from the fact that he at least managed to communicate with the Avengers before the unknown factor blocked any in and outcoming calls; even though he couldn’t have any feedback from them he was sure that they were on their way there.

Maria turned her head to Fury.

“Stark could help here; is his baby after all…”

“I’m afraid he is preoccupied with other things right now…” a sly voice that didn’t belong to anyone of Fury’s agents answered.

Fury turned rapidly with his black firearm pointing at the intruder and the agents that were fumbling with the control panel followed their superior’s move. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s vice director frowned: the man was dressed in dark green leggings and tunic; a long leather vest embroidered with gold waved at his sides. He wore some kind of helmet made from gold with long curved horns beginning from the back and ending at front. His forearms and upper arms were covered with golden plates.

Silence fell on the hall but for the low humming of the machines. Fury knew that his agents despite brave and courageous were shocked from their guest who stared at them smirking, his sneaky eyes sparkled gleeful making his narrow framed by his black hair face look like an old sketch of playful, mischief demons.

“Who are you?” Fury spat in his cold, rough voice completely undeterred.

Their uninvited guest rolled his eyes and began strolling at the hall as if it was his home.

“You’re not the smartest block in town, huh?” he said turning his head to Fury. “Hello?!“ he
stretched his arms horizontally and showed his clothes with his eyes. “What my attire say to you about my identity? And the fact I popped up in the most secure” he chuckled “not so secure” he jeered “building in the world?”

Fury cocked an eyebrow smirking.

“That you’re a nut job conjurer with bad taste in clothes…” he snapped and the stranger laughed.

“Nice, Fury, charming…Finally, I see how you made my brother join your petty team.”

“Your brother?” Fury narrowed his eye.

Loki yanked his head backwards sighing and touched his horns for emphasis.

“Made in Asgard – all rights reserved” he cackled and then pouted. “You’re not laughing? Mortals don’t have humor…”

“Thor’s brother…” agent Hill said and their guest bowed.

“Clever girl! Now, you’ll get bonus points if you say my name” but as nobody in the room said anything, he shook his head exasperated and raised his hands. “Okay, I’m not a star right now but I’m making my dynamic breakthrough appearance. Well, ladies and gentlemen, I’m Loki Laufeyjarson – for the enemies, just Loki.”

He looked around.

“It’s nice to see the place again…”

Fury frowned.

“Joker’s attack. You helped him overcome the building’s defenses. What do you want? World domination?”

Loki crooked his mouth in dislike.

“It sounds too mundane for someone like me…” Fury frowned and Loki smiled. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, I’m sorry to part with your delightful company but I need to watch the show from a better place” he tapped his index to his bottom lip “Stark’s apartment on the top floor: I don’t think he’ll bother…I suggest you stop trying overcome my magic which” he cocked his eyebrows smugly “is impossible and watch the show” he gestured to the screen. “See ya!”

“Back to your work!” Fury barked as soon as Loki vanished. “We must take back the Tower!”

“The control hall is locked” Maria said. “We can’t get the bastard!”

Fury looked at his agents calm and determined.

“We’ll overcome his conjures and then we’ll teach him a lesson!”

“What happened, Alfred?” Thor asked since he was seeing that Tony wasn’t in a state to ask.

Alfred didn’t react for a few seconds but then he regained his collected demeanor and looked at the blond god.
“I received a phone call from Master Richard that Joker was going to attack the Manor and then I heard a loud bang and the whole building shook. I ran immediately to Master bedroom” he cast a glance at the gun he was still holding “no, pardon me, sir, first I went to my bedroom to collect my gun. When I entered the Master bedroom Joker was…” he inhaled deeply “touching his lips to Master Bruce’s lips…”

Thor bit his bottom lip hearing that and Tony listening through a long tunnel closed his eyes imagining that scene with his mind’s eyes: it was his fault.

“I shot him” Alfred continued “and the first time it scrapped him but the second bullet bound off of him; even Mr. Arrow’s…well, arrow bounced, as if he had an invisible shield around him. And then when we both realized that our weapons wouldn’t manage anything we surged at him but he…he put his hands around Master Bruce’s body and just disappeared” he gulped as elegantly as possible. “I don’t understand how on earth he managed to breach the Manor’s security and then why our weapons couldn’t touch him…and the disappearing…”

Thor gulped.

“Loki, one of the Asgardian gods, helps him…He is my…let’s say brother. I’m sorry, Alfred” he placed his hand on the butler’s shoulder who shook his head.

“Is not your fault, Master Thor…” and then he suddenly remembered and narrowed his eyes. “Master Hero was with Master Bruce…Good Lord! He can’t be dead…”

Thor however registered some strange sounds from the bathroom and rushed there. He opened the door and the angry kitten stormed outside his claws already armed from scratching the door; Hero ran to his Master’s bed and climbed. Upon not seeing his human he began sniffing desperate and both Alfred and Thor looked at the animal sad.

“He is taken, buddy…” Tony mumbled and petted the kitten’s head. “But I swear I’ll bring him back.”

Tony in his numbness heard the pained groans of Joker’s goons that were left behind. His face distorted in rage, he turned on his heels and stormed at them grabbing the first slumped form. He lifted him and gritted his teeth to his scared face since his clown mask had fallen.

“Where did Joker take Bruce?!” he shouted. “Speak or I’ll rip your filthy guts, motherfucker!”

The goon began shaking: he was already in pain from the arrow that was stabbed to his upper arm and the blood loss made things worse. He shook his head.

“I…I swear…I don’t know…he didn’t tell anythin’.”

Tony had no patience to repeat his question; he punched the man with his iron glove and left him with broken nose on the floor. He grabbed another trembling goon and lifted him to the air with one hand clenching his throat.

“Where has Joker gone?!” he tightened his grip and the man’s eyes bulged as the loss of air made him cough. He opened his mouth to say something but Tony brought his other hand in front of his face with his nano missiles launcher opening with a low humming. “In your place I’d think twice what I’ll say: if I don’t like the answer my missiles will melt your ugly pan!” the lack of his face plate wasn’t diminishing the threatening impression.

The man tried to gulp but Tony clenched more his throat gritting his teeth.
“Speak, you sonovabitch!”

“Master Anthony” Alfred tried to reason with him as the launcher rattled ready to fire.

The goon looked at the Englishman silently begging yet Tony didn’t relent neither gave any indication that he had heard Alfred’s appeal.

“Speak! I’m counting to three: 1, 2…”

Thor grabbed his armed hand and lowered it; Tony glared at him without letting the goon.

“Stay out of this, Asgardian!”

Tony’s blazing black eyes collided with Thor’s calm baby blues.

“I’m doing what Bruce would want me to do: stop you before you do something you’ll regret.”

“I won’t regret!”

He jerked his hand to free it but Thor was unyielding.

“Think Bruce, Tony…” Tony blinked nervously. “Joker would never have told anything to his goons – let them to the police.”

A new pair of feet rushed inside from the open door; a panting respiration broke the tension.

“Where’s Bruce?!?” Catwoman’s slightly alienated voice demanded. “Every security measure is down! Why are you all here?!?”

Her manic eyes scanned the room: the whole in the exterior wall, the writhing goons, the blood on the carpet, Hero rubbing his head desperately to the mattress.

“Why are you in the Master’s bedroom?” and then it dawned to her: Bruce’s absence from Arkham Asylum, Tony’s tone when he told her that Bruce wasn’t coming.

She marched to Tony, her eyes sending daggers. Ironman let the goon fall from his hand literally paralyzed from the sight of the angry cat.

“What have you done to him?” she hissed.

Alfred made to hold her upper arms soothingly but Catwoman jerked them away.

“He wanted to meet Strange at the Asylum and I sedated him; I brought him here before I left; Joker found him unconscious” Ironman admitted.

Catwoman’s eyes widened, icy cold; she raised her hand and struck him in the face. Tony let his head loll to the side: he deserved that.

Two pair of feet invaded the room and the two panting respirations stopped abruptly taking in the condition of the room. Both Dick and Jason looked stunned at Catwoman and Ironman not understanding. Dick turned his gaze to Alfred’s pale face and then at the bed where Hero was purring sniffing his gone human’s perfume: the boy rushed there and hugged the distraught animal, Jason following giving some kicks to the goons on the floor.

“Master Anthony, the situation in New York has escalated”
The AI projected a hologram showing the chaos in the roads around Avengers’ Tower: people screaming and running panicked as human-like soldiers with odd machine guns shot at will at buildings and people the rattling of the shooting creating more panic.

“Dr. Banner, Captain America and Black Widow are almost there and calling you.”

Tony’s eyes were still locked with Catwoman’s, apologizing and urging her to punish him more but Thor broke their silent confrontation.

“Tony, they need us…”

“Bruce needs me too!”

“Get the Hell out of here!” Catwoman spat. “Gotham is my city and you’re useless!” she stormed at the window and jumped outside.

Police sirens filled the grounds and tires were heard stopping abruptly.

Thor looked again at his comrade and Tony lowered his head a second before the face plate covered it. Both Avengers flew outside.

Loki stood before the whole wall window in Tony Stark’s leaving room at the top floor of Avengers’ Tower. He had his hands behind his back and enjoyed the view: not the city’s breathtaking skyline that sparkled in the twilight but what was taking place down on the street and the surrounding area. The fact that he was a god helped a lot to that because a human couldn’t be able to have such range.

The roads that crossed before the Tower where among the most bustling so that time of the day they were washed by all kinds of multicolored lights: billboards, shops’ headlights, internal lighting of the surrounding skyscrapers, public lightings. And all this light illustrated more the action; the chaos underneath.

His army of humanoids marched icy cold through the streets and fired with their unseen before firearms causing refreshed shrieks of panic and running – some people were falling as they collided with others. Cars’ horns added to the whole chaotic impression accompanied with the eerie sound of screeching tires, crashing and broken glass. Police officers ran around trying to guide citizens away from the fire or shooting at the attacking horde.

“And that’s all about Avengers…Tomorrow the world will be laughing at you. Where are you, Thor? Still pulled by your dick?”

Suddenly, something caught his eye: in one corner, two of his soldiers were launched in the air and where they stood till then a shapely woman in dark blue skin tight attire looked around her with determined eyes.

“Get her…” Loki mumbled indifferently knowing that his order echoed in the heads of his soldiers.

Humanoids from every corner ran to her closing in; Natasha eyed them amused. They swarmed at her but then a flash ripped the air and half the humanoids were swept away; Natasha continued kicking their opponents and Captain America grabbed his shield that returned to him and sure that his comrade could handle them ran to the other side where a cluster of them were shooting the front windows of a café to attack the customers and the people who had found refuge there.

Captain America launched himself and fell on them with his legs united, crushing them to the
sidewalk; he immediately stood to his feet and began punching them swiftly.

Loki nodded satisfied.

“The team is gathering…Nice. Let’s make the show more captivating” he snapped his fingers smirking wickedly.

Natasha and Steve had just knocked out their last opponents running to face others when loud thuds lie from heavy footsteps drew their attention. Both looked north.

A herd of some kind of animals was running frantically at them; at first they weren’t clearly visible but when under the lights, the two Avengers saw beasts they haven’t seen before.

They looked like rhinos only they were light brown with iron covering their backs, chests and heads; from the top of their nose protruded a long, curved gold horn while lower a smaller straight silver horn stack out. Their eyes were human shaped except they were yellow, flashing like lamps; their nostrils and mouths emitted fume that in the cold air formed crystals.

People from their covering in stores and behind bins saw and began screaming, some of them blinded by their panic ran for it causing the animals chasing.

“Someone is a Lord of the Rings fan” Fury commented dryly casting a glance at the screen while hitting the hall’s door with his shoulder along with two other agents.

Captain America looked at Natasha, new humanoids attacking them from everywhere while the beasts targeted the scared people.

Loki lolled his head on the side.

“What? Have you lost your color?”

Steve tossed his shield to the legs of a beast that was ready to stab his horns to a woman pushing it a few feet away. He made to run closer but several humanoids fell on him. Natasha was also fighting with a bunch of them hitting with everything she had.

“Tough job, huh?” Loki mumbled through his smirk.

Steve jerked upwards roaring pushing off of him the humanoids that held him; he began running towards the attacking beasts throwing again his shield to one and jumping on the back of another punching it trying to knocked it out or kill it but its armor was very strong.

It took him several punches to finally yield the beast but he saw with horror that the beasts had hit some people.

“Damn!”

He dismounted from the slumped beast as some policemen tried to lead the people to safety; Steve threw his shield against two beasts at once but a flock of them was already heading frantically at him; he grabbed his shield that returned to him. He could jump off their way but they would hit the policemen that led citizens away. He tossed his shield at the feet of the beasts at the front but their stampede was such that the following beasts jumped over them ready to tread on Steve.

Natasha saw her comrade’s tough situation and made to run to him but humanoids surrounded her.

“Now we’re talking!” Loki’s smiled became even broader.
A roar shook New York’s downtown as the sound of gigantic feet made everything tremble more than the running beasts. Steve and Natasha both looked up waiting a new calamity. But Loki turned his narrowed eyes there too.

A green giant half naked with torn pants covering half of his things showed his teeth and stormed at the herd of rhinos that were a breath from squashing Steve who cleverly jumped away attacking with his landing a group of Loki’s soldiers.

Hulk’s enormous fists began hammering the beasts sending them to hit at walls smashing glass and cement.

“So the green giant is here…” Loki said and snapped his fingers.

More humanoids flooded the street chasing police officers and citizens firing at will right and left. Some of them shot with flamethrowers burning cars and bins but thanks to the police and the National guard no human.

Steve and Natasha moved to meet each other knocking out every enemy that stood before them. Hulk was growling at the odd beasts grabbing one by the leg and using it as a bat to knock the others clearing the field.

A nightmarish sound as if thousand wolves howled at once cracked the battle field and the two Avengers looked at the sky: a giant black cloud covered the area; a cloud that different colored waves crossed it as if something was stirring inside. And indeed the cloud parted and jet like objects with shark-like fronts flooded the evening sky.

“You’re kidding!” Natasha exclaimed exasperated before surging at a group of humanoids. “What’s this?” she asked Steve who was also fighting with several men. “Who’s doing it and why?”

Ironman and Thor were yards from New York’s Downtown; Tony was both watching the battle field in front of the Tower and trying to find a way to regain control over the building’s systems.

“Loki’s ability in magic is great” Thor said his face tight listening to the echo of the battle.

“And I’m a genius!” Ironman spat but instantly he remembered what had just happened in Gotham and his guts clenched. “And I hate magic!”

They both knew that Loki’s magic took down every security measure in Wayne Manor permitting Joker to enter and escape; otherwise Arrow and Alfred would have stopped him.

“What is this?” Thor asked frowned hearing the mixed sound of jets and roaring.

“Planes with jaws” Tony said nonchalant “and Hulk is having a party with some rhinos. Captain and Natasha are fist fighting as usual. Let’s save the day!”

Ironman’s heels emitted fires as he surged forward and Thor followed clenching Mjolnir and his jaw.

“I want Loki alive!” Ironman shouted and launched a purple beam that sent the first black jet-shark he saw to crash in the ocean the same time as Thor waved his hammer launching thunders at a group of humanoids that had surrounded citizens ready to shoot them.

Loki smiled devilishly seeing the new arrivals.
“Time to smash them all…” he nodded and the black cloud filled with dark green waves breaking the cloud to release Loki’s army: hundreds of men and women dressed as their leader – but without the glimmering gold - holding machine guns and axes began descending with parachutes.

The few remaining reporters in the press room of the *Daily Planet’s* building had gathered around one desk and watched awed the events that were taking place right now at New York.

“It’s a handy coincidence Mary is at New York these days” Perry said. “Who is attacking? What he wants?”

“He must be really powerful to manage to breach Avengers’ Tower and unleash all these creatures.”

Clark who was watching leaning above his colleagues remembered that night in the same building when Joker attacked; it was obvious that the madman then was assisted by the same who was launching the attack now. Bruce had saved the day then…he lowered his eyes thoughtful on the memory of the brave human.

The ring of his smart phone startled not only him but also his colleagues. Clark smiled uncomfortable and back stepped out of the reporters’ space to the corridor because this ringtone was Lois’.

“What are you doing?” his friend almost screamed to him outraged.

Clark pushed his glasses with his finger.

“I’m at Planet, right now.”

“Exactly! What’s wrong with you, farm boy? You forget who are you? You should be in New York right now helping people!”

“The Avengers are handling the situation.”

Lois growled.

“What do you have in your head?! Kryptonite?! People are in danger: some are already injured or dead and you say that Avengers are handling it?!” Clark shook his head. “Don’t shake your head and get your Kryptonian butt there! UFO!”

“Okay, Lois; you’re right” he inhaled. “Are you heading to New York?”

“No, we have a situation in Gotham. Some attack at Arkham – I’m there right now and from what I hear something else has happened. I’m gonna find out. Are you still standing there?! Move!”

She closed abruptly and Clark rushed to the elevator pressing the rooftop button; he jumped out and ripped his clothes revealing Superman’s attire. He took off heading to New York but he had barely reached Metropolis’ limits when he stopped abruptly.

Diana hovered before him with her arms crossed over the chest. Her face was stern.

“Where are you going, Kal El?”

“New York, come with me, they need us.”

She cocked her eyebrows.
“I don’t think so…” she said with conviction and Superman frowned.

“What do you mean?” he asked gloom. “People are in danger.”

“If they did want you there they would have asked for your help. Their selfishness doesn’t let them ask for your help so their arrogance must be squashed once and for all. And if you appear there uninvited they will accuse you for trying to intervene in their affairs intending to undermine them: all these petty things are beyond your greatness, Kal El.”

Superman met her gaze: she was right, he had experienced Stark’s arrogance and egoism and his hatred certainly would find an excuse to insult Superman for interfering with their business.

“But people are in danger.”

Diana smiled.

“Let them handle it: it is their responsibility if they don’t ask for your assistance. They should have thought the people there but they didn’t for the sake of their arrogance. We’ll wait and if they ask our help we’ll gladly give it to them. But if they don’t, the fault for what happens will be only theirs and it will show humans who is their real, their true hero and protector.”

Superman pressed his lips indecisive: the cries from New York clenched his guts but Diana had a point.

She stood before him and looked deep in his eyes and Superman felt numb, every other concern obliterated.

“You know I’m right…” she kissed him.

Thor landed with such force that he pushed away Natasha’s opponents sending with Mjolnir twirling thunders to neutralize a group of attackers that was firing at the national guards who had taken cover behind a pile of crushed cars shooting the invaders.

Ironman was attacking simultaneously two different craft-sharks blasting them to pieces over the battle field. As he was flying to meet more of these bizarre aircrafts he was helping his comrades sending laser and bullets to Loki’s soldiers with Jarvis constant updates about the battle.

Hulk was still struggling with the frantic beasts; some of them had run away from him smashing a store’s front window, rushing inside and threatening people that had found refuge there. The green giant with fast and wide strides reached the store and made a spectacular jolt and dive to fall on the back of a beast knocking it out with a punch on the forehead; instantly he used the massive body as a catapult to hit the rest of the animals one by one propelling them out of the store. The people inside who had covered behind the counter looked awed at the giant who was taming the beasts.

Ironman was blasting Loki’s soldiers during their descent but they were so many and he had the crafts to worry too, so hundreds of them managed to land.

“How on Hell did Loki gather all these shit?!” Tony snapped.

“Master Anthony, Mr. Fury and his agents managed to break out of the control room.”

“How?”
“I don’t know, sir, but it seems that your warm found a way to breach the wall that was blocking access to the building’s systems.”

“Can you locate Loki?”

“He is in your apartment, sir.”

“The motherfucker! Defiles my space!”

He wanted nothing more than to storm there and rip this guy in pieces but he couldn’t abandon his comrades who were fighting what looked like endless opponents.

Suddenly, dozens of soldiers were tossed to the air forming a line towards Steve who among his opponents squinted to make out what was that red flash approaching him; his enemies fell on him but he pushed them off of him and the red flash finished the job with punches that were so rapid that escaped the human eye.

Steve stood eyeing the newcomer: a lean man dressed in red skin tight uniform with a yellow thunder on his chest; he knew him from the operation against the League of Shadows.

The Flash saluted him in military style and smiled.

“I thought that you could use some help with the hordes of…” he chuckled “Mordor!”

Steve smiled.

“Every help is highly appreciated” he said and tossed his shield like a frisbee haying five enemies at once while Flash disappeared from sight, his traces the humanoids that fell down.

Hulk had finished with the beasts and now his entire attention focused on the human-like enemies; with wide strides he reached a cluster and sent all of them flying around with two punches.

Natasha jumped over a pile of crashed cars to stop three of Loki’s men from attacking some police officers.

Thor seeing a horde of green-clad soldiers leaving the area to swarm and threat other parts of the city hit his hammer on the street creating a fast running crack that upon reaching his enemies turned into a thunder tornado that tossed them all over the place.

Ironman flew around launching everything he got against the bizarre crafts and helping his comrades whenever someone was cornered. He frowned seeing that Loki’s army finding resistance in Downtown was moving to other places. He readied his stunning weapons feeling a bitter bit because that reminded him what he had done to Bruce. However he overcame his hesitation and hit them neutralizing them.

His pissed face lightened a bit seeing Hulk with spectacular jumps reaching others and squashing them using his arms like a scythe. Tony got the impression of a giant green monkey the way Hulk jumped from bin to crashed car and falling to their enemies like a tornado.

Loki had his arms crossed watching the battle field feeling that the tide was changed against his army but what made him frown was the sound of approaching running feet.

Suddenly, it dawned to him what in the heat of the battle had evaded his attention: his spells were
weakened...no, broken. That was impossible; nobody could break his spells. He gritted his teeth and tried to get inside to the one that had done that; in vain, a very dark cloud was hiding him.

The door to Stark’s apartment that till now was blocked opened to reveal Fury leading a group of agents surging inside.

Loki pursed his lips: time to fight!

Suddenly, Ironman saw Loki landing in the middle of the field carrying a golden spear and sending beams against Thor who dodged them and turned to confront him waving his spiting fires hammer.

Ironman saw the sneaky god and forgot anything else. He surged against him unaware that one of the crafts had opened its canons ready to shoot him.

“Sir, watch out!” Jarvis shouted.

Tony turned around seeing the fire ready to leave the canon but suddenly the craft changed course and along its firepower. He frowned trying to make out his savior: Hulk had jumped and hugged the craft’s tail turning it around causing the fire to hit the other crafts.

Thor and Loki were dueling with sparkles and thunders diffused around; Tony launched one of his missiles to hit Loki but the god dodged it cackling. A pile of cars was blasted and Tony was relieved to find that no people had taken cover there.

Loki’s smirk froze on his face as a beam swept Loki’s army neutralizing them; the Avengers and Flash looked at the Tower from where the beam had come. Tony’s lips formed a faint smile: Fury had managed to gain full control now that Loki left the building; the ingenious inventor recognized his weapon in action. Now he could deal with the devious god.

However the god looked his knocked out army and smirked.

“Time to say goodbye, guys! See ya!”

Ironman was already on him but once again Loki vanished and Ironman left with empty hands cursing aloud.

The Avengers gathered with their faces smoked and scratched; tired and thoughtful. Natasha and Steve looked at the meshed up Downtown as Hulk approached with heavy strides and Flash in a quarter of the second.

People came out of their corners fearful but upon realizing that the danger was over cheered. Thor moved to Ironman with his eyes filled with sadness. Only the two of them knew what had happened in Gotham.

“It seems that we’ve made it” Natasha said.

Steve shook Flash’s hand.

“Thank you; we wouldn’t have made it without your help.”

“Don’t mention it, dude: you’d have done the same for me...” yet Flash’s wide smile was somewhat restrained as his eyes looked around perplexed about Superman’s absence.
“Tony…” Thor said to Ironman.

Ironman didn’t answer and Thor shook his head.

“I promise you that I’ll find Loki – I won’t fail you this time.”

Ironman remained silent, the cold face plate in place: the only thing that haunted his mind was that Bruce would wake up with the realization that his best friend betrayed him and even worse he’d have to face Joker. Thor’s reassurance didn’t say anything to him; there was no solace for him. He took off away from them.

“What? No drinks this time?” Natasha asked slyly cocking an eyebrow but seeing Thor’s grim face walked to him with Steve and Flash. “What’s wrong with Stark?”

“With Loki’s help Joker got Bruce” Thor answered and Steve huffed.

Thor took in the gazes of his comrades and Flash’s but he was deep in thought: he had promised Bruce that he would watch Loki’s movements but he lost his sneaky brother. Loki wasn’t only a god but he knew much about magic and all this time that he and his palace was nowhere to be found obviously he strengthened his magical power and gathered his army: Bruce kept in his bedroom his cape and Eir’s elixir – they should have blocked Loki’s attack; not to mention that Thor suspected that Bruce had in his possession some powerful charm as well.

So it was clear that if he wanted to find Loki and therefore Joker and Bruce he would need help.

He tried to control his uneasiness, his terror but still his skinny body shivered in the thick darkness; the blindfold felt too heavy on his face and he struggled to not run away. The fact that he couldn’t see panicked him though this time knew that he was safe.

Two hands cupped his face gently but his instinctive reaction was to jerk to escape; however the hands were stubborn in their gentleness until his resistance was quenched.

“Falcone used blindfold while using you?” the suave voice of the lion like man caressed his ears.

Bruce gulped an embarrassing knot and nodded.

“Sometimes…”

Two hot demanding lips touched his cold cheek sucking needy.

“You know that you have nothing to fear when I’m here…I don’t want to upset you but you must learn to rely on your other senses: eliminating the sight strengthens the rest…Sight shouldn’t shackle you, child…”

Fingers were touching curiously his abdominals and then played with his nipples…Clark as usually took advantage of his independence of sleep to watch him sleeping and touching him…

His torso felt the cold of the room so his lover must have took off his pajama shirt at some point – well, for his pants couldn’t say because below waist he couldn’t feel anything…Anyway, what was more important than his paraplegia was that Clark was there, beside him. He smiled: Clark loved him so much…

But then realization dawned to him colder than the room: Clark was away…He didn’t love him
anymore; he didn’t want to touch him…Hence, someone else undressed him – he wasn’t on a mattress; he was positioned vertically – his senses were on fire – his surroundings were unfamiliar – someone was there – a flash crossed his mind: Tony had hit him with his stunning beam! Someone was there, close to him, touching him…A rough touch: leather in his abdominals, cold metal in his nipple…He jerked trying to escape.

“Gooooood mooorning, sunshiiiiine! Your Prince Charming has broken the speeeeeeeel!”

Thor walked decisively inside the old temple that seemed devoid of human presence: he would have stared at the strange place intrigued if he wasn’t totally engrossed in his musing…if his agony wasn’t so demanding…if he could think anything else.

He walked to the interior till he met a round shaped area. Thor looked around indecisive of the direction he should follow.

Suddenly, in the places half darkness he heard light footsteps approaching and the Asgardian turned to see a man dressed in dark blue attire with a burgundy cape falling from his shoulders; a golden round pendant fell on his chest. He had dark brown hair grayed in the temples and sported a well trimmed goatee. His sharp blue eyes stabbed the blond god with intense curiosity that seemed natural to him.

“Thor…in our humble residence…” he said in a deep baritone voice.

The god inhaled deeply and looked at him determined.

“I need your help” he said sharply.
“Surreal scenes took place – just a few minutes ago – at New York’s hot Downtown...” Mary Thorn, Daily Planet’s reporter was saying in a still shaken voice in front of the aftermath’s scenery.

The camera stopped showing her to zoom at the nightmarish situation behind her. The darkness was thick but the abundance of New York’s lights made everything visible: the picture of a disaster.

Crashed cars piled in every corner of the road; rescuers were now searching among the crumpled metal for any trapped citizen; shattered store windows the shreds sparkling under the lights of the bent traffic signals; billboards smashed on the cement marked from the battle; buildings carrying thousands of bullet holes and burnings; strange rhino-like beasts sprawled in the cement sedated or dead; police and authorities were wondering what to do with them because unlike with his army Loki didn’t take care to take the animals with him.

Ambulances formed a perimeter around the place and their sirens along with those of police cars gave the sad soundtrack for the scene; their multicolored lights dazzled the eyes. Police officers, National Guard members and paramedics gathered the injured or the dead which were both taken to the ambulances on stretchers.

“Till now the toll is 4 dead and 30 injured, ten of them in serious condition” the blond reporter said as images from the battle were shown. “The footage you’re watching right now is from video taken by witnesses... Police estimates that the number of injured will increase yet without the intervention of both the Avengers and Flash the toll would have been devastating given the busy hour that the attack took place. At the moment there’s no official announcement about the culprit of the attack neither of his demands but eye witnesses speak about a man with strange attire that wore a golden helmet with horns; at some point he engaged in battle with Thor. However what makes the greatest impression and monopolizes the discussion everywhere is why Superman didn’t rush to help: it is definitely something that doesn’t fit him and we know that he wasn’t busy in another corner of the planet. So the main question is: has the Man of Steel any misunderstanding with Avengers and if that so, is it so important to ignore the dire need of innocents?”

Superman watched with gloomy expression seated in front of the TV set in Diana’s living room. That last phrase made his insides clench: Superman wasn’t that selfish to ignore people in danger for the sake of any grudge – especially when there was no grudge...

Diana clapped her hands and the TV closed. She was watching too standing behind the sofa over Superman. She had a smirk curving her beautiful face.

“I told you before that humans are selfish and ungrateful” she said indifferent cocking an eyebrow. “I sense that you are sad about what they are saying...” she walked proudly, stood in front of him and cupped his face with one hand, locking their eyes. “But you shouldn’t: you did nothing wrong.”

Superman crooked his mouth.

“Yeah... As a matter of fact, I didn’t do anything at all...” he pressed his lips. “People died, got injured and I didn’t do anything to help.”

Diana’s gaze was strong and adamant.

“It wasn’t your fault, Kal El: Avengers could have asked your help but they didn’t do it – so it’s their fault that people died. Their arrogance made them believe that they could handle this without your
help and look what happened. All these people talking about your absence don’t know that it was the Avengers’ fault; that they blocked your coming.”

Superman shook his head.

“I should have gone there without their invitation as Flash did…”

Diana cocked her eyebrows.

“Flash acted foolishly – he is too young to understand.”

“Understand what?”

Diana shook her head and smiled.

“Kal El, you are so generous and kind; your greatness can’t even suspect their devious intentions.”

Superman lowered his head, Diana’s words not having the appeasing effect she intended to.

“What matters, Diana, is that people died and they might have not if I had come to their aid” he fixed his eyes on hers. “To people’s aid not Avengers’!” he ran his fingers through his messy hair.

She shook her head exasperated.

“You are an honorable warrior and that makes you ignore what is at stake” Superman looked her frowned and Diana’s eyes became soft but determined. “If you had gone there and helped them won that battle then the Avengers would have established their world rule…” she smirked “as world’s saviors of course…But we both know that they couldn’t be trusted with that role: we both know that they very easily could use that respect and position to something more totalitarian. Do not forget that their director and unofficial leader is Stark, that arrogant, thirsty for power dork: he is easily the smartest of them all and he can guide them into dominating the world for his account. And what about Black Widow? A former cold blooded assassin all of a sudden becoming protector of innocents?” she sniggered. “Consider that green powerful thing…mindless, prone to his teammates’ manipulation.”

Diana smiled seeing Superman’s eyes narrowed, deep in thought. Clark remembered how the League of Shadows had spread its web around the world using the S.H.I.E.L.D. Superman had no more trust to Stark. He raised his eyes to Diana’s face and she caressed his forehead.

“If you have helped them to triumph then you’d have contributed to their rapid increase of power; however, now that the battle ended with heavy toll, the world would never trust their fates to that team of losers” her smile was wide. “And people will continue to accept Superman as their true protector: a king with morals of granite who’d never seek dominance for his egoistic reasons.”

Clark felt charmed as if a powerful, wonderful spell had fell on him making him a better being. Diana was right as always. She made him understand that his absence from New York wasn’t a mistake; was in fact the right thing to do because he pointed to people how wrong it was to trust the Avengers.

He stood and cupped the back of her head, losing himself in the softness of her silken her and her perfume of every flower in the world. He stormed at her lips but she did the same meeting him half way: their collision was mighty and arousing as their hot lips battled violently for sucking each other’s taste.

A ring tone cracked the hot air and Superman closed his eyes realizing that he had forgotten his smart
phone open. Definitely Lois wanting to tell him off...Ugh! That Lois! Always believing that she knows everything!

Diana raised her eyebrows.

“You won’t answer that?” she asked determined. “Maybe it is something important” she smiled. “Go! I won’t go anywhere…”

Superman nodded disgruntled: it was certain that Lois would make him feel worse. However he walked to the bedroom and inhaled deeply.

“Yes, Lois…” he rolled his eyes before she even started.

“Are you crazy? Why you didn’t go to New York? People died, farm boy! People who if you had helped would have been with their families now!”

Clark crooked his mouth and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You don’t understand, Lois; after all, you always respect only your own view of things.”

“What?” the woman was enraged. “MY VIEW OF THINGS?! And what should I have understood other than you turning your fuckin’ ass to innocents screaming for help?!”

“Avengers didn’t ask for my help, Lois! If they wanted me there; if they did care about people they would have called me; but they believed arrogantly that they could make it by themselves – so I’m alright with my decision: that will teach them some humility. You really can see the devious politics of them?”

Lois huffed and rattled her teeth.

“Are you nuts?! Or are you high? You really expected an official invitation?” she laughed but her wrath was such that the laughter was cut sharply. “I bet Flash didn’t wait to be invited...This wasn’t a reception, farm boy: this was an emergency!” she fumed. “Remember when Stark, the arrogant, air head tycoon came to your aid at Metropolis’ attack? You had invited him?”

“That was something else, Lois...Stark did it just to boost himself and his team and only because Bruce would have scolded him.”

“You know, Clark...I think that all these are petty, ridiculous excuses and probably they aren’t even your own words. You’re not yourself, Clark: the man I knew would never have ignored calls for help even to his own death...You’re ruining yourself, farm boy…”

Superman licked his lips and inhaled erasing Lois’ burning words immediately. She was saying all these just to make him feel bad – she never had forgiven him for choosing Diana over Bruce...He frowned remembering suddenly what his colleague had said to him during their last call.

“Did you find out if really something happened in Gotham?”

“Do you care?” she sneered and after a small pause. “Never mind...There’s nothing official but it seems that there was another attack simultaneously with Arkham – Now, fuck off!”

Superman pressed his lips shaking his head: typical Lois! Whenever she doesn’t get what she wants relies on calling names. He shrugged: she’d have to accept him if she wanted to remain Superman’s friend.
He was eager to return to Diana’s waiting body but his damn phone rang again and this time he didn’t think even for a second to ignore it.

“Ma? Is everything alright?” with his stupid remorse about New York’s incident he forgot to monitor his mother’s vitals.

“I think it’s not, Clark” her voice was calm but deeply sad though Superman was hearing that everything was fine with her vitals. “What happened to you, son? It is the second time you didn’t run to someone’s help while you knew the danger…Clark…”

His eyes became blank; hearing his Ma saying that had a greater impact.

“Ma, it would be a mistake if I had gone there; they would have used that to achieve their devious plans.”

“Bollocks!” the old lady shouted and Clark was stunned because he had never heard her like this before. “Your father’s and my greatest fear was that your unique powers would eventually ruin our sweet, good-hearted boy: during his last moments, Jonathan asked me to always protect you from the wrong choices; from being corrupted. And I failed!”

Clark’s heart broke hearing his mother’s trembling, angry voice telling that; her sorrow deep inside, her tears stubbornly kept locked.

“No, Ma, you didn’t fail; your son did the right thing: it might not be clear now but in the long run…”

“Stop the excuses, Clark! You never relied on excuses before…There is only one truth: you first ignored Bruce being in danger and now hundreds of people. People died there, Clark, waiting till their last breath for Superman to save them…” her loud voice broke reaching the end of that phrase.

Clark felt his eyes getting wet: it wasn’t only the gist of that phrase but also the hue of his Ma’s voice. He had promised that he would always make his parents proud of him; he had promised that he’d never let anyone make them cry…and now he…the baby they took in and raised as their own did the very thing he sworn to prevent.

“Ma, please…”

“While you were with Bruce you were helping everyone; you shone like a true sun…now…now you hide the light in you: the light that you permit being little by little put out…I wish I was stronger and better to have managed to protect you…to not lose my only son.”

“Ma, you’re the best in this world. You haven’t lost me; you’d never ever lose me, I’ll be always your son…”

“Then prove it, Clark.”

“How?”

“By stopping using her words as guidance…It is easy for your Ma to distinguish her poison in your words. My Clark would have never stayed away. She poisoned you against helping – she is ruining you, Clark.”

“Ma, no…You’re wrong. Diana wants the best for me…”

He heard a sigh and the dial was cut leaving him empty; cold: he remembered that dream. The dark
void he was hovering in; the despair he was feeling and then the bright star, the only light in the
darkness that surrounded him…He pressed stubbornly his lips to stop that image of the star being
Bruce…

Joker was there. His mind went immediately in frantic function: obviously, Joker and his ally, Loki,
set the trap; suspected that Tony wouldn’t let him go to Arkham and when he left Joker attacked the
Manor. Loki’s power defeated their defenses exactly like during the Avengers’ Tower attack.

He knew he had to act the scared, the panicked but he was angry. Sick of the times he found himself
prisoner of someone and had to pretend the weak; the damsel in distress… but he knew he had to…

He was aware that he was naked above the waist and who knows about the bottom part of his body.
His arms were in pain and discomfort, stretched above his head and tied, one wrist on the other; yet
there was no rope or chain; Bruce frowned. He knew that behind his back was stone: all these years
in Falcone’s cage Bruce had been tied so many times to that stalactite that could easily figure. But
there was no metal or fabric restraining his hands…a realization made him shiver: his wrists were
covered with heavy stone – he wasn’t tied, his wrists were buried in the stone! He had to exert his
self control to not panic from that notion.

And he was blindfolded; the fabric covering his nose.

Leather fingers were touching his abs and Bruce wanted to huff in exasperation yet he just trembled
from fear. Shaking that became greater when he realized that the cold thing in his nipple was sharp
metal which suddenly stabbed gently the flesh drawing some blood. He inhaled scared.

“Uuuuuuu! I could doooo this forever! Cooooounting an’ cooounting those abs” the jester
giggled thrilled. “Greeeeat abs! And thooooose cute, pink nipples….Mmmm!”

Bruce felt a wet, warm mouth gulping his erect from the cold nipple, licking the hot drops of blood;
he jerked backwards resulting in pain that would have been much worse if he didn’t know the way
to protect his body.

“What is it, hoooooney? Didn’t Super-Goofy lick the lollipops?”

Bruce shook a bit his head.

“Wwhat? Where am I? Who are you?”

“Heheheheheheee!” his giggles stopped abruptly and Bruce heard Joker’s head lolling on the side.
“Youuuuu don’t recognize my vooooice? Ooooooh, babe” a leather palm was heard slapping Joker’s
heart in a dramatic gesture “you’re shhhhhhredding my pooor heart in pieces!” the jester lamented
but then a shoulder shrugged “it must be the shock or the sedation aftermath” he commented calm.
“Oooooh! Sorry, I forgot…”

Bruce felt Joker’s fingers approaching his face and then the fabric that covered exactly his eyes was
removed, leaving the rest of the blindfold. Being aware of Joker’s suspicions about Batman it wasn’t
difficult for Bruce to figure out the jester was trying to do.

However, he played the innocent and just looked around scared and curious: he was on his knees,
judging from the way everything around him looked. It was a dudgeon from shining, dark green
stone no bigger than his cage in Dolcetto; it was cast in darkness that was cracked by torches in two
niches at the corners of the walls. There wasn’t any kind of door just stone and Bruce though not
claustrophobic felt a bit distressed.
He could feel Joker’s staring eyes on his face.

“That’s muuuuch better!” the jester exclaimed. “You shouldn’t use those lenses: these eyes must be visible – aaaand I bet your intimidating glare is mooooore effective than the lenses.”

“Joker?” he turned his eyes to jester’s exhilarated face.

“How niiiiice you finally noticed me!” he stood and bowed, only to fell again on his knees.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked passing the lenses mention pretending that he took it for Joker’s usual nonsense. “What do you want?”

Joker lolled his head on the side pouting thoughtful.

“Let’s see…What I want?! Soooooome quality tiime with my beautiful wife?”

The man with the burgundy cape that at times gave Thor the impression that had its own life showed him to a chair before a small round table made from glistening light brown wood.

Thor sat and the man did the same.

“Dr. Strange, I need your help…immediately.”

The man’s features took the hue of amusement and an eyebrow arched.

“It’s very flattering when an Asgardian knows the name of a mere mortal” he said in his deep, bass voice.

Thor’s eyes fell on the man’s hand over the table and Strange smiled.

“Yeah…it’s still a bit shaky at times” he focused his eyes on the hand that went immediately completely still.

Thor felt the urge of the situation pressing him.

“My father Odin knew the Ancient One and through their mutual respect he maintained some knowledge about your…”

Strange smiled, focusing his eyes on the god.

“Cult? This is how one of my former colleagues had called it.”

The blond shook his head.

“I know it’s not a cult but an Order protecting the world.”

“Then we are colleagues” Strange commented looking at him a bit ironically.

Thor felt Strange’s stance like a cold shower: if this was for himself he would have left yet it was for Bruce and it was urgent, every moment passing could be detrimental to him.

“Look, I don’t know your impression of the Avengers and me personally but I do need your help.”

Strange pressed his lips and looked him serious.
“Don’t misjudge my attitude for dislike: is a leftover of my past” he stretched slightly his arms horizontally. “I’m a new person now” he raised his eyebrows “thankfully…I’ll gladly help you if is in my powers.”

Thor nodded.

“I’m sure it is. Have you heard of Loki?”

Strange grinned.

“Some things have reached my ears…He made quite the show in New York, huh?”

Thor fumed.

“I want your help to stop him” Dr. Strange cocked an eyebrow puzzled. “Loki is not a real Asgardian: he might be a god but he also has magical powers” Thor answered the question in Strange’s eyes: the man certainly was wondering why he had come to him. “I was always able to face and defeat him…till now. For months I was trying to locate him in vain…He and his palace are beyond my reach. I’m certain that all these months he increased his powers; and with his new powers assembled the army you saw and I’m afraid more than that…Loki is a threat as all of us just realized.”

Strange nodded.

“You know what Loki wants?”

“Nobody knows” Thor leaned closer “and I don’t really care right now. What burns me is to find him ASAP!”

The man’s gray eyes shone.

“After his defeat he will stay low for some time.”

“We can’t be sure with him and…” he gulped “there is something really urgent.”

Strange frowned.

“Which is?”

Thor pressed his lips and inhaled.

“He holds someone.”

Stephen Strange knitted his fingers.

“A hostage…Whom?”

“Tony Stark’s best friend.”

“Bruce Wayne” he said. “He intends to blackmail Stark, huh?”

“I don’t know his intentions but he works with a human criminal; it was actually this criminal who took Bruce with Loki’s help.”

Dr. Strange lolled slightly his head.
“Who is that criminal?”

“Joker. He has a sick fascination for Bruce and I don’t even want to think what he might be doing to him as we speak. I know that Joker holds Bruce where Loki is located – out of our sight. Probably somewhere between different dimensions” he clenched his fist “and that’s where your assistance is crucial. His palace can’t be found neither by a mere a god nor by a mere mortal: and you are a man with special powers and abilities.”

Strange’s expression was thoughtful and Thor narrowed his eyes.

“Loki’s powers are great. Bruce was in his Manor when Joker attacked: the Manor has the tightest security there is but that doesn’t say anything for Loki’s powers; but what makes me sure about his enhanced powers is that there were other things protecting Bruce.”

Strange raised an eyebrow interested and Thor lowered a bit his eyes.

“I gave him one of my capes and Bruce was keeping it in his room; my garments could protect from Loki’s attacks – till now at least” the man’s clever eyes shone interested. “And Bruce had also Eir’s elixir which is a powerful protecting charm.”

The wizard nodded and waved his hand.

“Which obviously you gave to him…”

Thor closed his eyes for a second.

“Yes, because Bruce is constantly in danger; it’s like all the evil in the world has him in target.”

Strange leaned closer.

“I see that Bruce Wayne is really important to you. What is he to you?” he asked in an almost demanding, playful manner.

Thor locked eyes with him and Strange coughed.

“Sorry…I know I have no right to ask that.”

“He is a great, brave man and I’m honored with his friendship.”

Strange smiled.

“I have heard the man’s story.”

“Then you do understand that we must find him as soon as possible. He is still recovering from multiple injuries” Strange’s eyes became blank for a moment. “He is a paraplegic and he is on complex medication; necessary for sustaining his organism” he sighed “I don’t know how long he can last without proper treatment and under Joker’s madness…”

Strange drummed his fingers on the table and lowered his gaze. Thor eyed him eager, his gaze intense and impatient; he felt that he was losing precious time. He stood.

“You’ll help?”

Dr. Strange raised his eyes and met the god’s determined gaze.

“We will find him.”
Bruce closed his eyes in hopelessness.

“How?” he asked making it clear that he was trying too hard to keep his composure; Joker was looking at him smiling amused. “How you managed…”

Joker cocked his eyebrows mockingly.

“What? Getting you?” he laughed and yanked his head backwards. “Oh! I could have demolisssssshed castles to get to you!” he shook his head. “And actually that I did” he snapped.

Of course…Bruce thought but Joker shouldn’t see that; Bruce should be surprised that Joker managed to overcome Tony’s security measures. It was supposed that he didn’t know about Joker’s partnership with Loki; Joker had to admit that.

“But…there was security all over the place…nobody gets inside…”

Joker lolled his head on the side and watched him with the same amusement.

“Oh…” he dusted his jacket cocking an eyebrow “I don’t want to brag but I have over--come ol’ Tony’s booby traps again in the past so it wasn’t really a problem…”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“You’re a tech expert then?”

Joker began hopping in the dudgeon giggling. In the end squatted again in front of Bruce and grabbed his chin between his fingers.

“No, daaar-ling…I could be a tech freak buuuuuut I’m just a freak; as for expert…mmmmm…I’d say that I’m an aaaally expert…By the way, I love your kitten and he loves me too…” he gestured to the scratches all over his face. “And the fur ball immediately understood that I love scars.”

Now Bruce was really scared; he tried to move but his torso was stretched to its limits and his wrists deep in stone.

“You didn’t…You didn’t kill him?!”

Joker tapped Bruce’s lips with the fingers that were holding his chin.

“Oh, hon--ey! You’re pale…HEHEHEHEEEE…You loooooove that littl’ fur ball, huh?”

“Did you?” he insisted with trembling voice: Bruce wouldn’t stand losing Hero again.

Joker rolled his eyes and left Bruce’s chin to jerk his arms upwards.

“For what kind of monster you have me?”

“The one you are…” Bruce mumbled giving much tremor to his voice but Joker burst out in laughter so much so that he lost his balance and fell on the stony floor.

He rolled in the floor for a bit under Bruce’s exasperated gaze and then stood up taking a serious expression.

“Diiiiignity, Joker!” he said in a gruff voice to himself and shook his index finger to Bruce. “You’ve
gooooooot soooooo much spirit in you…and humor…aaaand cinnamon…uuuuuuuh! I’m a lucky man I married you.”

“You didn’t kill the kitten then?” he asked with hope.

“Noooooope! I looooove animals after all…Bats for instance…”

Bruce let his head loll on the shoulder tired but relieved that Hero was alive.

“You sent me a tree full with killed bats for Christmas.”

Joker pouted.

“I sent a card” he said dignified “they were mmm…impostors -defilers…I want only one bat in my sky” he twitched his eyebrows indicatively.

Bruce inhaled deeply.

“And why you sent that to me?”

Joker giggled and tapped his finger on Bruce’s chest.

“You don’t know, huh?” he dragged more his nasal voice.

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Am I supposed to know?”

Joker lollled his head on the side and looked at him curious.

“Batsy, let’s talk with open cards” he conjured a joker card from his sleeve; he had sketched a heart with red paint; inside it read ‘J loves B’…

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“What?”

Joker yanked his head backwards exasperated and leaned to Bruce’s ear.

“I know who you are…an’ I ap---prove. Actually, I’m thrilled I’m married with nooooone other thaaaaaan…” he put his palm as if he was going to share a secret “Baaaaatman!”

Bruce yanked his head and Joker managed at the last moment to hold it before hitting the stone.

“I’m not!” Bruce said with widened eyes. “How is it possible?” he writhed on the cold stone. “I’m not!”

Joker held him firmer to quench his resistance and licked his lips.

“Eaaaaasy, babe…” he caressed the fabric that covered Bruce’s half face. “I had much time to observe you with half your face covered and noooooow with your eyes uncovered: it matches.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No…faces can resemble each other.”

Joker smiled stretching his scars to a full Cheshire smile.
“Aaaaand then I stripped you…” Bruce panicked tried to look at his body’s lower half since he
couldn’t feel its state; Joker giggled. “I admit that it was a greeeeeat temptation to unwrap my
presents yet I wanted you to be fully conscious foooor that. Anyway, I took off your beautiful shirt
and I had the pleasure to goggle and droooool at your goooodgeous torso…Ooooh, boy!
That Falcone was a very lucky bastard! Soooooo taut and sooooooft…Sooooo perfectly toooooned,
exactly as my Batsy should be.”

“No, you’re wrong…”

Joker stabbed his finger to the big scar that crossed Bruce’s stomach and looked pointedly at his
prisoner.

“I remember this veeeery well – I did that to you.”

Bruce breathed heavily and closed his eyes.

“Falcone did that…”

“No!” Joker roared angry. “The first time I saw your naked torso when I was still Napier you didn’t
have that scar; then I stabbed Batman and the next time I had you half naked…voila! The scar!”

“You must remember wrong…I have this scar years…”

Joker was enraged; raised his hand and slapped violently Bruce whose head ended up on his
shoulder. Bruce began breathing fast and heavily, panicked; his body shook.

“Myyyyy memory is notorious as another member of my deielicious body…lower.”

“Please…” he whispered and Joker cupped violently his face with both hands and made him look
him in the eyes.

“Stop pretending that you’re scared of me! I know you’re not! You’re boiling with anger Grrrrrr! C’m’mon! Cut the act! Giive a bit of grrrrrr to me…”

Bruce was trying to shake his head in the negative.

“Stop, please…”

But Joker tightened his grip and kissed crudely Bruce’s lips licking the blood his slap had left on the
corner.

“Beeeeeee yourself with me, Batsy…I won’t kiss and tell…” he said completely serious keeping his
eyes fixed on Bruce’s. “I’m craaazaazy for the beaten kitten that hides a tiger!”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Please, let me go…I’ll give you whatever you want…just…” he stopped talking as if his courage
had run out.

Joker released his face and stood staring at Bruce who let his head fall to his chest breathing fast.

“I’ve got one uni--que bat in the cage: I’d be an idiot if I let the bat go…”

“How could I be Batman?” Bruce mumbled without raising his head. “I can’t even walk…”

Joker smiled.
“Exactly, babe…” he said exerting his nasal voice. “That night at the factory…”

Bruce lifted his head and narrowed his eyes.

“What factory?”

Joker lolled his head on the side.

“I should believe that you don’t remember or that you weren’t there?” Bruce closed his eyes.

“I don’t know what you are talking about…”

“I had asked for you and Batsy to come meet me there oooor I’d kill those brats…Hehehehe” he chuckled amused on the memory. “Of course, oooooone of you would have been enough, right? And Batsy did come.”

“I was in the clinic, injured.”

Joker giggled.

“You found a way to overcome that and cooooome” Bruce sighed exasperated. “Heheheeeee! The puuuuuurfect cover – you play these things in your long, lean fingers – but you can’t fooooooool Joker: your husband. You came an’ saved the brats but you didn’t estimate that I’d have a secret ace: that brat Grayson. You fought me to save him and that doooooork Lou shot starting a fire: you took me out of danger – oh! Daaaaaarling, you do love me, huh?” he blinked cutely. “Theeeeeeen you saved that brat but you didn’t manage to leave the building on time; the roof collapsed on you” Bruce’s eyes were widened and Joker’s voice became serious. “You’d have died there but Super-Goofty saved you – huh? I’m saying it right? But your spine was shattered rendering you paraplegic” his voice was strangely serious.

Bruce shook his head.

“I?” he asked puzzled.

Joker surged on him and grabbed his face.

“You!”

“But…”

Joker nodded nervously.

“I knooooow… I knooooow…Batsy is active even after that night…Buuuuut” his Cheshire smile cracked his face “your friend is Tony-fucking-Stark: he definitely found a way for you to be able to appeaaaar so that nobody puts one and one together, huh?”

“You are crazy…” Bruce mumbled.

Joker shook his head and casually bit the tip of his glove and removed it, repeating the same with his other hand.

“Nooooooo, I’m not” he lolled his head “Well, I am; but you can’t fool me, babe…By the way, that Lou…I should have killed him loooooong ago” he scratched his head “I must keep some sticky notes… youuuuu know all over the fridge – I must find little magnets with Batsy on them…”

All of a sudden, he took his blade that had remained on the floor and touched it to Bruce’s cheek;
Bruce took a sharp inhale and his eyes widened.

“Please…”

Joker touched the blade on Bruce’s lips.

“Shssssss…” he licked his lips and took the black fabric off of Bruce’s face. “Who would think that that cowl hides such a pretty, cute face…Hehe! Definitely, not Falc--one, huh?” he bit his lips. “Mmm…time for soooooome fuuuuuun at laaaaaast!”

Black smoke swirled under Darkseid’s unimpressed eyes and Bagdana emerged in front of his ally’s enormous granite throne; the tornadoes engraved in the stone began twisting.

“You called me” the demon said indifferent eyeing the new god.

“You saw what happened at New York?” Darkseid asked slyly.

“I saw.”

“The Avengers stopped that army.”

“I'm aware of that.”

Darkseid smirked.

“But they had very difficult time stopping that clown-god. Their Tower was breached and controlled by their enemy’s power…and they couldn’t break his spells.”

It wasn’t difficult for Bagdana to discern the irony in his ally voice neither the hints. And he really didn’t have the patience for the arrogant god’s bullshit.

“What do you want, Darkseid?”

Darkseid’s eyes became angry.

“Someone broke the spells and gave them the chance to regain their Tower’s control.”

“So?”

“I know you did it.”

Bagdana knew that there was no use to deny it and he had no reason to do so.

“So?” he repeated cocking an eyebrow; his naked torso shone with heat through the voids his black leather vest; the ancient demon was enraged.

Darkseid clenched the armrests.

“How do you expect me to trust someone who helps my enemies?” he ground his teeth.

Bagdana laughed.

“Helped?” he shook his head. “I thought you smarter than that” actually, Bagdana thought the new god no smart at all.
Darkseid smirked.

“So you want to tell me that there is a deeper reason you did that than helping the humans who were in danger?”

Bagdana rolled his eyes disgusted.

“Only hearing that disgusts me…”

Darkseid raised his eyebrows and pursed his plump lips.

“It seems that loving that mortal pest made you more sensitive to humans.”

Bagdana knitted his eyebrows and fume was emitted from his nostrils; his silver spikes radiating sparks all over his head.

“I only care for Bruce: I don’t give a damn about humans! They have given me only…” pain? A demon couldn’t feel pain, could he?

Darkseid snorted and stood.

“Then explain to me this treachery!”

“What treachery! Can’t you see what happened? A petty god was ready to squash the Avengers and dominate the world: if nobody had stopped him your glory would have been dimmed. A petty god taking what is rightfully yours? He ought to be defeated just for his arrogance to claim what is yours. Besides his deeds might have ruined the effectiveness of your machine’s operation. I didn’t betray you: on the contrary, I protected your best interest.”

Darkseid smirked; his sneaky eyes shouting his doubt.

“You’re a cunning demon, Bagdana; after all, this was the reason I saved you from your prison…I’m not sure you’re saying the truth – your mind is well shut as your human’s” his expression became grimmer when he remembered Bruce. “Do not think that you can fool me…” his eyes turned to the fire inside the vessel in front of his throne.

Scenes from New York’s battle revived between the flames.

“Thanks to that foolish Asgardian I got the chance to watch my enemies…Superman was absent: that says a lot for his power and will: his superiority is collapsing and I shall squash him between my fingers!” he clenched his square fingers under Bagdana’s I-don’t-give-a-shit gaze. “I just hope for your own good that when the time comes you will have proved yourself worthy and escape my judgement…otherwise the fate of yourself and your pet’s will be horrific!”

Bagdana stretched his body unfazed.

“If you finished I have some matters to attend.”

Darkseid cocked an eyebrow.

“Betraying me again?”

Bagdana looked at him dead serious and then grinned.

“I have always your best interest as my priority. My Lord…”
Darkseid snorted but Bagdana made a deep bow and vanished.

With one hand Joker pressed the blade to Bruce’s cheek and with the other fondled his prisoner’s naked chest; his painted lips captured violently Bruce’s sucking and licking, moaning as his hands appreciated Bruce’s taut flesh.

Bruce felt his breath being cut not only from the force of the motion but also from disgust; he tried weakly to take his face but the blade dinged his skin threateningly. Joker touched his cheek to Bruce’s and their eyes collided.

“You gaaaaave that abundantly to Supes but not to your husband?” he hissed in a low voice and licked Bruce’s cheek.

Some sweat drops spurt all over Bruce’s face.

“I didn’t have anything with Super…” his phrase was cut abruptly by a sharp, scared intake of air as Joker’s blade cut slightly his flesh.

Joker sucked the blood on Bruce’s skin.

“Maybe I should give you aaaaara permanent smiiiiile…then you’ll be forced to stop lying about who you are…” the blade left abruptly Bruce’s face but he couldn’t breathe easier having Joker’s face on his cheek and his leathered hand squeezing his nipple sadistically; his breath became faster as Joker’s blade caressed his torso going slowly, sensually lower.

He stopped feeling the metal when it reached his waist but he heard the sound of fabric being ripped; his trousers and his underwear. The blood drummed inside his head.

“Don’t…” he whispered meeting his captor’s eye.

Joker answered sucking his cheek and pinching viciously his nipple.

“I waited toooooooooo much for our first night, Brucie-Bats…Doooon’t be afraid, hon: I won’t do to you something you haven’t experienced yet…although…not that I want to brag…buuuuuut I’m a sex bomb…”

Bruce jerked backwards meeting the stone and Joker let his nipple to fist his hair; he mouthed Bruce’s lips pushing his wet tongue deep inside. Bruce could hear the sound of Joker’s other hand and he knew that the jester was fondling his paralyzed length; nausea boiled in his stomach and he had to recruit his training to calm himself into stop the room from spinning.

“I’m jeaaaaalously, Brucie-Batsy…” he mumbled keeping Bruce’s lips trapped. “You see my hair?” he lowered a bit his head for Bruce to see. “I don’t have to dye them anymore: they are green from jealousy…”

Bruce pretended that was unsuccessfully trying to control his quick breath.

“I told you…I don’t have anything with S…”

Joker took out of his pocket a black velvet pouch and Bruce’s eyes widened: it was the Black Butterfly! He looked down to his chest and was gone.

“It’s his present?” Joker demanded.
“No” Bruce answered “please, give it back…”

The jester opened the pouch and took out the sparkling dark gem under Bruce’s gaze that he managed to turn into scared hiding the anger.

“Uuuuuu! Seems tooooo priceyyyyy…”

“If it’s for money I’ll give you whatever you want but don’t get it from me…”

Joker lolled his head curious.

“Whyyyyyy? Why is it so preeeeeeecocious to you? A suvenir from another lover?”

Bruce inhaled deeply and looked him in the eyes though with a flickering of fear.

“It was my mother’s…” he mumbled. “Please…”

Joker scratched his head, crooked his mouth and in the end put the pendant around Bruce’s neck patting the pouch over his prisoner’s chest.

“It fits you puuuuuurfectly, Bbbbatsy…Black, hard, shining an’ prooooud…Heheheheeee…Mommy had a hunch about her baby, huh?”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I told you: you’re wrong…”

Joker’s mouth engulfed Bruce’s and the disgusting tongue invaded again furiously choking him, licking the warm cavities of his mouth while the wet sounds of Joker’s both hands now reached Bruce from his non-feeling pelvis.

Bruce saw Joker’s eyes closing in pleasure and the healthy part of his spine shivered feeling the man’s erection on his belly.

“Oooooh! It feels fan---tastic even with the fingers…sooooo warm and soft…like velvet ooooor chocolate…melt chocolate…inviting…I can’t wait shoving Jokey there” he cast a fleeting glance to his bulging groin “hehehehe…neither does he…” he pouted “c’mon, babe; don’t be soooooo shyyyyy! Ooooooh! You’re driving me crazy: brutal and shy on the same packet…UuuuuuH! Meeeeecery!”

“Please, don’t do that…”

Joker bit hard Bruce’s bottom lip and his prisoner sobbed because all of a sudden he felt pain in his anus as Joker shoved three fingers deep inside. The jester smiled satisfied.

“Soooooo it’s true what they say…Paraplegics do feel when are fucked…Now it’s more fan-----tastic! Uhuuuuuuu!” and then he became dead serious bringing the hand that was rubbing Bruce’s length to his prisoner’s face. “Do you like your own smell?”

Bruce tried to averse his face but Joker withdrew the hand from his prisoner’s inside and fist his hair forcing him to breathe his smell from Joker’s wet hand. The younger man closed his eyes defeated while Batman inside him growled.

Joker watched him curious and a bit sympathetic; in the end, he smelled his fingers and groaned with pleasure; he petted his prisoner’s sweaty cheek.
“I don’t want to torment you like the others did…” he whispered.

“But you do…” Bruce commented in a voice that was just heard between his ragged breaths.

“You’re a tremendous actor, you know…Buuuuuut I get the feeling that you doooooo suffer…Look at me!” he growled and Bruce’s wet eyes opened. “I’m very angry you took that brat in your house!” he shouted.

Bruce narrowed his eyes confused.

“Leave Richard out of this…He has nothing to do with this” he mumbled trembling.

“You almost died for him an’ now you have him live with you…I haaaaate it! Whyyyyyyy he an’ nooooot me?!! Huh?!!”

Bruce lifted his head and Joker caressed the sweat drenched locks that had fallen to his forehead.

“He has done nothing to you; he has suffered enough…” Bruce said.

Joker stood his erection bulging.

“I under--stand that at some point the need to have a child becomes pppppressing” he said in a mocking scientific attitude. “Yet if you wanted a child you should have come to me” he moved his eyebrows suggestively with his eyes showing his erection. “I’m fertility in flesh and blood!” he stretched his arms in the air.

Bruce rolled his eyes inside. Joker pouted and kneeled again before Bruce taking his blade from the floor.

“Of course, there’s a tiiiiiny problem: you lack sooooome…mmm…necessary equipment” he touched his blade to Bruce’s taut belly and giggled. “Otherwise by now this world would have been filled with beauuuuuuutiful babies – if they didn’t have Falcone’s ugly pan” his face distorted in aversion “Eeeeek!”

Bruce’s mind went to his dreams of the possible lost child but shook himself because Joker was already watching him curious behind his green curls.

“You’re a bit melan--cholic, huh? Time to lighten uuup your spirits!”

“No…” Bruce said realizing Joker’s intention.

But Joker grabbed both his thighs and spread them grinning broadly to Bruce’s blank gaze; he lowered his own pants and underwear ready to thrust in his prisoner.

“A smaaaaaaaall motion for Joooookey a laaaaarge screw for Joker…”

But all of a sudden a voice called his name and Joker yanked his head backwards, rolling his eyes and huffed.

“You’re…joooooking nooow!”

Loki’s voice echoed again like in the long tunnel calling him and stood up looking amused at his hungry erection.

“Down, boy, dooooomown…You’ll eat later” he brushed his erection on Bruce’s chest and soon his fluids splashed the wall making Bruce’s nausea torturing as he recalled the times Falcone had used
his body to jerk off. “Ooooops! Pre----mature ejaculaaation?” he frowned. “Don’t get disappointed, babe: it’s just performance anxiety.”

Bruce would have said some nice things to him that had learnt hearing Falcone’s thugs but stayed silent shaming from fear and cold.

Joker zipped his pants and moved to the wall opposite Bruce and a part of the stone shaped like a door vanished waiting Joker to walk out. The jester lolled his head backwards.

“Stayyyyy liiiike this, babe: with open legs, mmm…” he licked his lips like a cow. “Doooooon’t try to untie yourself…I bet the big baaaaaad bat knows many tricks to escape. Buuuuuut these shackles are magic: the more you try to mooove your hands the stone will preeeeess them moooore” he winked and walked out the door that just appeared giving its place to concrete stone.

Pepper walked slowly in the dark vastness of Tony’s penthouse in Gotham. Everyone was looking for her boss: Nick Fury, Steven, Alfred and Leslie who despite their worry for Bruce were equally scared for Tony. Jarvis was unavailable even for her.

She was fuming: not only because of Tony’s hide and seek game at this crucial point but also because he shut her off. At the same time she was worried for that stupid air head: she didn’t know what had happened but she was certain that it had to do with Bruce’s kidnap.

She had a hunch that he would be there but the penthouse was creepily silent and dark as if haunted.

“Jarvis!” she called but as she expected no answer. “Tony!”

Nothing…She huffed exasperated. If Tony was here there was only one room where he would be at his difficult hour. She took the lift and felt relief that at least the descent wasn’t blocked too.

When the doors opened she was greeted by the bluish hue of Tony’s several working holograms; some of them was flooded with constantly renewed data and others giving different points of view of what Pepper recognized as Bruce’s damaged spine; the bionic parts hovering around the spine constantly taking their places as if in a puzzle and then getting removed to be adjusted in perfect detail.

At the far end stood gloomy the three different Ironman armors that Tony had in Gotham. She walked there bypassing the holograms that covered the whole view; but Pepper already knew what else was there.

Tony stood before the classic version of the armor, at the far right staring at the empty sell with eyes bloodshot and emptier than the alloy. A bottle of whiskey almost empty was clenched in his hand and Pepper took in more empty bottles around his feet.

“They weren’t full…” Tony said gruff reading her mind. “Can you leave now?”

Pepper walked closer and crossed her arms.

“No!” she retorted determined her eyes fixed on Tony’s; the billionaire chuckled, lifted the bottle and drunk a large quantity at once under his assistant’s pissed gaze. “Are you content now you drank that thing?” she asked snidely.

He didn’t answer just looked at his armor.
“Peps, leave now…”

“You wish, buster!” she grabbed the bottle off of his hand and shattered it on the second armor causing a slight flickering in Tony’s eyes; she crooked her mouth. “What? Don’t tell me your alloy is so weak?”

Tony thought that she was going to add “like you” but she didn’t. He strode calm at the mini bar he had in his workshop and took another bottle. But Pepper followed him so when he turned found her in front of him.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

He cocked his eyebrow and shrugged without his old playful mood.

“Boozing…”

“You don’t help Bruce that way…” she touched the invisible elephant in the room and Tony shivered.

He ruffled his messy locks and went to his working bench, his back on Peppers.

“I never helped him in any way…” he said hoarsely. “I didn’t help him eighteen years in Falcone’s captivity; I didn’t help him when that fucking factory fell on him almost killing him…and now…I bestowed him to Joker…”

Pepper came closer and placed her hands on his shoulders.

“I felt that something was off when I spoke with Alfred but the man was just worried about you and didn’t mention anything.”

Tony smirked and shook his head.

“Worried about me?” he huffed. “Oh, Al…”

“Listen, Tony, if you had another petty argument with Bruce, you know that these things…”

Tony turned swiftly to her, his eyes shining angrily not for her but himself.

“I used Ironman’s stunning beam on him, Peps!” she should know. “I stunned and left him unconscious in his bedroom!”

Pepper continued looking at him as if waiting for him to say more.

“We knew that Joker was to attack Arkham and we were going to bust him – from the start I tried to persuade him to not go there but when Joker finally made his move, Bruce insisted on wearing the armor and going; I block his way saying that I wouldn’t let him but he retorted that I couldn’t stop him and he stood…” he inhaled deeply. “I believed that I had no other choice and shot him with my stunning beam; I thought he’d be safe in the Manor” he closed his eyes and shook his head. “I was selfish; I wanted him to do what I thought was the best and I doomed him…I was afraid that if he went there he would be captured and once again abused – I thought I was right! But that bastard clown knew how I was going to act and with Loki set the trap… I managed exactly what I wanted to stop…His sobs and the pleadings were constantly on my mind: I wanted to stop this from happening again…And now this fuckin’ monster has him at his mercy…and Joker has no mercy…”

“Do you expect from me to comfort you?”
Tony licked his lips.

“No, I don’t deserve that; I condemned Bruce; I gave him to Joker.”

“You didn’t. You just make a mistake but sitting here getting wasted doesn’t change anything! Selina is out there looking for Bruce; your comrades as well; we have lost Thor’s traces but I’m sure he searches too. And you sit here and weep! This is preposterous, Tony!”

Tony shook his head.

“Maybe it’s better if I don’t do anything: whatever I do concerning Bruce causes him more troubles.”

Pepper raised her hand and slapped him; Tony looked at her startled.

“From the moment Bruce came back you whine that he was tortured while you were drinking and partying and fucking without searching for him! And now that he needs you again, what are you doing? You sit here drinking and whining like a brat and again don’t do anything to help him!”

Tony was staring at her.

“When Bruce comes back – because we know Bruce and he will make it again! – what will you do then? Pitying yourself for being inert throughout the whole ordeal? Alfred and Leslie have their agony for Bruce and you make them worry even more with your whims! Don’t look at me with that stupid, totally un-Starkish way! You were discussing everything with Bruce: if you put your air-filled mind to work you’ll remember things and find leads!”

She clenched her waist with both hands, yanked her head and groaned.

“First, you find Bruce and bring him back safe and then you’ll have plenty of time to kneel before him and beg him for forgiveness for the rest of your life. Tony Stark, I’m going to slap you again if you don’t move your sorry iron ass to look for Bruce!” she raised again her hand.

Tony smiled tired but with a sparkle that encouraged Pepper and himself. He took her raised hand and kissed the knuckles.

“You’d be right to slap me again, Peps: Bruce needs me and there are things Bruce told me that I can use” he cocked his eyebrow and pursed his lips. “This time slap my other cheek because you girls slap always the same cheek – Selina slapped me too and you two have really strong hands.”

Joker crossed the shining marble isle that led to Loki’s throne hall; as he entered the hall he cast a glance at the round fountain where piranhas swam calmly and sent them kisses. He hopped to meet his ally looking appreciatively the naked statues that formed the columns around the room.

“Brucie’s body is better, assholes!”

Loki was pacing with his arms crossed over his upper arms; he was still wearing his golden horned helmet and Joker chuckled.

“Niiiiice touch!” he said pointing at the horns “but the coooolor…” he crooked his lips “gold is a bit kitsch” he lolled his head on the side and studied the god. “Mmm…things didn’t go as you wanted?” he patted him in the back under Loki’s pissed eyes. “Shiiiiit happens to anyone…” he pouted “except than me of course.”
Loki squinted.
“Your humor sucks, you know that?”

Joker’s smile was huge.


Loki rolled his eyes.

“Of course: we’re not finished. I’ll be back!”

“Huhuhuuuuu! Like Terminator? Someone’s a cinephile…”

Loki lowered a bit his head deep in thought.

“They had help – someone broke my spells… otherwise they wouldn’t have a chance.”

Joker nodded.

“Who am I to contra---dict youuuuu?”

“How’s our guest?”

“Great! Brucie woke up and we had a heartwarming reunion.”

Loki rolled his eyes.

“Woke up? You sedated him to bring him here?”

“No, actually, I found him ready for shipping…our Tony not only locked myyyy sleeping beauty but also he put him to sleep so to keep him safe in the Manor.”

Loki smirked; his sneaky eyes blazing.

“Exactly, as we predicted! Stupid Stark! Now, I feel that I’m the true victor!”

Joker cocked his eyebrows.

“Or Victoria…” he shrugged.

“What?”

“This is a…film quiz, right?”

Loki fumed and rolled his eyes pissed.

“Anyway…As long as I have his best friend in my grasp then I hold Stark and my dear brother from the balls. And of course what happened in New York won’t be the last…”

Joker narrowed his eyes annoyed.

“Brucie is mine” he hissed in a low, evil voice.

But Loki leaned to him and met his eyes with equal determination.
“You have Bruce down there thanks to me: weren’t for me you wouldn’t even have gotten near him. So don’t forget who I am and the magnitude of my power.”

An enormous Cheshire smile stretched Joker’s lips. The jester patted his jacket over the place of his inside pocket and noise from the things there was heard causing Loki’s interest.

“I don’t forget that, Loki” Joker said amused but with eyes icy still patting the place of his inside pocket confidently. “Noooooow, if you’ll excuse me – frankly, I dooooon’t give a shit if you excuse me… I must feed my caged little bird!”

He began prancing out of the hall.

“IIIIII…I got you, baaaaabe…” his nasal voice echoed through the halls.

Loki shook his head: he didn’t trust much that jester but he didn’t have anything to fear from that idiot: he was a god and when penetrating Joker’s mind he found only mayhem and disorder. Joker wasn’t a threat to him; just a pawn to his board.
Chapter 68

“How long can he last without his medication?”

Alfred’s composed voice cracked the death silence of the kitchen; for an outsider this voice would have seemed emotionless yet for Leslie who was standing supporting her back on the built-in stainless steel closet fridge it was anything but that.

The butler stood in front of the big window over the sink and gazed at the dark grounds but only seemingly. On his right, lay on the black granite counter the crystal bowl with the pile of pills Bruce was taking at this time of the day.

Leslie could discern in her friend’s low voice the almost inaudible crack and the hidden agony. She detached from the fridge and walked to him placing her hand on his shoulder and Alfred looked at her, his eyes calm as ever trying to hide his internal suffering.

“Bruce has been inoculated so he isn’t in danger from most viruses. Also, a satisfying amount of recovering time has passed from the accident so his organism’s resilience is enhanced. Missing some of his medication dosages won’t be detrimental…”

“However this cannot be extended much, right?”

Leslie couldn’t lie; she pressed her lips.

“No, it can’t be much” she inhaled “but our Bruce is strong and his friends are out there looking for him.”

Alfred shook his head and his hand hovered over the pills with almost tenderness.

“It is so unfair, Leslie…Not even a year has passed since the boy gained his freedom and people don’t seem to give him a tiny break to enjoy what he hard earned and heal his wounds properly…It is like the life constantly snarls at him that…” he didn’t have the heart to articulate his thought.

But Leslie understood: life seemed to snarl at their boy that he wasn’t meant to be happy or even live...The fearless doctor locked eyes with her friend.

“It is unfair…” she agreed “our boy is special, unique and we know that scum is drawn to anything that shines…”

Alfred yanked his head and his eyes were lost in the vastness of the Palisades.

“Sometimes I wish that Master Bruce wasn’t so special just for being happy… I’m afraid, Leslie” he turned his eyes to her “I dread to imagine what this horrible man can do to him… I wish that Joker had taken me along so that I could tend to Master Bruce.”

Leslie caressed her friend’s cheeks.

“Bruce wouldn’t want that, Alfred; maybe if what you wish had happened things would have been worse for him… We’ll take him back.”

He pressed his lips and nodded.

“I’m worried about Master Anthony too; he has disappeared and I’m sure he feels guilty about what happened.”
Leslie cocked her eyebrows; Alfred had told her about how Tony stunned Bruce.

“I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes right now…He had the best intentions but he did something wrong and to make matters worse the outcome was the opposite of what he hoped. I hope he realizes that he isn’t responsible for Joker’s deeds…” she shook her head.

Alfred nodded.

“I should go upstairs to see if the crew Lucius sent to fix the wall needs anything” he said nonchalant but as he moved towards the arc leading to the corridor Dick ran to him with Hero in his hands still restless after Bruce’s kidnap; Jason following.

Alfred looked at the boys with sympathy: he didn’t get the chance to ask what exactly happened and they came immediately after Selina. Dick released Hero who rubbed to Alfred’s legs as if he wanted to comfort him.

“Alfred, it’s all my fault” Dick said in one breath raising his eyes to meet the butler’s. “I’m sorry…”

Alfred shook his head and Leslie came closer interested.

“Nonsense, Master Richard” Alfred said kindly to the boy who closed his eyes exasperated.

“Jason had heard Joker’s goons discussing that Joker would attack Arkham and told me” Jason nodded affirming. “But I” Dick bit his bottom lip “I chose to go to Arkham…”

“May I ask the reason, sir?”

The boy averted his gaze and huffed.

“To kill Joker!” he said through gritted teeth.

Alfred placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

“If I may, Master Richard, that was foolish: first, you positioned yourself and Master Jason to a grave danger going there – we are very fortunate that you two are unharmed; second, by killing someone you never gain anything, on the contrary the complications just make matters worse” the boy watched Alfred carefully and the butler smiled kindly. “Nevertheless it isn’t your fault that Master Bruce was taken: Joker attacked the Manor not the Arkham Asylum.”

Jason crossed his arms.

“That’s true, man…” he pointed to his friend.

Suddenly, it dawned to Dick.

“That funny guy that pretended Joker in Arkham said that it was easy to guess Stark’s plan to keep Bruce away from there – how did Stark knew that Joker will be in the Asylum?”

Alfred saw the curiosity and suspicion glimmering in both boys’ eyes and shared a sideways glance with Leslie.

“Master Bruce was meeting with Dr. Strange so it was certain that someone would see him and the word would reach Joker so Master Anthony had people watching the Asylum just in case” Alfred managed to explain. “Now, I believe that it is time for both of you to have a light supper; Master Jason, would you do us the favor and stay for the night?”
Jason cocked his eyebrows smugly.

“Master Jason…” he mimicked Alfred’s thick English accent and Leslie chuckled. “Wow! Call me Jay, Alfie. Mmm…I’ll call mom.”

Dick noticed something on the shining surface of the long black kitchen island. He moved there with knitted eyebrows and both Leslie and Alfred watched him touching Bruce’s Cosmos tablet that Alfred had brought there to not be seen by the police that had done forensic work in the bedroom some hours ago.

“Is anything the matter, Master Richard?” Alfred asked.

“This is Wayne’s smart phone?”

“But of course, sir, why?”

Dick gave a tight smile.

“Nothing…” he walked to Jason who met his eyes with a knowing expression. “Will be at my room till the supper is ready…” he grabbed his friend and ran out of kitchen under the two adults’ frown, Hero at their heels.

“You saw that tablet?” he asked Jayson as soon as they entered his bedroom and he closed the door after letting Hero hop inside.

The younger boy nodded.

Dick rushed to his neglected backpack and opened it to take out his tablet. He turned to Jason.

“It’s like mine…”

Jason cocked an eyebrow, crooked his mouth and came closer.

“Maybe he saw yars, got jealous an’ bought one?” he asked sarcastic and Dick lolled his head on the side exasperated.

“Very funny!”

“I told ya from the start that this thingy wasn’t on the market when yar granny gave it to ya…An’ still it’s not in stores though…I’ve seen some posters an’ ads in the net…It’s brand new…from Wayne Enterprises…” he pouted.

Dick shook his head and eyed his tablet.

“Maybe I’m wrong – maybe it’s not the same…”

Jason came closer.

“Or maybe the guy wanted ya to have the newest model an’ gave it to yar granny tellin’ her not say anythin’ ‘bout him…” he twitched his eyebrows for emphasis and Dick averted his eyes to look at Hero who was pacing nervously probably having remembered his missing human.

Many conflicting things twirled in his mind: his granny’s words, Tony’s warm presence that all of a sudden started to emanate things that made Dick numb with cold, Wayne’s stoic stance…so many things had happened that doubted everything he knew and believed till then. It was so overwhelming that he needed to stop thinking and just let things unfold.
Jim took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose; he was still at his office in MCU reading reports from officers all over Gotham looking for Joker. There was nothing; he raised his eyebrows…of course.

Alfred Pennyworth had explained to him the unbelievable way the criminal had vanished from the Manor with Bruce Wayne. In other case, Jim wouldn’t have believed him but what happened at Arkham reaffirmed the man’s sayings; not to mention that overcoming Stark’s security measures certainly would demand something, well, beyond common.

Jim had distrust for magic or god-like beings: not that he didn’t like Superman, Thor or the rest of extraordinary beings that had entered human ordinary life – yet the existence of these benevolent heroes meant that major threats of the same powers could be out there too. And frankly, humankind had already suffered enough from human criminals: thinking of a god helping Joker was at least disconcerting.

He shook his head: how could Gotham’s police help Bruce and his loved ones against this? Certainly they were doing the best they could yet Jim had to admit that they had to rely on Tony Stark’s super powered friends – though after the attack in New York they certainly had their hands full.

The Commissionaire felt guilt about the Wayne heir: not only he had been unable to protect him but also Gotham’s police had failed to make any progress in finding the grandmother of Wayne’s charge. He had read a report a few hours ago with no development in that case: it was as if the earth had swallowed the old lady. On the other hand, if she was dead they would have found a body by now…

At least, Tony Zucco’s case was in the DA’s hands and from what they discussed there were enough evidence to build a strong case.

“I just want to see the Commissionaire!”

Jim frowned and stood from his chair; he walked to the door listening to his officer dispute with a woman. He opened the door.

“Pete, let her come” and when the woman was close enough “how can I help you, Miss Lane? We just had a briefing about the attack at Arkham.”

Lois nodded and looked Gordon in the eyes with a shine that Jim didn’t like.

“I know, Commissionaire but something else happened in Gotham, right?”

“Miss Lane…” he said calm.

Lois arched an eyebrow.

“Police is guarding the Wayne Estate…something happened to Bruce Wayne, right?” she asked almost demanding but also with a hue of worry in her voice. “I have heard some rumors” she whispered but Jim’s expression remained neutral denying her a clue.

“We would have made an announcement if something had happened” he made to turn to his office; they had decided to not announce anything yet on Wayne’s kidnap.

“Commissionaire” Lois said calm but determined “I understand that you want to keep it secret…I’m not here as a reporter but as Bruce’s friend.”
Jim looked at her.

“I give you my word that everything you tell me will stay between us and I won’t harass Bruce’s loved ones… but I’m worried” the young woman continued serious.

Jim was looking her in the eyes estimating her honesty.

“While Mr. Stark was at Arkham Joker breached the Manor and took Mr. Wayne” he confirmed her suspicions.

“Damn!” Lois exclaimed through gritted teeth.

Jim nodded.

“Excuse me, Miss Lane” he mumbled and walked opposite her to the waiting room’s exit where Lieutenant Bullock was waiting for him.

Lois noticed the way the two men exchanged some words seemingly indifferent and then left; she was sure that those nonchalant words were for something important and felt bad for Jim Gordon that had so many emergencies to face at once…but the man was used to this and absolutely the best for this work.

Her first instinctive urge was to take out her smart phone and call Clark to inform him about Bruce. But she closed her eyes and sighed disappointed.

It was futile: she knew that Superman wouldn’t come and though she was tireless in giving him Hell…she was very tired of being constantly disappointed by her friend and her hero being so indifferent…

Bruce looked around free from Joker’s presence: definitely, a dudgeon and judging from the magic around, some building belonging to Loki – maybe his palace; Thor had told him that he couldn’t locate the mischievous god. Naturally, since Loki was preparing something along with Joker. And Bruce had a suspicion that the attack at Arkham and the Manor wasn’t the only.

His eyes fell on the stone ground: Joker had let there his stuff, the blade with Bruce’s blood still on it and the black blindfold. He pressed his lips – Joker’s belief that he was Batman was so solid that rational arguments wouldn’t do anything. After all, the jester didn’t care about logic.

Looking at the items, with the corner of his eyes caught a glimpse of his own body, bare naked and violated. He closed his eyes and turned his head elsewhere: from the day Clark was out of his life, Bruce returned to his aversion for his own body; since then he avoided any eye contact with his body, especially without clothes. Gross…

He licked his dry lips and looked at the wall opposite him.

The only way Joker was going to be persuaded was if he saw both Bruce and Batman…the real Batman not one of his friends dressed as Batman: Joker might be impulsive and even careless about most things but he was very observational about what he wanted and he definitely knew every detail of Batman.

Thinking about other things different than his own naked body was safer and more useful…

There was a way for this simultaneous presence to be achieved but being here made it impossible for
Batman to appear because Bruce was sure that they were far away from Gotham.

He made to move his wrists to test his restraint and to ease them, only to feel the stone pressing bone-crushingly as Joker had warned. So Bruce stopped immediately not only because the pain was horrific but also because having two crushed wrists wouldn’t help.

He bit his lip; he was used to cold and pain and could ignore them yet he couldn’t deny their presence; and given his body’s condition it wasn’t good that his back ached – this could be bad news for the healthy part of his spine. He shook his head: no, he could say that this pain albeit annoying wasn’t meaning any danger – there were the energy casts protecting him…

A faint smile appeared on his face because the alien casts brought the memory of the good moments with Clark – how much he cared; how gently he was taking care of him; how much he loved him… He shook his head clenching his jaw determined: that was over. Clark wouldn’t come back.

He forced his mind to focus elsewhere…somewhere with meaning. To things that were urging. Bruce gathered the information the current developments gave him.

Loki wasn’t working with someone else; he wasn’t part of a greater scheme – the god worked for himself, for his own goals. He might have appeared in Thasos the time of the attack against him but that was a coincidence; Bruce was sure that Loki wasn’t working with Vivian which would have been the conclusion if the mischievous god had orchestrated the attack to bring Diana into their lives. Also, Loki didn’t have any involvement in the raids to LexLabs which would have indicated that he had recruited Mannheim.

Not to mention that Mannheim didn’t seem the man to be recruited even by a god…Joker wasn’t either but the jester did it for his own interest while Mannheim was taking care of his interests by himself: he looked like one to recruit others not to be recruited…Of course, Loki could take forms so he could have presented himself as Mannheim however Bruce didn’t believe that for the extra reason that Loki wouldn’t hesitate to reveal it to laugh at him.

Bruce was sure that they were faced with two different schemes at the same time; each independent of the other. The healthy half of his body filled with agitation and impatience to go to his cave and dive in the results of the search about anything on Vivian: he was sure that if he found the truth about her he would be able to figure everything. She couldn’t be working alone: she definitely had the ability to manipulate and even control people yet there were more things related to her that she couldn’t manage – at least, from what Bruce knew about her. The powers mimicking the real Amazon Princess weren’t her doing and the way she had been appearing wherever Superman was…

He closed his eyes and almost smell the humid, cold scent of his cave; the metal smell of the Tumbler; of the waterfall; of the bats. His heart beat fast from the need to be there despite the fact Tony certainly would object…

Tony…Bruce remembered his friends’ determined almost angry – desperate – eyes a second before he felt the beam running through his body. Bruce bit his lip and sighed; he was sure that the damn video had a great impact on Tony driving his overprotectiveness beyond the limits…

That video…The images and the feelings from the night Falcone did all these to him attempted to slip through his mind’s barriers but he stubbornly shut the door to them. He didn’t want to touch at all that, leaving the investigation to the police yet he knew that to find the buyer of the video who was the mastermind they had to start from the hacker and unroll the skein: who knew Isaac’s skills in hacking?

He felt Tony’s anger; his sadness…Oh, Tony…
He heard the inaudible hissing of the wall opposite him that he knew that announced someone’s entrance…

Tony was at Lucius’ workshop in Wayne Tower; Pepper had called Alfred to tell him that Tony was fine but the billionaire couldn’t find the courage to speak to him.

Lucius was casting glances at the younger man who was perusing the flood of data in the hologram before them.

“Jarvis, get access to Bruce’s surveillance system to Harleen Quinzel’s apartment: cable phone, smart phone, phone at Arkham, everything.”

“Harleen Quinzel?” Lucius asked and stood from his stool to approach Tony who seemed unable to sit down.

“She was Joker’s shrink in Arkham and she has a fascination with the man; Bruce was watching her. Actually, we knew that Joker would attack Arkham because she had seen Bruce visiting Strange there – and we were right” Tony elaborated.

Lucius nodded: Bruce had said to him some days ago that he had appointed to his trusted scientist too many responsibilities so obviously the young man didn’t want to put more weight on Lucius’ shoulders.

“So you hope that Joker will eventually get sick of Loki’s ‘custody’ and reappear in Gotham seeking his docile former therapist and she will lead us to him.”

Tony looked at Lucius and pursed his lips.

“You think the chances for that are negligible?” he asked almost discouraged.

But Lucius gave a faint but so confident smile that Tony felt his hopes up. The African American arched his eyebrows.

“On the contrary, I think that it is very possible this will be the course Joker will follow – besides, it is what Mr. Wayne believed as well” he gestured to the flood of data.

Tony watched the new data moving rapidly in the hologram in front of him.

“I hope so…”

“I understand that bringing police in this is for the time being forbidden.”

Tony nodded.

“My urge is to have the bitch arrested and interrogated to spill where that nutcase but I need to think like Bruce to help him – patience is not my expertise but it is Bruce’s: arresting her right now might not get us anywhere as I bet she doesn’t know anything about his current location. So for now we can only watch her and wait for Joker’s move.”

Lucius put on his glasses.

“Informing the police right now about Quinzel’s role will require explain to them how we know her relationship with Joker which won’t help Mr. Wayne’s need for secrecy.”
Tony crooked his mouth.

“That damned secrecy…” but he didn’t continue. “On the other hand, I doubt that police’s monitoring will be better than ours…”

Lucius nodded.

Watching the telephone numbers of Quinzel’s calls that the processor automatically crossed with registered numbers, Tony didn’t find anything suspicious. He remembered that Bruce had pointed out that Joker probably suspected that his associate was watched and found another way to contact her – maybe another phone registered with different name or no registered at all.

“We can’t just rely on the monitoring of her phones and apartment – we need to watch her movements constantly.”

“Definitely” Lucius said and he touched the screen of his phone like gadget bringing up another hologram showing a bleeping spot that was Quinzel in her apartment.

Tony was scanning the data from the processor from the cave; Bruce had also detailed logs with reports about Crane’s supposed whereabouts: there was a interactive map where every location was noted constantly updated whenever a new report arrived in the police’s database; flashing lights had formed a rectangular where his movements where restricted – rectangular that was shrinking or broadening according to the updates.

“So Bruce believes that Crane is also important to find Joker…”

Lucius shook his head.

“We need to keep an eye for him too…”

Suddenly, Lucius noticed something.

“The cave’s processor alerts on an emergency” he pointed with his index to a yellow blinking little light. “A breakout from MCU” he looked at Tony who ruffled his hair.

“I don’t have time for that; let the GCPD handle it…”

“Master Anthony…” Jarvis’ quiet voice fell like thunder in the lab.

Tony closed his eyes and sighed.

“Don’t tell me…”

“We have a situation at Siberia.”

“Loki?”

“There is no indication of his presence…”

Tony shook his head.

“The others can handle it” he said adamant “inform Fury.”

“Sir, there are more reports about emergencies all over the globe.”

Tony ground his teeth and locked eyes with Lucius.
“The bastard wants to keep me busy to not look for Bruce…What he is up to?!”

Lucius pressed his lips.

“I think you should go, Mr. Stark. Bruce would want you to and I’ll be here constantly updating you.”

Tony’s armor rapidly began enclosing his body. His eyes were filled with gratitude when he met Lucius’s eyes.

“Thank you, Lucius.”

“No need, Mr. Stark” he answered with his warm smile “it’s what I’m here for…”

Steve closed the door to the rooftop and walked calm towards the edge. Catwoman was standing on the ledge watching across with her hands fisted in her sides.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer your call. I left my phone in the apartment when Fury beeped us for the attack in New York. I saw your call when I returned.”

He hugged her shoulders.

“Thor told us that Joker took Bruce…” he rubbed her upper arms. “I’m so sorry, honey… Any luck?”

Catwoman bit her lip.

“This city is empty…That sonovabitch is nowhere!”

“Maybe you should return to the Manor and wait? Loki must have hid Joker somewhere.”

She turned to him with blazing eyes.

“No, I won’t stand and watch! Joker won’t stay for long with Loki – I’m sure at some point he’s going to get rid of him. He isn’t the guy to be someone’s footman” she cocked her eyebrows “it’s too boring for him.”

“Then?”

“When he’ll make his movement I’ll be ready, watching that bitch…” she gestured with her head to the opposing building.

Steve frowned.

“Whom?”

“Harleen Quinzel, she was Joker’s shrink in the nut house. Bruce was positive that they are connected and in constant” she shook her head with conviction. “He’ll get in touch with her soon, summoning his puppet.”

“I’ll be here with you.”

Catwoman shook her head.
“World needs you…”

And as if wanting to confirm her Steve’s beeper sounded demanding; Catwoman smirked as Steve eyed frustrated the small gadget in his belt.

“Go…” she urged him meeting his eyes and placing a small kiss to his lips.

The stone opposite Bruce dissolved forming an oval opening to reveal Joker who hopped inside carrying on his hand a golden tray with food.

Bruce filled his eyes with terror and tensed because he knew that the jester would try to finish what he had started – his nudity returned more strikingly to the center of his awareness.

Joker cast a sideways glance to the wall that was taking again its solid form.

“Uuuuaahhhhh!! I aaaaaalways wanted to do that: pass through walls like a gggggggghost – heheheheheeeeee…”

He turned his head to his prisoner and a wide Cheshire smile cracked his white painted smile. He walked closer, kneeled before Bruce and placed the tray on the ground.

Bruce began breathing fast with fear not even casting a glance to the food and his captor, keeping his eyes down.

Joker murmured annoyed and grabbed Bruce’s chin yanking his head to look at him.

“You must be hungry, littl’ gem…” he said nasally.

Bruce made a deliberately clumsy effort to an angry stare.

“Don’t call me that” he took care that his demand was flickering with terror and Joker smiled.

“I looooooove your acting skills, littl’ geeeeem…”

Bruce closed his eyes defeated.

“Please, don’t call me that…” he deserted any effort to demand it and Joker chuckled impressed.

“’Cause Falconi called you that? C’mon, baaaaabe, you know I don’t like to repeat things but this suits youuuuuuu…” he licked his lips. “Noooow, I saw how skinny you were in that disg—usting video an’ daaaddy Joker won’t let you starve again.”

Bruce shook his head.

“I’m not hungry” he mumbled and raised shyly his eyes to Joker’s face. “My back…hurts…” his voice lost more of its volume saying that and Joker lolled his head backwards.

He cupped his prisoner’s face and caressed his cheeks with his ungloved hands; his fingertips touching Bruce’s flesh fascinated.

“I can’t un—restrain you, can I?”
Bruce breathed fast.

“I…I can’t do anything…I’m disabled and even if I wasn’t…what could I do?”

Joker pouted.

“Poooooor thing…” he sneered at him. “As if I believe you – HEHEHEHE!” he stopped abruptly laughing turning a serious expression. “Nooooooow, mum! Umm…I don’t know what bats eat…HEHEHEHEHEEE! Sooome say that they eat miiiiice and drink blood – HEHEHEHEEE!” he became serious again and waved that off. “Buuuulshit! An’ where I was going to find thooooose, huh? Not that the staff of this establishment isn’t helpful…”

Bruce let his head loll on the shoulder tired but Joker cupped his chin with one hand caressing the stray locks on his forehead with the other.

“Weeeell, look what good daaaddy brought to his puuuppy! Miiiiilk, chicken fillet and apple pie for dessert” he lolled his head to the side and regarded his prisoner’s scared eyes. “Whaaaat?! I didn’t puuuuut any surprise in there, oooon myyyy mmm…blades’ sharpness!”

The jester detached his hand from Bruce’s hair, broke a bite from the fillet with the spoon and brought it to Bruce’s mouth; the younger man averted his face but Joker tightened his one hand grip on his chin forcing him to return to his previous position.

“Aaaaaaaa! Come…For Daaaddyyyyy Jooooooker… OPEN YOUR DAMN MOUTH!” he shouted frustrated.

Bruce closed his eyes and opened slightly his mouth permitting Joker to shove the food inside. The jester caressed tenderly his prisoner’s cheek.

“It wasn’t thaaaaaat difficult, huh?”

Thankfully, Bruce didn’t detect anything suspicious in the chicken’s taste; actually, it was very tasty yet his stomach was a knot. Joker was staring at him fascinated.

“Do you want mooooore, littl’ gem?”

Bruce shook his head.

“But it was sooooooo little: a big, bad bat needs more food to be…weeeell, big an’ scaaary an’…mmm…del--ICIOUS, huh?”

Bruce yanked his head huffing.

“I’m not he…Please, give me my clothes – it’s so cold here.”

Joker pouted and eyed the rugs around Bruce’s thighs that were what was left from his expensive pants. He shrugged.

“You mean these?” he chuckled arching his eyebrows like the child who had broken the vase. “I don’t think that they are mmm…wearable but I can do something for the cold…I can’t let myyyyy little bat shivering, can I?” he said with a wicked shine in his green eyes.

Bruce tensed but Joker was on him in a rapid motion, his arms tightly wrapped around his stretched torso fondling fast and roughly.

“HEHEHEHEEEE, eeeeee? Daddy Joker found the sol—ution: I’ll keep you warm aaaaaaand I’ll
give you a niiice massage for your back pains. Hihihiiiiiiii!

Bruce closed his eyes to choke the nausea and the all familiar panic that rapidly filled his mind as Joker took out his jacket with hasty movements touching his torso on Bruce’s; his hands more greedy than before.

“I want real contact, damn it!” the jester said with seriousness and a deep voice completely foreign to him.

“No” Bruce mumbled “don’t do this…no, please, stop…” but Joker silenced him capturing his mouth with his, shoving his wet tongue deep inside exploring demandingly, one hand fondling his prisoner’s back and the other ruffling violently his silken locks.

“Hooooooooly Blades! Thiiiiiis is toooooo gooood…” he moaned without interrupting his kiss.

The jester’s brutal kiss lasted more than a minute and in the end Joker detached reluctantly from Bruce’s lips biting hard the younger man’s bottom lip drawing blood which the jester licked closing his eyes and groaning in delight.

“Youuuuuu taste like a jester’s most beautiful dreams” he mumbled and his hands travelled fast Bruce’s back to his buttocks. “Mmm…Myyyy baaaaaat has a greaaaat butt: what more can a poooooor clown ask?”

Bruce was coughing choked from Joker’s brutal kiss but the jester fisted his hair and yanked his head to the side plunging his mouth on his prisoner’s neck sucking and licking the drumming vein while his hands were groping violently his buttocks.

Bruce couldn’t feel his brutal ministrations but he could hear the wet sounds and the effect was almost the same; he tried to keep his mind busy and away from all these as Ra’s had taught him but once again the result wasn’t good enough.

“Please…” he could resist yet that wouldn’t have a result and wouldn’t fit Bruce’s submissive past.

“As much as…” he dove again to Bruce’s neck; he detached “I looooove your playing the weak” his mouth sucked again flesh; he detached “why not demaaaaand that with your batsy voice, huh?” his mouth travelled lower to the chest “oooooooh! That chest is fantastic! Like statue…the muscles sooooo…mmm…the fleeeesh so taut and velvet…oooooh…”

Joker took off his shirt in a rapid motion.

“Few!” he exclaimed relieved “it’s with press stuuuuuuds” he giggled and rubbed his naked torso that burned from arousal on Bruce’s cold one. “Oooooooh! Littl’ gem, you’re a piece of ice buuuuuut I’m a sex boooomb…soooooo I’ll be your liberaaaator…uuuuuuh…”

The violent friction from Joker’s torso was suddenly combined with the brutal friction of two fingers inside him and Bruce’s heart went frantic; his breath became panting.

“You’re hooorny, baaaaabe? Dooooon’t worry, I won’t leeeet your sweet hooole waiting loooong for the good stuff…”

Bruce sobbed; all the times Falcone used him crushed on his mind like thunders on trees. He clenched his fists as he had learnt but the tightening stone warned him crudely to stop crushing more his wrists.

Joker was licking his abs now and Bruce felt the jester’s panting breath going faster, and hotter
which meant that he was about to… Without taking his mouth off Bruce Joker brought his one hand to his fly ready to free his throbbing member.

Bruce in the deep mist his mind was heard the distinctive hissing of the wall opening. He turned his sweaty head to see while Joker didn’t notice absorbed in his arousal both sucking Bruce’s member and thrusting three fingers so fast and deep that it hurt horribly.

“Sorry to interrupt…” an ironic voice said and Joker growled.

Thor stood by Dr. Strange’s side on the marble floor of the temple’s exterior watching the man performing odd, precise movements with his hands which created colorful sparkles.

“I’ll come with you; I might be able to be of some help.”

Strange looked at him with an eyebrow arched.

“You don’t trust me with your friend?”

“Of course I do but I don’t know what Loki might have in store for anyone approaching; maybe when you find him you’ll need my help.”

His beeper’s sound hit the peace of the scenery hard and Thor’s frown was deep; his determination to go with Strange unbreakable.

Steven smiled and patted the god’s upper arm.

“Go… It’s better if I’m alone in that search. If I need your help be sure that I’ll ask…” he smiled seeing Thor’s hesitance to leave. “I’ll find him, Thor.”

“What do you want?!!” Joker shouted still attached to Bruce’s length. “That Asgard place doesn’t teach you manners?”

Bruce looked at their visitor: Loki had his arms crossed over the chest and regarded the scene before him with a mixture of amusement and distaste. Despite the serious of the situation Bruce chuckled inside thinking Joker’s state being every time cut abruptly at the moment of his culmination...

“This place is mine if you forgot” he said pointedly and with a nod of his head Joker was tossed away from Bruce. “And Bruce here is my guest – I didn’t give you permission to do him such things.”

Bruce gulped and lowered his head embarrassed.

Joker was fuming; he jumped on his feet and glared at the god with his green eyes flashing among his disheveled green curls.

“Brucie is only MINE, you stupid freak!” he shouted nasally, his stuttering vanishing completely.

Loki smirked and Joker was tossed to the opposite wall and then to the floor. The mischievous god cocked an eyebrow.

“Take your rags and leave…” he ordered Joker indifferent and watched as the jester clearly enraged gathered his clothes and left the cell.
The space became dead silent minus Bruce’s asthmatic breath that let every now and then an almost inaudible sob with the youth every time pressing his lips silencing himself. Loki after a minute walked closer and Bruce feeling his sneaky eyes on him raised tiredly his head and met his gaze.

“Is that what you wanted?” he asked quietly but accusingly.

Loki moved closer, his privy eyes travelling Bruce’s naked body.

“I should say, yes” he cocked an eyebrow and his grin became broader “this body is magnificent: has my dear brother devoured its beauties yet?”

Bruce gulped but didn’t lower his eyes.

“Thor never touched me; he is honest and honorable; his mind isn’t on these things.”

Loki rolled his eyes.

“How stupid!” he narrowed his eyes wickedly. “Do you gather he is…impotent?” he sniggered.

Bruce lowered his eyes again breathing hard.

“There’s nothing funny…” he mumbled exhausted. “You act like Joker…What do you want from me?”

Loki squatted in front of him and brought his face close to Bruce’s. He raised his hand and his fingers touched hesitantly the youth’s sweaty but cold cheek; he sniffed mesmerized.

“Mmm…I never met such a perfume again: the rarest cinnamon – sweet and spicy with hues of orange and hibiscus’ blossoms” he closed his eyes reminiscent “it makes my groin twitch. Superman was so lucky…” his fingers moved to Bruce’s neck and he looked him scared “and so idiot!”

“Please, don’t touch me…”

“Joker was ready to do worse things to you…” he cocked an eyebrow “and I’m your savior.”

“Because you gave him the chance. Is this really what a god like you wants from his power? To bend as low as a mad criminal who butchers children?”

Loki touched his hand on Bruce’s chest and caressing moved lower to his abs.

“Thor will be enraged…”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Is that why you stopped Joker? To finish this yourself?” he mumbled.

Loki cast him a lopsided glance without taking his hand from Bruce’s body.

“I can’t resist a piece of art…I’m a collector – I should show you my throne hall.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Do you understand that you have become Joker’s accomplice? He has dragged you in his madness…I understand that you feel neglected, wronged by your kind but…” he felt Loki’s eyes on his face “because of you Joker killed a young man during the attack at Avengers’ Tower; you set him loose and many people are in danger because of you…”
Loki grabbed Bruce’s face with both hands and Bruce’s eyes flickered pretending fear.

“’You’re cold” Loki said.

“I’m naked in a dudgeon… but I’m used to that… my entire life I was buried in a dudgeon, in the cold… You said once that we are alike; but you gave me to Joker or you will do to me… what Joker wanted to… just to piss your brother.”

“I don’t want to harm you…”

Bruce smiled.

“I’m sure…” he said in disbelief.

Loki blinked and instantly Bruce felt warmth; beautiful dark red clothes from velvet covering his body. He looked at Loki.

“I’ll hold you till I achieve my goal…” the god said blatantly.

“Which is?”

“Showing to everyone in Asgard that I’m the best among them” he smirked. “A bastard – that is what they called me – better than them.”

“Working with Joker and helping him with his crimes you only prove them right! They might treat you badly; they might bully you but taking the responsibility for Joker’s crimes makes you like him!” he shook his head seeing Loki’s thoughtful but at the same time doubtful eyes. “You can’t trust Joker… He will double cross you!”

Loki licked his lips and patted Bruce head like he was petting a cute puppy. Bruce rolled his eyes frustrated but only inside.

“Don’t fret: I won’t let him near you again. I’ll take you to a beautiful room.”

“You think so!”

Bruce saw Joker emerging from the wall, a bottle in his hand; the jester smashed the bottle on the ground and thick smoke filled the place. Bruce coughed but Loki’s eyes bulged recognizing the gas. Joker came to them as Loki weakened slumped to Bruce’s torso. Bruce without of course showing anything realized what Joker did: that gas was the same Loki had asked from Crane to create; the gas that neutralized any special or godly power – the one they used at the Avengers’ Tower attack.

The jester laughed and grabbed Loki from the collar of his vest tossing him to the floor away from Bruce.

“Do you recognize this?” he hissed blinking his eyes cutely but maliciously.

Loki clenched his jaw in anger but as much as he tried to react his powers were thinning rapidly.

“You used my gas!”

Joker leaned above him with his Cheshire smile reaching his ears.

“No, not ‘youuuuuuuuuurs’: you gave the instructions and the ingredients an’ gooood ol’ Crane manufactured it… HEHEHEHEHEEEEE!” he smacked his lips and hugged Loki’s shoulders like a
friend “Listen a tip from an expert in the field” he grabbed the pale god’s chin “doooooon’t you eeeeeeever trust a shrink with knowledge” he rolled his eyes “especially, a loony shrink. HEHEHEHEEEE! With the right amount of money he made it for me…”

Loki was fuming causing Joker’s amused giggle.

“Uuuuuuuuh…I loooooooove weak, boooooling ANGER!!!!”

The jester tightened his grip on Loki’s jaw and the god was surprised to feel pain for the first time; pain that became worse when a needle stabbed his upper arm.

“Oooour goooood crow-doctor maaaaade a compound mixture with loooooonger duration – heheheeeeee! Ooooh, that Crane! Sooooooo seeeerious but with a sour taste of humor…”

Joker turned rapidly into seriousness and Loki’s surprise became utter fear hued with wrath when his former pawn touched a blade to his cheek.

“I told you that Brucie was MINE an’ you had the audacity to stand between us” he shook his head and licked his lips “I could kill you for that bbbbbuuuuut it’d be funnier to let you here weak for your brother to fiiiiiind…”

“You fucking…” Loki said through gritted teeth but his eyes widened in terror when the blade cut his cheek and the god felt warm blood slithering his mortal-like flesh.

Bruce knew that he had to intervene.

“Don’t kill him…”

Joker rolled his eyes and looked at him.

“Youuuuuur soft spot for goooods it’s disconcerting, babe…we need to sort this out. Well, I don’t plan to kill that moron – HEHEHE…I bet you thought you could move me around like a puppet, huh? Now…” he smacked his lips “Call your half naked servants and order them to take my Brucie out of this rock and send us back.”

“I don’t take orders from a ridiculous being like you!”

“Really, now…” a second blade appeared like from thin air and Loki’s throat was in a second between two stinging blades already cutting flesh.

Sweat drops filled Loki’s face and Bruce frowned.

“Okay!” Loki said.

“If I sense a trick I’ll cut your throat, Ass-gardian!”

Loki said something in a strange language and a half naked fairy appeared; her face paled seeing Loki kneeled with two blades at his throat and blood streaking his cheek.

Bruce was watching seemingly shaken yet he was already estimating the new situation: going back to Gotham would be actually good for him.

“Baaaabe, time for sleeeeeep now…”

He didn’t have time to react before Joker put a fabric drenched with liquid in his face; his eyes shut immediately.
The burgundy cape gave a slight wave as Steven’s feet touched with the shining marble floor. He looked around him and the luxury of the place made him raise his eyebrows: at his side there was a round golden pond with a crystal shark fountain – he noticed with curiosity that fish swam inside and leaned to see.

One of the fish jumped at him with bare sharp teeth but the cape dragged him away; Dr. Strange crooked his mouth.

“Piranhas? Goodness…”

He walked hastily away to the seemingly endless space with his eyes captivated by the dome; he gazed at the murals and smirked when he focused on the painting: a very extreme orgy with every detail depicted. He chuckled and coughed forcing his eyes to abandon the fascinating ceiling and continue.

His chuckle became laughter when the pillars that supported the hall became visible in detail: men and women completely naked.

“We’re talking about a sex addict god…not to mention, lacking any good taste…” he eyed the golden throne at the far end; on the seat a golden horned helmet was placed. “At least, it’s the right place…Now where our knave is?”

He felt a force dragging him which he by now had learnt that was his cape.

“Okay, okay…I’m with you” he mumbled in his bass voice finding his balance.

His cocked in sarcasm eyebrows knitted as he crossed the vast corridors following his gut feeling and his cape. At first, he was puzzled by the lack of guards or any resistance but then his puzzlement became a grim premonition eyeing fairy-like beings – gorgeous by the way, and completely naked under the transparent veils they wore; that Loki knew how to get the most out of his eternal life!

“Don’t drag!” he snapped to his cape “I’m not losing my focus but I’m a man, for Goodness’ sake…”

Loki’s maidens were slumped on the edges of the corridor, curled up with shaken faces and just watched him passing them towards what Strange felt was the basement – he was going downstairs.

He felt that the dark place – completely different than the shining golden palace – was full of magic yet these spells were ragged, torn in shreds, the power that had set them, their master was weak.

Steven hurried his steps following the dark and humid corridor that thankfully was sparsely lit by torches stack in the stone walls. The wizard kept looking around with his guard up for any attack though he sensed that there wasn’t anything dangerous there. The more he regarded the place the more he was sure that Thor would have beaten his brother to a pulp if he had seen where he kept Bruce Wayne.

As a doctor and as a patient that had suffered multiple injuries, Steven could say that this place was the worst possible for a paraplegic who was recovering from grave traumas. He just hoped that this bad feeling had nothing to do with Wayne.

He felt the tag from his cape but he had already sensed that the wall before him was his destination: there was magic absorbed in this stone but now it was rapidly dissolving; the stone was meant to permit the entrance only to those the god wanted but Steven knew that he could easily pass the stone.
Yet he felt that he should observe first and then enter.

Behind the stone were two presences, one very weak and the other powerful.

“Where is Bruce? What have you done to him, you hellion?” someone was growling.

Steven cocked an eyebrow.

“Joker took him…” a weak but still cocky voice answered.

“You know where he is… Speak or I’ll end your pathetic days!”

Steven rushed head first to the stone and after a feeling of warm shower he was inside a rectangular space – a cold, humid dudgeon. He saw on the floor rags of what must have been tailored, pricy pants and underwear; he sensed agony, suffering, arousal and anger… His guts clenched: something bad had happened to Wayne.

He detached his eyes from the stone where Wayne had been tied till recently and turned to the presences he felt. They haven’t seen him yet – his reflection invisible.

Loki was on his knees, his long raven hair was disheveled and his thin face pale; he looked weak and how else could he look?

A man was towering him, having a golden arrow’s point touching the god’s forehead, the bow’s string ready to launch it. He was dressed in dark green, a hoodie covering his head casting in shadow his face letting only the sparkle of his green eyes being seen.

The dark green gloved hand tightened around the thick shining black wood of the bow and the one touching the arrow seemed eager to release it to pierce Loki’s head.

“Because of you that bastard got Bruce! You gave Bruce to him! You are guilty for whatever Joker does to him! You will die for the pain you caused to him!” the grinding of his teeth was really spooky to hear.

Steven cocked his eyebrows impressed – another man in agony for Wayne…: that man definitely charmed and infatuated people with a skill that the greatest wizards would be jealous…

Loki to his merit was calm and even challenging; his eyebrow slightly raised.

“I wish I knew where that fuckin’ clown took Bruce…but I don’t. He stabbed me in the back.”

Steven could see the angry smirk of the archer’s lips.

“You won’t have to live much with the hurt of his betrayal…” he hissed sniggering. “You’re useless after all…”

His hand released the arrow and Steven heard the archer’s enraged and surprised growl when his arrow was snapped in two. It was remarkably difficult for Steven’s powers to snap this arrow.

Loki breathed relieved but the archer looked around his eyes flashing more than ever.

“Show yourself!” he barked having sensed the other presence.

Steven yanked his head proudly, fixed his cape and made himself visible with a dignified cough.

“I know you have your right” he said to the archer “but I can’t let you kill him.”
The archer cast him a furious but at the same time contemptuous look that made Steven frown.

“Suit yourself, sorcerer! I’ve got more important things to do!” he said and walked out of the stone that now was so weakened that anyone could cross.

Loki encouraged from the archer’s departure turned to Strange with a cocked eyebrow; his mischievous character having somewhat recover.

“It seems I’m lucky after all…” he said with some distress accompanying his playfulness.

The wizard shook his head and smirked.

“Not when Thor gets you…” he snorted feeling his old sarcasm returning at the fullest but he couldn’t fight a satisfied grin seeing Loki’s grim expression.

The whole wall world map in the center of the Avengers’ Tower’s conference room was lit with several orange colored lights over different global locations: nuclear reactors, oil rings, weapon storages. All of them battle sceneries.

Fury gestured with four fingers to the map and the orange lights became green – the color of safety. He turned to his heroes that were gathered in the room, seated not around the oval, glass titanium table but anywhere else.

Captain America still in full battle attire sat in a leather armchair supporting his elbows to his knees. Thor had managed to tame his agitation and was sitting in one of the conference seats that he had dragged away from the table. Dr. Spanner dressed in his cheap jeans and T-shirt scrolled data in his tablet while Natasha watched from the leather sofa at the far end opposite the big table.

Tony was the only one who didn’t look at the holographic map; he couldn’t contain his emotions and let himself sit down. His body was still in full Ironman armor except for the face plate.

“The madness of the last twelve hours is finally over” Fury said. “Of course our surveillance satellites are in full vigilance exactly as our local departments all over the planet” he cast a glance at Tony who was gazing at the dawn colors of New York’s skyline. “This time Loki chose to attack through his minions to targets that wouldn’t be in the spotlight and in live coverage.”

Thor clenched his fist.

“He just wanted to have us on the run; disoriented; busy.”

Fury nodded and Dr. Spanner raised his eyes to his teammates.

“All the systems in the Tower are fully recovered, in perfect operational mode.”

Steve pressed his lips.

“I know that the newest attacks took place in facilities that are under strict secrecy…but it strikes me Superman’s absence: that is unlike him” he raised his eyebrows. “The New York attack was covered live…I mean, Flash did come.”

Natasha shrugged and cocked an eyebrow.

“Maybe he was busy: he and his girlfriend. What matters is that we managed without him…”
“Yes but this is worrying” Steve insisted. “Maybe something is wrong with him and what will happen if the next threat is something that we can’t fight alone?”

Natasha snorted.

“We’ll fight harder…” Tony spat from his position without turning to them. “The alien is not worthy of our trust; he is useless…”

Steve exchanged looks with his teammates; Thor knew the depth of Tony’s bitterness and distaste about the Man of Steel: not only the symbol of hope for many people hurt his best friend but also he never once helped since then.

“The Asgardian jerk just wanted to play with us…stall me; torment me forcing me to fight for anything else than…” Tony closed his mouth and shook his head. “Now, I have to go: if you need me…” he didn’t have the mood even to finish his phrase.

He made some heavy steps to the exit under his teammates’ gaze, the door already opening for him: Tony planned to go to the far end of the corridor where the wall with the huge golden A on the exterior had already opened for Ironman to take off.

Thor met him half way and Tony stopped.

“Tony, Loki might have done all these to keep us afar but he won’t make it.”

Tony was tired and in grim mood but definitely wasn’t hopeless.

“That goes without saying!” he spat and made to leave but Thor grabbed his upper arm.

“As we speak Loki might have been already spotted and caught.”

Tony frowned and Thor locked eyes with him.

“I asked the help of the right man.”

Now Tony’s eyes flashed.

“I don’t want another stranger around Bruce!” he grabbed the edges of Thor’s cape on his shoulders. “You trusted someone we don’t know to find him!” he gritted his teeth to Thor’s astonished face.

Thor felt for his comrade; Tony had made one major mistake and now was scared for every tiny possibility of things gone awry.

“We can trust him” he said confident. “He is with the good guys and he has powers that make him a valuable asset against Loki.”

“Who is he then?” Tony asked doubtful and gloom.

“Dr. Steven Strange, Mr. Stark” a bass baritone cracked the silence and Tony turned around… Just before storming at the newcomer.
Tony’s eyes was seeing only red, his hands had already taken position to punch or choke to death. But as he was ready to make contact he felt an invisible barrier and he was bounced off. The push from the impact made him regain his connection with the environment.

He registered a golden-transparent round shield covering his target; the newcomer had his hands positioned to form an arch exactly as the shape of the shield. Tony narrowed his eyes and fumed, his gaze sending daggers to Loki who behind the safety of the shield smirked.

However his annoying smirk vanished when something smacked the back of his neck sending him to the floor. Tony turned to see Thor’s hammer emitting sparks.

Dr. Strange arched his eyebrows.

“You can pass my shield? I need to look to it…” he said thoughtful.

Thor moved forward and Tony looked at him.

“Shatter the shield and let Loki to me!” he growled and he saw agreement in Thor’s eyes.

“I can’t shatter his shield” he answered “I can only send some energy through it.”

“Damn!” Tony glared at the wizard who was staring at them both. “Take that shield off!” he spat at him.

Stephen nodded.

“Gladly” he said “but I don’t think that killing him will help you in any way…”

“It’s none of your business what I’m going to do to that sonovabitch!” Tony barked. “What do you care anyway?”

Stephen shrugged one shoulder and lolled slightly his head.

“I guess another leftover of my past…but overall I hate gore…”

Both Tony and Thor moved forwards ready to attack.

“Guys…” Dr. Strange tried to reason with them holding his palms in the air appeasing.

“You don’t know anything about that!” Tony spat. “He didn’t harm your best friend!”

Stephen closed his eyes and cast a sideways look of contempt at Loki who rolled his eyes.

“I knew that you hated me” Thor said to Loki “but attacking Bruce from all people…” he shook his head locking eyes with the mischievous god who for the first time seemed regretful. “He has suffered so much… He didn’t wrong you in any way! And, damn it! He is a paraplegic!”

“It was your fault, bro!” Loki retorted glaring at his brother through his disheveled raven hair; his green eyes sparkled sneakily. “You showed so much interest for him that you turned my focus on him – Bruce was the best way to get to you; to make you understand how crummy you are – that I’m so much superior that I could take from you the object of your affection!”
Thor made to storm at him but stopped thoughtful; it was what Loki wanted: enrage him to have his fun but the important thing was to find Bruce.

“How did you manage to capture him?” he asked Strange. “His powers have increased considerably during the last months…”

Loki rolled his eyes and sighed.

“When I found him he was weak” Strange answered, registering the other Avengers and Fury gathering around him curious. “He has lost his divine powers.”

Tony’s eyes sparkled.

“Glad to hear that!” he said and his laser canon on his shoulder was heard loading.

Thor placed his hand on Tony’s shoulder to restrain him.

“How is that possible?” Captain America asked.

Tony shook his head exasperated, annoyed from Captain’s intervention.

“Oh! It’s obvious! The asshole trusted Joker but Joker knew that Loki had used a gas that neutralizes super powers: remember the attack at the Tower?” everyone watching nodded and Tony licked his lips. “Loki hired Crane to do the job and Joker used the mad doctor to get the same gas and use it against its creator. You deserved that, asshole!”

Loki clapped sarcastic.

“Wow! Stark! You have a brain after all; it’s not filled with boobs…”

Thor had to hold Tony’s both arms to stop him. Stephen rolled his eyes on Loki’s last words remembering what he saw in the god’s palace.

Captain America moved forward.

“Where is Bruce?” he asked the question that was boiling in Tony’s and Thor’s minds but the wrath held back.

Tony put his wrath at bay and Thor released him.

“Yeah, screw Loki!” Natasha spat.

Stephen smirked.

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that…” he remarked with his old irony coloring his baritone voice and he looked lopsided at the kneeled god “judging from his palace he definitely needs some of that…”

Loki arched his eyebrows.

“Is that your professional opinion?” he asked sarcastic but an invisible punch from Thor brandishing his hammer sent him on the floor.

“You busted the motherfucker” Tony said to Dr. Strange with hope and tried to control his impatience “you took Bruce to the Manor?” he asked the wizard who pressed his lips.

Dr. Strange was a doctor and he was used to not chew his words but this time hesitated.
“I’m afraid not” Tony closed his eyes. “When I found Loki, Bruce Wayne wasn’t there. And of course the same goes for that Joker guy.”

Tony’s eyes fell for an instant before he narrowed them; he stormed at the weak god and grabbed him from the lapels lifting him up, the others just realizing that the shield had vanished.

“I guess it wasn’t safe to withdraw the shield yet…” Stephen mumbled dry. “Stark, show some restrain here…”

But Tony wasn’t hearing anything.

“What did you do to Bruce?!” he roared. “Where did you take him?! You bastard! He needs his medication to not lapse! He is vulnerable and you trusted him to Joker?”

Loki gulped.

“I didn’t…I tried to protect him…”

Tony’s grasp became vicious and he gritted his teeth in front of Loki’s face.

“Trapped?! he made a feeble attempt in sniggering but his ire and agony were such that gave up. “You’re a fuckin’ god! And you helped that bastard catch Bruce!”

Thor approached looming over them and Dr. Strange made a step backwards watching with raised eyebrows: maybe now Loki would cut the crap.

“Are you deaf? Or you lost your connection?” Loki’s snarky remarks were cut abruptly when Tony released his one hand to punch him in the nose. “I stopped Joker before…” he hurried to change his tone but he didn’t finish seeing Tony’s teeth emitting sparkles from the grounding. “But the bastard used the gas and weakened me and then threatened to kill me if I wouldn’t order my servants to send them back to Gotham.”

“Gotham?” Tony asked.

Loki licked his lips and nodded nervously.

“I was concealing his presence all this time…”

Thor loomed over him knitting his eyebrows threateningly.

“You’ll give us the location.”

Loki nodded but Tony clenched his lapels.

“Joker isn’t that fool; he won’t go there.”

“I can find him still” Loki said some sweat drops spurting all over his face.

Natasha leaned over him.

“And you better do that…” her thick Russian accent stressed her threatening tone. “You now Hulk? He so much wants to meet the one who was the reason people died!”

Loki gulped.

“I dressed Bruce with Asgardian garments and those clothes have a special aura.”
But Tony heard only till the ‘dressed’.

“Bruce was…NAKED! You sick bastard!” he treated Loki another punch but Thor took his brother from Tony’s hands only to grab Loki from the neck himself.

The blond god was now fuming: the thought of Loki taking revenge on him by violating Bruce made his blood boil.

“What have you done to him?!”

Loki sniggered satisfied but his smirk vanished as soon as he was choked from Thor’s grip; he began coughing.

“Joker tore his clothes but I stopped him before…”

Thor dropped him disgusted on the floor and Captain America hurried to grab Loki from the upper arm. Everyone looked at Tony’s downcast eyes: the billionaire felt hopeless now he heard that Joker had stripped Bruce; he didn’t have any trust to Loki’s words…and whatever happened to Bruce was his fault. The only comfort he had was that back in Gotham they had Quinzel under surveillance so as soon as she went to Joker, they would catch them. He just hoped that it wouldn’t be too late.

“There was another one in the dudgeon when I found Loki” Stephen said “an archer dressed like Robin Hood.”

Tony looked at him interested.

“The Arrow…” he said and pressed his lips; he hadn’t forgotten that the same man had saved Bruce from a double attack just a few days ago.

Fury and Steve lifted Loki between them.

“The sonovabitch will be tried” Fury said his eye sending daggers to Loki.

Tony had turned ready to leave but hearing them glared at the god.

“The only justice he deserves is from my machine gun! Bruce is disabled, you coward bastard! You used your godly powers to attack someone in a wheelchair!” his lips trembled from disgust.

Steve looked at his comrade with understanding.

“He’ll take what he deserves, Tony. Bruce wouldn’t want you to kill him.”

Thor moved forward.

“He must be judged by the Asgard’s high Assembly” he said determined and Fury crooked his mouth.

“Because of him humans died” Natasha said. “And Bruce Wayne was kidnapped and is still missing.”

Thor nodded.

“I know, I know; and I feel you and share your wrath: but he is a god and when the effect of the gas is over no prison could hold him.”

Dr. Strange nodded.
“I concur to that.”

Tony snorted.

“Believe me” Thor looked at each of his comrades separately: they were all baring the marks of the fierce battles of the last twelve hours “I want him punished as much as all of you and even more but the Asgardian Assembly is the best option we have” he brought his fist on his heart. “I give you my word of honor that I’ll seek the most severe punishment for him.”

Tony shook his head disappointed.

“Whatever…” he spat disgruntled, relenting only because finding Bruce was pressing and didn’t want to lose more time “I’ve got more urgent things right now.”

“I’ll come with you” Thor said but Tony not even looked at him.

“Stay here and make sure that the asshole won’t escape…” he retorted and took off getting out of the open wall.

“Lucius, keep close track on Quinzel” he said immediately as he flew rapidly through New York’s sky. “Joker is back in Gotham with Bruce.”

That sour smell was so familiar; so scary that made his body numb… and that taste of copper in his mouth…There was blood near him; and over him, stall blood. His eyes were still shut but he knew that…he could feel the humid atmosphere…he was in that alley and the smell of blood was from his parents’ bodies! His heart clenched and sobs began burning his throat sending tears to his eyes.

No…his mind was screaming in despair. No…

But then as he began waking, the dizziness fogging his mind but not his thinking, Bruce regained his contact with reality. He wasn’t eight years old, he was a man now, free from Falcone and Chill but – his guts formed a knot – captive of Joker.

That copper taste was from the bites Joker made to his lips and that smell of fresh but stall blood was…

He opened his eyes tired; the space was dark and he was lying on a bed with his wrists tied above his head to the rails of the bed. He waited a couple of minutes for his eyes to adjust in order to make out forms but then something screeched and some light came from outside. A light had been turned on outside and came inside from the small window on the top of the door.

That door was opposite the bed, in pristine condition but clearly old – definitely restored; the light from outside rushed in the room as the door opened: and who else would get inside than Joker? A click and dim light filled the room. Joker closed the door behind him and Bruce without showing got his surroundings: it was a hospital room – old hospital room judging by the old fashioned bed.

“Finally, you’re wake, baaaaabe! I think I put more than I should in the rag…aaaaaaaanyway…Oh! I got a sur--prise for you. Dooon’t you like we’re back in Gotham? Ooooooh! That fresh air of Gotham…” he inhaled deeply closing his eyes in delight but immediately his face show disgust and he coughed. “Not sooooo fresh after all…” he shook his head.

Bruce frowned: Joker’s surprises were never nice. As his eyes and his senses got perfect contact with his environment he realized that the smell of blood came from the floor; he cast a lopsided glance
there and he let a yell leave his mouth.

Joker jerked startled.

“Eaaaasy, babe…You dooon’t want to give me a heart attack, riiight?” Bruce rolled his eyes inside. “What? Ooooooooh! So you saw my sur--prise…”

On the floor, lay a body in the middle of a pond of blood. Bruce let his body begin shaking and his breath become panting.

Joker lolled his head on the side looking with vast curiosity at his captive and walked towards the body. He grabbed the body from the collar and lifted it to drag in front of Bruce’s face that became death pale. It was a man with deep, grotesque scars digging his cheeks formed from black dried blood; Bruce could see also the dark red gash that almost severed his head.

“He is the idiot who fired at the chemicals and caused the building’s collapse” he said dead serious. “He lived to long – you’re disabled because of him.”

Bruce was keeping his eyes shut trying to control his breath but he knew that Joker’s acid eyes were fixed on his.

“I…I don’t understand. My legs became paralyzed because of the League…they…they hurt me…they beat me too much…”

Joker shook his head nervously.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah…They might have doooooone that but the fella here caused your par—alysis - noooow, baby-bat: how can a bat be so cuuuuuute, uuuu? Now, open your beau--tiful eyes ‘cause daddy Joker has mooooomore surprises – GIFTIES!!”

Bruce’s insides clenched and opened his eyes.

“No…please no…”

“Ooooh, boys!” he called in a singsong voice and the door opened again. “Dooooon’t be shy, babe – after all, daaaaddy Joker took care of your attire.”

And really Bruce registered that he was dressed in – what a surprise! – black pants and a black shirt unbuttoned till the middle of his chest; thankfully, the pouch with the Black Butterfly lay on his chest. Bruce smirked inside: of course, the cunning jester must have suspected that the clothes Loki gave him would emanate a special aura – Superman had told him so when he made him a scene about keeping Thor’s cape: Bruce’s heart hurt in the memory of that night… but he had to focus in the present.

Two goons with clown masks entered the small room carrying a man each: the two men had their
heads covered in hoods and their hands were tied back.

“Please, Joker” Bruce whispered “don’t hurt anyone else…”

Joker licked his lips.

“Hush, baby…Wait first to see – you will chaaaaange your mind.”

He whistled to his goons and they took off the hoods revealing two pale men with wet, bruised eyes and dried blood on their faces. Bruce gulped recognizing them: it was Wizzie the president of GTV and Isaac the hacker – he looked Joker in the eyes and shook his head. He understood immediately: Joker wanted to punish them for the video… Images of what the jester had done to Falcone rushed to his mind.

“Please…it wasn’t their fault: let them go – they will be tried.”

Joker squinted.

“Nooooow you’re kidding me, honey…You can’t be sooo forgiving – belieeeeve me, it’s eeeeeextremely un--healthy…an’ they’ll think you of a sucker…trust, daddy…”

He stood and walked towards the shaking men who become weeping.

Joker with slow movements, so much unlike his habits, pulled out of his jacket two blades bare of handle as always. He wanted the men to see them and panic: a new sequence of screaming and begging began.

“No!” Bruce exclaimed and Joker cast him a lopsided stare through his green curls.

“You’re suuuuuuch a kind puppy – we must change that…” his voice became serious.

The two men’s begging became louder and more desperate.

“Please, Joker, don’t kill them” Bruce pleaded with him. “Someone else had the video – police told me. They didn’t do it!”

Joker smiled and Bruce felt his spine getting frozen.

“I’ll find him too, be suuuure, littl’ gem…till then…” he said calm and in a flash of steel a blood avalanche spurted splattering his face; the necks of the two men gaped slashed only a patch of flesh holding the head.

The goons released them to slump on the ground, their dying bodies still twitching. Joker smirked to their bulged crystallized in ultimate terror eyes.

“Noooobody hurts my Brucie…” he said dead serious and then turned to look at Bruce.

Joker narrowed his eyes seeing that his captive had fainted. He lolled his head and stared at him intrigued.

“Take the corpses out and toss them to the junk!” he barked attaching his calling cards on the sticky blood.

He walked slowly to the bed curious watching closely trying to detect if Bruce was acting; he touched his gloved fingers to his neck and watched his breath.
“You’re not pretending, huh? Weeeeell…” he licked his lips. “I’d neeeever expected Batsy to not bear two tiny slashes…yet we should account that you must be exhausted, huh? And tthat chloroform…”

He rummaged the inside pocket of his jacket and eventually dragged out a small vial, uncorked it, took gently Bruce’s head and put the vial under his nose till his captive began stirring and his eyelids moved.

“I was reaaaadty to give you the kiss of life…”

Bruce closed his eyes again, exhausted, disgusted on the idea.

“Why are you doing this to me?” he whispered.

Joker pouted.

“Whaaaa’? Punishing baaaad guys? We are a couple, honey! I’m doing what you do! These people wanted either to become rich or have fun with your suffering…by humiliating you!” he shook his head. “That’s unforgivable, babe…”

Bruce opened his eyes and looked at his captor.

“Stop killing people on my name…” he mumbled scared.

But it was obvious that the Joker was thinking other things from the way he was looking at Bruce. He giggled.

“HEHEHEHEEEE! You wanted to coaaaaax me into believing that the big bad bat can’t stand seeing a smaaaaall slash of necks? Hooooow long you think you can continue the game, huh?”

Bruce shook his head.

“I’m not playing any game…Please let me go…”

Joker waved that off.

“Unless…You’re a…now hooooow shrinks call it? Hm…identity disorder? Two personalities in the same hot body…W—O—W!” he licked his lips. “Then we’ll need the help of a professional to get the truth out of you.”

Bruce widened his eyes.

“What are you…”

Joker didn’t let him speak: captured his lips and sucked him loudly.

“I got you the best, baaaabyy…Daddy will take care of his hooooot bat baby” he said his eyes devouring the part of the chest that the open shirt let exposed.

He put his hands at each upper arm of Bruce and ascended the arm fondling sensually till the bound with handcuffs wrists. Bruce was watching him with dread and Joker smiled to him.

“I know these re--straints are not as good as the ones Lo-loki provided buuuuuuuut if you release yourself from these then you’ll confirm that you’re my Batsy…Aaaan’ you’re disabled: you can’t do anything without your armor.”
His Cheshire devilish smile cracked his face with a triumphant glow.

“I loooove your scared attitude, Batsy, yet I’d like also some fiiiire on my bed…Anyyyyy chance you give up the act an’ fuck with open…” he giggled feigning shyness and coughed “cards?”

Bruce lowered his eyes and Joker patted his cheek.

“No, huh? I must follow the difficult path then?” he sighed and Bruce frowned. “Buuuuut I’ll dooooo it” Joker touched his heart dramatically “because that’s love, huh?”

Bruce took a breath pretending that he was trying to find the courage to say something.

“Jack?” he asked shyly and Joker looked at him pouting.

“Yeeees, Batsy?”

Bruce shook his head.

“I…I’m not he…”

Joker nodded in spastic movements.

“Yadda, yadda…we’ll seeeeeee ’bout that, sweetheart. That was what you wanted to say?”

“No…I…” he huffed “I’m on medication…I need my medicines.”

Joker smiled reassuringly and touched his lips on Bruce’s cheek shucking the flesh loudly.

“Oooooh, babe! Dooooon’t worry…I’ve got looooooads of that for you…”

Bruce frowned but instantly he felt the sting of a needle and his eyes became heavy. Joker showed him the syringe he used and with the other hand the Batarang Batman used to seduce Joker the night he had chased him.

“I treaaaaasure your present, hon…I looove you chose my butt to stick the bat-thing” he pinched Bruce’s cheek “you nau---ghty boy…”

But Bruce’s eyes had already closed dragging him to a deep sleep.

Ironman was seeing Gotham’s skyline approaching. He had already spoken a second time with Lucius to learn any news on Quinzel’s movements.

“Sir.”

“Jarvis, tell me you have good news for once …” he grunted.

“I cannot give you an answer to that, sir; Mister Fury wants to speak to you.”

“Pass him.”

“Tony” Fury’s always determined voice filled Tony’s helmet “Loki gave us Joker’s hideout, the place he had under his concealing spells.”

“I’d be able to see Joker?”
“He says so. Since he has lost his powers his spells are weak too. But to cover every possibility Thor and Dr. Strange are coming.”

Tony snorted.

“I hate magic…” he mumbled “from wherever it may come.”

Fury chuckled.

“Me too but it helps when you have a wizard on your side…”

“Fair point. Give me the location.”

“Chinese Docks, warehouse 113.”

Upon hearing about the Docks, Ironman changed immediately course towards the sea.

No more than two minutes and the smell of salt passed his helmet giving him some relaxing feeling he so much needed. The sun was up and workers were already there stopping their work to look puzzled at Ironman hovering over the area.

Tony could see the warehouse yet there was no trace of human presence there and he didn’t expect differently: the warehouse was visible all this time Loki was helping Joker – it’d be very strange if an entire warehouse suddenly vanished – yet nobody saw Joker or any odd movement. So Tony for the first time couldn’t be sure about the accuracy of his systems’ findings; he couldn’t be positive that indeed Joker and Bruce weren’t there.

Ironman launched a small powered missile to make a hole to the wall and enter. He didn’t land but continued flying exploring the two storey building trying to see what his systems might have failed to see. He was in agony and anger because that stupid spells might be hiding Joker even under his nose.

“Tony!”

He frowned and turned to see Thor and Dr. Strange. Ironman flew to them.

“The spells are still strong” Tony said “I can’t see anything but you can, right?”

Dr. Strange shook his head.

“You can’t see anything because there’s nothing in this building.”

Thor nodded.

“Joker must have expected that Loki would betray his hideout and he didn’t come here.”

Tony was glad he wore his face plate because he wouldn’t like them to see him on the verge of depression. Yet he clenched his jaw: he would find Bruce!

“How about the Asgardian garments?” he asked coldly.

“Dr Strange and I will float over Gotham to find the signals – we’ll find him, Tony.”

“You shouldn’t be guarding that asshole brother of yours?” Tony asked; he had no mood to be interrupted again in his search by Loki’s shenanigans.

“For the time being he is too weak” Dr. Strange said.
“And with Dr. Strange we created a field prison he can’t escape” Thor placed his hand on Tony’s shoulder and looked in his lenses. “This time nothing will stop us, Tony.”

Dr. Strange looked at Ironman.

“You should take some rest, Mr. Stark. We’ll take it from here; rest and then you resume the search.”

Ironman shook his head.

“I’m alright; Bruce is out there suffering because of me…You two look for the garments and I will search with my humble ways: as soon as you find anything call me.”

He took off immediately without waiting.

Thor looked at Dr. Strange.

“He loves too much his friend” he said “he is scared that he might lose him again.”

The wizard nodded.

When Bruce opened his eyes again he was tied in a chair: he looked around. It was certainly a medical lab of old times: at his right stood a big rectangular machine with all sorts of cables attached; it wasn’t difficult for Bruce to figure what this was. It helped a lot seeing the examination table in the center of the room. Only it wasn’t an examination table: it was strange, with straps all over for the arms and legs and a helmet-like thing. He felt a shiver running his spine – a table for electroshock therapy.

Right next to the rectangular old fashioned generator was an old trolley with medical instruments: obsolete syringes, old fashioned bottles of medicine. Everything clean and pristine as if they were still used. He also registered that the chair he was tied was actually a hospital wheelchair of the past.

And then it dawned to Bruce: where Joker had taken him. He was in Arkham Asylum; at the part of the institution which was turned into a museum…He huffed, of course…Quinzel offered the perfect hideout for her favorite patient hiding him right under the police’s nose. Bruce remembered the events before Tony stunned him – the attack at Arkham. Police certainly would have searched the place after so who would suspect that Joker would choose that exact place to hide …

His mind was working fast: Joker had killed three people and who knows how many more he would kill if not stopped. He had to get out of there and stop Joker yet as the jester said getting out of his restraints which Bruce could do, would be an admission that he is Batman. He had to set his plan in motion…Joker should see both the real Batman and Bruce Wayne at the same time.

He looked around: Arkham Asylum. Crane despite the fact he partnered with Joker didn’t divulge his secrets to him – of course, the former doctor was too clever to reveal to Joker the passages that led to Jeremiah Arkham’s underground chambers and from there to the sewers and freedom.

Bruce was already forming the mental map of Gotham’s cave system he had learnt from years of exploring. Crane knew about Arkham’s basement’s connection with the sewers but he didn’t know that under the sewers was an entire world: Bruce’s heart twitched in the memory of the feeling of freedom he got every time he escaped down there…

His caves would serve him this time too…He closed his eyes because he was aware of how difficult
if impossible this was and his mind fled to the Water of Immortality: some drops would give him the strength and the healing needed to perform that task…

He inhaled deeply: no, he had to do this the hard way.

Something screeched in the lock and the door opened; with one click the room was cast into light and Bruce shut his eyes blinded.

“Oooooh! Sorry, littl’ gem…” the familiar nasal voice said and a snort from Joker’s side answered him.

Bruce felt joker on him, his hands cupping his face possessively.

“Look whooooom I brought you!”

Bruce opened his eyes cautiously but seeing Joker’s guest a sharp inhale of breath left his lips; Joker drew back startled.

“Whaaa’? I thought you knew our Crany-crow!”

Bruce met the former psychiatrist’s cold, jeering stare and averted his face only for Joker to cup again his face and make him look at him.

“I asked you somethin’…”

Bruce gulped.

“Don’t give me to him, please…” his eyes got wet and Joker lolled his head curious.

“I know he was with the bad people who tortured you buuuuuut daddy won’t let him huuuurt you again.”

“He was giving me drugs…”

“You toooold me you needed your medication…”

Bruce closed his eyes defeated.

“Drugs to damage my brain.”

Joker pouted thoughtful.

“This isn’t toooooo bad, baaaabe. Ask me.”

Crane walked inside stretching his small posture; he brushed the electroshock machine.

“I see even a clown like you can appreciate the beauty of science’s history…”

Joker gaped and scratched his head.

“Naaaaah…It’s just that nobody comes here…HEHEHEHEEEE!”

Crane rolled his eyes.

“This time I’d prefer another kind of treatment for your…darling” he spat. “And since we’re here…” he smirked. “Electroshock can do miracles and combined with psychopharmacology can open every secret door in his brain – because both of us know that there’s more to him.”
Joker yanked his head.

“Shut it, crow! I would never do that to Brucie…It’s tooooooo painful. Besides you’re not here to treat him” he lolled his head on the side and pouted.

Crane frowned.

“Then why you called me?”

Joker giggled.

“This kind of jobs needs stuff an’ doctors need helpers…”

Crane’s glare became dark and his eyebrows knitted.

“You don’t expect me to become the assistant of someone else?”

Joker gave a big nod.

“Oh, yeeees, I dooooon!” he made a dramatic gesture to the door like a show presenter “gentlemen, I present youuuuu…”

The door opened and Bruce inhaled sharply, his hands fisting the armrests.

“Dr. Haaarlequiiiiinn!!!”

Harleen walked inside dressed in her white rob, wearing her eye glasses and carrying her briefcase. Her face didn’t show any trace of being working with a criminal but it was as if she was visiting her patients in a routine shift.

“I’m not working with this ignorant woman!” Crane snapped and marched to the door passing disgusted the young doctor as she placed her briefcase on the trolley.

Joker turned to Bruce shaking his head.

“Occupational competition, huh, precious?” I didn’t believe you a sexist, Crany… An’, yes, you will work with her!” he said in a singsong voice and turned so swiftly that Bruce managed to see the blade launching from his hand only thanks to his training.

Crane astonished felt the force of the blade that passed half an inch from his nose and stabbed the door in front of him. The petit doctor touched his heart to find his cool and turned slowly to Joker.

“That was a threat?”

Joker twitched his eyebrows and rolled his eyes to Bruce jeering the doctor.

“Oh, doctor, the levels of your intelligence makes my eyes tear…” he wiped his left eye and twitched his finger tossing an imaginary tear. “No, you asshole” his voice was sharper than his blade “that was a token of how easy it is for me to kill you! You want me to bring on my resentment for what you did to Brucie?”

Crane licked his lips and inhaled.

“Alright, I’ll help you.”

“Heeeelp meeess?” Joker arched his eyebrows and then waved that off. “Uuuuuu, whatever…”
Quinzel was watching with eyes filled with sarcasm.

Joker turned to Bruce showing with his thump back at Crane.

“As if he has a choice…HEHEHEHEEEEE! But I like his style…”

“I should be the insulted here” Quinzel spat. “I don’t wanna work with a mental case.”

Joker closed his eyes frustrated.

“Geeef a griiiiip, people!” he groaned. “Before my blades wake up…” he gestured demanding to the trolley with Harleen’s briefcase.

Bruce licked his lips that were bleeding as he had bit them reopening Joker’s bites.

“Don’t do that to me, please…”

“It’s for your own good, littl’ gem” he leaned over Bruce’s ear. “Don’t worry…they woooooon’t be here when you’ll do the big revelations: it will stay between us, like every loving couple does.”

Crane walked reluctantly to Harleen who had just opened her briefcase and took out a small vial. He cocked an eyebrow.

“Amytal?” he asked and Bruce felt his spine getting cold.

“Yes, it will lower his defenses and help him speak freely in order to relieve himself from whatever tortures him subconsciously.”

Crane sniggered.

“So…you’re curing him?”

Harleen yanked her head and looked at him crooking her mouth.

“As a working therapist, of course…MY job” she cocked an eyebrow “is to help patients not experimenting on them.”

Crane narrowed his eyes.

“My experiments aimed to help patients too in the long time” Harleen shook her head in disbelief “and I’m way better doctor than you!”

Joker rolled his eyes and turned to them.

“Children! Children! Focus…”

Crane rolled his eyes and looked at the liquid that Quinzel pumped into the syringe.

“Add three ml more – he has a great resistance to drugs.”

Joker looked at Bruce frowned and then nodded.

“Of course…” he said smirking “Harley, doooo as he says: he has experience with Brucie.”

Bruce gulped and some sweat drops appeared over his brow yet inside he was concentrating gathering his mental power as Ra’s had taught him in order to fight off the drug’s effect. He heard Quinzel’s light steps approaching and bit his lips; when she raised his sleeve and disinfected a part of
his upper arm Bruce looked her in the eye.

“Please, Dr. Quinzel, don’t do that…you can’t co-operate with Joker.”

She cast a lopsided glance at Joker and smiled.

“But I’m not, Mr. Wayne…I’m merely a hostage like you – I’m just forced to do what he wants. But we can get useful things out of that: your healing will lead to his healing…Imagine that!”

Her eyes sparkled thrilled and Bruce clenched his teeth a second before the needle stabbed his flesh and the liquid was pumped into his vein.

Joker smirked, locking eyes with Bruce; he then yanked his head and looked at his minion doctors.

“Out!” he ordered. “Give us our privacy!”

Harleen’s eyes widened.

“But, Mr. J, I can help…” she protested almost complaining.

“O-U-T! I’m not going to repeat it, Harlequin.”

Crane didn’t need a second word and hurried to leave the room. Harleen however pressed her lips disappointed and left reluctantly.

Joker loomed over Bruce whose eyes began to become blank.

“Just the two of us now, Batsy.”

Catwoman was watching Arkham Asylum from the rooftop of an abandoned building opposite the gothic Manor. She had followed Quinzel from her apartment there and waited for her to leave to meet Joker because Selina was sure that Joker would call his accomplice.

Her face was tight in determination as she gazed the building, standing on the rooftop. There was no fatigue in her body, only a calm resolution.

“Have you anything on Quinzel?” Tony asked Lucius.

“Nothing suspicious, Mr. Stark; she left from her apartment to the Arkham Asylum and she is still there.”

“Thank you, Lucius; I’m over Narrows scanning the area…but nothing.”

“You’ll make it, Mr. Stark.”

But Tony was not so sure; it was almost noon and he had no news from Thor and Dr. Strange. Maybe Loki fooled them saying that the garments would be detected and show the location – the bastard must have something on them to conceal them.

Suddenly, he saw Thor coming to him; his face was grim and Tony already knew.

“We found the garments, Tony…but no trace of Joker or Bruce….”
Ironman gritted his teeth: Joker suspected that the clothes would be easy to detect so he got rid of them either dressing Bruce with common clothes or… Bruce was naked. That made his hair stand on edge and his pulse elevated; he made a sharp U turn rushing to Gotham’s sky.

Thor huffed shaking his head equally discouraged and took off to continue.

His sleep was too heavy, too abnormal yet he felt relieved because he was aware that he hadn’t said anything he didn’t want; at the same time, the sense of urgency became more pressing: he had to get away and realize his plan.

He knew that after the Amytal injection Quinzel at some point injected him with sedative. Though he was still aslee he could tell that they had brought him back to the metallic bed, into the first room. Also, he could feel acid eyes on him and gloved hands rubbing his tied arms.

“Wake up, sweetheart…” the nasal voice breathed in his ear.

“Mr. Stark” Lucius’ collected voice interrupted Tony’s thoughts.

It was afternoon and there wasn’t any development on finding Bruce. In the meantime, as soon as he parted from Thor, Tony found the calm to contact Jim and inform him that Joker was back in Gotham. Hovering over Gotham Tony had seen the police being in constant action looking for the jester.

“What do you have, Lucius?”

“Police have found three bodies in the junkyard.”

Tony halted in midair along with his breath: no, it couldn’t be…

“It is Isaac and Wizzie and one of Joker’s goons” Lucius added hastily sensing the younger man’s agony and understanding his fear.

“Then Joker is indeed here and in action” he spat. “What the cops say?”

“They had Joker cards on them; their necks were almost severed; time of death 6 in the morning. Forensics are trying to find anything about the site of the murders.”

Tony nodded: he was sure that Joker killed them because they hurt Bruce and…Batman. And judging from the man’s cruelty and madness he might have done it in front of Bruce to prove his… love. He wished that police might find something this way.

“Thank you, Lucius.” Hold on, littl’ guy…

Bruce pretended to be asleep for a couple of minutes more but he knew that he couldn’t stay for long that way: Joker might bring Quinzel or Crane to wake him up with more drugs.

His eyelids twitched tiredly and opened but as soon as he saw Joker’s face over him, a gasp left his mouth: he might be pretending yet Joker’s face definitely wasn’t the best sight to wake to…

The room was abundantly lighted and Bruce was grateful that no corpse waited him this time. He
gulped and looked at his captor shyly.

Joker touched feathery the stray locks that had stuck on Bruce’s sweaty forehead.

“I loooove your hair like this” he mumbled. “It’s like your untamed nature, huh, Brucie?”

Bruce didn’t answer just let his head loll on the other side of his pillow but Joker took gently his chin and turned him to regain eye contact.

“You’re my Batsy!” he said thrilled. “Sooono resilient to those craaaaazy-drugs – like Daaaaaddy Joker…Ooooh! We’re so much alike! I could say to Harlequin to in--crease the dose buuuuuut I don’t want to cause any damage to your beautiful brain – it’s so much like mine…”

Bruce didn’t like that ‘compliment’ at all.

“Resilient?” he asked feigning puzzlement and Joker rolled his eyes.

“Doooon’t tell me you don’t remember that you didn’t admit the truth?” he narrowed his eyes in disbelief.

Bruce closed his eyes exhausted.

“What truth?” he asked.

Joker brought his face even closer.

“That you are Batman.”

“But I’m not…” Bruce protested tired.

Joker didn’t seem to listen and just caressed Bruce’s cheekbone.

“You know how hard it is to not act my conjugal rights, right here and right now?” he sighed and licked gently Bruce’s cheek. “Back in Loki’s hat I was ready but here, back in our Gotham, I first want you to admit the truth.”

“There is no…”

But Joker cupped violently his cheeks with both hands and gritted his teeth.

“Do you know what male cats do when they want to mate with a cat with kittens?!” he howled and Bruce felt a shiver.

“What do you mean?”

Joker smirked.

“The cat of my dreams decided to adopt a kitten named Dick-y and I want to mate and I’m jealous.”

Bruce’s guts clenched and Joker lolled his head seemingly calm.

“Sooollllll do you know what male cats dooooo?”

Bruce didn’t want to learn but Joker leaned his face over his.

“They kill the littl’ ones…sooo... that the cat couples with them” he whispered and Bruce took in the message.
“No!” he said. “Let the boy alone – he has suffered enough because of you!”

Joker smiled.

“So I can save him once and for all from his misery – reunited him with his family” he twitched his eyebrows emphatically. “Not to mention that you were injured and crippled to save him…soooo he is his fault you’re disabled.”

“That’s not true! Dick has nothing to do with my disability; let him out of this.”

Joker smirked and licked his lips.

“I’m afraid I can’t; he is between us…I thought it much – bullshit! I neeeever think much… - I’ll bring the brat here to punish him for what he has done to you…aaaaand get rid of his annoying preeeeesence in your hooooome.”

“He has done nothing! Leave him alone!”

Joker cocked his eyebrows.

“Are we getting aaaaaangry? HUUUUUHHH! I LIKEY IT! TIME FOR SOME BAT, HUH?!” he growled and Bruce closed his eyes letting his head sink to the pillow. “What are you willing to give me to spaaaare him?”

“Anything…” he whispered “just don’t hurt him – leave him alone.”

Joker leaned above him and nibbled Bruce’s lower lip.

“Mmm? How about sooooooome confessions?”

Bruce opened his eyes and Joker met his gaze.

“Admit you’re Batman…” the jester hissed dead serious.

Bruce lowered his eyes and gulped.

“Ooooor I’ll come out an’ fetch the littl’ brat myself for some playing…”

Bruce raised his eyes.

“No…Okay, okay: I’m…” he gulped pretending that the word couldn’t come out of his mouth “he.”

Joker attached to Bruce’s bottom lip raised his gaze to meet his prisoner’s eyes.

“Saaaaaaay it: I waaaaant to hear it…”

Bruce gulped.

“I’m Batman” he mumbled and Joker pouted skeptical.

“Growl to me, babe: I missed your sexy husky voice…”

Bruce could detect Joker’s skepticism: he believed that Bruce was Batman and he liked that he forced him admit that yet the way Bruce admitted it wasn’t satisfying and the jester had his doubts.

“Growl?” Bruce asked puzzled.
Joker yanked his head grunting and squinted.

“Are you playing me for a fool?” he detached. “Okay, baaabe…I’m off: you’ll stoooop playing when my blade is grazing the bastard’s neck” he was ready to stand.

“No, please!” Bruce exclaimed yanking his head and his torso as much as the restraints permitted. “I’ll do what you want…” Joker lolled his head on the side watching him suspiciously. “Just promise me that you won’t get near the boy ever again” he gave a feigned growl not exactly like Batman’s.

Joker cocked an eyebrow.

“Hm…It’s not exactly…Maybe I should after all…”

But Bruce didn’t have the mood for more threats; he concentrated and looked Joker deep in the eyes as Ra’s had taught him to mesmerize his opponents – his late mentor was thrilled with his student’s effectiveness…

“Naaaaah…Let’s forget the brat” Joker said “there’s so many better things to do, huh, batsy-babe? Noooooow…”

He straddled Bruce and grabbed the shirt’s lapels pulling off all the buttons; the jester’s eyes glimmered seeing the perfectly toned thorax. He pushed the fabric away from Bruce’s body to reveal the entire torso and then he bit his glove in the finger to pull it off doing the same with the other. He placed his palms over Bruce’s breasts and began rubbing moaning.

“Uuuuh! Lala… I’ll never have enough of this…My Batsyyyy baby undeeer me!”

Joker leaned and began nibbling Bruce’s face, every now and then licking greedily yet Bruce put the disgust at bay because he needed to concentrate. Now they were in Gotham he didn’t have to endure this, especially when for the time being he managed to make Joker forget Dick. However he couldn’t trust the jester so it was time for his plan to be in motion.

The jester was sucking Bruce’s ear.

“Noooow that we understand each other, what about giving me what you were giving to Super-Gooofy?” he whispered and licked Bruce’s neck.

“I had nothing with him” Bruce answered in the same un-Batmanish growl.

His captor laughed and shook his index finger.

“I appreciate it that you satisfy my kind request of using growl…although is not exactly…Mmm…I know you were” he licked his lips “expressing your gratitude to the alien – he saved you after all…” he lolled his head. “Do you reckon I owe him?” he waved that off. “Naaaah!”

Joker’s hands were fondling crudely his abs heading lower but Bruce took advantage of the jester’s eyes looking at his face and concentrated his thoughts targeting his energy on his captor’s mind. Bruce knew that Joker wasn’t an easy target for mesmerizing.

The wet hands had slipped under Bruce’s jeans already caressing his genitals when Joker stopped abruptly with a frown.

“Uuuuuuu…I’ve got to…” he frowned puzzled. “I’ve got to speak to Harleen” he dismounted and turned to leave but stopped and looked at Bruce. “Sorry for the disruption, babe, but daddy has to make sure that bad guys won’t find us.”
“You’re not dragging your words…”

Jester laughed.

“Hehe! You see what true loooooove can do?”

Bruce nodded but inside was smirking. As the door closed behind Joker he was sure that Quinzel would bubble Joker enough.

He had already dislocated his thumps so he immediately slipped his hands out of the handcuffs. But for the next step he hesitated: he remembered the last time with Tony when he stood on his feet and his friend stunned him.

“You know that you should not be doing that, Bruce…” his friend repeated.

But Bruce knew that he had to do this. He pressed his lips determined and moved his legs off the bed and to the floor. He closed his eyes to gain focus and began breathing diaphragmatically; the presence of the Black Butterfly felt so encouraging; after two minutes he felt a current running his legs and supported his hands on the bed pushing his body upwards. He stood and walked to the door stumbling a bit; there was nobody outside – Joker didn’t believe that Bruce would try anything.

He cast a last glance to the bed to ensure that everything was as he wanted.

Bruce smiled cunningly: Bruce was sleeping tied on the bed. He knew from the days of his training with Ra’s that his reflection would be there as long as he wished, fooling everybody who would look from the door’s window.

He opened the door and walked supporting his hands on the wall to not burden much his legs. From the time he was studying the Arkham Manor’s blueprints to find Crane’s whereabouts he knew exactly where to go: the secret passage to the basement and from there to the ancient manhole leading to the caves and then out of the Asylum. Neither Crane nor Joker knew that in Gotham’s gut lay a whole world and that Batman was using that labyrinth to his war.

He slipped inside the secret passage on the end of the west wing’s corridor and walked. Although it wasn’t visible Bruce found easily the rusty grating covering the manhole and from there he descended to the sewers; from there wasn’t much distance to the forgotten manhole that led to the caves.

The same feeling of freedom washed his body; it was the exact feeling as when he was flying. He smiled: like a true bat, loving sky and caves the same.

The path to the next manhole leading to the sewers and then to the surface was short and although he wanted to stay longer to his ‘home’ he knew that in this case it was a blessing he didn’t have to cover a longer distance.

He’d need a diversion for his plan and Bruce knew where to find it. Bruce lifted the grating carefully having first listened for any bystanders: thankfully, he knew the area and knew that the tunnel led to an alley.

Catwoman was still watching as the evening covered eerily the Asylum: Quinzel’s car was parked there all the time and Selina had clear view of every entrance of the building so she was sure that the doctor hadn’t left unnoticed.
Quinzel was still inside but the working hours had passed: Catwoman frowned – either she had some work there or she had a very important job there including Joker.

Selina’s heart jolted: they were holding Bruce there. Her eyes glimmered determined and her fists clenched; she was ready to jump from the rooftop and go inside but she felt that someone was watching her.

A red and gold bird was hovering over Gotham’s dark blue sky. Ironman wasn’t going to stop if Bruce wasn’t found. As the hours passed, despair tried to lurk inside his mind yet it only managed to fuel his determination and anger.

“Any news on Quinzel, Lucius?”

“No, Mr. Stark; she is still in the Asylum.”

Tony frowned.

“She should have left the place, right?”

“I’ll check her shift…yes, her shift ended two hours ago.”

Tony’s eyes flashed as his mind made a rapid connection: she didn’t leave to find Joker because Joker was in the Asylum! They had Bruce in there with Quinzel covering the madman. He sped there but he didn’t inform the police because their intervention might warn Joker.

Bruce smiled seeing Catwoman’s lean silhouette standing on the edge watching the Asylum – he knew she was there, he had sensed her presence; her ponytail moved slightly and then his favorite cat turned her head towards him. Her frown gave its place to widened eyes filled with joy. She rushed to him and hugged him kissing his cheeks.

“I knew you would escape!” she exclaimed and detached a bit to scan him.

Her eyes narrowed seeing his open shirt and the dry blood and bruises on his face.

“He hit you! The bastard! I’m gonna..!”

Bruce held her rubbing her upper arms.

“I’m alright – don’t worry” she watched him not persuaded.

“Leslie will say that…”

Bruce shook his head.

“Is Dick alright? Safe?” he was worried that Joker had taken the boy despite his promise.

Selina frowned.

“He is alright, in the Manor; Stark has reinforced the security.”

Bruce discerned her anger for Tony and pressed his lips.
“Now we’ll take you to the Manor” she said “the others will take care of Joker and his girlfriend.”

She frowned again seeing Bruce’s denial.

“No. Batman must do that.”

“That can’t be…Bruce, you can’t stress that more” she gestured to his legs that support his body.

“I must: Sel, Joker must stop believing that Bruce Wayne is Batman.”

“How? Even if Batman tackles him Bruce won’t be there…” suddenly it dawned to her; once Bruce had told her about his ability to create a reflection of himself.

Bruce nodded.

“I need to contact Lucius to bring me my armor and then you must attack them to create a diversion; Joker would definitely try to take Bruce and leave – Batman will find him then.”

Selina bit her bottom lip.

“It’s dangerous, Bruce.”

“The armor will protect me and help me move without exerting myself” he saw his friend’s hesitation and narrowed his eyes. “Sel, I have done more difficult things than that…and you are here with me – there’s nothing to fear.”

She inhaled deeply.

“You know that I hate you?” she said giving him her smart phone.

Bruce smiled and took it.

“Everything will end by this weekend.”

Zucco was looking at Wayne Manor coming closer.

“Why?” Rebecca asked frowned. “The custody hearing is going pretty well and you could win.”

Zucco smirked.

“Something is off, Beccy…Wayne’s lawyer today asked for a postponement and I don’t trust Wayne…Bringing Breizic in the game wasn’t random: that bastard prepares something and I won’t stay to find out.”

She turned her head towards the Manor.

“Is that why you asked from the judge to spend the weekend with your nephew?”

He smirked.

“I’ll get everything and leave with the kid: Wayne is fond of the brat so he won’t dare to chase me to not harm him.”

He stopped the car and ascended the stair to the main entrance.
Alfred opened the door collected as ever not showing anything from the turmoil he was facing. He already knew who the visitor was since he opened the gates for him.

“Good evening” Zucco said. “I came to take Dick for the weekend – I have judge Moot’s permission” he made to pull it from his pocket.

“That won’t be needed, sir: Mr. Collins has informed us. Master Richard is ready.”

He heard the hurried footsteps and turned to see Dick carrying on his shoulder his backpack with everything he needed for the weekend. Alfred knew the boy’s adoration for his uncle yet Dick’s face wasn’t as joyful as he expected.

The butler moved to him.

“Is everything alright, sir?”

Dick met the butler’s eye.

“I don’t feel right leaving now…” he said almost whispering because he knew the secrecy about Bruce’s kidnapping and didn’t want Tony to hear.

Alfred shook his head.

“There is nothing you can do here, Master Richard, and I’m sure that very soon everything will be back to normal. So enjoy your weekend as much as possible.”

Dick smiled.

“You’ll call me for any news?”

Alfred reflected his smile.

“I will, sir.”

Dick walked to his uncle who hugged him one armed.

“Can we go, champ?”

The boy looked back at the Manor and Alfred. He nodded and followed his uncle.

Alfred stood on the doorstep watching as Zucco opened the back door for Dick to enter. The car sped following the lane leading outside the grounds.
“Life returns slowly back to its usual rhythms here at New York’s Downtown 24 hours after the attack that cost the lives of 10 people.”

The camera was zooming to the yellow police tapes that still cordoned the area were the battle took place. The debris was mostly removed but still there were some forgotten ruins reminding the yesterday’s nightmarish scenery.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. and specifically the director of the organization, Mr. Tony Stark, has given the city’s mayor a fund dedicated to the restoration of the damage. The tycoon’s personal assistant, Miss Victoria Potts, had a meeting in the City Hall today with the Mayor discussing the details.”

The image changed to show prerecorded footage from Victoria Potts walking out of the City Hall accompanied by the Mayor himself.

“I’m here today to bring to Mr. Mayor my employer’s, Mr. Stark’s honest regret about what took place yesterday in New York and reassure him that the city will have his funding and technical support to restore all the damage. Also, Mr. Stark authorized me to express his condolences to the families of the people who died at the same attack; Mr. Stark will take care of the immediate needs of the families both of the dead and the injured: S.H.I.E.L.D. and Stark Industries have already established a special fund for the people who suffered from yesterday’s attack.”

“Miss Potts, who was the mastermind behind the attack?”

“Do you expect another attack of this scale?”

Pepper’s face was dead serious exactly as the Mayor’s.

“These questions are more for the S.H.I.E.L.D. to answer so I recommend you stay with the official announcement the organization made.”

“So, no new attack is expected?”

The Mayor turned to the reporter.

“The announcement says exactly that, John.”

“Miss Potts, does Mr. Stark have any explanation for Superman’s absence during the fight?”

The man who was at the dark corner of the bar felt a shiver.

Pepper’s gaze was calm.

“I’m afraid you have to ask Superman. Now I think that we must focus in healing our wounds so no more questions, please.”

Clark had followed there two men whom he suspected to be members of the Intergang – newly recruited from Metropolis’ underworld; he focused on them because the known members had gone below the radar as if the earth had swallowed them.

It was still evening yet they didn’t have any hesitation to be outside especially since they mixed with innocent people in one of Metropolis’ most quiet bars.
He was sure by now that the Intergang was very much alive and kicking gathering forces for ruling Metropolis’ underworld. Actually, the guys Clark followed were met in the bar with two other shady men and Clark was sure that they were recruiting.

“Boss was right” one of the guys whispered to his partner “Superman has lost his grip; he was too afraid even to confront those guys in New York…”

The other chuckled and Clark clenched his jaw enraged.

“I can’t understand why Superman didn’t come to help us” a New Yorker was saying from the built-in TV over the bar. “I thought he cared about us…”

“I’m disappointed…” a woman said on camera. “And sad…my friend was there: if Superman was helping she might be alive now…”

Clark bit his lip and heard again his mother’s words:

“People died waiting and hoping till their last breath Superman to save them…”

His guts suddenly felt twisted; his chest heavy and his heart cold, scared like he never before had felt it. He frowned: no, he recognized that feeling…

Clark saw again himself floating into the dark void with the same cold feeling of having lost everything…that his loved ones was lost forever; himself was lost forever. The loneliness, the despair, the hopelessness…He had felt like this in a dream. But in the dream something lit his darkness, warmed his coldness. He remembered the star that led his way and the warmth when he reached it: the presence of that star took away the despair giving him back hope.

He saw again the star taking the form of a man…Bruce…He saw him again laid before him his beautiful eyes filled with love and happiness.

All of a sudden Clark’s head filled with a familiar strong heart beating, determined as always but tired; he could hear the calm breath…And that calmness filled his own body as well flooding him with a sense of reassurance; knowledge that he wasn’t absorbed by the darkness… That there was a beacon for him.

Clark’s eyes widened realizing that unconsciously he had found Bruce’s vitals as he was doing for months. He felt as wonderful as back then. Clark was tired…He must be exhausted after being fucked by Thor: they were celebrating the Avengers’ victory in New York and Superman’s humiliation. The sniggering voice inside him continued by reminding him how breathtaking Bruce was under the shine of the love making sweat; his eyes’ dazzling glow during his orgasm…Clark felt an irresistible urge to surge at the Manor, beat to a pulp Thor – because Superman could smash all the Avengers together – and claim Bruce…

But then Diana’s eyes came in his mind; her perfume dizzying his senses. He saw Thor under that bridge in New York’s park pinning Bruce to the pillar and thrusting in his body the human begging for more…

He felt the wrath of that day returning like a river of lava: Bruce had betrayed him maybe not by fucking with Thor, at least then, but certainly with his thoughts. Because Clark had seen how he talked with the god. And then Bruce used his knife to hurt him; Clark still had the scar on his upper arm. No, that stupid dream was a product of the influence’s return since Bruce had inoculated him inappropriately in order to make Superman his slave as Ra’s wanted.
Yet now that he had taken the right inoculation Clark could see the truth.

Diana was the true star of his life; the only one that gave him tranquility, love and happiness. He glanced at the screen where more people was whining about Superman not being in New York ignorant of what was really at stake; they were so eager to blame him after everything he was doing for them all these years.

His heart beat faster than usual in anger: Diana was right. Humans were so ungrateful…even Lois and his own mother…He inhaled deeply…no, not Lois and his Ma: they simply didn’t understand but he was sure that in the end they would see the truth as everyone else.

Or…

He didn’t feel the need for them to understand…He didn’t care: all these were only making him tired. He was Kal El: what did he care about the opinion of others? Especially when they were wrong? Only Diana was accepting him for what he was: he knew his worth, his kindness.

He left a bill on the table and stood forgetting the men he was stalking. He needed, he wanted to be back to Diana: his true star; the source of his happiness in this dark and hostile world.

Lois stopped her car. She chose to do so a block away from her target wanting to remain unnoticed. She decided to go on foot to the Arkham Asylum.

Officially, there was nothing but she was a fighting field reporter and her experience of years didn’t let the silence fool her. Since morning she was wandering the city and noticed the movements of police cars seemingly doing routine work but in a clearly frantic way like they were searching for something.

And to confirm her suspicions police announced that they found two bodies: Isaac and Wizze, both of them connected with the case of that horrible video with Bruce. Now who else could have killed them than Joker? So police was in Joker’s traces.

To make matters even clearer Ironman was reported by some news stations being floating over the city…Ironman patrolling Gotham? No, after the attack in New York the reasonable would be to patrol New York…So he had some intelligence on Joker’s whereabouts and he was looking for him and Bruce.

Now, why Arkham Asylum? She asked herself that. Joker could be at any place in city. However her instinct was telling her that the madman would choose the mental institution, maybe because nobody would suspect.

Lois knew how to be discreet in order to not become a hurdle in police operations – not that she saw any police around. She chose to approach through the alleys of the buildings around.

As soon as she had clear view of the gothic, eerie in the evening’s darkness building Lois took out her Smart Phone and shot some pictures. Suddenly, she lowered her phone because something caught her eye.

Lois hurried to the alley opposite and the person that lingered in the shadows saw her with as much surprise as Lois herself.

“What are you doing here?” Lois asked whispering though there wasn’t an obvious danger of being heard.
Vicky Vale rolled her eyes.

“The same with you, darling…”

Lois crossed her arms on the chest and lolled her head. Vicky huffed.

“There’s a bizarre silence in the city matched with some things that caught my attention: police is in frantic action, Tony Stark makes circles over the city looking for something or someone, three corpses were found all of them connected with Joker and the two of them connected with Bruce Wayne as well...let’s see...I think that Joker took advantage of the turbulence after yesterday’s attack at Arkham and cooks something concerning Bruce. And I have sources that informed me that Ironman heads here so Joker must be here. Or something…”

Lois gave a small crooked smile.

“You would be a nice partner…”

Vicky smiled flattered.

“I thought that you were working with Kent.”

Lois cocked her eyebrows, her disappointment clear in his eyes.

“You know how unreliable boys can be…”

“There is something more to this, huh? I mean the situation with Joker…” Vicky said narrowing her eyes.

Lois thought it a second.

“It’s confidential…”

Vicky pouted.

“I think I proved that I am trustworthy.”

Lois nodded.

“Fair point. Yesterday, when Arkham Asylum was breached Joker attacked Wayne Manor and abducted Bruce.”

Vicky pressed her lips.

“How much more has this man to suffer?” she narrowed her eyes pouting “Hm. By the way, did Bruce have an affair with Superman? You must know” but seeing Lois’ glare Vicky crooked her mouth. “Oh!” She chuckled “job’s habit... Ugh! And this Joker guy…”

Lois remembered the interview Vicky had with Jack Napier aka the Joker and then the hostage situation in Gotham’s Opera.

“You had many experiences with him.”

Her colleague cocked her eyebrows.

“Yeah...I had the...pleasure…” she chuckled and turned towards the building. “What are we doing now?”
Lois leaned her back to the wall letting the darkness of the evening swallow her.

“Wait…”

Batman came out of the small cavity behind the natural arch created from stalactites and stalagmites under the street leading to Arkham; Catwoman stood from the flat rock formation in the right. Lucius was already standing looking calm as ever but thoughtful the imposing stature of Gotham’s vigilante. It was obvious that underneath his composure a huge battle was taking place inside the loyal scientist; a big doubt about what he was helping to happen.

Batman’s hand on his shoulder felt reassuring.

“Everything is going to be fine” Batman said to him with conviction. “You and Tony equipped me with all the safety I need.”

Lucius met Batman’s eyes which weren’t covered yet from the lenses; the so familiar sapphire-emerald eyes seemed so different under the hue of iron determination.

“I sure hope so…” Lucius replied avoiding using his employer’s name.

The caves were the safest place in Gotham yet Lucius still didn’t feel okay using his employer’s name addressing Batman.

“You better leave now” Batman said to him. “Things might get nasty and I’ll feel better if you are in a safe distance. Thank you for everything.”

Lucius nodded. Bruce knew that his loyal scientist had no problem finding his way in the caves since he had come himself there; during his youth Lucius loved spelunking so he knew enough about the cave system and Bruce’s diagrams made it even easier to navigate.

“Good luck” he said and walked towards the exit of the cavity that led to a natural corridor and then to the manhole for the sewers; he stopped and turned to them. “Be careful, you two.”

“We will” Catwoman answered with a small smile and Lucius walked out.

Batman waited for a couple of minutes for Lucius to cover enough distance; the scientist had left his car quite afar from the Asylum and followed the underground route to the meeting point so that even if someone who knew his car or him saw either no suspicions would be raised about Lucius involvement in what was going to happen.

Catwoman looked in her friend’s eyes.

“It’s time?” she asked and Batman replied with a nod.

He rubbed her upper arms.

“Don’t worry…”

Catwoman cocked an eyebrow and crooked her mouth.

“That’s impossible, sweetie…”

Batman gave a small grin and activated his eye lenses.
“How do you know that Joker hasn’t already returned to your cell and touched the reflection realizing the trick?” Selina said as they walked to the opposite direction from the one Lucius had taken.

“Remember that time at the Haven’s reception?”

She rolled her eyes.

“How can I forget such glorious moments?” she remarked snarky and Batman crooked his mouth.

“Remember how I dazzled the goon to not betray us?” she nodded. “I did the same with Joker sending him to Quinzel and knowing her, she will keep him busy enough time for you to attack. But to be sure…”

He pressed a hidden button in his armor’s forearm part and a neon green diagram of the Asylum emerged in the humid darkness of the cave.

“Quinzel said to them where to dwell to avoid the security cameras and the footage from the cameras in the museum section give the same image of the facilities all the time – good thing we can use satellite feeding to cross the dots indicating human presence with image…” he ‘touched’ the museum section part of the diagram and images of the goons guarding the halls appeared in succession.

“Cool…” she said.

“And this” he showed the room at the far right part of the museum “is where they hold Bruce…” he pointed at the spot there and Catwoman shook her head.

“Impressive! It gives a signal as if a presence it’s there…”

“But it is…only it’s not an exact presence. And it is only one so Joker hasn’t returned.”

They inspected the museum section’s zoomed diagram since the jester wouldn’t leave that area because the rest of the Asylum was normally monitored.

“They can be here.”

Catwoman showed a room where two dots where inside and Bruce ‘touched’ that part to get image: Joker was speaking with Quinzel.

“And they are quite far from my cell” Batman said.

“Let’s go” Catwoman gritted her teeth. “I can’t wait to kick some ass!”

Tony had stood on a rooftop some yards from Arkham; he was watching inside his helmet Arkham Asylum’s diagram and sequential footage from the security cameras. He wanted his movements to be precise in order to not give space to Joker to hurt Bruce or use him as a shield to escape.

“Jarvis, I want every image you can get from the Asylum” he was sure that the jester was inside the Asylum with Quinzel’s protection yet there was nothing suspicious coming from the building.

He pressed his lips and cursed.

“You have every available data from the Arkham Asylum, sir.”
“There must be something more, Jarvis… I know Joker and Bruce are there: they can’t be invisible!” suddenly something flashed into his mind. “Jarvis, give me all the data Bruce has on Crane – focus on those regarding the Asylum.”

A flood of data began water falling in front of his eyes and Tony was happy for his ability to read fast. In the data Bruce had about Crane, there was a diagram of the Manor. Tony frowned and noticed how his friend had marked some spots…

“That’s it! That’s how Crane escaped from the Asylum: Arkham had secret passages to the basement and from there he had built paths connected with the sewers. Crane used that passages and since he is cooperating with Joker then that is how he got inside unnoticed. On the other side, from what Bruce told me Crane wasn’t going to trust his secrets to Joker so the madman got inside otherwise… Damn! That doesn’t help… No! Joker doesn’t know about the passages.”

He perused again the footage from the cameras and reaching those from the museum section something was off.

“Jarvis, give me the footage from the security cameras in the museum section from the last 12 hours.”

He focused on the footage. He didn’t want to lose any detail.

“Bingo!” he was right: definitely something was off. “Compare every frame.”

“The frames are exactly the same, sir.”

Tony smirked and nodded.

“The bastards!”

They had fed the cameras with the same footage for the last 12 hours and given the fact that the museum section had no traffic at all, nobody would have come upon some clowns wandering there.

“Joker is in the museum section: give me footage from every available satellite.”

Catwoman slithered in the dark corridors of the Museum section of the Arkham Asylum. She along with Batman entered the building through the secret passage which Bruce used to get out; they didn’t came from another part of the building because they didn’t want cameras to capture them and the cameras in the Museum Area was frozen to the same image.

She knew exactly where each clown-goon was guarding and where to hit for Joker to hear.

Two goons with clown masks stood on the two sides of the corridor holding firearms ready to open fire. She smirked and followed the direction that led behind them; worry was biting her insides about Bruce’s condition and his risky plan yet she would do what they agreed in order to end all of this and her friend return to safety as soon as possible.

She approached more and heard the guys mumbling nonsense sure that nobody would come there. So they were completely astonished when something fell on their backs. Catwoman could have knocked them out at once yet the plan was for them to create fuss so Joker would hear and come.

With the force she fell on their backs the goons collapsed on the floor and in normal conditions Selina would have neutralized them before they could blink an eye yet now she waited for them to stand. Of course, rolling her eyes for their clumsy movements…
Her leg rose to kick the one’s nose making him scream while her hand jerked slapping the second goon in the face sending him to the wall.

“We got an intruder!!” the second yelled as Catwoman elbowed the first one knocking him out.

“Mr. J, I think you should detach from Bruce Wayne: your fixation with him is clear that holds you back from healing.”

Joker rolled his eyes and smirked, hearing about healing: why healing? He was perfect.

“What? You don’t listen to me, right?” the psychiatrist asked frowning. “I want the best for you and this man only damages you. You should trust me: after all I’m risking everything for you…”

Joker scanned the room: a large space with cases and shelves carrying old fashioned bottles, needles, books and other equipment. Harlequin’s rant was actually amusing even though it last for almost half an hour.

“You risked every—thing, daaarling, ‘cause you wanted toooooo. ‘Cause you knoooow that I can giiiiive you experiences that no---body else can. Soooooo don’t bitch ‘bout that…” he lolled his head on the side.

“You shouldn’t have kicked me out when Wayne got the amytal – I could have helped! I could have helped you! But you care only for that stupid brat!”

Calling Bruce ‘stupid’ was unacceptable. Joker raised his hand and slapped her in the face.

“You don’t get to speak like this for him!” he yelled.

Harleen still dressed in her white robe held her cheek shocked but with the same shiver like that time Joker hit her during his escape.

Joker lolled his head interested.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t liiiiiike thaaaaat?”

She made to retort something but something about an intruder was heard and then a shot. Joker rushed to the door.

The goon who yelled pointed his firearm at Catwoman shooting but she jumped and fell on him taking the weapon off his hand and hitting him in the head with the stock.

She heard footsteps running there and grinned: the decoy worked. Five goons were coming at her and she jumped to avoid their bullets; with two back flips she landed behind them rushing immediately on them kicking the butts of the two closer to her and sending them to crush on the others.

“Whooooo fired?! You idiots!”

“Sir, gunshots are coming from the corridor A1 in the Museum Section.”
“I know, Jarvis” Ironman was feet from the building and his systems kept them constantly updated.

He could see that a figure was engaged in battle with the goons; enabling image with the satellites’ help he saw Catwoman beating Joker’s goons.

His eyes shone determined.

“I’m coming, honey…” he said and smashed a window to enter the building.

Selina turned to see what they had hoped: Joker hearing the unwanted fuss left Quinzel and ran to see what was going on. She dodged a second before the blade found her forehead; the corridor was only half lit yet her lenses gave enough visibility.

“Ooooooh! Myyyyy favorite Kitty! What now? Doooooo you have a loony boyfriend an’ you’re afraid for his safety?”

Catwoman smiled.

“No; but Gotham deserves better humor than yours” she winked and stormed at him wanting more than anything to graze his neck to death but having to stick to the plan.

“Soory, love…I’m Gotham’s best enter---tainer…Get her…” he pushed two of the goons who were following him and made frantic gestures to the rest coming to charge at her.

He watched eagerly as his goons attacked Catwoman but she effortlessly avoided them answering with punches and back kicks. A goon that after a kick had landed flat on the floor grabbed his shotgun that lay near him and pointed at her ready to fire. Joker sent a blade finding his palm and the clown looked at his boss.

“No, bullets, you dooork! We dooon’t want police here!” he conjured a blade and launched it at Catwoman’s back who was engaged in punching two thugs at once.

“No, fast, asshole!” the blade was instantly turned into dust as a yellow beam struck it.

Joker smirked; he knew that voice.

“Starky, m’ booooooy!” he stretched his arms in a welcoming gesture. “At last!”

Selina stood regarding Ironman ready to fire at Joker: that would ruin Bruce’s plans but certainly it could be a solution.

Joker looked at the loaded cannon on Ironman’s wrist and lolled his head in the side.

“Noooooow…that’s not toooooo polite, isn’t it?”

“What’s Bruce?” he asked but then snorted. “Never mind I’ll find him myself…”

Joker knew that the cannon was ready to fire yet his Cheshire smile was bigger than ever. Selina wanted to stop Tony but speaking would suspect Joker on Bruce’s plan and she wasn’t sure that didn’t prefer Tony’s solution.

Suddenly, Ironman was shaken by what felt like hundred thunders at once starting from his waist; he slumped on one knee.
“The high electricity voltage caused a disruption on your systems, sir” Jarvis gave the immediate evaluation.

“Thanks, Jarvis…” Tony spat disgruntled and turned his head back.

Quinzel dressed still in her white robe was holding one of the guards’ Taser guns. She was smirking and pressed the button charging the weapon to hit again.

“Thaaaat for my destroyed baby blade!” Joker yelled. “Giv’ him one more, Harlequin!”

“Gladly, Mr. J!” the doctor answered with a gleeful shine in her eyes and stormed at the fallen hero.

Only to be tumbled by Catwoman who kicked the Taser off her hand and dragged her to the floor slapping her face.

Joker giggled.

“Wooo--hoooo! Laaaaadies fight! You should thank me, Starky: I know you looooove these shows… But now I’ve got to gooooooo!”

He began running turning the curve of the corridor; Tony even though his armor hadn’t regained its full operational capacity jumped onto his feet and followed him.

But upon turning the curve the jester was nowhere to be seen and Tony growled but immediately set his scanners to locate him.

“Systems can’t locate him, sir.”

“You’re always so informative, Jarvis” he remarked snidely.

Tony shook his head: it seemed that Crane had informed his ally about the secret passages and those led to parts of the building that were built with such materials that blocked his systems. Thankfully, Tony had Bruce’s map with the passages so it wasn’t difficult to find the one that Joker used to disappear. It was pitch black but Ironman’s lenses permitted him to see around.

He set his systems to track Joker since now he was inside the passages so the materials shouldn’t block the signals. However there was no trace of the jester.

“Damn!” he spat and continued walking.

Joker giggled as he came out from the big, built-in cabinet: Harlequin had said to him that that antique cabinet was made from materials that blocked most systems. He had listened carefully before emerging to be sure that Stark was gone. The jester hopped at the corridor of the Museum Area heading to the old hospital room where he had Bruce.

“Heheheheheee… If thaaaaat Starky believed that he could catch me… he is mooooore stupid than I thought.” He regarded thoughtful the old cabinet “I aaaaalways loved hide an’ seeeeeek! Now let’s give them sooooomething other to play while I make my leave…”

He delved into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a thing like a remote control.

“That thingy is tooooo much fun: let us freeeeeee the loooooonies to plaaaaayyyyy…Toooo bad I won’t be here to play…”

He pressed the key that Quinzel had said that unlocked the high security section with the most dangerous criminals. He raised his index finger and pressed graciously half closing his eyes waiting
to hear the sound of yells and riot.

“Commissioner!” Rene Montoya said to Jim Gordon who was talking with one police officer reporting on the developments of their research.

They were in the Narrows ready to move to another part of the city as soon as Gordon got informed by his people. The Commissioner turned to his Detective.

“Gunshots are heard from Arkham!”

“Again?” Jim exclaimed and hurried to his patrol car with Montoya. “All the available units there!” he spat simultaneously to the police officers there and to the cars’ radio.

Joker’s delighted expression became a deep frown as nothing was heard.

“Eeeeek! The saaaaame disgusting silence…” he shook the gadget and tried pressing the buttons again but still nothing.

Joker and Quinzel didn’t know about the extra security measures that automatically locked the high security section and the area with the doctors’ offices in case of an attack. Batman had taken care of activating it the moment he returned in the building.

Joker pressed once again the button and in the end waved that off pissed tossing the gadget over his shoulder.

“Neeeeeever mind…I have my own fun…”

“Not so fast.”

Joker rolled his eyes exasperated.

“Another oneeee?” he giggled. “Ooooooh…it geeets annoyingly fuuuuuny!”

Thor walked towards him with Mjolnir clenched in his hand emanating blue sparkles as much as his eyes.

“Maybe you were too hasty to get rid of divine protection?” the blond spat, his face distorted in rage.

Joker crooked his mouth and lolled his head.

“You meeeeeean your black haired ass-hole brother? He was booooring after a while an’ trying to mesh with me an’ my baby…Me an’ Brucie are sooooo much better after that Lo-locki was off…”

Thor frowned.

“Lead me to Bruce and pray he is alright!”

Joker leaned his head.

“Pray toooooo whom? ‘Cause lately sooooo many gods have joined us that I’m con--fused… Heheheheheheheeeeee!”
Thor clenched his jaw, his teeth gritting; he was in so much agony about Bruce and that man was fooling him.

“Shut up and do what I say!”

Joker rolled his eyes.

“That’s why I don’t like gods…” he mumbled matter-of-factly and crooked his mouth “an’ neither my friend…”

Thor felt a spray on his face coming from back and immediately it dawned to him: the gas depriving of special powers. Suddenly, Mjolnir felt too heavy for his hand and slipped to the floor; Thor’s eyes widened as a lean, short guy with a sack over his head came in front of him joining Joker who giggled.

“I always wanted to study panic reaction to gods” the guy with the sack hissed and Joker giggled worse.

“I loooooooove your fixation, Crowy! An’ I aaaaalways wanted to take that hammer an’ explore its potential…”

“No!” Thor yelled and made a step forwards though his legs felt too heavy; he wouldn’t let that madman take his weapon.

But as Joker reached Mjolnir a current hit him tossing him backwards.

“Hehehehehee! It cooooomes with security system, huh? Maybe if his master is in panic that thingy will change attitude?”

Thor understood as the guy with the sack approached him raising his hand, protruding his wrist where he had a leather bracelet where a spray can was attached.

“I don’t think so, buddy” a bass baritone cracked the silence and Crane was tossed away by a blue wave.

Joker turned there.

“Uuuuuuuuu! C-G-I! I loooooooove it!” he made to grab the hammer but Thor made a dive, caught Joker’s legs and dragged the jester away.

The powerless god punched the jester who giggled.

“You suuuuuurely are path--etic without your god powers, huh?” he kicked Thor off of him and stormed at the hammer only to hit on a green barrier.

“I hate magic!” he spat nasally glaring at Stephen Strange who turned his hands at him ready to hit him.

But then Scarecrow fell on him spraying him with the gas he had on his wrist.

“No!” the doctor screamed feeling the earth moving away and the ground coming at him rapidly. He was again in his Lamborgini as the car fell from the steep cliff; death was coming rapidly at him along with pain. Excruciating pain…

Joker giggled but didn’t try to get the hammer because the shield was still holding.
“Bye, children” he said and ran to the corridor towards Bruce’s room.

He was only some feet away when a figure blocked the corridor. A man dressed in dark green with a hood covering his face and two blazing eyes burning his opponent. His bow was in his hands and the string was stretched ready to send a thick arrow to Joker.

“I should have killed you that day…” Arrow said ice cold.

Joker shook his head and cocked his eyebrows.

“Yeah…but I’m too cuuuuute, huh? By the way” he narrowed his eyes “this place suddenly became tooooo crammed, don’t you think, Robin of Loxley? Huhuhu! We’re the doooope – est costume party in toooown! Yuumuuuuupyyyyyyyy! Sigh! Only Batsy isn’t in the party but he couldn’t join us, huh?”

Suddenly, he threw something at the Arrow and the corridor was cast in thick smoke; the arrow from the bow launched to hit the place where Joker was.

But the jester was already on the door to Bruce’s room; the archer turned to stop Joker but before he even registered the motion he felt a sharp sting in his upper arm and instantly his legs bent and he fell on the floor, his eyes shutting rapidly.

Joker bent his elbow in a gesture of triumph.

“Nooooobody gets between me and Batsy, heheheheee! I’m coooooming, hon!” he stormed at the handle to open, his eyes looking through the door’s window; a smile cracked his white face. “Here’s Batsy, sleepin’ like a real baby – uuuuuuu…” he opened the door ready to burst inside. “Time to leeeeeeaaave” he said in a singsong voice.

Lois’ eyes widened as police sirens filled suddenly the area. Vicky laughed.

“We were right then!”

A convoy of police cars stormed in the Asylum’s yard and officers raid the building.

Lois began taking photos and Vicky dragged her closer.

“Let’s go!” she said to the reporter from Metropolis and both ran to the Asylum taking advantage of the turbulence to slip inside.

Zucco’s house was at the outskirts of Gotham not far from the Narrows. It was a sole house, small with a cared little garden.

“It’s not Wayne Manor” he had said patting Dick’s shoulder when they arrived.

“It’s great” Dick had replied.

But since then the boy sat on the gray sofa of the living room in front of the large TV watching, keeping his tablet all the time on his lap.

Rebecca brought a dish with cupcakes and placed it on the coffee table in front of the boy.
“I hope it’s how you like them” she said with a sweet smile and Dick looked at her almost surprised.

“Thanks…” he said absentminded “they look really yummy…”

The woman met Zucco’s gaze; the man was sitting on an armchair at the right of the couch staring at his nephew and finally stood gesturing to his wife with the eyes to leave him alone.

He sat beside Dick and wrapped his arm around the boy’s shoulders.

“Are you alright, champ?” he asked worried. “If you preferred staying in the Manor I’d understand.”

Dick shook his head regretting his stance.

“No, not at all…I’m glad I’m here. Yet…I” he felt the urge to tell his uncle about Wayne’s kidnapping but stopped “I just wait for something…”

Suddenly, an ad played on TV. It was for the polymorphic tablet made by Wayne Enterprises: the Cosmos. Dick’s eyes were fixed there and then at his own tablet.

Zucco smirked understanding the boy’s realization.

“Wayne tried to buy your sympathy” he said. “To present himself as kind and caring. But you’re not from the naïve children who are bought with fancy toys.”

Dick nodded.

“No, I’m not.”

“That’s my boy!” the adult patted the boy’s back. “Well, we have only two and a half days so what would you say if we spend them in the best possible way and not shut in here?”

Rebecca walked to them.

“I’m not staying inside at Friday night…”

Dick looked indecisive and his uncle smiled.

“You’ll have your tablet all the time with you to see what you’re waiting for…What do you say, champ? Do you want us to have our first outing as a true family?”

Dick smiled forgetting for the first time the grim emotions of the last 24 hours; only Hero’s sad eyes when he was leaving still haunted him. The boy nodded and Zucco stood taking him along.

“I have big plans for the night, champ!”

“Definitely he has…” Rebecca added.

Tony stepped out from the passage in front of him. He had located a room in the far end of the corridor with one lone figure lying on the bed; he knew it was Bruce and hurried his steps.

“Sir, that presence in the room gives odd signs.”

Tony pressed his lips and continued with agony biting his insides.

“I know, Jarvis; who knows what Joker did to him…”
As he took the curve to the corridor to Bruce’s room he noticed that not far from him, three people were just before the room. One unconscious and two others.

“What now?” he spat and activated the boost for more speed.

“Not so fast, Joker…”

The jester’s eyes widened in shock: he knew that growl; it was the perfect growl coming from the other end of the corridor and not from the room where he was seeing Bruce. He lolled his head on the side.

“That it can’t be…” he turned slowly and snapped his fingers around his head to check his hearing. “Nooooooope, my ears are fine…”

Batman walked slowly towards him imposing as ever; his lips in a tight line.

“It can’t beecee… it can’t beecee…” Joker shook his index finger to Batman. “Hallucinations are nooooot part of my CV.”

And then the jester frowned with a shine in his acid eyes.

“I kneeeooowwww… You’re another hologram, huh? Like thoooooose fooling the bad guys.”

Batman didn’t reply just jolted upwards and in a flash fell on the jester punching him in the mouth. Joker pouted thoughtful.

“Naaaah… I guess you’re nooooot, huh? Sooooooo Bruuuuuucie isn’t…?!”


“Doooon’t get maaaad but I thought he was youuuuu… buuuuut he is paralyzed an’ you’re here an’ he is there… an’ I’m ooout of order…” he giggled hysterically.

Batman had had enough; he gave him a flat hit in the neck, in the spot of the instant knock out. Joker felt slipping rapidly into unconsciousness and fixed his eyes on Batman’s cowl.

“I can have myyyyy threesomeeee…” he mumbled and feigned.

“Batman?” Tony’s eyes behind the lenses were bulged not believing the sight in front of him: Batman had knocked out Joker and at the same time Bruce was lying inside that room…

It was obvious to the billionaire that his friend was using some of his unique skills - he wondered how many things he ignored about Bruce - and of course Lucius brought him the armor.

Batman turned and looked at Ironman. He stood and locked artificial stares with his friend.

The Arrow stirred and stood stumbling; Bruce frowning at the speed of his recovery from the sedative Joker obviously used to neutralize him. The archer looked at Batman and the shadow of his hood hid his surprise.

“Batman…” his voice didn’t indicate any astonishment and Bruce who knew that the Arrow was
aware of his secret identity smirked for his skill. “Is Bruce Wayne alright?”

“Sleeping…” Batman answered with his own poker face; maybe tonight he had managed to disperse the suspicions of both Joker and Queen. “Ironman can take his friend to his home” he said looking pointedly at Ironman who nodded. “I think you should let him with his friend” he turned to Arrow who nodded.

“My job here is done” the archer answered and turned to the direction leading away.

Sirens were heard from outside and Batman looked at Ironman.

“Inform the police that you’re leaving with Bruce…nobody must see you…” he said.

“I…” Tony mumbled uncomfortable but Batman nodded and left dragging Joker behind him by the collar.

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The Ancient One was stabbed…She was badly injured…The blood was spurting from her body…they had to hurry...

The nightmarish, horrible, enormous creature was barking threats at him and then pain…More pain that he had ever felt...

Kaecilius was winning; he had to stop him but he was losing; he frantically conjured every source he could to fight him back but he was sniggering...

Catwoman had arrived just on time to help Thor who struggled to stop Crane who attacked him ready to gas him with the fear toxin; Scarecrow laid on the floor unconscious but now the blond god held her down stopping her from trying to tackling Dr. Strange who was erect sending multicolored beams around blowing parts of the walls.

Batman heard the commotion and hurried dragging Joker along; he frowned registering the sight before him: a man in a burgundy cape was launching beams that had been demolishing parts of the walls and the ceiling.

The man was standing but writhing in agony, his face contorted in what Batman knew was terror and pain.

Seeing Scarecrow unconscious Batman understood that the caped man had been sprayed with his fear toxin. His eyes behind the lenses widened seeing Catwoman and Thor slumped on the floor, at the niche of the wall. The god didn’t hold his hammer only tried to stop Catwoman from attacking the man. It was obvious that Crane had applied to Thor his weakening gas.

First, he had to neutralize the panicked man before he hit someone or himself. Nobody had seen him yet so he sent a sedative Batarang at the writhing man knocking him out instantly; then he left the shadows approaching slowly and leaving the unconscious jester on the floor.

Lois and Vicky were running to the corridors of the Asylum not knowing where they were going but following the police officers. At some point, they lost the officers and just followed the sounds of battle.

Suddenly, both women stood awestruck seeing Batman coming out of the shadows proud and
strong.

“Is this…?” Lois whispered awed.

“Batman!” Vicky completed for her and set her smart phone into videotaping shooting the legendary hero.

Catwoman’s eyes widened in relief but Thor’s were filled with surprise, awe and worry.

The police officers were coming running with Gordon on the head. The Commissioner gestured to them to lower their guns seeing that Batman had cleared the area and sent them to handcuff Crane and Joker.

Batman approached Catwoman and Thor and without a word he pulled out of a compartment in his utility zone a tiny needle.

“All right?” he said in his husky voice to Thor’s astonished eyes.

Bruce after the attack at the Avengers’ Tower had packed his utility belt with antidotes to the gases the attackers had used. He had always with him the antidote to the gas weakening super powered beings because he was afraid that Superman could be attacked again. It came handy with Thor.

The god offered his bulging upper arm with trust and Batman administered the antidote. He turned to the unconscious unknown man as Thor began to regain his powers. The first thing the god did was to grab Mjolnir and feel its energy vibrating inside him.

Catwoman followed Batman as he kneeled above the man.

“Who is he?” he asked.

“I don’t know but from the fireworks he made probably a wizard…”

“He is Dr. Strange” Thor replied having come to them. “He is with me.”

Jim approached too as his officers handcuffed Joker.

“Crane’s fear toxin” the Commissioner spat.

Batman nodded and pulled another cased mini syringe and stabbed it to the man’s thigh. He stood and turned to Thor.

“When the sedative’s effect is over he’ll wake up without any side effect from the toxin.”

Thor nodded, his eyes looking fascinating at the vigilant.

“I’ll take care of him.”

Batman didn’t answer just turned towards the shadows from where he came and vanished; Catwoman gave an impressive backwards flip that made the officers goggle at her and landed several feet away behind them; she turned her head graciously to them smiling.

“You’ll find a certain Dr. Quinzel unconscious in the corridor to the right: she was helping Joker. Bye, boys and girls!”
She turned her head and crossed the way to the main building walking sensually.

Alfred’s eyes widened in relief and happiness seeing Batman rushing into the cave on the bike he had borrowed from Catwoman. However it was Hero that first ran to his human, climbing on him to leak his exposed chin as soon as the bike stopped next to the Tumbler.

Batman caressed the kitten and walked to his butler who was already coming to him pushing his wheelchair along.

“Master Bruce…”

Batman let Hero perched on his chest and removed his cowl.

“Alfred. How did you know I was coming?” he patted the man’s shoulder smiling.

“Master Anthony called me. Leslie is coming, sir” he told to him looking with dread at the young man’s legs that supported his body.

Bruce pressed his lips understanding the older man’s fear.

“I had to do it, Alfred: there was no other way.”

The butler closed his eyes and shook his head.

“I know, sir; but now please sit…”

Bruce looked at the chair hesitating and in the end though he didn’t want Batman sitting there, he did it placing Hero on his lap and still holding his cowl.

“Dick and Jason were in the Arkham during the attack – Joker didn’t get them but are the boys alright?”

“They are just fine, sir; actually two hours ago Mr. Zucco took Dick for the weekend.”

Bruce jolted to his legs and looked at his butler.

“What?” he grabbed Hero to not fall from his sudden movement.

Alfred’s eyes filled with worry seeing his young master’s distress.

“He had Judge Moot’s approval, sir. Mr. Collins told me that he had the right to spend some time with his nephew…”

Bruce closed his eyes for a fraction of the second and then gave Hero to Alfred taking his cowl.

“Zucco is up to something” he said and turned towards the Tumbler.

Alfred touched Batman’s upper arm and Bruce stopped before wearing again his cowl. His eyes filled with warmth seeing Alfred’s worry.

“Master Bruce, if I may, you shouldn’t go out right now” he licked his lips. “You are exhausted, sir; you are…”

Bruce looked him determined and patted his upper arm.
“Fine” he completed for him “I’m perfectly fine, Alfred.”

He smiled to his butler and wore his cowl. Alfred hugged the kitten close to his chest seeing his young master leaving.

“Be careful, Master Bruce” he whispered.
Dick was slumped on the back seat of Zucco’s gray BMW; he had his tablet on his lap and scrolled endlessly news sites perusing with blank eyes.

Zucco was driving but simultaneously was casting sideways glances at the driver’s mirror to see what his nephew was doing. He was frowned and at some point his eyes met with Rebecca’s who was sitting next to him, exchanging silently impressions; the woman crooked her mouth and Zucco twitched his eyebrows.

The ring of an incoming call made Dick jerk although he was anxiously waiting for that; Zucco glanced pointedly at Rebecca and she rolled her eyes.

“Alfred?”

“Master Richard, I’m happy to inform you that everything is alright. Master Bruce is safely back.”

The boy nodded.

“Thanks, Alfred.”

“I hope that this will help you enjoy your weekend, sir.”

“It will, Alfred. Good night.”

“Have a lovely night, Master Richard.”

Dick ended the call with a relieved expression over his face.

“Goods news, dear?” Rebecca asked.

“Yeah…” he inhaled deeply and turned his gaze outside the window where the peaceful setting of Gotham’s outskirts was stretched under the evening’s colors and the public lights.

Zucco smiled broadly.

“Great, champ! Now we can enjoy our weekend!”

Dick didn’t know that Mall; it wasn’t in Downtown but it was big with a lot of people going inside or leaving carrying bags with brands’ names.

Zucco parked the car at the underground parking of the Mall and they embarked the lift upwards.

Dick was looking around: it was definitely less big and impressive than the Comet Mall they had gone with Wayne but he liked it; especially, since he was with Tony. His sentiments towards Wayne might have changed a bit yet Dick still wanted to be around his uncle – he was his connection with his late father.

“Well, it’s not as glamorous as the places Wayne gets you…” Tony mumbled light hearted as if he had read Dick’s mind.

Dick shook his head affronted.

“No, it’s cool! I’ll call Jay to come too…”
Zucco grinned.

“Mmm…how about spending the night as a family and tomorrow inviting Jay home?”

The boy shrugged.

“Fine.”

Rebecca took them to a vast store with clothes and insisted on buying Dick some expensive jeans despite the boy’s objections.

“Let your aunt do what she wanted so long” Zucco patted him. “She was ranting about meeting you.”

Rebecca smiled to him.

“Unless you don’t like it” she pointed to a model of jeans trousers “so we can buy something else.”

Dick shook his head and his eyes sparkled.

“Not at all! I wanted these trousers the moment I saw them but…it’s too expensive.”

Rebecca kissed him in the cheek.

“Don’t think about it, Dick; it’s my first gift to my nephew after all.”

“Okay…” Dick grinned.

Rebecca seemed very pleased when she gave her card to the cashier.

“Hey, champ” Zucco said as they walked to the corridors among the various shops and the bubbling people. “Are you any good at bowling?” he gestured with his head to a great bowling hall. “Or I’m going to teach you a lesson?”

Dick laughed.

“A lesson? I don’t think so…I’m awesome-ly good.”

“We’ll see about that” Zucco made an inviting gesture towards the hall. “I warn you: I’m a champion.”

Dick cackled.

“Which century?” he cocked an eyebrow and ran inside.

The Tumbler was moving in stealth mode through Gotham’s dark streets; Batman had set it in auto pilot because he was perusing data on the car’s control panel.

He had already made his research on Zucco before Joker kidnapped him so his house’s address was known. However he didn’t head there because the signal from Dick’s tablet wasn’t in that area; instead his current location was in the district’s Mall so for the time being the boy was safe. But that wasn’t reassuring: Zucco was up to something so Bruce knew he had to keep his eyes open.

But it was difficult even if he didn’t want to admit it. His body felt really exhausted and sleep seemed...
so tempting. Joker kept him sedated for some hours but that sleep seemed to have tired him instead of giving him some rest.

He clenched his jaw; it wasn’t the first time he had fatigue to face so he just buried that in a deep corner of his mind and forget it as he always did. Dick was in danger and that was the only thing that mattered.

“I won’t ever forget the way you were laughing, Beccy” Zucco shook his index finger mock warningly to his wife and she laughed again.

After a game of bowling that didn’t last long they ended up in the Mall’s McDonald’s. Dick was eating his Mc Burger chuckling.

“You must have been champion many decades ago…” the boy crooked his mouth amused and Rebecca smirked.

Dick had defeated rather easily his uncle.

“It’s just that I haven’t practiced for long…” Zucco commented waving that off. “Next time I won’t spare you…”

The boy took a big sip from his soda and twitched his eyebrows.

“I can teach you some tricks…” he mumbled teasingly.

Rebecca patted the boy’s back.

“Yeah, you do that; it will save him from new humiliation…” she chuckled again.

Zucco leaned towards Dick and locked eyes with him.

“For that we’ll need more time together.”

Dick nodded.

Zucco’s expression changed into dead seriousness.

“Unless, you’ve changed your mind about me becoming your guardian.”

The boy frowned almost offended; he shook his head.

“Of course not, Tony! What are you talking about?”

The man smiled innocently and glanced at his wife.

“Lately I detect that your feelings for Wayne have changed” he pressed his lips. “I feel that you have become fond of him.”

Dick closed his eyes.

“Now that is…” Zucco prompted him with the eyes. “I… I just feel bad for the things that happen to him lately…but I still want to live with you instead of him. You are my uncle, my dad’s best friend: definitely want you for my guardian.”
Zucco smiled satisfied and Rebecca did the same.

“Thank you, champ” he said touched. “This means a lot to me.”

Dick shrugged.

“Is simply how I feel, Tony.”

After they finished their meal they walked back to the parking to return home. Dick was happy both for the jeans he got and the good time he had with his uncle and aunt and because Wayne was safe from Joker.

“Do you want radio?” Zucco asked on their way back to the house and Dick shook his head in the negative.

Suddenly, the car stopped and Dick looked outside.

“We’re going somewhere else?” he asked.

His uncle smiled.

“It’s something I got to do, Dick. Come with me” Rebecca nodded.

The signal from Dick’s tablet stopped and Bruce touched the screen on the Tumbler’s control panel to get a detailed map of the area. He pressed his lips: of course…

A 24h branch of Gotham’s General Bank was located where the signal was. Bruce knew what Zucco wanted.

Dick shrugged and jumped out of the back seat to his waiting uncle. They walked to the opposite sidewalk and Dick read the illuminated sign over the store: it was a bank branch.

Zucco squatted before him and held his shoulders.

“You trust me, champ?” he asked locking eyes with the boy.

Dick smiled.

“You gotta ask?”

Zucco’s eyes flashed.

“Just don’t say anything in there, okay?”

Dick didn’t understand but he nodded. He thought that Tony wanted to withdraw some money for the weekend although he didn’t understand why he wanted him along.

Zucco pressed the special button for the door of the branch to open and walked straight to one of the clerks who shook hands with him and showed them the chairs before his desk to sit.

“How can I help you?” the man asked smiling.

“My name is Tony Zucco and I’m the legal guardian of Richard Grayson.”
Dick was startled from that but didn’t speak; he trusted his uncle.

“There is an account on my ward’s name and I need to withdraw all the money.”

Dick almost choked in his own saliva but he managed to keep his eyes from bulging.

“May I have the number of the account?”

Zucco grinned.

“Certainly” he put his hand in the inside pocket of his black leather jacket and gave a paper to the clerk.

Dick frowned but kept an indifferent face to not create a problem to his uncle. But inside his head a storm was raging: where had his uncle taken all this information? And why he did care so much about his account?

The clerk began typing and then stopped thoughtful; Zucco frowned.

“Is anything wrong?”

“No…it’s just that this is a special account; first of all, the amount is too big.”

Zucco pressed his lips.

“We can’t withdraw them all?”

Dick’s insides clenched more as the time passed: all this fuss about the money and his uncle’s lie didn’t stand right to him.

“You can…However this account has two owners” he gestured to the boy smiling. “Richard Grayson and his guardian.”

Zucco nodded.

“And I am his guardian” he pulled out of the same pocket a formal looking paper and handed it to the clerk.

Dick’s eyes widened a bit catching a glimpse of the signature on the bottom of the paper: it was the same with the signature he had seen on the paper with the permission given to Tony to take him for the weekend – Judge Moot’s signature and next to this a stamp. The boy was sure that both of them weren’t real.

Cold sweat began flooding the boy’s body: Tony had forged the Judge’s signature and the stamp to take the money… He felt dizzy but didn’t speak; Tony’s face was completely calm as if nothing was wrong. As if he had done such things again so it wasn’t a novelty for him.

The clerk after a thorough reading of the paper nodded. He stood and walked to another desk, spoke to a woman and see unlocked the small safe on the file cabinet to her right. The first clerk returned with POS like gadget the woman had given to him.

Dick saw with the corner of his eyes Tony’s slight frown; obviously, he expected something else.

The clerk sat and placed the gadget on the desk.

“This account as I told you is a special type of account; you can make any withdraw you want but
Mr. Grayson's and his guardian's thump print and iris are necessary. Mr. Grayson, if you please…” the man said politely to the boy and Dick leaned there.

He placed his thump on the gadget and then his eye on the special place. Inside he was trembling but he managed to keep his cool. A green light beeped and the word ‘MATCH’ appeared on the small rectangular screen. Zucco smiled.

But when the adult followed the same procedure the light was red and ‘NO MATCH’ flashed on the screen.

“I don’t understand” Zucco said. “I’m Richard’s legal guardian and the handler of his money.”

The man pressed his lips.

“I’m sorry but I told you that this is a special account.”

Zucco’s tranquil mask cracked and he shook his head huffing.

“I presented you all the paperwork.”

The clerk pressed his lips.

“I’m sorry but we are obliged to stick with the terms set for the account.”

Zucco ruffled his hair.

“And whose fingertip and iris are accepted?”

The clerk typed some orders on his keyboard.

“Ms. Melanie F. Turner.”

Zucco’s fist clenched but the clerk didn’t see it. He jerked his hands upwards chuckling exasperated.

“But Ms. Turner has disappeared nearly three months ago and I have now Richard’s guardianship.”

The clerk shook his head.

“I’m sorry but nothing has changed in the terms of the account; without Ms. Turner’s approval no money can be withdrawn.”

Zucco frowned. It was clear to Dick that he was cursing inside.

“What if she is dead?” Dick’s eyes widened hearing that so coldly from his uncle: he didn’t have many hopes about his granny but hearing it so blatantly made him shiver. “Richard won’t be able to have access to his money?”

The man knitted his fingers on the desk.

“There must be an official declaration of her being deceased and then the nature of the account will be changed but till then Richard must rely on his guardian’s money. Of course, till he turns eighteen.”

Zucco nodded.

“I see…” he inhaled deeply and looked at his nephew whose eyes were blank having heard so many
times about his granny being dead. “Well, thank you very much” he stood and the clerk did the same.

The two adults shook hands.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you” he said but Zucco waved that off although Dick could say that he was pissed beyond words.

“It doesn’t matter; what matters is Dick’s happiness, right, champ?” he patted the boy in the back giving him the signal to stand. “Good night.”

As they returned to the car Zucco had his arm wrapped around Dick’s shoulders. However his expression was grim.

“Why you had to do that?” Dick whispered.

“For you, Dick: we must leave Gotham and this money belongs to you and will secure your future.”

“But…”

Zucco looked around.

“Get in the car, Dick; we’ll discuss it back in the house.”

Dick looked forward to get back to tell Tony his mind about what happened but at the same time hoped against hope that his uncle’s explanations would change that hollow, dreadful feeling in him.

Rebecca looked at Zucco just as he entered and the look he gave her it was enough for her to understand. So the road back was in complete, icy silence.

As soon as the signal began moving Batman followed them. He knew the outcome of Zucco’s visit to the bank. The bank branch had maximum security even soundproof building yet it wasn’t a match for Tumbler’s systems.

Batman had a smirk on his face during Zucco’s exchange with the bank clerk: definitely, Zucco didn’t expect that and Bruce could imagine how pissed he must be, struggling to contain his wrath. Yet that was dangerous for Dick so he had his senses in high alert.

His insides were clenched: as he could imagine Zucco’s wrath, he could also feel the boy’s disappointment; puzzlement; upset…And he felt so sad…

Zucco parked his BMW outside the house’s small yard, in front of the pavement. It was obvious that the man hadn’t any mood to drive further to the houses’ garage.

Dick grabbed his backpack feeling his tablet at the front case; he was tempted to call Alfred to drive him back. He hopped out of the car: no, he wasn’t going to give up on his uncle till he heard his explanation.

As soon as they got in the living room Dick couldn’t hold anymore himself. He couldn’t even sit down so he stood holding absent minded his backpack.

“You forged Judge Moot’s signature and the stamp! This is illegal.”
Zucco clenched his waist with both hands and looked at his nephew; Rebecca slumped in an armchair.

“No, kidding!” he retorted cocking his eyebrows but then realized the hurt expression of his nephew and changed his attitude. “I had to do this, Dick.”

“Why?”

“Because I really want you as my ward. And the money is yours and must be used to make you happy.”

Dick lolled his head.

“But you can win the guardianship in the court – I don’t get it.”

Zucco squatted and held the boy’s upper arm.

“Wayne has bought the judge to win the guardianship.”

Dick shook his head.

“No, I don’t believe that.”

Rebecca snorted and Zucco laughed.

“So I was right” the adult man remarked snidely “he bought you.”

Dick jerked in his hands.

“No, he didn’t! I just know that he wouldn’t have done it. After all, if he had done that the judge wouldn’t have forced him to see a shrink…”

Zucco crooked his mouth.

“But, Tony, you made an offense; they’ll catch you and we’ll never be a family.”

Zucco let him and ruffled his hair.

“No, they won’t; it’s why I wanted the money: to get you and Rebecca away. And still we will leave Gotham.”

Dick pressed his lips; he was in agony because what his uncle just did would result in him in jail and them apart forever.

“You can’t hide: they will find us. And…I don’t wanna leave Gotham – what if granny returns and doesn’t find me?”

Zucco sniggered.

“We both know that she won’t ever return, Dick” he saw the boy’s face falling. “There is nothing to keep you here, champ. I wait one phone call and we are gone!”

Dick pouted: he wanted to be with Tony…well, after what happened he was confused; something cracked inside him yet he still had faith in him. But he wasn’t ready to leave the city: he had Jason…his training…he had his family’s graves… He licked his dry lips. He made to say something but Zucco’s smart phone rang and the man raised his index finger indicating to the boy to hush.
Rebecca stood from the armchair eager to hear.

“Tell me, Stan” Zucco said to the one who called.

He was nodding and gradually the nods gave their place to a nasty frown.

“Okay, thanks, man” he said in the end finishing the call.

Zucco threw his smart phone to the table, slapped his face and drag his hands slowly to ruffle his hair half huffing and half growling. Rebecca walked to him with narrowed eyes.

Dick’s clenched guts began twisting watching the two adults.

“What happened?” Rebecca demanded.

Zucco bit his lips.

“Everything was ready for the apartment to be sold but the purchase was blocked” Rebecca narrowed her eyes and Zucco nodded nervously. “Turner’s signature is necessary here too no matter who’s the guardian.”

Dick till now thought that Tony was selling some apartment of his but hearing his granny’s name and about the guardian he realized that his uncle tried to sell his granny’s apartment. He turned his puzzled eyes on Zucco.

“You were selling granny’s apartment?!”

Zucco ruffled more his hair; his eyes were different than Dick had ever seen them: almost evil, mocking and pissed. The man was clearly bored of having to answer his questions.

Rebecca turned to Dick with a jeering expression.

“That apartment isn’t your granny’s” Zucco spat “it’s in your name like the money. I wanted to sell it to…” he inhaled and rolled his eyes not even trying to make believable what he was to say “make your life better now we were going to leave Gotham” he said dryly as if citing something rehearsed many times.

Rebecca rolled her eyes.

“But obviously Wayne had everything prepared…” she hissed.

“I don’t get what he has to do with all this” Dick said. “The money is my father’s and the apartment…” Zucco snorted chuckling causing Dick’s frown. “And…” he suddenly remembered the day Wayne bought him Christmas’ presents “that thing with the account…that it needs my granny’s fingerprint to open it’s not true. Wayne had taken money from there to buy me things.”

Now Zucco burst out in laughter: cold, dry, evil laughter. Dick gaped at him gulping uncomfortable.

“Tony, why are you laughing like this? I don’t like it” his voice was half annoyed and half hurt.

Rebecca crossed her arms over the chest and cocked an eyebrow. She lolled her head on the side to look at Zucco.

“He doesn’t like it!” she mocked Dick’s voice.

Zucco stopped laughing and walked to Dick; he met the boy’s eyes.
“Are you really that dump, kid?” he asked in a voice so different than what Dick was used to.

“I…”

Zucco yanked his head backwards and exchanged looks with his wife.

“That apartment and the money in that bank account is Wayne’s! You moron!”

Dick’s eyes widened and Zucco sniggered amused.

“Oh, kid! You’re so stupid, like your father!”

Dick gritted his teeth and clenched more the handle of his backpack.

“Don’t speak like that about my father!”

“But it’s true, kiddo! Really you believed that the money was John’s?” he laughed. “He died completely broke…”

Dick’s heart gave a jolt; the room immediately became dark.

“But…”

Zucco leaned to him with a mocking expression.

“Buuuuuuut…” he mocked the boy’s voice. “After your family’s murders Wayne bought that apartment in your name and created a fund of 500,000 dollars for you. Either from pity or real concern, who knows? But he didn’t let Turner tell you…This is the reason your granny gave him your guardianship. Hearing about the apartment and the money I immediately suspected that the rich brat had endowed you – you see, John died penniless – and then I saw the tablet: a never before seen gadget, clearly expensive, and I was sure: Wayne took you under his wings without you suspecting even though you loathed him.”

Dick tried to digest what he was hearing. So what his granny and Jay were telling to him about Zucco was true? His uncle never cared about him and wanted only Wayne’s money?

“You returned for the money?” he asked in a sunk voice.

Zucco stretched his arms to the air.

“What else, kiddo? You were so stupid to believe that I really cared for you? After 13 years of indifference?” he shook his head exasperated.

“So you claimed my guardianship only because you wanted the money?”

Zucco rolled his eyes exasperated.

“Of course! But that sneaky bastard Wayne had settled thing so that I couldn’t take the money – I underestimated that brat!”

Dick suddenly remembered his backpack that stayed in his hands neglected; in his puzzlement he remembered his Cosmos tablet in the front case that was touched to his belly hiding his hand: the gadget had a recording app; he sneaked his hand unnoticed and touched the spot to activate it.

“And you used in the court what I told you about Wayne’s breakdown for that…”
Rebecca rolled her eyes snorting.

“Your nephew is really stupid” she said to Zucco.

And he sniggered.

“He is like his father; of course I used that precious info to defeat that bastard. I didn’t tell you because you, like your father, wouldn’t have done what was necessary. Like you’d have never let me use the Judge’s forged signature: it was easy to forge his signature and stamp from the paper allowing me to get you for the weekend.”

Dick shook his head; the discussion he had with his granny came to his mind – it seemed like ages ago. She had hinted that Zucco had slipped secretly drugs in his father’s water to enhance his performance – his father loathed drugs so Zucco did it without John knowing; but he must have suspected his cousin because he asked from Mr. Breizic to be again his trainer. Till now Dick didn’t even think the possibility of Tony having done something bad to his father but now…it seemed possible.

“Like the drugs in my father’s drinks?” he demanded.

Zucco shook his head smiling almost like deranged. He cast a sideways glance at his wife who was smirking.

“He has some brain after all...” he said. “The idiot was getting old and his performance was becoming lousy” he smiled. “But...he liked to put the blame on me so I slipped something in his isotonic drinks to make him satisfied. I didn’t tell him because he wasn’t going to accept it. In the end, the Federation caught him and...once again it was my fault: he didn’t say it clearly but I could see it in his eyes...and he brought back that other asshole, Breizic. Don’t tell me that that dirty old scumbag didn’t tell you: I’m sure Wayne hired him exactly for that – to turn you against me.”

Dick lowered his head; everything inside him was a bitter, prickling void: the man he trusted so much, for whom he had quarreled with his granny and Jayson; this man he believed that connected him with his late father. Tony was a big lie; he only wanted Wayne’s money...

“Don’t speak for my father like this!” he said again glaring at Zucco. “You’re not worthy to speak his name!” Zucco laughed. “I want to return to the Manor” Dick said determined “enough.”

Zucco leaned over him.

“That’s for me to decide, kid!” he gritted his teeth. “And no, you’re not returning to the Manor” Dick frowned feeling his spine freezing. “After all, you hate that place, remember?” Zucco lollled his head on the side. “And especially Wayne. He is the reason for all your misfortunes, remember?” he cocked an eyebrow. “It’s your own words... Oh! How many times you brought me to the verge of giggles when you spoke about him. But I have to admit that that old cow Turner got me” he shook his head. “I didn’t expect her to have persuade Wayne to take your guardianship.”

Dick remembered his granny; his sweet granny and her fear about the same man he was defending causing her so much sadness. Suddenly, missing his granny became more torturous than before.

“You’re planning to ‘disappear’ me like you did with my granny?” he asked trying to keep his calm though he was really scared. “You have done something bad to her, huh?”

Zucco locked eyes with the boy and shook his head.

“Nah...Unfortunately, someone got me to that too but let’s hope that the one who did it did a good
job!"

“You sonovabitch!” Dick forgot his fear of the man who now revealed himself to be a complete stranger and stormed at him letting his backpack drop on the floor: he had enough of him speaking bad about his father not his granny too.

Zucco was startled from the boy’s kick in his shin but managed to grab the boy’s hands and heave him so that their faces were close.

“Enough! I had enough of you, littl’ shit! Behave or I’m gonna break your face!”

Batman had turned on the high range microphones from the moment Zucco, Dick, and Rebecca got inside. He was hearing carefully recruiting all his training in tranquility to keep his agony at bay; his eyes fixed on the house’s diagram on his control panel.

His jaw clenched listening to their exchange and when Zucco and his wife began leering at the boy Batman had to struggle with himself to rush inside and beat Zucco to a pulp: he had used the boy; he had done so much damage to him and now he mocked the boy as well.

It would be so easy to get inside and finish this yet he knew he had to wait; however he got out of the Tumbler and through the shadows he slipped closer.

His eyes widened…

Rebecca smirked.

“He need some of that…he is a spoiled brat!”

“Take yar filthy hands off ‘im, ya asshole!”

The low window behind them smashed and someone jumped in. Both Zucco and Rebecca turned startled to see, but Dick knew already who was.

Zucco rolled his eyes seeing the sight.

“You have to be kidding me! The Todd brat!” he laughed.

But then Jason smirked and brought his hand in front of him pointing the handgun he was holding at Zucco.

“Jay!” Dick’s face was radiant. “How did you find me?”

“Ya forgot ya sent me a SMS to come tomorrow morning here? Ya gave me the address, remember? Well, I didn’t trust that asshole so I came to keep an eye…Let Dick go, NOW! Ya motherfucker!”

Zucco smirked.

“You believe that you are a tough guy, huh, littl’ seed and you like guns, huh?” he lifted Dick more and grabbed his hair yanking his head to the side.

Dick moaned and Jason’s eyes widened, his finger twitching in the trigger but afraid he might hit his friend.
Batman saw Jason breaking the window and entering the house; he knew that the boy was ready to
do something foolish because his night vision enabled him to see the handgun Jason was holding.

Now he had to act fast and cautious…

Zucco and Rebecca laughed with the boy’s hesitation.

“What now, big guy?” Rebecca mocked him with cocked eyebrows. “You lost your balls?”

“Exactly, you dumbass!” Zucco said. “If you shoot you’re gonna kill yar buddy! Now, toss your gun
to Rebecca or I’m breaking his neck!” he yanked more Dick’s head.

“No, Jay” Dick said but his voice was caught by a shriek as his neck was stretched crudely.

“Okay, okay!” Jason shouted. “Ya asshole!” he obeyed but he tossed the gun in such a way that hit
Rebecca in the face.

Zucco gritted his teeth.

“You littl’ punk!”

“Ya said to toss it…” the boy shrugged smirking. “Ya didna say how…”

Rebecca turned to Zucco; her nose was bleeding.

“I’m fine, Tony” she took the gun and pointed it at Jason. “Can I shoot now the littl’ shit?”

Jason crooked his lips.

“Says the big turd!” he spat at her face.

Dick cast a sideways glance at his backpack on the floor hoping that Wayne had the insight to have
some surveillance in the tablet to locate them but then he got hopeless: Wayne must be sleeping in his
soft bed after everything with Joker and…he wasn’t Batman anyway.

“No, darling” Zucco answered. “It’s better if it is again an accident…”

“Again?” Dick asked frowned, new clouds covering the room and his soul.

Zucco laughed and pulled more on the boy’s hair.

“Yeah… Graysons usually die by accident…” he cackled.

Suddenly, it dawned to Dick and the realization was as if a thunder had hit him.

“You…my father’s death wasn’t an accident?!” he felt his brain being on fire and his breath stopping
more than from Zucco’s grip.

Zucco had had enough of all of this and now that he couldn’t take the money he had no reason to
insult the boy and lie. After all, he was going to get rid of the brats and he’d enjoy so much the littl’
bastard’s expression.

“You father lost all his savings investing in a company” he said clearly satisfied for the chance to
say it to the boy. “A company I suggested to him…but dear John was a lousy loser: he was all the
time whining envious that I hadn’t lost anything from the same investment- and how I was to lose?
The company was mine!”

Rebecca chuckled.

“The doping scandal made him even worse to bear and he hired back Breizic undermining me…
Now that wasn’t good…rumors were already spread making speculations about the reason of
Grayson’s disgruntlement; and to add to this I discovered that your daddy had gathered others who
lost their money and was investigating the case. Well, that was too much…”

Dick was listening without breathing and Jason was frowned.

“And you killed him” Jayson spat what Dick couldn’t.

“The gym’s renovation was the best chance I had. A newly established company” he cocked his
eyebrows bragging “well, I have a knack with businesses… my company made the best offer and
took the job… from there it was easy for Rebecca, a professional engineer, to set in the Horizontal
Bar the tampered bolt. I knew your father’s program perfectly so I damaged the bolt so that with the
most difficult exercises the bar would be moved slightly but enough for him to not manage to grab
again the bar after the grand jump. You can’t imagine my joy seeing him crashing down – the
cushions weren’t the best after the renovation…It was Falcone’s era so police had better things to do
than the death of a gymnast even if he was an Olympic Champion – after all, shit does happen. So
the case closed as an accident; no charges was pressed against the company – but even if were
nobody could connect me with the company. I was free to enjoy my money away from that
shithole…yet the money at some point gets fewer and then I heard about the murders of my cousin’s
ex wife and her family. Wayne’s name was mentioned along so I sniffed fat money and decided to
have a look.”

“You murderer!” Dick shouted and began thrashing in Zucco’s hands who made his grip harder till
the boy was forced to stop.

Zucco looked at Rebecca.

“We leave now! Enough with this city” his wife nodded. “And we’ll clean our business with the
brats…”

He let Dick stand on his feet but grabbed his upper arm and made a sharp move with his head for
Rebecca to walk; she put the hand that held the weapon inside her pocket in case someone curious
was looking but kept it pointed to Jason indicating to him to move.

“Move!” Zucco ordered the boys who looked at each other shaken: they knew what was waiting
them following Zucco.

The room became dark. Zucco looked around him frantically.

“Tony?” Rebecca asked.

“Damnit!” he cursed and tightened his grip on the boy.

Dick knew what that meant and his heart gave for the first time tonight a happy jolt. So when
Rebecca shrieked and Zucco jerked surprised he kicked Zucco’s leg with all his might and anger and
ran forward where he remembered that Jason was.

A thud was heard where Rebecca stood and Zucco staggered in the darkness there; he realized that
she was unconscious and as his hand was feeling her neck he was cut by a sharp edge: something like a bat… Zucco’s eyes bulged and jerked upwards a second before another Batarang managed to hit him.

The sound was deafening; debris fell all over covering the darkness with dusty mist.

Zucco realizing that Batman was there took the gun his wife had in her pocket and turned it towards the place where the sound had come. But before he pulled the trigger a black ghost fell on him punching the gun away and him in the face.

Dick and Jason crawled to the broken window but a moment before jumping outside Dick stopped.

“We can’t leave him alone” he whispered to his friend.

“It’s pitch black, ya dick! Only the Bat can see…”

Dick pressed a button of his wrist watch and light as if from a strong flash light filled their corner. Jason rolled his eyes.

“Another geek gift from Wayne?”

“Let’s go! Zucco is sneaky…”

Batman’s kick had sent Zucco to the wall; he was slumped down, yet as light broke the darkness he saw his jacket thrown on the back of the armchair. Batman rushed on him stopping his effort and hit him in the neck to knock him down yet the cunning man managed to escape only by millimeters and used the tree-like hat stand to hit Batman in the back.

Zucco was pleasantly surprised hearing the vigilante’s grunt and taking advantage of his momentary weakness he slipped away grabbing his gun from his jacket’s pocket.

Bruce heard the sound of loading and having isolated the pain turned around ready to storm at Zucco.

But then the light came closer and Dick with Jason stormed at Zucco.

“Dick, Jason, No!” Batman yelled as Zucco turned the gun to the boys instead.

Batman clenched his jaw and jumped feeling his back protesting but ignoring that. The only thing he could hear was the bullet leaving the gun and the boys’ halted breaths.

The only thing Dick could think as the bang fell like thunder was that he drove Jason to his death; at least, if someone was to die, let it be himself.

But then a force fell on both of them dragging them to the floor under a considerable weight.

Bruce felt the heavy impact as if a sledgehammer had hit his waist and the pain on his back got worse so much so that his breath stopped for a second as he felt his legs paralyzing. At least, the boys were alright.

In front of Dick’s eyes a moment from months ago passed, when Batman once again tossed him away to not be crashed under the collapsing roof. Batman was trapped under the debris instead.

“Leave…” Batman growled to them and turned to launch a cable from his wrist to Zucco’s wrist sending the gun away.
Jason dragged Dick away.

“Let’s call the cops” the younger boy said out of breath to his friend who was looking with blank eyes at the fallen Batman.

Zucco might have lost the gun but jolted to his legs encouraged by Batman’s fall and ran casting a fleeting glance at Rebecca.

“Sorry, babe…You’ll stall me.”

However he didn’t manage to make a couple of feet when Batman launched a Batarang to stab Zucco’s leg. Bruce couldn’t gather yet the mind power to erase the pain and the paralysis to stand so he used other ways.

Zucco grabbed the chair over him and tossed it to Batman. He grabbed the Batarang and pulled it off his leg. He was happy that at least it wasn’t with sedative and he crawled outside to avoid new attacks.

Once outside he stood.

Tony still in Ironman’s armor was speaking with Jim in the waiting room outside his office at MCU. He had to tell the police that he took Bruce in the Manor and his friend was sleeping as Tony hoped was the truth.

“Finally, Mr. Wayne will get some rest” the Commissioner mumbled and Tony nodded.

Also, Tony wanted to be sure that every security measure was taken so that Joker and his allies were properly detained so he was listening eagerly to Jim giving orders to his officers.

Which was no easy thing since there was too much fuss in the space as the evidence from the operation at Arkham was reported and the phones were constantly ringing from calls wanting details for various news outlets.

Tony saw Bullock running to Gordon.

“Gunshots at Jenner and Bell street; on the South Channel Island.”

Gordon frowned and Tony knew the reason.

“Near Tony Zucco’s house” he said and Commissioner nodded.

“Inform Montoya.”

Tony felt a twitch in his guts and was glad that Bruce and even that brat Grayson were back in the Manor probably not knowing anything.

Batman felt the presence before hearing anything. The almost inaudible sound and the warm and beloved body kneeled next to him. Their eyes locked immediately.

“No!” Catwoman mumbled and touched his jaw.
After the Arkham, she had gone to the Manor to make sure that Bruce was alright. But upon arriving in the cave still in Catwoman’s suit she saw that the Tumbler was gone and realized that Batman was out again. She ran to take the lift to ask Alfred but the butler was already getting there with the lift.

The cave’s security system had alerted him. She learnt from Alfred what happened and she knew that her friend would be at Zucco’s house.

She had just arrived when he heard the gunshot so she climbed on the roof and seeing the hole there slipped her heart beating fast in the sight of Batman on the floor.

Dick heard the woman’s cry and turned his eyes there. The same woman over the same man; the same situation; suddenly everything dawned to him: why that day in the Arkham Catwoman as soon as she heard that Joker was going to attack the Manor and Bruce Wayne stormed there. Why Batman had come to him after his family’s murders, in the balcony of their old apartment. Why Joker had asked for both Batman and Bruce Wayne to come at the factory. Why Joker had threatened to kill him if Batman didn’t take off his mask. Why Bruce was paralyzed exactly after that night the roof trapped Batman; why his body was so perfectly trained; the scars…

On the other hand, Batman was fighting while Bruce was in a wheelchair. Dick grinned: the armor must have a mechanism helping him move somewhat.

“Are ya thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” Jason asked him with his eyes narrowed.

Dick didn’t answer; he rushed where Batman and Catwoman were and Jason followed.

“I’m fine…” Batman said to Catwoman and placed his hands on the floor for support.

She wrapped her arm around his waist and helped him stand; the boys who just arrived offered their shoulders to assist her. Catwoman left Batman to the boys and walked to Rebecca.

“She is unconscious” Batman said. “But Zucco got out; we must get him.”

Zucco dragged his injured leg and huffing and puffing reached his car. He made it; he was a moment before leaving that cursed city. Zucco clenched his jaw and grabbed the door’s handle…

But all of a sudden, the neighborhood echoed from police sirens coming from every direction. Tires screeched as the speeding cars halted abruptly.

Rene Montoya burst out of her car pointing her gun at Zucco.

“Tony Zucco you’re under arrest for fraud and John Grayson’s murder!”

Batman felt the boys’ awed and puzzled eyes: both boys’ faces were flashed, sweaty and their hair disheveled; he looked at them, calm now that he heard the police cars blocking Zucco’s escape.

“I’m fine, boys” he made to stand alone but his knees bent and the boys hurried to support him.

Catwoman came to help them.

“You need a doctor” Dick said shyly and Batman met his shaken eyes, only for the boy to lower his gaze.
“No, it’s nothing; are you two hurt?”

Jason shook his head.

“No, man; ya came right on time.”

Dick was looking at his feet.

“Hero will be mad at me if you get hurt again… because of me…” the boy said.

“I don’t understand” Batman said keeping his expression undeterred.

“Yar secret is safe with us, dude” Jason intervened and the two adults looked each other.

Batman looked from the broken window not wanting to answer.

“I taped everything that Zucco said in my tablet” Dick said his voice still a bit shaken. “I’ll give it to the cops…He also forged Judge’s signature and pretended to be my guardian to take the money from my account” he hesitated.

“I know” Batman retorted.

“You were right” Dick said.

Jason cleared his throat.

“I was also right, ya dork!” he gave a small pat to the back of his friend’s neck and Dick lowered his head.

Catwoman rolled her eyes.

“Sorry to interrupt, boys, but we must leave.”

“We can’t leave the boys” Batman answered and Catwoman crooked her mouth.

Dick still not looking Batman in the eyes shook his head.

“Police is here; we are safe…”

“As safe anyone can be with cops…” Jason remarked snidely cocking his eyebrows and Catwoman chuckled.

“I need to tell them everything about Zucco” Dick’s teeth rattled and his eyes flashed. “He…he killed my father…” Batman brushed the boy’s back and Dick lowered more his head. “But you knew that too…”

“I did…” Bruce admitted in his normal voice.

Jason looked outside.

“Cops are comin’…”

“Go!” Dick said. “Alfred will be sick of worry…”

Batman nodded and used his grapple gun to launch a cable that drew him to the roof and Catwoman slapped her whip to hook herself up too.
Batman looked once more at the boys who nodded to him. But he didn’t leave: he stayed hidden in the shadows along with Selina till Rene Montoya came to the boys: police wasn’t corrupt as in Falcone’s era yet Bruce wanted to be sure.

Catwoman supported him in their way to the Tumbler and Batman looked at her.

“I can make it: I don’t want you to carry my weight.”

The woman smiled and let him.

“You could have denied it, you know…”

Batman pressed his lips.

“Your identity” Catwoman clarified.

Batman looked back at the house that was surrounded from police cars with their sirens on; Zucco had been tossed to the back seat of one of them and curious neighbors had began gathering.

“No. The boy has been told too many lies; being fooled so much…so for once he deserved some honesty to regain some of his trust to people.”

Catwoman smiled.

“You love that littl’ dick, don’t you?”
The silver Rolls was strolling calmly the bright, crowded streets and its lazy movement made everything seem peaceful even in a city like Gotham.

“No offense, Alfie” Jason leaned forward “the car is nice an’ ol’ that but I’d prefer a ride with the Bat car – remind the big guy that he owes me one, will ya?”

Alfred chuckled and cast a sideways glance at the boy; Bruce had told him that the boys knew the secret.

“I certainly will do that, Master Jason, although I think that the big guy doesn’t forget his debts.”

Dick tried to let the tranquility feel him by gazing outside through the one-way window of the back seat. But the storm inside him was raging so soon he abandoned any effort and turned to the back of Alfred’s head knowing that the butler would see him through the driver’s mirror.

“How is he?” he asked in the end. “He needs a doctor.”

Alfred gazed at the mirror and smiled to the boy; this change of Dick’s attitude was most welcome for him.

“Do not have a worry, Master Richard. Master Bruce is fine.”

Dick ruffled his hair and huffed. Both boys’ clothes were wrinkled – well, that wasn’t a novelty for Jason – and their faces bore the events of the last hour, being a bit dirty and pale.

“Yes, but Zucco shot him in the back!”

Jason’s good mood evaporated; that was true.

“Dr. Thompkins was already at the Manor when Master Bruce returned. Thankfully, the suit absorbed most of the impact; however, Dr. Thompkins would never let things just like that and she examined him.”

“An’?” Jason asked.

“She didn’t find anything urgent but tomorrow Master Bruce will be at her clinic for further exams: he stayed with Joker too long and we must be sure that everything is alright.”

Dick crossed his arms and nodded gazing back at the street.

“Hey, Alfie” Jason ruffled his hair. “How ‘bout takin’ me to the Manor instead of my home?”

Alfred looked firmly at the boy and shook his head.

“I must absolutely decline that, sir. Your mother is already too worried: you left the house without a notice.”

Jason crooked his mouth but didn’t insist.

“Tomorrow, however, you and your mother are most welcome to come to the Manor: I think it is the best occasion to celebrate Master Bruce’s birthday since the latest developments didn’t allow us to do it on time.”
Jason chuckled.

“Bat shaped cake?”

“Maybe next year” the butler answered grinning.

Alfred stopped the car in front of the apartment building where Jason lived and the boy hopped out using the shadows the trees formed to remain discreet.

“Are ya sure that my bike is safe?” he asked Alfred.

The butler grinned and gestured with his head to the pavement in front of the building’s entrance where Jason’s bike was parked. The boy’s eyes widened.

“He took your bike from Zucco’s house and brought it here before returning home.”

“So my bike had the ride I didn’t? Shit!”

Alfred grinned.

“Good night, Master Jason.”

The boy lolled his head.

“Not that I don’t like the Master thing but it’d better ya don’t say it her’, ‘cause I’ll lose my image… I’ve got a status inda neighborhood to keep.”

Alfred chuckled.

“Oh! I do understand…I’ll remember that.”

“See ya!” the boy said and ran to his bike to make sure that everything was alright.

Alfred remained there till the boy entered the building.

As the car crossed the Chelsea Tunnel to the Palisades Alfred cast fleeting glances at Dick’s grim face.

“If I may, sir; I know that this night was full with painful revelations but at least now your father will find justice.”

Dick nodded.

“I know but…”

“But?”

“Alfred…”

The butler looked to the mirror.

“Yes, Master Richard?”

“I’m sorry…”

“May I ask the reason?”
“For everything I told about Bruce…about my behavior. It must have been terrible for you having to listen to someone speak like that about someone you love so much…someone you almost lost.”

Alfred’s eyes became blank and nodded.

“It was, sir. But I always knew that someday you would realize the truth about Master Bruce and that you’d take back everything.”

Dick shook his head.

“I don’t know if that will be enough, Alfred… Especially, the things I’ve done to Bruce…”

Alfred grinned.

“In this life, Master Grayson, there are few things that are irredeemable and what you did isn’t one of them.”

Dick gulped and gazed outside to the peaceful dark scenery of the Palisades. He wished what Alfred had told him could ease the storm he had inside him.

The high gates to the Wayne grounds opened on the car’s approach and Alfred was happy that for once there were no reporters gathered outside; thankfully, the fact that Bruce was Joker’s hostage remained a secret and the events in Zucco’s house weren’t broadly known yet.

Alfred noticed from the mirror that Dick although till now was eager to get back once the imposing building came nearer looked sadder. So when the Rolls stopped before the Manor the boy seemed hesitated to get outside. Alfred opened the door for him and Dick pressed his lips, grabbed his backpack that was empty of his tablet since police kept it to take the record of Zucco’s confession, and hopped out.

Alfred patted the boy’s back and both climbed the stairs. As soon as Alfred pressed the doorbell, Leslie who had seen them approaching opened for them.

“Are you alright?” she asked the boy and Dick nodded.

“Can I see Bruce?” the boy asked her immediately.

Leslie shook her head.

“He is sleeping: I gave him some painkillers and sedatives. He was exhausted.”

Dick lowered his head.

“I wanted to talk to him.”

Alfred grinned.

“You’ll have plenty of time to do that, Master Richard. Now I suggest you have a shower and rest.”

Dick ruffled his hair and looked at Leslie.

“Is he really fine? I mean…”

Leslie nodded.

“From a first exam he doesn’t have any major trauma but tomorrow we’ll do all the necessary exams
They moved inside and Alfred turned to Dick.

“I shall prepare you some milk and a light supper, Master Richard; it will help you relax and sleep.”

The boy nodded but then he looked again at Leslie.

“Is it possible to see him?”

The doctor huffed.

“He is sleeping, Richard…” but then touched from the boy’s agony, she nodded. “I suppose you can see him.”

Dick raised his eyes that flashed.

“I won’t stay long! I promise!”

Leslie nodded and the boy stormed at the main stairs. She turned to Alfred raising her eyebrows.

“All of a sudden he cares…” she said coldly.

Alfred pressed his lips.

“He is a good kid but he was misguided; and then Zucco took advantage of his vulnerability. We should give him a chance.”

Leslie huffed and shook her head.

Dick’s rush was halted abruptly when the Master bedroom’s door was in front of him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening slowly the door.

The heavy curtains were drawn to prevent any nuisance from outside so the only light in the dark room came from the lit fireplace. Exactly, as the dominant sound in the room was the screeching of the burning logs joined with another low sound.

Dick walked in the tips of his toes and approached the bed. As he got close to the bed realized that the other sound accompanying those from the fireplace was Hero’s purring. The kitten was curled over Bruce’s chest sleeping along with his human.

Suddenly, a glimmering yellow eye stabbed him and a low growl replaced the soft purring. The animal wasn’t sleeping, Dick realized: Hero was guarding his human still pissed because someone snatched him under his nose.

Dick brought his index finger to his lips and hushed the animal.

“Hero, it’s me” he whispered “I won’t disturb him.”

The kitten watched him a bit more with narrowed eyes and then having decided that he was indeed a friend calmed and curled again on Bruce’s chest but still watching Dick with the corner of his eye.

Dick looked at Bruce’s face: the man was pale and his features bore the hue of fatigue. He was spent and his breath came out shallow.

Dick had seen while in MCU the video with Batman in Arkham; how he helped Thor and the other
man. Bruce must have escaped all by himself and captured Joker on his own; then instead of having his rest he followed Zucco to save him.

Despite the gadgets the armor had to allow him to walk, certainly all this must have demanded major effort and energy – not to mention pain…And Bruce used all these, without thinking of himself to save him from his uncle…as he did in that factory.

He gulped realizing what till now lurked at the edges of his mind: Bruce was paralyzed because of him and if Superman hadn’t intervened then, Bruce would have died. That night Bruce was already injured from what the League of Shadows did to him but in spite that he again used all his energy to come for him and save him from Joker…

Dick’s eyes bulged and he bit his lips. And all this time he was constantly making the man’s life a Hell.

His eyes fell on Bruce’s empty wheelchair; his own enraged words came to his mind, like a thunder ripping the sky:

“I hope you rot in that chair!”

He bit again his lip and looked at Bruce’s calm face. All this time he suffered all his insults without ever defending himself, without punishing him; the only time Bruce punished him was to make him realize how dreadful and dangerous for him was wandering in Gotham late having consumed alcohol.

The boy moved shyly his hand and touched Bruce’s hand that was gently laid on the mattress. He remembered the night he was having nightmares due to the storm and Bruce came to his room to comfort him; he had closed the window making the room completely soundproof. And then he remembered the night he heard Bruce begging and crying in his sleep: the night after that horrendous video was broadcast – definitely, someone who hated Bruce did that knowing that it will hurt him the most in the hearing about his guardianship.

Bruce accepted to be psychologically evaluated to not lose his guardianship not for any other reason but for Dick to not end up with Zucco because Bruce knew who Zucco really was.

“I’m sorry for everything” he whispered and his index finger made a slight caressing move on Bruce’s hand.

He didn’t say anything else just retreated tiptoeing.

A man in a burgundy cape was grunting clearly in a state of confusion and panic; he was waving his hands in the air creating multicolored sparks and shapes; in the opposite corner, Thor was slumped on the floor and a woman dressed in skin tight black leather was with him – both of them was trying to take cover from the beams the distressed man conjured.

Suddenly, something flashed cutting the darkness and the man in the cape jerked slightly before collapsing.

And then from the shadows an imposing, proud dark figure came forward tossing the mass he was dragging – an unconscious Joker – to the floor. Batman walked to the corner Thor and Catwoman were and Thor stretched his arm looking him in the face with deep trust.

Something shone in Batman’s hand and a tiny needle was stabbed to Thor’s upper arm…
The video lasted longer but Superman sat on the bed of Diana’s bedroom snapped it shut. Then he closed entirely the *Daily Planet*’s site from his Smart Phone.

He tossed the phone on his nightstand and listened to the shower. Diana had just returned from a global patrol and she needed a shower before lying by his side to enjoy the night. He waited for her having his back on the headboard, completely naked with the white sheet covering his lower body.

Enjoy the night…

Superman clenched his jaw. Lois definitely made the best use of her visit in Gotham…She found a partner, Vicky Vale: the video and the entire coverage of the Arkham incident was made by those two. And they got a rare video of Batman in action.

“*Despite the rumors of the past months, Batman is very much alive and kicking*” the reporter from Gotham had commented on the video.

So Bruce insisted on putting on that armor and doing his show, Superman crooked his mouth. Of course, Thor was in danger and Batman rushed to save the god.

“*Crane used on Thor the same compound gas that was used some months ago during the attack at the Avengers’ Tower resulting in the weakening of the God of Thunders. Also, the paranoid former head of the Arkham Asylum used his fear toxin on the unknown man with the burgundy cape – the footage is very dark to identify the man but rumor has it that he is a new member of the Avengers or an ally. Back to Crane, the infamous criminal was working with Joker who with the covering of Dr. Harleen Quinzel was hiding in the famous Asylum*” Lois had described briefly the situation.

Superman’s fist fell with force on the mattress and in the last second he controlled his power to not smash the bed. The weakness he had traced in Bruce’s vitals wasn’t weakness; it was his agony for his blond lover.

He growled.

“Is anything the matter, Kal?” Diana asked in her proud voice; she was frowned.

Superman raised his eyes to her: she was coming out of the attached bathroom completely naked with the water still slithering sensually over her curves, over her bulged breasts and her pelvis’ V. Her body’s irresistible perfume filled his nostrils and his mind instantly paralyzed pleasantly; the perfume erasing everything that bothered him.

He stood letting the sheet fall from his body and in a fraction of the second he was glued in her hot body; in her safety and happiness. His strong arms wrapped her muscle bounded back and she caressed his hair smiling.

“Which ungrateful worm caused you bitterness?”

Superman smiled.

“I’m with you, Diana…Nobody can hurt me when I’m with you” he captured her lips and she deepened the kiss tangling their tongues.

“*Coooooome oooooon, Brucie*…” the nasal voice made a crude attempt on compassion. “*Dooon’t cry…just tell me what’s wrong.*”
Bruce realized that everything he experienced till now was a lie: his escape from Joker, the jester’s arrest, saving Dick from Zucco, his return home. He wasn’t sleeping in his king size bed with Hero on his chest; he was still in the examination room in Arkham’s Museum and his mind was obscured under the Amytal’s effect.

Bruce knew that what he was experiencing was creation of the drug yet he couldn’t fight off the pain, the agony, the despair, the terror. It was dark and cold as it was always in his cell and he was in pain…and shame. He was crying and the tunnel behind the stalactite was so tempting: slithering and staying in the caves forever. Alone.

“Who hurt you, Brucie? You know that I can punish him and save you…”

“Master did it…” he whispered.

The jester cleared his throat.

“I punished him for the pain he caused to you, sweetie…You know you can trust me…I want the best for youuuuuuuu…Tell me, Brucie: what you know about…mmm…Baaaats?”

“I…I’m scared…they are all around me…in my cell and…and…they…they sniff my blood and come close… will drink my blood.”

“Sooooo Bats are baaaaaad…what about Batman?”

“Who?”

He felt wet lips on his ear.

“He diiiiiiiid help you, right?”

Bruce nodded and heard Joker lick his lips.

“It must have been a great fun kicking Falcone’s fat ass…”

“Yes…but I couldn’t…I…He was too strong…and I…I was too weak; I was scared of him…I couldn’t…He’d…punish me…”

“Buuuuuut your poor parents deserved justice; they deserved to have their killer punished.”

Bruce gulped a sob and sighed.

“They…they do…but I’m so weak and scared.”

“But Batman isn’t…He kicked Falcone’s ass and sent him to the joint.”

Bruce nodded and sniffed.

“He…he did. I saw him.”

“Brucie, I know you are Batman…it’s okay…I feel you…I understand you…I punished Falcone…I saved you; c’mon, admit you’re Batman.”

“But I’m not…”

Two wet lips sucked his cheek.
“It’s nothing wrong with being Batman, Brucie…”

Bruce felt so weak, so desperate being in his cell beaten and used; a waste of space; a disgrace for his parents.

“I know…” he sobbed. “I want so much to be him…If I was him nobody would dare to touch me” he was aware that he shouldn’t tell the truth; although he was young and in Falcone’s cell somewhere in his mind he knew that someone was trying to get answers for him – to make him divulge his secrets. “But I’m not…”

Suddenly, the wet disgusting feeling on his cheek was gone as music filled his mind; a melody he knew so well; a melody that always made his heart melt with love and joy.

“Moon river … wider than a mile” a soft voice sang to his ear and goose bumps flooded his back. “I’m crossing you in style…someday…” that beloved voice. “Old dream maker, you heartbreaker…”

He felt hands touching his shoulders and massaging gently with the perfect pressure taking the pain off his tired, throbbing back; making numb the healthy part of his body. A smile caressed Bruce’s face and he moaned in pleasure from all the pleasant senses at once: the voice, the song, the touch, the bodily perfume, the body over him.

“You seem to need a good massage…naughty boy…” the voice breathed in his ear. “And nobody knows your body as I do…And you’re cold…You need more warmth, Star…” the body he knew perfectly touched carefully his transmitting his unearthly warmth, extinguishing every pain, or stiffness…

Bruce felt the urge to open his eyes and devour on this face; but he didn’t do it, afraid that it might be only a dream that will evaporate as soon as he opened his eyes.

Lips touched softly his cheek next to the corner of his lips; a kiss that he knew perfectly.

“I missed you, Star…so much it hurts…”

Bruce pressed his eyelids over his eyes to not indulge the temptation and open his eyes: his heart was beating fast. He was thirsty to hear those words…all these months.

“I miss you too, Clark…” he breathed but his voice was choked “but I know you’re only a dream…” he felt his heart breaking again on the realization.

Suddenly, he was on his wheelchair at the round balcony of the Avangers’ Tower; snowflakes had started to fall… He was gazing at New York’s skyline deep in thought when the melody of the song Clark was singing to him reached his ears.

Unconsciously, he turned his wheelchair towards the ballroom; his jaw clenched. Superman was dancing with Diana, clearly mesmerized, absorbed in her eyes…

And then Diana dressed in her suit stood in midair. The Man of Steel saw her and his face gloated with love; he flew to her and she did the same; their collision almost emitted sparkles and Superman hugged her attaching her body to his, capturing her lips in a deep, breathtaking kiss.

“She is my Star!” Superman said with his voice vibrating with happiness.

Bruce gulped and opened his eyes.
“You were always a dream…” he whispered.

“That’s right, Bruce” a deep, suave voice cracked the sudden silence of the room. “He was never the one for you.”

Bruce supported his torso on his elbows and rose a bit to see the one who already knew that was in the room. Queen walked gently towards the bed; his smugness had left his face letting only what seemed like love. The man’s eyes were two fires as when under the Arrow’s hood. Bruce felt those eyes piercing him to the core.

“He was always a lie…and deep inside you knew it” the man knelt by the bed and brought his face close to Bruce’s. “I am the one for you, Bruce…”

Bruce thrashed on his bed and heard through a tunnel a familiar meow. His mind and body were in a deep mist from the sedatives yet he stubbornly opened his eyes though in him lurked the fear of seeing Queen over him.

Instead, a wrinkled hand he had connected with pure love caressed his face and Bruce saw Alfred.

“Please calm down, Master Bruce; it was just a dream.”

The Englishman swept the sweat from Bruce’s face with a cotton white rug and Bruce saw Leslie coming. Her face was worried and she held a syringe.

“The pain and the tension were too much for the sedatives.”

“I’m not in pain” Bruce mumbled trying to ease their worry though he felt the stiffness and the throbbing returning fast.

Leslie nodded.

“We’ll see that tomorrow. Now, I’ll give you something stronger – you need the rest, Bruce.”

Yes, he needed that…so he didn’t protest but let Leslie inject him and welcomed the instant deep sleep.

Tony had just come out of the bathroom with his hair still wet from the quick shower he had. He was dressed in his Garfield pajamas and paced barefoot in the dark living room of his penthouse contemplating the events of the last hours. Suddenly, he realized that he was in front of the whole wall window, Gotham’s breathtaking nightly skyline regarding him grimly as if blaming him for what he has done to her protector.

He pressed his wet hair to his head and huffed; he stormed at the right wall where the built-in bar was placed. Upon approaching the wall opened and the glass bar slithered towards him presenting its tempting, large variety of booze; on both edges of the glass shelf two columns contained an assortment of crystal glasses for each different beverage. Tony stretched his hand to grab a short, round bottle of expensive scotch yet at the last second he stopped. He closed his eyes: alcohol wasn’t the solution.

He clapped and the glass bar slithered back inside leaving the wall at its former state. He slumped on the leather corner sofa and glanced at his StarkStell tablet on the glass titanium coffee table.

“Jarvis, how’s Dr. Strange?” he opted to ask his AI instead.
“The vitals of Dr. Strange is normal now, sir; the remnants of the toxin has been entirely removed from his organism and his brain waves indicate that he is sleeping in normal sleeping rhythms.”

“Thanks, Jarv” he replied out of mood.

They decided with Thor to keep Dr. Strange here, at his penthouse instead of putting him through the trip back to New York. There Tony would be able to monitor him and the man would have the time to properly recover from Crane’s poison. Of course, Bruce had acted on time to stop the toxin before damaging permanently Strange and repel any consequences.

“Bruce…” he sighed and his heart beat fast from desire to learn about his friend.

His hand hovered over the tablet to call the Manor’s number but he closed his fingers. No, he had no right: because of him Bruce found himself Joker’s captive and was forced to exert himself to escape. Nothing would have happened if he hadn’t hit him with his stunning beam. He couldn’t forget Bruce’s eyes just before fainting; they were filled with surprise and the bitterness of betrayal.

His closed fingers became a fist and he downed it to the table which didn’t shatter only thanks to its special materials.

“Sir, there are news on the gunshots that occurred in Tony Zucco’s house.”

After he heard about that, Tony had left the MCU believing that both Bruce and Dick were safe at the Manor. However he asked Jarvis to keep watching for any development since Bruce would definitely be interested for anything concerning that man.

Tony gathered his members and sat properly; he grabbed his tablet and with a few scrolls got access to MCU’s database. He perused the reports about Zucco and slapped his face.

“Damn!”

Dick had been in Zucco’s house; the scum had asked from the judge to take the boy for the weekend and used Judge Moot’s forged signature and stamp to prove that he was Dick’s guardian to take the money from his account and leave the town. Of course, Bruce was one step in front of the scum and took care that the account would be opened only with Ms. Turner’s credentials.

After that it seems that the bastard realizing that he had nothing to gain from the boy decided to get rid of him. Tony cocked an eyebrow: Batarangs were found in the house and on Zucco’s wife – Bruce upon returning to the Manor learnt that Zucco took the boy and followed them which was life saving for the boy but also exhausting for his already spent friend.

At least, the police was already coming to Zucco’s house to arrest him based on the evidence Bruce had gathered. And the little rascal had the brains to record on his tablet Zucco admitting his father’s murder.

His rush to fly right now to the Manor to check Bruce became torturing but he inhaled deeply and stopped. He couldn’t see Bruce in the eyes after what he had done and his concern would seem hypocritic…

However, he had to learn…His hand moved on its own and touched the tablet’s screen calling the Manor.

“Wayne Manor, how may I help you?”

Oh, how he missed Alfred’s calm voice.
“Alfred, it’s Tony. It’s late even for you…”

“Master Anthony! I was informed by Master Bruce that you are alright but I was expecting you to come at the Manor.”

Tony rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Alfred, how’s Bruce? I checked with the clinic’s database and he wasn’t admitted there.”

“Leslie deemed it better for him to stay here tonight: she examined him and scanned him with the portable MRI and there was nothing urgent” Tony sighed with relief. “Nonetheless, he sustained some major blows that thankfully were mostly absorbed by the armor so Leslie will take him to the clinic tomorrow for further exams. He is exhausted and runs a slight fever but Leslie administered him painkillers and sedatives; he is sleeping now and Leslie is with him.”

“Thank you, Alfred…I’ll call you tomorrow to tell me about the exams’ results.”

A long pause from the other end.

“Master Anthony, if I may; it couldn’t be better if you came yourself to the Manor?” Alfred’s voice was cautious; he knew how tricky things were after what Tony did.

“No, Alfred” Tony shook his head. “I have no place there and I’m sure Bruce will be better off without me.”

“Forgive my indiscretion, sir, but I reckon that you are too hasty in your assessment of the situation and Master Bruce’s emotions. Tomorrow evening a small gathering for Master Bruce’s birthday will take place in the Manor and my humble opinion is that you should be with us.”

Tony ruffled his hair with both hands.

“This time I fucked things, Alfred…” he pressed his lips: he wanted to go there and be close to his friend as well but he wasn’t that selfish to press his presence to his friend. “Good night, Alfred.”

“Good night, Master Anthony” Alfred’s voice was hued with a discreet melancholy.

Dick had woken up quite some time now – not that his sleep was ideal…More a foggy state between being wake and asleep with thousands thoughts tangled; images replaying what happened just a few hours ago; memories of how Zucco had tricked them fuelling his hatred for Bruce and making him hurt his granny. How he missed his granny!

He gladly left his bed with the first pale light of the morning. He bathed, wore fresh clothes but he stayed in his room pacing nervously till eight because he was sure that Bruce wouldn’t wake up earlier. As a matter of fact, his guardian should sleep till late to have the rest he needed.

He ran to the kitchen, only to stop abruptly seeing only Alfred serving tea to his white-blue porcelain cup and Leslie sitting to the island. He had hoped to see Bruce there as almost every morning but now he was thinking about it, that wasn’t too possible.

“Good morning, Master Richard” Alfred said and Leslie mumbled the same.

“Mmm…Good morning” the boy replied. “Bruce didn’t come down for breakfast? Then he is ill…” Leslie looked up at Alfred and sipped from her coffee.
“I just recommended that he stays in bed today” she said “we’ll make the exams to have a proper image about his condition.”

Dick licked his lips.

“If he must stay in bed all day how is he going to go to your clinic?”

Leslie shrugged a shoulder.

“On a gurney of course; I’ve arranged for an ambulance.”

Dick nodded and ruffled his messy hair. Alfred grinned with sympathy.

“Master Bruce is taking his breakfast in his room accompanied by Miss Kyle. I think that you should have your breakfast too, Master Richard.”

Dick turned his head towards the upper floor.

“I’m not hungry” he replied. “Can I…?” he asked shyly both the adults.

Leslie crooked her mouth.

“Yeah, you can.”

“Thank you!” Dick exclaimed and stormed at the corridor, his running footsteps echoing behind him.

Leslie shook her head and Alfred grinned.

Dick once again stopped abruptly before the door to the Master bedroom and inhaled deeply trying to control his breath and his heartbeat. He raised his hand to knock and then lowered it before he raised it again. He gulped and knocked.

“Come in”

It was Selina’s voice. Catwoman’s, Dick realized. He opened the door and made a hesitant step forwards. Bruce was lying on the bed resting his back on pillows; he was absorbed in reading something on his Cosmos’ screen but he raised his eyes right away to regard Dick. He smiled clearly in a good mood though his face was pale and his eyes bloodshot.

Beside the bed Selina was sitting on a ottoman eating from the breakfast on the silver lay at the bed table over Bruce’s legs. Hero was curled next to Bruce and eating the chunks his human fed him.

“Good morning, Richard” Bruce greeted him causing Selina’s glance.

Dick licked his lips; he still couldn’t look him straight in the eyes.

“Mm…yeah…good morning” he scratched his neck and cursed inside realizing that he was doing one of Jay’s reactions. “Can I speak to you?”

“Of course” Bruce replied and Selina stood.

“I leave you two alone” she said and pecked Bruce on the cheek.

She walked to the door and looked at Dick as she passed by him.

“Don’t let him work on his tablet anymore…” she mumbled and the boy nodded.
Selina closed the door behind her but Dick still hesitated; Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“Have a seat” he prompted the boy gesturing to the ottoman and Dick did as he was said. “You had breakfast?”

Dick still without looking him in the eyes shook his head.

“Alfred told me to but I wasn’t hungry…”

Bruce smiled and showed the tray.

“Help yourself…Alfred always has the tendency to overfeed me…”

Dick looked at those delicious smelling cinnamon biscuits and grabbed one.

“Mm…thanks. Those cinnamon biscuits are my favorite” he said chewing the delicacy.

“Mine too” Bruce commented and Dick looked at him with the rest of his biscuit hovering near his mouth. “Richard, I wanted to tell you that what you’ve learnt about me last night …I mean…it’s not a reason for you to change the way you feel about me.”

Dick closed his eyes and lolled his head on the side.

“I knew you’d say that…” he shook his head. “How are you? I mean, last night, that bullet…”

“The armor absorbed most of the impact; I’m fine.”

“You’re pale thought…”

“That’s my standard” Bruce said.

“About what you said…’bout Batman and my feelings for you…You were all this time like this: tolerating me being an ass and never asking anything. But your kindness can’t change the fact that I was…wrong; I treated you…I was unfair, mean: whether you are…him or not. But the fact you’re Batman makes my behavior even worse.”

Bruce pressed his lips; he hoped that things would get their way without all this.

“Last night you saved my life risking yours and risking your condition…”

Bruce didn’t want to hear more; he wanted the boy to be just happy not to be eaten by guilt.

“Richard…”

The boy looked at him.

“Please, call me Dick. I was saying that last night wasn’t the first time you saved me. That night in the factory with Joker, you again didn’t think the risk for my sake. And you almost died that night… and…and you’re in a wheelchair because of me.”

“Not because of you: nothing of this was your fault. Joker started that.”

Dick looked at the wheelchair.

“I was ungrateful; I made your life a Hell; I made people speak ill of you; and all this time your suffering was for my sake. I blamed you for my family’s murders though it wasn’t your fault.”
Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“I understand you... You were filled with pain, with anger, with despair: it was reasonable some of these feelings to be turned against the one whose name was written to the wall over your loved ones’ bodies.”

“I even cursed you to rot in that chair...” he said and his voice fainted as his phrase reached the end; he lowered his head.

Bruce caressed the boy’s hair.

“I knew that you didn’t mean it...”

“But I did! I’m that bad!”

“No, you didn’t; even if then you believed that you wanted it you are such a good boy that deep inside you didn’t want it.”

Dick raised his eyes to meet Bruce’s and Bruce smiled.

“I’m sorry, Bruce; for everything.”

Bruce nodded.

“I know, Dick...I want you to forget everything that happened and move forward. We all do mistakes but what matters is to learn from them and continue.”

Dick caressed Hero that came to rub at him.

“I believed Zucco; I let him poison me against my granny, against you... All this time you wanted to warn me, to save me from him; you cared about me and I was following blindly Zucco...my father's murderer...I feel awful...How fool I was?”

Bruce shook his head.

“You were desperate, angry and he took advantage of you.”

“Yeah...but still...I was doing everything he was telling me without seeing how wrong it was. I can’t forgive myself...”

Bruce pressed his lips. Since Dick knew the truth about him the boy could learn more.

“When I was 14, still Falcone’s slave, a man popped up a night at the cabaret and cured my cripple arm. He fed me, he washed me, he dressed me, he even made Falcone torture me less; he promised that he’d save me and bring justice for my parents.”

Dick watched frowned.

“When I was 14, still Falcone’s slave, a man popped up a night at the cabaret and cured my cripple arm. He fed me, he washed me, he dressed me, he even made Falcone torture me less; he promised that he’d save me and bring justice for my parents.”

Dick pressed his lips. Since Dick knew the truth about him the boy could learn more.

“For the first time after 6 years of endless pain and despair, I began hoping...” he chuckled. “He trained me to be a killing machine...He took advantage of me, he used me in every possible way and I” he huffed “I believed that I owed him whatever he wished from me – that what he was taking from me was very little in comparison with what he was offering me. I thought he cared for me...that he would free me...I was obeying him...I was ready to do whatever he wanted me...” he raised his eyebrows “I was doing everything he wished...” Bruce felt embarrassed because he was sure that Dick understood what he meant. “And then one day, he revealed chuckling that he wasn’t going to let me go; he’d use me to eradicate Gotham and after would take me with him...his slave: serving
Dick noticed Bruce’s blank eyes and figured that he was lost in his past – maybe re-living those things; but he was eager to learn about Batman…about Bruce.

“And?”

Bruce looked at the boy as if waking from a dream.

“I couldn’t do what he wanted; I wasn’t a murderer; I knew then that he was evil… I tried to escape but he caught me; he punished me; he threatened to kill my loved ones if I ever tried to escape again. He…He tortured Tony” Dick’s eyes widened remembering Tony Stark’s story: his abduction by terrorists in Middle East, that he almost died; Bruce nodded. “He was going to kill Tony to break me once and for all but Tony managed to free himself. Yet Tony since then is forced to have that arc reactor to live…” he chuckled bitterly. “Because of me…Because I believed the wrong man…”

Dick caressed the back of Bruce’s hand and he looked the boy puzzled.

“It wasn’t your fault. You were scared and defenseless and that man offered you hope.”

Bruce smiled.

“You see?” he twitched his eyebrows pointedly. “It’s the same thing with you and Zucco…”

Dick pressed his lips not totally convinced but he smiled a bit more relieved.

“I wish granny was here…I have so many things to tell her…To apologize to her…”

“Maybe you’ll have the chance.”

Dick shook his head.

“She is gone…She left sad from my behavior; scared about what would happen to me. And she was right: you care about me more than anyone else. I wish I had the chance to tell her that she was right and I was wrong - stupid.”

“Don’t lose your hope…”

Dick shook his head and decided to change the subject to tell what was burning his mind from last night.

“Till now I respected Batman but now that I know the truth…I admire Bruce Wayne. You’re the strongest, the bravest, the kindest man I even known.”

Bruce chuckled.

“You’re 13 years old: you haven’t met many people yet…”

“I’ll never meet anyone like you – ever…I have the best guardian in the world – a guardian angel.”

Bruce smiled.

“And I don’t deserve you…” the boy added and Bruce’s expression became dead serious.

“Hush…That’s not true and I don’t want you to ever tell that again. You’ve been through a lot of things that even a grown up wouldn’t be able to cope with and you’ve made it: you remained the
great boy your family raised – your grandmother is proud of you and I’m honored she trusted me with your guardianship.”

Knocks on the door.

“Come in” Bruce called.

It was Alfred and Leslie.

“Master Bruce, the ambulance is here.”

Bruce nodded. Dick met his eyes.

“Can I come with you?”

Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“It’s a boring procedure.”

Leslie snorted and took the bed table off his legs.

“Next time we’ll redecorate the clinic to resemble a theme park, Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce grinned and turned again to Dick.

“And you have your training – I know you and Jeff are practicing some new exercises Mr. Breizic made for you; and after I think you’ll have a better time with Jason playing bowling.”

Dick pouted downhearted.

“Okay…”

Bruce patted his upper arm.

“Dick, everything is alright now: just let go and have fun for a change. I promise that everything will be fine from now on.”

The boy smiled and nodded.

“If you promise then it will be.”

And definitely Bruce would have preferred to be with Dick and Jason than in the clinic coming out of one examination room to get inside a scanning room. Not to mention all those needles taking blood or tissue samples: after all those experiences with Crane, Quinzel and Joker he felt nausea in the sight of those pointy tools…

Yet in the end he managed to convince Alfred and Leslie to let him go somewhere promising that it wouldn’t be for long and that after he’d stay in bed and rest. Of course Bruce counted on the fact that the two of them wanted some secrecy to prepare his birthday gathering and his short absence would suit them. Supposedly, it was a surprise but Bruce had caught some strange sideway glances between them and he remembered Alfred mentioning his birthday before all Hell broke loose.

Alfred insisted on driving him but Bruce asked him to take care of the boys: Dick’s emotional state troubled him – he wanted the boy to feel relieved and not burdened by all those things.
He drove his car in the underground parking of the building and slipped in his wheelchair to head to the elevator. But then someone’s footsteps approached him from the back. He stopped the wheelchair and grinned.

“Thor…”

The blond god walked to come in front of Bruce. He was dressed in his civilian attire: blue jeans, leather jacket, a hockey cap and a long blond ponytail. He smiled at Bruce.

“I’m always pleased when you recognize me without seeing me.”

“You are my friend, Thor.”

Thor nodded.

“I wanted to meet and thank you but it is almost impossible to sneak out from Alfred and Leslie. I hardly persuaded them to let me come here.”

Thor grinned.

“I feel for them; they must be distraught after last night. I heard that after Arkham Batman had another adventure.”

Bruce lolled his head on the sight.

“I heard the same.”

The blond chuckled and lowered his eyes.

“I followed your car just in case – I hope you don’t mind” but then he remembered what Bruce had said. “Thank me? I’m the one who should thank you: you saved me administering the antidote.”

Bruce waved that off.

“That was nothing.”

Thor lolled his head on the side and arched an eyebrow crossing his arms over the chest.

“Really? I don’t agree: being able to hold again Mjolnir is everything to me” he pressed his lips. “And why you wanted to thank me?”

“For your help in everything that happened the last days: I read about Loki’s attack in New York” his face was a bit shadowed and Thor was sure that the reason was Superman’s absence: Bruce must be very disappointed and sad. “Your help was crucial there and in capturing Loki.”

“How you know that?” Thor frowned: he couldn’t have read that anywhere because S.H.I.E.L.D. kept it close to the chest.

Bruce pursed his lips.

“Joker gave him a compound dose of the weakening substance in front of me and you and Tony were looking for me at Gotham which means that you found Loki and he told you that Joker returned here” Thor smiled.

“Always the detective. You should teach me that: I’d like to be the first god-detective!” he chuckled and Bruce did the same.
“And Dr. Strange?”

“Actually he was the one who found Loki’s palace and captured him.”

Bruce met his clear blue eyes.

“You asked him to help.”

“How do you know?”

Bruce grinned and his eyes sparkled.

“He isn’t a member of the Avengers and he is not Tony’s friend otherwise he would have mentioned him. And when I found you he was conjuring things with his hands, which means that he has special skills not known to many people.”

Thor nodded.

“My failure to locate Loki all this time proved that my brother couldn’t be found either by a god or a mere mortal. So I went to Dr. Strange; he is a member of an order that protects Earth from dark powers and he had the skills needed.”

“So you do deserve my gratitude.”

Thor almost blushed and Bruce grinned.

“And Dr. Strange, of course” the human added.

Thor kneeled before him.

“I’m so relieved you’re alright, Bruce; back to us. Did that man hurt you in any way?” his agony was evident even now.

Bruce met the god’s clear eyes.

“Nothing serious…” he reassured him. “Alfred is preparing a small gathering this evening for my birthday: it’d be my pleasure to join us.”

Thor pressed his lips and his eyes filled with disappointment.

“It would be mine too…but unfortunately I have to transfer Loki to Asgard. Odin is furious and has called that Asgardian Assembly.”

Bruce nodded.

“I understand.”

Thor stood and shook Bruce’s hand.

“Happy birthday, Bruce!”

“Thank you, Thor.”

A single rucksack was dropped somewhere on the floor and a briefcase lay closed, thrown careless on the sofa next to a long coat. The vast room was dimly lit only by the gray natural light of the
Tony wasn’t a tidy person and he didn’t care to be so his departure preparations were hasty and messy – especially, since his mood was grimmer than the gray sky of Gotham that stared at him almost mocking from the whole wall window. It was afternoon and he had set the jet for departure in an hour.

He sat on the sofa engrossed in his tablet, reading carefully what he had hacked from Leslie’s clinic. What else? The results from Bruce’s exams. He had already called Alfred for information and the blessed man told him without any objection yet Tony wanted every detail – he wanted to have his own opinion over the doctors.

It was difficult to break the firewalls to get the data he wanted – after all, Bruce had shielded the clinic’s electronic database – yet in the end he managed to break through. His heart was beating almost as fast as when one year ago, in this very room, he was to see Falcone’s toy to ascertain if he was indeed Bruce.

There was some inflammation in Bruce’s back where contusions and lesions were manifested: Tony gulped and covered his mouth with his palm seeing the images from MRI. Bruce definitely was hit in the back with force and the other nastier lesion was from a bullet. Yet the armor as Alfred had said absorbed most of the impact. The energy casts did their job again – bless that alien tech!...but not that UFO scumbag!

Tony closed his eyes considering his own deeds…No, he was a scumbag too but not as bad as the alien.

Bruce’s blood exams indicated the presence of high doses of chloroform and Amytal and Tony cursed. That Quinzel and Crane tried to force Bruce to admit what Joker wanted: something bit his insides hard. Did Joker find out? Damn! He could have asked Bruce, if only…

Bruce had a low fever which was not good but it could be only due to the hardship. A bit dehydrated with some minerals low – easy solved with some supplements. Also, the fact that he missed some dosages of his medication manifested in his vitals – thankfully, not so much to cause damage. Overall nothing that couldn’t be restored.

Tony pressed his hair on his head and sighed in relief: his blunder didn’t have detrimental consequences.

Suddenly, the low, almost inaudible humming of the lift broke his thoughts. Only Pepper had free access to the lift, no other…except than…no, it couldn’t be.

The lift stopped.

“Master Bruce, sir”.

It was preposterous how Jarvis’ indifferent voice shattered Tony’s superficial tranquility and made him jump.

“Why you didn’t notify me, you traitorous, sneaky AI?” he yelled.

“But it is Master Bruce, sir…” the AI replied innocently but Tony rolled his eyes because he sensed a bit of amusement there.

“Nice…AIs made fun of us, ol’ dude” he said to himself and thought to run away but just slumped on the sofa hearing the lift doors opening and then the discreet sound of Bruce’s wheelchair.
Damn! Alfred and Leslie shouldn’t have let him wander around: he needed rest. However he noticed something else: Bruce was using the wheelchair Tony had crafted for him…poor thing! After Superman’s betrayal and his own Bruce had run out of options. He wanted to look at him but Tony knew that didn’t have the right.

Bruce’s lips slightly cracked seeing Tony like this and then his eyes fell on his friend’s baggage scattered around.

“So you’re ready to leave without a word?” he asked and Tony closed his eyes.

Tony shook his head.

“You should be home resting; it doesn’t worth the effort…”

Bruce licked his lips and moved his wheelchair closer causing a shudder in Tony. The younger man huffed

“Let me decide what it is worthy…”

Tony nodded: everything started because he wanted to force his opinion to Bruce.

Bruce arched an eyebrow looking at Tony’s tablet.

“Are they good enough?” he said amused and Tony frowned. “I mean the results.”

Tony made to turn his head towards him but stopped himself.

“You knew?”

“I knew that you’d want to learn every detail and that Alfred’s info wouldn’t be enough so I put the results in the database with such hard firewall that only you could break.”

Tony chuckled and shook his head.

“Why you did that?”

Bruce sighed.

“What kind of a friend…” he said raising his voice and Tony lowered his head inhaling deeply: here we go, he thought.

Bruce had come here to confront him; he nodded and surrendered because whatever Bruce would say was well deserved.

Bruce crooked his mouth taking in his friend’s reaction and imagining his thoughts.

“What kind of a friend leaves and doesn’t attend his friend’s first birthday after nineteen years?”

Tony felt as if a bucket with icy water splashed on him – with the bucket; he didn’t believe in his ears and in his confusion turned to Bruce.

“What?”

Bruce cocked his eyebrows and took advantage of Tony’s turn of the head to lock eyes with him.

“I’m sure that Alfred invited you to my birthday gathering, which by the way, it’s supposed to be
secret” Tony couldn’t fight but chuckle to this. “It’s the only reason Alfred and Leslie let me out of
the Manor after all… But I see that you are ready to snub my birthday and leave…Is this what
someone expects from his best buddy?”

Tony’s lips trembled and he couldn’t restrain himself from rushing to his friend and kneeling before
him to give him a bear hug minding his hurt back. He held Bruce’s upper arms and looked him in the
eyes.

“You can’t be so forgiving, littl’ guy…” he mumbled. “What I did is unforgivable: I gunned you
even if it was a stunning beam because I was stubborn and I wanted to force my choice to you. What
kind of a friend does that?”

Bruce lolled his head on the side pouting.

“You!”

Tony erupted in light hearted laugh.

“I know you did it out of despair; because you care that much, Tony. And I know that you regret
it…I don’t want to lose you again…” Bruce said dead serious.

Tony lowered his head; he was happy, beyond happy; relieved but all this was overwhelming.

“You can’t be so forgiving” he repeated thought it suit him “you must thing more of yourself, littl’
guy…”

Bruce smirked and his eyes sparkled wickedly.

“But I do…” Tony frowned “because from now on you wouldn’t be able to deny anything to me”
Tony gaped and raised his eyebrows. “It’s handy to have Tony Stark’s genius and Ironman’s
firepower at my disposal without objections.”

Now Tony began laughing real hard and his head fell on Bruce’s lap: the agony, sadness and
hopelessness of the last hours making him lose his grip and the energy to keep his head erect.

Bruce caressed his friend’s disheveled raven hair as Tony’s head shook from relieved laughter.

“Mm…sorry” a bass baritone invaded the vast living room from the corridor leading to the guest
bedroom “am I interrupting something?”

Bruce turned his gaze at the man and despite the fact he was now dressed in one of Tony’s least
favorite pajamas, he recognized the man with the cape from Arkham. Dr. Strange. However Bruce
didn’t show that he recognized him – Batman had seen him not Bruce Wayne.

Tony raised his head rather reluctantly.

“It’s not what you think” he cocked an eyebrow to his guest with a mock guilty expression as if
cought cheating and Bruce rolled his eyes, happy inside for his friend had found his cheery self. “Dr.
Strange, this is my best buddy, Bruce Wayne” he said standing and the man walked closer. “Bruce,
Dr. Strange: he found and captured Loki helping us find Joker and take you back.”

“Hardly” the doctor said shaking Bruce’s offered hand. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Wayne.”

“Me too, Dr. Strange.”

“I was saying that I don’t deserve the credit Mr. Stark gives me.”
“Tony” he said. “Mr. Stark makes me look 33 years old, that is, ten years older than I am.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows and chuckled.

“No comments, please…” Tony mumbled.

Dr. Strange smiled.

“I was saying that I found Loki but he was already weak; and in Arkham…” he shuddered only from the memories. “I was useless…Tony told me that Batman saved me – I must thank the guy.”

“Good luck finding him” Tony mumbled “well, boys, excuse me but I have to make myself presentable.”

Stephen cocked an eyebrow.

“Plastic surgery?”

Bruce chuckled and Tony lolled his head to look at the doctor with narrowed eyes.

“I think I’ll like this guy…” he commented.

“Then Dr. Strange can come to the Manor with us” Bruce commented.

The man looked startled.

“Well, why not?”

“Nice then” Tony clearly in exhilarated mood patted the doctor and walked to his bedroom. “Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars…”

Bruce’s face was radiating from a big smile when Dr. Strange looked at him.

“He is relieved…” the doctor said serious “he was desperate while you were missing.”

Bruce nodded.

“He would have killed Loki if I hadn’t put a shield around him.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I wouldn’t want Tony to kill…”

Stephen sat on the edge of the corner sofa right next to Bruce.

“Well, as a former doctor I detest killings too.”

Bruce frowned.

“Former?”

“I had a car accident that robbed me from my skills…despite all the surgeries I’ve been through” he chuckled “and spending almost all my fortune” he shook his head. “Nothing” he looked at his hands.”

Bruce pressed his lips; he could feel for the doctor. His eyes fell fleetingly on his own dead legs.

“Thor told me that you have skills that enabled you to locate Loki and you mentioned creating a shield that stopped Tony from killing Loki.”
Dr. Strange smiled.

“Yes, in my quest to find a way to overcome my limits I met people that taught me that I have some powers that I didn’t know…yet they can’t replace the skills I need to be again a surgeon.”

Bruce shook his head and noticed how Dr. Strange gazed at his wheelchair.

“You’re an admirable man, Mr. Wayne…Inspiration.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Me?”

“In the hurricane of my personal adversities I came across your story in the news…to tell you the truth I didn’t pay much attention then” he smirked “my pain was the entire world. But then Thor came to ask my help to find you and told me that you are a paraplegic, a multi-injury patient” Bruce didn’t say anything. “As I was searching for Loki I connected everything I heard about you: about the horrific abuse you suffered for eighteen years in the hands of your parents’ murderer and now about your paraplegia; the kidnapping…And I thought that you must be a very special human being since you managed through your tragedies to gain the respect and deep love of unique beings like Thor or Superman.”

“Thor is so kind and this kindness is that makes him so caring. As for Superman, he cares for everybody, right?”

Stephen lolled his head to the side.

“Thor was also ready to rip apart Loki for what he did to you. And before I reached his palace someone else had caught Loki.”

Bruce frowned: that was new information.

“Who?”

“I found Loki in the dungeon he held you but he wasn’t alone. An archer was ready to hit him with a golden arrow; he was mad, his worry for you vibrating from his entire existence.”

Bruce’s heart beat fast.

“An archer?”

“Dressed in dark green like Robin Hood.”

Bruce shook his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose, feeling the dizziness of the last hours worsening. Dr. Strange watched him worried.

“It can’t be…Thor told me that he couldn’t locate Thor and that meant that no mere god or mere mortal could find him.”

“That’s true; even in Loki’s weakened state his palace was concealed by strong magic…”

One thought cracked Bruce’s mind like a flash: *Bruce, you’re an idiot*…
expected but also Master Anthony and another guest.

“I’m sure you missed me, Al” Tony said patting the older man’s back. “By the way this gent who wears my suit is Dr. Strange; he helped us find Bruce etc, etc.”

Alfred nodded kindly.

“I saw it on the news. It’s a real pleasure meeting you, sir.”

“The pleasure is all mine, mister…”

“Alfred; I’m Alfred.”

As soon as they reached the big arch of the grand salon the chorus began:

*Happy Birthday to you…*

Tony waved his hands like a maestro and Bruce acted the shocked to not ruin the surprise.

In the middle of the room was a big round table with a huge cake on; the candles were already lit.

Around the table stood Leslie, Lucius, Selina with Steve, Pepper, Jason with his mother, Matt and his fiance and Dick.

“Make a wish, Bruce” Selina said after the song ended and kissed him on the cheek.

Leslie had put the cake on a short trolley and brought it to Bruce for him to blow out the candles and when he did everyone clapped to Bruce’s amusement and uneasiness: it seemed like ages since he last celebrated his birthday. Shattered images crossed his mind swiftly as if from a really old movie: giggles of cheerful kids, his peers; happy children songs, pointy party hats in small heads; multicolored balloons and decorations; his parents beaming distributing presents to their little guests.

The huge cake – really huge for a short boy of eight – missing a part in his index finger’s shape because Bruce couldn’t fight the temptation and dove his finger in the cream. He had blown with all his strength because he wanted his wish to come true and his mother hugged and kissed him. He didn’t remember what that wish was…

His eyes became blank without realizing and he sensed Dick’s eyes on him filled with understanding and smiled to his people.

“I see you brought your old dirt bag friend” Pepper said after she leaned to kiss Bruce.

Tony wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I like girls dirt-talking!” he said and kissed her on the lips.

Ms. Todd was handing the plates with the cake.

Bruce accompanied by Dr. Strange guided his chair to Leslie and Lucius.

“Leslie, Lucius, let me introduce you Dr. Strange. Dr. Strange, Dr. Leslie Thompkins and Mr. Lucius Fox, two of my closest friends.”

“But I know Dr. Strange” Leslie said. “We had met briefly in a conference. I don’t know if he remembers me.”
Dr. Strange shook hands with her.

“Yes, I remember you: the fierce doctor from Gotham. And Mr. Fox” he shook hands with him “I had followed eagerly your work in bionic body parts and I have the feeling you’re ready to revolutionize science…”

Lucius smiled.

“I sure hope so, Dr. Strange, with Mr. Stark’s help. Your interest on our work is very flattering.”

The door bell was barely heard over the chats, the laughs and the light music. Alfred left to answer the door and Bruce followed him with his eyes.

When Alfred returned some random glances fell over there to stay.

Suddenly, a surprised, exhilarated voice hued with disbelief towered every other sound in the room.

“Granny!”

Dick rushed there and hugged his grandmother who had leaned and opened her arms; tears were sliding over his cheeks as he was crushed in the woman’s hug. However the boy lifted slightly his head from his grandmother’s chest and cast a sideways glance at Bruce who was looking at them smiling.
First of all I want to apologize” Bruce said looking at Dick who was still in his granny’s hug.

After Ms. Turner’s arrival the small party continued with more cheer since she wasn’t the only one who entered the Manor. Harvey Dent, Rachel and Mr. Petrou had come with her.

It was when Matt with his fiancé and Ms. Todd left, and Pepper drove Dr. Strange to Tony’s private jet in order to fly for New York that Bruce was ready to answer the questions that he knew Dick and his friends had. Jason had asked from his mother to let him stay at the Manor for the rest of the weekend.

They had settled in the salon.

Dick frowned in disbelief hearing Bruce; he was still exhilarated by his granny’s return: he was still uncertain if it was true or a dream.

“Apologize? You?” he asked.

Ms. Turner tilted her head to Bruce.

“Dick is right, son; we owe you so much.”

Bruce shook his head sensing his friends’ curious gazes: they didn’t know anything and they were surprised as well.

“Because of me Dick went through a great distress and agony all these months” he huffed “but I thought that it was the best solution.”

Ms. Turner nodded smiling.

“When Ms. Turner came here and told me about Zucco’s threats and her wish to make me your guardian I just couldn’t let things in that man’s hands waiting. Ms. Turner was sure that he had killed Dick’s father so what would have stopped him from doing that again? So I persuaded Ms. Turner to let me stage her disappearance until we managed to prove the truth about Zucco and send him to prison. Dick would be safe here during that.”

Dick exchanged glances with Jason who gaped and the older boy turned immediately back to Bruce who pressed his lips.

“So I arranged for Ms. Turner to go to Canada and live with Harvey and Rachel till things would be safe for her.”

The old woman smiled to her grandson. Bruce huffed.

“It was very difficult for her to spend Christmas without you, Dick; and it was really hard to calm her down and convince her to stay in Canada and not come back when she learnt that Zucco was challenging in court my guardianship.”

Ms. Turner nodded and caressed Dick’s hair.
“That’s true…I panicked; I was scared that Zucco could manage to take you. I wanted to take the plane to Gotham immediately.”

Rachel shook her head.

“It was impossible to reassure her; till Bruce called her and she was somewhat calmer.”

Harvey chuckled.

“But still we had the door locked just in case…”

Ms. Turner laughed.

“I’m so weak…”

Bruce moved his wheelchair to her and took her hands.

“On the contrary, you’re a very brave lady, Ms. Turner, and I’m glad I helped.”

Harvey looked at Bruce.

“Now you have to explain everything to the police – I’m sure you didn’t tell anything to them.”

Bruce blushed.

“No, because that would risk the plan; I hope Jim will understand.”

Tony smirked.

“If he doesn’t I’ll unleash my Stark charm: we’re buddies with Jim.”

Leslie snorted. She was watching from the armchair right of the fireplace.

“If your last resort is Anthony’s charm, you might end up in jail” she chuckled.

Tony nodded several times.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence!” he cocked his eyebrows and placed his palm over his heart “it means a lot, my lady!”

Dick was staring at Bruce with utter adoration.

“You gave me the greatest gift of all: my granny back.”

Bruce shook his head.

“I was the one who took her in the first place” he commented. “All your troubles with Zucco was because he sniffed my money.”

Dick grinned.

“I’m sure he’d hurt my granny if you hadn’t taken her away on time: he told me so last night… You’re so clever” the boy widened his eyes impressed “the way you blocked Zucco’s any access to the money – a perfect trap” he was ready to say more but he didn’t know if he should: the people who came with his granny might not know about Batman.

Jason made a really bad gesture taking his hand from petting Hero’s back.
“That asshole took what he deserved! I always hated the guts of Zucco…” he elbowed his friend in the ribs. “They couldn’a tell ya anythin’ ‘cause ya’d say everythin’ to him.”

“Ouch!” Dick exclaimed. “Ya coulda tell it without yar elbow” he mimicked Jason’s way.

Ms. Turner caressed Bruce’s blushed face.

“You’re an angel – our good angel.”

Bruce didn’t say anything because he couldn’t believe that: their loved ones were brutally murdered because of him.

“Of course you’re welcome to stay in the Manor as long as you want. And that goes for you too” he turned to Harvey who sat next to Rachel on the sofa. “It will be a pleasure for us.”

Rachel chuckled.

“Oh! I’m sure, you’re Bruce after all…”

Harvey patted Rachel’s back and looked at his father.

“We’re going to settle in Gotham now that Joker is back in custody and my suspension is almost over, I think I can start working here again.”

“And I managed to find a position here as well” Rachel commented and Mr. Petrou laughed.

“And I hope that Mr. Wayne will be so generous to give me a small work because I don’t think that anyone else in Gotham will want a former thug as an employee.”

Selina snorted.

“You’re better than many ‘dignified’ people I know…” she offered and Tony raised his eyebrows.

“I hope you don’t mean me…”

Selina tilted her head to him.

“I said ‘dignified’ and even with quotation marks” she made them in the air with her fingers “you don’t qualify.”

Tony yanked his head backwards.

“Thank goodness!”

Bruce shook his head amused.

“Mr. Petrou, your position waits for you – I’ve already spoken to Ms. Philips.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Don’t mention it…”

Alfred was touched and proud of his young master but exchanging a look with Leslie knew that it was time for Bruce to get some rest. He walked towards him.
“As Master Bruce has already perfectly said it, all of you are welcome to stay with us… as for you, Master Bruce” Bruce closed his eyes in helplessness and both boys chuckled “it is high time you got some rest.”

Bruce nodded. It was true that he felt really tired but also he wanted to have some time alone to set his thoughts in a line.

Alfred took the handles of the wheelchair and Bruce looked at him.

“Alfred, you don’t have to come with me; you can stay.”

But Leslie stood from her armchair and walked to them.

“Yes, he has, young man; and I will come later to see you.”

Bruce nodded.

“Good night” he greeted the company and they did the same.

Alfred accompanied his young master to the master bedroom and helped him sit in the reclined seat of the bath tub much to Bruce’s uneasiness.

“Alfred, you really don’t have to do this…Please…”

“Leslie strictly ordered for you to not make any challenging movements. Especially, after the exhausting things you just did and the blows you took.”

*Challenging*, Bruce thought: supporting your body for a second and sliding it to the seat… He didn’t say anything though.

“Have your shower, sir, and I’ll bring your dinner. You need to take your medication” Bruce nodded. “I must insist that you wait for me and do not get out on your own.”

Bruce sighed.

“I’m not hurt, Alfred; there’s no need for all these.”

“Please, sir.”

The young man pressed his lips and just nodded.

Alfred left the bathroom and Bruce took off his clothes. He didn’t have any intention to take a shower yet he didn’t want to make Alfred and the others suspect that something was troubling him. He didn’t want to discuss anything with anyone yet; only with himself.

And for that he had to wait. Because Alfred returned surprisingly quickly and kept talking to him outside the glass windows of the tub as if the Englishman knew that he wanted to muse on things.

When Bruce finished, put on the bathrobe Alfred gave him and had to accept his butler’s help to sit at his waiting wheelchair.

His light dinner was waiting for him on the bed table; Alfred had the ‘luxury’ to let the bed table on the floor since Hero had stayed with the boys.

Bruce wore the pajamas Alfred had set on the bed and again with his butler’s help settled to the bed; of course Bruce spared Alfred from most of his weight. The Englishman set the special supporting
pillows behind to Bruce’s back and the younger man began eating.

After he obediently took the handful of pills Alfred offered him Bruce was eager to plunge himself in work; thankfully, his tablet was on the nightstand tempting.

Alfred lifted the bed table and the corner of his eyes fell on the waiting tablet. He didn’t say anything just transferred the empty dinnerware on the silver tray. The Englishman turned to leave but he stopped and looked at his young master.

“Master Bruce, it would be too bold of me to ask you not to work too much on your tablet?” he asked in his stoic, composed way.

Bruce smiled for being caught.

“No; actually, it’d be ‘too normal’ of you, Alfred” he licked his lips. “It won’t be much: it’s just that if I don’t settle some things in my mind I won’t be able to sleep anyway.”

Alfred nodded hiding his emotions.

“Good night, Master Bruce” he said and left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind Alfred, Bruce grabbed the tablet; this seemed so childish to him – as if he was to watch a R movie that his parents forbade him to; he chuckled.

He touched the option that connected him with the monster processor of the cave. Dr. Strange’s description of the Arrow in Loki’s dudgeon rang some bells: it brought something to his mind. The wizard had said that the palace was concealed by strong magic that no common human or god could pass and then the archer was ready to kill the god with a golden arrow.

Bruce was scrolling frantically the data from the cave’s processor on his tablet screen looking for the image Dr. Strange’s description reminded him…

His finger stopped hovering over the screen; his eyes were shining but remained blank. An old parchment from a secret library specializing on the occult; an ancient painting covered an entire page. Bruce bit his lip: the answer lay inside his database all this time…Mocking him; his heart beat fast.

The left hand archer who killed gods with his golden arrows. Bruce felt dizzy: a gigantic figure with silver spikes for hair and two ivory small horns protruding from both edges of his forehead: an ancient god-demon.

He pressed his lips: the most powerful demon, the one who could kill gods with his golden arrows. Damn! He closed his eyes and pressed his hair on his head with both hands. Bagdana. All this time…

How could he be so blind?

It was so shocking that he actually felt numb for a few seconds: everything came back to him and finally had a perfect explanation.

Oliver Queen’s interest in him…yes, since Bagdana is the Arrow then he is Queen too: that was the reason the people who know him were speaking about him being different. It wasn’t coincidence that he first met Queen in the reception at the Avengers’ Tower when Superman danced with Diana being totally charmed by her. Queen would be the safe boat for the heartbroken Bruce…

Queen had returned from the dead supposedly saved by the Amazonian Princess but Bruce knew
that she wasn’t the legendary Princess. That meant that Bagdana was working with her from the beginning…

Bruce remembered the way Queen spoke to him about eternal love that night in Cobblepot’s restaurant. Bruce fell asleep all of a sudden, only for Queen to take him to his suite: he was tired but certainly Bagdana did something to him.

That explains how Arrow knew his double identity so he guided Batman to the rooftop he knew that Superman and Diana was having sex; he wanted to make him break up with Superman knowing that this was going to be the final blow to finish what was accumulating the past months. After Batman left he also videotaped and published the scene not only to make things for Bruce more painful but also because he couldn’t resist his craving to humiliate Superman.

Now that Bagdana was revealed to be the Arrow was easy to understand how he could be found in different cities… Bruce frowned recalling what had happened in Chicago: he had heard about Arrow’s appearance there and his focus was there – he had also asked Selina to make a research. Bagdana knew that Bruce would have wanted to learn more about him so he was sure that his focus would be on Chicago at the right time… At the right time, when the explosion – probably his doing - would happen and Superman would run there to save people…exactly, for Diana to appear and help him ending up to their passionate embrace and kiss.

“She is my star…” Superman had said.

And Bagdana knew that Bruce was watching and that he’d take another blow which the demon hope that would make him forget the hero and find haven to the love of someone who understood… Queen.

He shook his head; the back garden after the attack in the Palisades when Arrow saved him…Queen had come in the Manor.

“She is my star…” Superman had said with his velvet voice omitting entirely his usual smugness. “Your tears are the most precious gems on earth…like diamonds…only purer.”

Of course, the demon of the Earth and gems always loved speaking using gems. He remembered in the dark basement of Ra’s Al Ghul he was childishly amazed in his horror seeing the demon’s gigantic body taking the texture of every gemstone in the world.

“Sapphire and emerald in your eyes…” he heard again the ironic voice of the demon in that basement “Like the rarest star sapphire no human will ever see…”

He failed to make the connection then…

“You know they love you; you know they want to understand and you wish they could…and then you wish they never understand you…because what they can’t understand is for their own good… Right, Bruce? You long for someone from your loved ones to understand but at the same time you dread the moment they will see what you have inside…the darkness, the loneliness, your need to be free…” Queen had said after the attack.

Of course, Bagdana knew everything about darkness and loneliness.

“…it is odd how evil is drawn to purity…” Arrow had said.

Bruce snorted: Bagdana knew everything about evil…

All this time, he believed that the fake Diana was the key but in the end, the key was Oliver
Queen…

It wasn’t only one impostor pretending the Amazonian but another one pretending the businessman. That’s why the Arrow was left handed while Queen before the shipwreck was right handed – he probably, didn’t expect Bruce to find out that Arrow and Queen was the same person; that was why the head of his legal department told Bruce that Oliver seemed to him like a different person. That’s why Queen was so displeased when his old friend from college met them at the restaurant. That explained why Queen was lousy in archery while the Arrow was a perfect archer: that must have suited Bagdana perfectly into hiding that Arrow and Queen was the same man.

He rubbed his chin: and he didn’t suspect Bagdana…But how he was to? Months ago he had thought it for an instance and asked Thor to check Bagdana but the Asgardian had gone to Bagdana’s prison and saw him there, chained, weak…Bruce sighed: obviously, the cunning demon knew how to fool the god into believing that he was still there.

So he had to face again Bagdana? Bagdana who once again was powerful…The prospect was unpleasant and Bruce felt a stone crushing his chest. Bruce wasn’t afraid of him, of confronting him again – he knew deep inside that the demon wouldn’t kill him: Bagdana preferred to enslave him and that made Bruce’s spine shudder. But still it wasn’t fear that stirred that feeling of fatigue…

However he would confront him…but he needed to figure out the whole scheme first because someone really powerful freed the demon. Both Ubu and Thor said that Bagdana couldn’t escape the prison if not with the help of someone with great power.

And given what Bruce knew about Diana being Vivian she wasn’t the one who freed him. On the contrary – Bruce cocked an eyebrow – Bagdana was the explanation of how she managed to impersonate the Amazon Princess and have her powers: flying, being extremely strong, using weapons that Jor El’s analysis showed that weren’t made with anything human related.

Bruce huffed and fisted his hands: that’s why Clark was their target because their break up could only be Bagdana’s wish. The one hiding behind the demon would prefer to kill Superman to have him off his way but that wasn’t enough for Bagdana. He wanted Superman beguiled to hurt Bruce; to make him vulnerable to someone else’s love – someone who supposedly was a mere human and understood him since he had similar experiences.

He frowned: what about the real Queen?

Dick followed his granny to the bedroom Alfred guided her. The Englishman after showing her the room discreetly left them alone knowing that they had too many things to discuss.

Ms. Turner opened her small suitcase to take a nightgown. She felt her grandson’s eyes on her and turned to him smiling; she hugged the boy and kissed his hair.

“I missed you so much, honey! It was so hard away from you; every moment I wanted to take the airplane and return. I was so afraid; so devastated that I had to leave you behind after everything you’ve been through.”

Dick raised his eyes to her face.

“I was sure that you had died…” he said and tightened his embrace around his granny’s waist burying his face to her chest. “Oh, granny, I feel so bad for the things I said to you…I hurt you for Zucco’s sake…I’m stupid, stupid.”
Ms. Turner caressed his hair.

“You believed in him…The scum knew how to gain that – he did that to your father too…And now he used your father and your need to find someone to connect you with him to take advantage of you. Believe me, I didn’t care for anything other than your safety. I knew this man was dangerous – I was always suspecting that he killed your father.”

“And I didn’t believe you…I can only imagine how much I made you hurt…”

“Come on, Dick…”

“I’m sorry; I’m so sorry and so happy that you are alive” the boy said in one breath and continued that way. “When Zucco admitted everything and was ready to…to kill me” a sharp inhale escaped Ms. Turner. “I was sure that he had killed you too.”

Ms. Turner focused her eyes on the window opposite her.

“I was sure he was going to do that when I came to Bruce” Dick raised his eyes and looked at her. “I wanted to secure you from Zucco’s clutches because if he killed me he would have been your only relative – he had threatened me that night of Thanksgiving in the gym.”

Dick remembered; he had seen his granny dead pale slumped in a chair that night and Bruce with Selina had helped her.

“I asked from Bruce to be your guardian because I knew he cared about you. He was reluctant because he didn’t want to force you to live with him but in the end he accepted. However when I told him about Zucco’s threats and my suspicions he suggested that we shouldn’t wait for Zucco to do again his move – this time we should have the initiative; he helped me to ‘disappear’ from Gotham and sent me to Harvey Dent and Rachel in Canada. He wanted me to be safe until police found everything about Zucco.”

Dick nodded: police…yeah, sure. Granny obviously, didn’t know the truth about Bruce and better not learn. But Dick who knew the truth was sure that Bruce had researched the case of his father’s death and found the needed evidence to convict Zucco. That explained Mr. Breizic’s return to Gotham. Bruce organized the charity gala with the US national team of gymnastics to bring his father’s trainer in touch with Dick and to learn more about Zucco’s relationship with his father.

The boy blinked: the more he found about Bruce the more he admired him. He wanted to learn everything about Bruce and Batman: about what he’d been through; about how he managed to defeat both Falcone and that other man who Bruce said that trained and had him under his control.

“Bruce did so much for us and I was an ass to him” he admitted “but you must already know that.”

Ms. Turner narrowed her eyes and sat on the mattress patting the mattress next to her for Dick to sit too.

“No.”

“I thought you were in contact with Bruce.”

“I was.”

Dick frowned.

“And he didn’t tell you what I’ve done to him?”
Ms. Turner’s expression became strict.

“No, he didn’t tell me anything but you, young man… You made his life difficult, don’t you?”

Dick gulped.

“You know I hated him and I wanted to be with Zucco. I thought that your disappearance was another proof of how bad he was for my life and being forced to live with him seemed…it was awful; a nightmare. I know I was wrong; I apologized to him…”

Ms. Turner smiled and caressed Dick’s cheeks.

“That’s my boy… I hope from now on you be nicer to him. I’m sure that Bruce is very happy now; he was really sad for the pain you felt – he blamed everything on himself.”

Dick now was sure for that and made his guts twist.

“And I made that worse… But I…I regret it and from now on…I hope…”

“You two will be friends.”

Dick nodded and gulped.

“You’re right to choose him as my guardian; he is the best.”

“I’m glad you see that now, Dick; I want you to find your peace now…”

Dick hugged tighter his granny grateful but also trying to prove to himself that his granny was really there and not a wonderful dream from which he would be abruptly awoken.

Ms. Turner caressed his hair.

“I’m here, sweetheart; I’m here now…”

Bruce didn’t believe that the real Queen was dead or still stranded to an island or prisoner somewhere. There was no doubt that Bagdana found the man and possessed him: Bruce’s many files about the demon said that he was doing that throughout the ages.

And suited the demon to wear the human body since nobody could suspect that he wasn’t the real Queen; even the medical tests he went through after his return showed that he was the same person. Not to mention that that way Bagdana would have access to Queen’s memories and personal information so that the impersonation would be perfect.

He tapped his fingers on the mattress thinking…the Black Butterfly was able to keep the demon away from him… but Queen, Bagdana, had no problem to be near him… How? Unless… He huffed: Bagdana was ‘wearing’ a human’s body so he could avoid the powerful talisman’s defense. Bruce yanked his head backwards closing his eyes.

Bagdana all along… He wouldn’t lose the chance to use his given back powers to control Clark through someone who was set to impress him. The legendary Amazonian Princess was the best candidate: gorgeous, powerful, fighting for justice, a goddess who could supposedly understood Superman.

And they started it in Thasos bringing the fake Diana to intervene during that attack against him; she
saved him from his attackers but at the same time blew them into dust so that no traces would be left leading to the mastermind – the one who freed Bagdana.

The odd creatures were sent by him/her because Bruce didn’t believe that these creatures were Bagdana’s minions…

And then the way the fake Diana appeared at the burglar of the LexLab in Metropolis helping Superman…like she knew where the burglars were to hit. She definitely knew because the one who ordered the burglar told her when to intervene; she couldn’t have just heard the alarms because she wasn’t the real Amazon therefore she didn’t have the enhanced hearing of Superman. Bagdana who knew the plan told her to be there.

Bruce was sure that for finding out who was behind all these, who freed and gave Bagdana his powers back, he should follow the only traces he had. And the only one acting openly was Vivian. Her actions must be the key to unravel the mystery.

She cast an irresistible influence on Superman but Bruce wasn’t sure if that was one of her skills for which Bagdana chose her or another work of her partners. Bagdana was known for enchanting mortals into copulating with them and he had given Ra’s the ingredient to create the substance that would make Superman addicted to Bruce. Yet if that was the case Jor El would have recognized the pattern when examined Clark but he spoke about something different.

Well, Bagdana knew that Bruce would have searched the reason behind Superman’s changed attitude and certainly wouldn’t have risked so he chose a female partner who would be able to do that maybe with a little enhancing by the demon. Judging from his flashback with Vivian back in Dolcetto she wouldn’t lose the chance to ‘defeat’ him in Superman’s affection: besides, her diminishing remarks and her gleeful glares showed that clearly.

He noted mentally to start digging all the archived stories about news connected with plants since from his memories and Tony’s description of her apartment she definitely had something with plants. And one of the last times Clark approached him sexually, he complained about his perfume asking for something more flowery, clearly seeking Vivian’s perfume.

He frowned as he remembered the attack at Metropolis’ underground: it was a crucial point for Diana’s influence on Superman. She came there to help Clark and Tony to stop the supposed terrorists. Also, she took care to finish off Morgan Edge that supposedly ordered the attack and was the leader of the Intergang…

Intergang…Bruce bit his lip: can Bagdana and the fake Diana be connected with Intergang? Because he was never persuaded that the Edge was indeed the leader; also, the way the ‘terrorists’ and those who committed the raids to the LexLabs were brainwashed could just be that they were mind controlled. Bruce never believed in coincidence and the fake Diana’s presence each time an Intergang crime occurred wasn’t one.

Vivian worked with Bagdana so the fact she knew the exact time and place the Intergang would hit showed that Bagdana was the one who was informing her; so Bagdana was an insider to the gang but he couldn’t be the leader because Intergang was active before Diana appeared and thus before Bagdana was freed. And why an ancient demon working with a gang of mortals if its leader wasn’t the one who freed him…Wait…

The point where his reasoning brought him was shocking…

Freeing Bagdana was something that demanded too much power and definitely not human power… But if this was the case then…well, Bruce was almost sure that Mannheim was the leader of
Intergang so Mannheim freed Bagdana which makes him…

Bruce narrowed his eyes feeling his head splitting in half; he rubbed his forehead.

During his one meeting with Mannheim he felt something odd as if someone was trying to breach his mind. That would suit the pattern of mind control of those committing the crimes for Intergang. And the attack against him by the mind controlled thugs came after he challenged Mannheim about the items he found in LEXLABS.

The items…the strange items that Mannheim wanted desperately enough to raid LexLabs and exact his power to free Luthor from jail. Nobody could tell who moved the wheels to make powerful people forget the laws and order Luthor’s release.

The strange machine that Luthor was building for Mannheim…the way Luthor acted around the businessman/gangster totally matched the brain control pattern.

And he freed Bagdana: Ubu had told him that only a god would be able to free the demon from his prison.

Bruce huffed exhausted and angry, feeling hammers hitting his head and his heart heavy: honestly, he was tired of gods and god-like beings trying to harm humans! Except Thor…

He felt all the fatigue of the last days and months weighing on his bones and muscles; his eyes ached yet his mind was a stormy sea and he was sure that he wouldn’t be able to sleep. For the first time after long he wanted to sleep: he needed some peace; some break from thinking…

Soft knocks on the door; he closed his eyes – probably, someone was going to scold him for being still up.

“Come in” he didn’t want to pretend that he wasn’t working on his tablet but he closed the files he had opened because for now he didn’t want anyone to know.

Both Tony and Selina entered; Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“I’m going to be scolded by both of you?” he asked amused.

Selina moved graciously towards the bed shaking her index finger with a smile on her face.

“I caught this fella ready to knock your door and I don’t trust him alone with you.”

Tony crossing the room rolled his eyes.

“My cheek still hurts from her slap…” he mumbled and Bruce raised his eyebrows impressed.

“You did that?” he asked Selina who sat on the mattress next to him.

“Of course! He hit you and left you unconscious for Joker…”

“She is going to bring that up to me for an eternity…” Tony huffed.

“And a day!” Selina snapped to him.

“Kids!” Bruce said chuckling. “Behave…It’s over now.”

“How are you?” Tony asked dragging a chair to sit next to the bed.
“Good enough” Bruce said.

“Leslie will drop by soon to check on you” Selina said.

“And imagine her reaction seeing you working instead of sleeping…” the billionaire from Malibu mumbled widening his eyes.

Bruce tilted his head towards him and cast him a lopsided glance.

“I finished my work” he said and closed his tablet placing it on the nightstand. “And I want to sleep yet…”

“What?” Selina asked hugging his shoulders.

“I think I’ll need some sedative…” he said looking both of them.

Tony nodded.

“So many things happened… you must have too many tension gathered: we should have asked Matt to stay and give a good massage.”

Bruce shook his head.

“At least, I hope you’re happy that the kid and his granny are back together” Tony added.

Bruce grinned.

“I am…”

Selina smiled too.

“You just couldn’t stay with your arms crossed and watch as Zucco was ready to hurt the granny… so you set things according to your plans, huh?” she pinched playfully his cheek and Tony giggled. “So Batman-ish!”

Tony nodded and stood.

“I’m bringing Leslie.”

“Thanks, Tony” Bruce said and his friend just smiled.

Selina watched Tony closing the door behind him and then turned to Bruce pursing her lips.

“You miss that alien bastard, huh?”

Bruce raised his eyes to her puzzled: leave it to Selina to read him like an open book.

“Huh?” he pretended indifference.

Selina cocked an eyebrow and crooked her mouth.

“Forget who I am? Your poker face doesn’t work with me, buster…” Bruce lowered his eyes and she took gently his chin to lock their eyes.

“I know you’ll reveal the truth about that bitch and then the alien will crawl back to you begging… But I want you then to be so hard to him… make him beg on his knees” her voice was filled with rage and satisfaction on imaging that. “He must pay for the pain he caused you… in your heart and
your body. Don’t be lenient to him!”

A faint smile appeared on Bruce’s face.

“It’s over, Sel…whatever might happen won’t change that: it’s over.”

Selina pressed her lips: she wanted Bruce to punish Superman but she knew that Bruce’s happiness and love was to that alien’s hands… Her fingers combed gently Bruce’s messy locks. Selina knew that Bruce’s heart had turned into a stone in regards to love but a stone that was bleeding inside.

Bruce sensed that his friend was absorbed in her thoughts and grinned.

“What?”

Selina shook her head.

“I just wish you had fallen in love with someone else.”

It felt like returning home. Lois smiled as she walked inside the reporter’s space in the Daily Planet’s building. Some of her colleagues waved to her upon seeing her.

“Nice job, Lo” Torry said to her from the desk on Lois’ desk right “I knew that if Kent could catch Batman you could too.”

Lois saw with the corner of her eyes Clark glancing at her and shrugged.

“I was lucky.”

The red haired woman cocked an eyebrow and grinned.

“Yeah…As if Lois Lane relies on luck…”

Lois had hardly settled in her chair and opened her PC when Perry came out of his office and straight to her. He patted her back to Lois’ crooked smile.

“That’s what I call a reporter with instinct: your personal visit to Gotham gave the Planet a hot exclusive. Well done, girl!”

Lois shook her head.

“I’ve got the right timing. Or I’m a jinx…”

Perry grinned.

“So you’ve gained a new partner?”

That made Clark jerk and focus his sensitive hearing there; he might have problems with Lois lately but he didn’t want to lose her neither as a friend nor as a partner. Actually, he missed their friendship when he wasn’t filled with Diana’s presence.

Lois was sure that Clark was overhearing.

“Nah, unfortunately Vicky is an avid Gothamite and wants to stay in her city” she rolled her eyes “of course nobody can understand this but…whatever…” she shrugged. “Anyway, after the exclusive
with Batman and something else she prepares, Vale won’t have a problem finding a new better job. Of course, she is willing to co-operate with me and the Planet in the future.”

Clark sighed in relief.

Perry shrugged.

“Okay; I can’t have all the stars in my roster… I’m satisfied with what I already have. Besides collaboration is also nice.”

He made to leave but Lois cleared her throat.

“What about a raise for your ‘girl’?” she asked amused knowing already his reaction.

Perry mimicked her clearing of throat.

“You better than anyone know about the financial crisis, Lois” she cocked her eyebrows smirking.

The Planet’s chief patted once again Lois’ back causing her sideways glance and returned to his office, stopping for a bit to another desk to give some orders.

Clark was sitting on fire: he felt the urge to go and speak to Lois, explain to her why he didn’t go to New York during the attack. But hesitated; he was rubbing the rim of his glasses for several minutes immersed in his indecisiveness. Meanwhile, Lois was absorbed in working at her PC or at least that was the impression.

Clark rolled his eyes irritated from his own hesitation: finally, he stood and walked to his friend’s desk.

“Nice work, Lois” he said and Lois turned to him.

“Thanks, Clark.”

“I want to talk to you.”

Lois huffed.

“No need for that – I’m busy” she said and Clark understood that she was still pissed that he didn’t help with the attack.

“Please, Lois” he said locking his eyes with hers.

Lois felt like the old times; as if the old, pre-Diana Clark was back. She crooked her mouth and sighed.

“Let’s go” she stood and moved forward outside the crowded reporters’ space because she knew that what they’d say shouldn’t be heard by others.

They ended up at the building’s rooftop with the Planet's logo, the enormous globe above them. It was for them both one of their beloved places. Clark gazed the city’s skyline breathing the air and the familiar sounds.

Lois was looking at him impatiently: she wanted to believe that he might find his senses but doubt it. She crossed her arms over the chest.

“Well?” she asked.
“Congratulations on the video! Is there a director’s cut with Batman kissing Thor in the end?” he asked raising an eyebrow.

Lois frowned: her hopes being crashed.

“What nonsense is that?”

Clark crooked his mouth in irony and Lois rolled her eyes.

“Is this why you wanted to speak to me? Because if that so, I have work to do” she turned to leave but Clark touched her shoulder.

She looked at him.

“Look, Lois, I know you’re mad that I didn’t help with the New York attack.”

Lois tilted her head on the side.

“Super intelligence…” she snidely remarked.

He gulped the irony.

“You must understand that going there would only serve the S.H.I.E.L.D.’s and the Avengers’ purposes. Do you really trust those people? Only a couple of months ago S.H.I.E.L.D. was revealed to be working on establishing its status quo in the world.”

“That was the League of Shadows and S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers fought along with you to root out the League. You have an eidetic memory, did you forget about that?”

Clark shook his head.

“They did. But look who’s in charge now…Tony Stark. Do you trust that air head? And look at the Avengers: a god, a former assassin, an uncontrolled beast, a soldier accustomed to obey orders” Lois pursed her lips. “Do you trust them that they won’t go awry?”

Lois shrugged.

“How can I?” she said innocently. “Even Superman went awry…”

Clark jerked his head huffing.

“Lois! I’m still Clark…nothing has changed” Lois shook her head in disbelief. “I can’t be connected with them; it’d be like giving them my blessing to do whatever they want. If people see me with them then everyone will blindly believe and follow them.”

Lois focused her sharp gaze in his eyes.

“Wake up, buddy! This is exactly what is happening now. Superman turned his back on people when they needed him the most; the Avengers and Flash saved them and people are grateful as they were all this time to you. The only one that is losing his path is you, Clark.”

Clark lowered his eyes and inhaled deeply; Lois licked her lips: she loved the alien fool and was sorry to see him like this.

“You truly believed what you just told me or it is just her spells that make you take her words for yours?”
Clark raised his eyes and looked at her frowned.

“She wants the best for me! She is the only one who accepts me as I am without preaching; without turning her back on me just because I don’t do what she considers right; without trying to boss me around.”

Lois was pressing her foot down.

“But she is bossing you around, farmboy! Do you really believe that I – you know me over a decade – and your mother have turned our backs on you just from selfishness? Get a grip! You were whining because Bruce didn’t want to trust your love; you fought to make the man trust you and open his heart and then after he did that enormous leap of faith, because of this woman you snubbed his love in the worst possible way: cheating him!”

Clark closed his eyes and pressed his hair on his head.

“I was wrong with Bruce – I thought I loved him but it wasn’t love…When I met Diana, I realized that and, believe me, I tried to resist to not hurt Bruce but I couldn’t. If I had stayed with Bruce I would be fooling him and he doesn’t deserve that.”

Lois snorted.

“It was he that kicked you out – you told me. You wouldn’t have a problem lying to him and have them both; and that alone tells me that you’ve changed.”

“Lois, why you don’t accept my choice?”

Lois stabbed him with her eyes.

“Because from the moment you met her you’re not yourself, Clark! Especially, since you broke up with Bruce and live with her all the time, things get worse and worse.”

Clark shook his head.

“It’s not like this!”

Lois was beyond pissed; she clenched her jaw.

“Bruce was kidnapped by Joker with Loki’s help!” she spat in his face and Clark frowned. “You didn’t want to join Avengers during the attack in order to…whatever nonsense you said but why you didn’t help Bruce?”

Clark felt as if one of Thor’s thunders spiced with Kryptonite had hit him.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

Lois shook her head.

“Jim Gordon and Bruce’s friends decided to keep it secret – perhaps they reveal it now that things got calm. But this is no excuse for Superman. He might have broken up with Bruce but he still could hear the man’s despair – he was monitoring his vitals for months; he might have broken up with him but the hero I knew wouldn’t ignore it when he’d be in danger.”

Clark remembered the moment that for an instant he caught Bruce’s vitals; his fatigue, his agony… He believed that it was for Thor but actually Bruce was a captive, subject to Joker’s sick intentions. Something clenched inside him.
“What happened?” he asked quietly.

Lois licked her lips.

“Joker was working with Quinzel…”

“The…”

“Yes, the head of the Arkham Asylum so he was holding Bruce there: I can’t– and I don’t want to - imagine what a madman like Joker did to Bruce with the help of two deranged psychiatrists.”

Clark felt a painful pinch in his heart hearing that.

“Thor along with a man in a burgundy cape, Stark, Catwoman and Batman rushed there to free Bruce. Stark took Bruce back to the Manor and Batman caught Joker and helped Thor and the other man to overcome the effect from Crane’s toxins” she cocked her eyebrows with irony. “It seems that Batman who brought the Avengers into the case of the League of Shadows still trusts them.”

“How do you know about Batman and the League?”

Lois shook her head impatient.

“The League was working for years in Gotham and Batman was the one who led FBI to eliminate the League from Gotham; well, only someone with insider knowledge could have had that knowledge not only to manage that but also orchestrate such a precise operation in world scale to eliminate the danger once and for all…”

Clark was astounded not because Lois figured out Batman’s role but for what he learnt that took place in Arkham; of course he knew better than Lois so he knew that Bruce saved himself and caught Joker. He looked at Lois who was regarding him with crooked mouth.

“Is he alright?” he asked her “I mean, he is still recovering and must be under medication so while in Joker’s hands he…”

Lois closed her eyes and ruffled her hair.

“For fuck’s sake, Clark: You can find out yourself” she said.

And for an instance Clark thought about doing it but immediately crossed out the option to go to him.

“I won’t go to him – Diana doesn’t deserve that.”

Lois growled.

“But Bruce deserved to see you and her fucking on a rooftop?!” she jerked her head. “I didn’t mean to go there; but you can monitor his vitals, don’t you?”

“No…”

“Okay! He is fine! More so since that Zucco guy who wanted to take Grayson from him was arrested: police found evidence that he staged the accident that killed Richard’s father.”

Clark shook his head in disbelief: police, yeah, sure…That sounded more like something Bruce did: he investigated the case and revealed the truth.

Lois turned to leave but Clark touched her forearm.
“What?” she snapped.

Clark pressed his lips.

“I want us to be friends, Lois.”

“I never stopped being a friend…of the real Clark. It’s you I care about, you asshole: get a grip before it’s too late!”

She rushed opposite him towards the door to the interior and Clark didn’t try to stop her. He turned to the morning city and took a deep inhale of breath: he felt divided – one part of him feeling guilty and the other, the stronger was saying to him that he did nothing wrong.

He couldn’t always run behind Bruce; besides Bruce himself didn’t want him to. Clark was with Diana and he was happy: Lois and his Ma didn’t believe that and were worried about him. Also, both women were too fond of Bruce to accept that Clark chose someone else.

Lois and his Ma were doing the same mistake with him: confusing love with sympathy. Both women were sympathetic to Bruce and believed that this was love and wanted Clark to continue be with him.

He was sure that if they knew Diana as he did then they would understand him. On the other hand, that was impossible to happen: Diana didn’t know that he was raised by humans neither that he was working 9-5. So maybe she didn’t accept him as he was?

He shook his head in the negative: no, Diana was perfect for him; she accepted him as he was; she loved him.

And Diana didn’t have to endure their assessment. She loved him and Clark loved her and his people would have to accept that.

Darkseid in his real form stood in the middle of the vast throne hall under the Mannheim Mansion; his enormous bluish body towered Granny Goodness in his right and Bagdana at his left.

In front of them the air had transformed in a frameless screen where the battle at the Avengers’ Tower was replayed.

Darkseid laughed.

“If they had a hard time winning this then they are really pathetic! This circus was a playground compared to what I have for them,”

Goodness laughed like a maniac with her eyes shining gleefully.

“I can’t wait for the time this horrible planet and its pathetic forms of life are at my disposal!” she hissed.

Darkseid turned his head to her.

“I’m sure, my dear, that you will make the perfect use for them.”

Bagdana however was watching thoughtful without commenting and Goodness walked to him, her eyes watching him ready to spit poison.
“He obviously has a soft spot for them – Master, you can’t trust him.”

Bagdana sniffed at her with a gaze that didn’t bother even to be hostile; he chuckled and looked at Darkseid.

“Making judgements is not the reason you hired her, right?” he looked at her again sensing Darkseid’s eyes on him. “My dear, in case you forget that: I’m a demon: I torture and kill humans for millions of years; I hate them more than you and your Master can imagine. So, go do your job and don’t waste my time.”

Goodness growled and Bagdana smirked just snorting at her before turning to Darkseid.

“Do what you want with all these losers but don’t harm Batman and Bruce Wayne: remember that they belong to me.”

Darkseid clenched his jaw.

“Nothing belongs to you! Everything is mine and I decide how to reward my servants.”

Bagdana shrugged indifferent.

“Call it as it serves better your ego but do what you promised me.”

Darkseid yanked his head and walked around the ongoing battle.

“That Batman guy doesn’t seem to worth my attention” he said and Bagdana crooked his mouth. “He didn’t bother to join the battle probably too scared for that, and I haven’t seen him doing anything anyway” he turned to his demon. “Maybe he doesn’t even exist?”

Bagdana crossed his arms over his chest that was dressed in black leather vest.

“Believe me: it is better to not meet him…”

Granny Goodness snorted.

“You talk as if he is a god and can stand before the greatness of Darkseid. That’s blasphemy!”

Bagdana shrugged.

“Have it your way…”

Darkseid narrowed his eyes and looked at Bagdana obviously thinking hard.

“You only demand things as if you have any right to them, Bagdana; what’s your contribution? Even a slave like Luthor offers me better services than you.”

Bagdana’s grin was wide.

“Luthor won’t give you Superman; you knew from the start that only I could give you him and that was the reason you freed me.”

Darkseid’s irony vanished from his face and he rushed to the demon, locking their eyes.

“I doubt you can do that. I will face and vanquish the Kryptonian because he is not a match for me” he sniggered. “You can’t give me the Kryptonian because he is stronger than you more so because now he has the Amazon helping him.”
Bagdana cocked his thick eyebrows.

“Really now?” he patted Darkseid’s shoulder and the god glared at him. “Trust me: you’ll soon realize that I indeed worth my reward.”

Chapter End Notes

When I was ready to write the chapter about Bruce getting Dick's guardianship I faced a struggle: I was indecisive between 'killing' Dick's granny or keeping her alive staging her disappearance. In the end, I favored the first option because I just couldn't accept that Bruce would have known about Zucco's threats and just let things happen. I think it suit better Batman's personality to direct things rather than just reacting to them. I hope you liked it.
“Good morning, Martha.”

The woman gasped surprised hearing the familiar voice from her receiver. It was a beautiful but cold Sunday morning and she didn’t expect any phone call; the truth was that Clark used to call her at Sundays but not so early and after what they told in their last communication she doubted it. And definitely she didn’t expect her friends to call this time of the day.

Lately Martha was in a very bad mood, almost depressed. She hadn’t felt so bad since Jonathan’s death. Of course she didn’t stop her social life with her friends in Smallville yet anyone who knew her well enough could tell she wasn’t her usual self.

“Bruce! My dear!” from all the people Martha didn’t expect Bruce to be on the other end of the line but on the other hand, now she thought about it, she should have expected that.

“How are you, Martha?”

The woman chuckled.

“I should have asked that first…”

“I’m fine and you?”

Martha rubbed her forehead.

“What can I say? You called because obviously you know and” she smiled “you’re concerned about me, right, sweetheart? Thank you.”

Bruce shook his head. He was in the Master bedroom still in his pajamas; he should have been still sleeping especially since Leslie gave him a sedative last night but his concern about the kind lady wake him up earlier. Before calling Martha he put the filter that would stop anyone from overhearing their discussion.

“There’s no need to thank me, Martha. I…I saw what happened in New York and my thoughts are with you.”

Martha laughed bitterly.

“My dear, dear boy! You know me really good…yet my condition is nothing compared with those who lost their loved ones there while he wasn’t there to help.”

Bruce sighed.

“You’re so sad – your voice made that clear. Martha, I called to reassure you that he remains the man we know. I understand your worry yet things are not as they look.”

Martha smiled and shook her head.

“You always defend him, dear…But you can’t deny that he has changed; he has lost his path. I’m afraid… My only agony about him was that he might turn evil one day and now I see…”

Bruce just couldn’t bear to hear Ms. Kent’s strong but touched voice; his insides twisted hearing the word ‘evil’ uttered for Clark.
“No, Martha! That’s not true… Do not believe that. He is not evil” he huffed “please, do not give up on him. Don’t despair…”

Ms. Kent sighed.

“I can’t give up on him, can I? He is my baby…but that doesn’t mean that I’m not seeing what’s happening: people needed him and he turned his back on them; he ignored their need.”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Martha, you must believe me: it was just a bad moment – he hasn’t changed. He is not evil in any way.”

“That woman influences him in a bad way but he should be able to distinguish wrong from right” she said sternly. “Jonathan and I should have managed that all these years.”

Bruce rubbed the bridge of his nose; it was because of him that Clark got in troubles. Bagdana did this to Clark to take the Man of Steel away from him; the demon wanted to hurt Bruce but in the way he hurt other people too – innocent people like Ms. Kent.

“And you managed that perfectly, Martha: you raised a great person. Please, trust me, Martha, when all this ends you’ll realize that it wasn’t his fault at all” he couldn’t say more to her because he was afraid that her love might urge her to hasty moves and revelations that would trigger Clark’s most hostile reactions.

Martha smiled; in other case she would be happy for that but now what she sensed in Bruce’s voice only made her melancholic.

“You love him so much, son, I wish he had appreciated that as much as he should and given you a fraction of the love you’re giving him.”

Bruce pressed his lips; he didn’t want people speak about that.

“I just know that he remains the man we knew…”

Martha hesitated but in the end decided to go forward.

“But he hurt you: both your heart and your body.”

Bruce jerked and frowned: she couldn’t know that. Clark wouldn’t admit that to his mother.

“No, he didn’t. Martha, he would never hurt me…”

Martha sighed and looked the morning view of the fields from the living room’s small window at her side. She closed her eyes.

“I hope he didn’t, honey; but if he can do the things he does now, I’m afraid that he wouldn’t hesitate to be violent to you.”

Bruce gulped and felt sweat drops on his forehead. He saw again Clark’s enraged eyes over him that night in his bed, before he slapped him in the face.

“I owed that to you, Bruce!” he had sneered.

“He didn’t, Martha…He was always perfect to me till the end” it was a lie and he hated that he was lying to her yet Bruce couldn’t hurt the kind lady anymore – it would break her if she heard the her
son reached the point of abuse. Besides, it wasn’t completely a lie: Clark would have never done that without that mind control.

“Thank you, sweetheart” the woman said really grateful. “For trying to offer me comfort.”

“It’s not just that, Martha…” he hesitated indecisive if he should tell her the truth or not. “Martha, just trust me: there’s something else…Things aren’t as they look.”

Martha frowned. She always had the impression that Bruce was much more than everyone saw to him. If he said something then it must be like that.

“Bruce, what’s going on?”

“Just, trust me, Martha. I promised you once that I’ll always take care of him and I promise you that again.”

Martha sighed.

“He told me that you saved his life once…so it goes without saying that I trust that you’ll protect him again…though it should have been the opposite” she chuckled. “But, honey, I must know the truth about him.”

Bruce rubbed his forehead. Of course…

“Believe me, Martha, I feel your agony but it is better if we don’t say anymore right now. You have my word that when the time comes I’ll tell you everything. Just...just, trust me.”

“I do, Bruce. And even if I sound panicked” she chuckled “the fact that you’re there for him it’s a great relief for me. But...you must take care of yourself too, son.”

“Do not worry about me, Martha…”

Martha stayed silent for a few seconds.

“If only he knew how much you love him… then he’d have realized how wrong he was.”

Bruce shook his head.

“That doesn’t matter, Martha. Just have faith in him as…”

“As you do?” she completed for him in a sympathetic voice; and since Bruce didn’t comment. “I have faith in you, son.”

“Thank you, Martha.”

As he ended the call he felt the urge to apologize to her because her son was in danger because of him. But he didn’t do it because he should have to explain everything – about the demon that haunted his life and he didn’t want to trouble that kind lady with this crap.

Thankfully, Alfred didn’t come to help him to shower; maybe because it was still not even 9 and he believed him asleep.

Now that he had calmed her somewhat he guided his wheelchair to the bathroom with the intention to work at his tablet after the shower and before going down for breakfast.

Yet he had hardly put his clothes on after the shower when the ‘omnipresent’ Alfred knocked his
door and informed him that the breakfast was ready as if saying “don’t even think about skipping that for working.”

Well, Bruce forgot his frustration for not getting the time to work as soon as he got inside the kitchen. He actually smiled: it was the first time after…nineteen years that the kitchen’s island was filled with people and good people, chatting and laughing, and…happiness in that house. Dick with Jason were talking avidly and fighting like careless children too; Rachel, Harvey, Mr. Petrou, Tony, Selina, Steve, Pepper, Ms. Turner and Leslie were discussing seriously like adults do but in a light mood. His parents would have been so happy…

Everyone greeted him and he did the same – even Hero who was delved into his bawl of cat food turned and looked at him licking his mouth causing Bruce’s smile.

He chose a spot and he felt so happy when Dick and Jason took their stools and sat next to him.

Bruce was really exhilarated by this ‘family life’ scene but there was something that nudge him: he had work waiting for him to the point of feeling agony.

The good thing was that Alfred would drive Ms. Turner to the city, Leslie would return to her clinic, Tony, Pepper, Selina and Steve had some things to do in the city, which was the case for his other guests and the boys had their homework…yeah, well, he hoped that Dick would influence Jason into doing that as well.

All in all, he would have the chance to go down to the cave and work like the old days.

Now that he knew who Oliver Queen really was, Bruce had finally the time to delve into all the results his processor gave on cases concerning plants. He always wanted to know his enemies perfectly.

There were loads of articles since he wanted to cover a broader timeline; Vivian might have been active before her time in Dolcetto.

He began scrolling and scanning the articles and at some point he added the term ‘influence’ and ‘mind control’. As he had expected nothing was found – reasonably so since not only Gotham’s police was under Falcone’s rule then but also who would believe that anything could be caused from ‘mind control’? It certainly would demand much research for someone to find out something like this and at that time Gotham wasn’t in the mood for much.

So he changed his course focusing on articles about research on plants: there were not as many articles because the subject was quite unpopular. What caught his eye was the work of a botanist called Marc LeGrande: the article said that his experiments with plants were called by him breakthrough but nobody knew their exact nature. Which was odd enough because every scientist at some point presents his work in conferences or publishes it in scientific journals. But not this scientist. And that smelled of shady things…

As a matter of fact Bruce didn’t meet his name on the articles again, till some years later an article mentioned that he was killed when his lab exploded and was burnt to the ground. The article said that he was working with another scientist, a botanologist, Dr. Pamela Lilian Isley, but the woman wasn’t found even though the guards of the facilities testified that she was inside at the time. Since during the fire the temperature was too high and the toxins that were emitted were too eroding the experts closed the case saying that the woman was killed and her remains were literally evaporated.

Bruce never trusted cases that were closed like this and furthermore he wanted to learn more about their experiments and since Dr. LeGrande’s work was secretive maybe he could find something from
the second scientist.

Dr. Isley was a stellar student in the Department of Botanology and Chemistry at Gotham’s University; however what made Bruce a great impression was her care – almost pathological - about plants and ecology. Her name was in every protest made for pollution and in every activity aiming to preserve the natural environment. She was arrested several times because of her dynamic presence in those activities and some deeds that exceeded the limits of dynamic protest.

She like her partner didn’t have many published works and especially at the timeline Bruce was interested in yet her previous works had to do with the secret qualities of plants. Dr. Isley’s claims that plants can be more powerful than humans caused her colleagues’ sneer and her isolation from the scientific society – some of them even called her ‘insane’ or ‘Dr. Mengele of the plants’.

Bruce believed in his instinct and something was nudging him to search more on this. Dr. Isley’s conviction about the power of plants and her love for anything with chlorophyll definitely was in tune with Vivian’s countless pots and her characteristic, unique perfume. Yet Dr. Isley was a scientist devoted to her science while Vivian was a whore – moreover her photographs from newspapers and the university’s archives showed a bespectacled woman with blond hair tied in a strict bun and blue eyes, definitely not the honey haired, brown eyed, seductive Vivian.

Bruce clenched his fist and perused aimlessly the other articles of the same era. He frowned.

At the time the two scientists worked on their super secret project Gotham faced a wave of robberies – well, not a surprise for Gotham and especially during Falcone’s rule yet some of the robberies were on banks and stores that Bruce knew that belonged to Falcone. And those days nobody dared to touch anything that belonged to the Gray Wolf.

Also, those robberies where happening without any fuss, without any violence or gunshots as if the security hadn’t noticed anything and without any resistance. The guards testified that suddenly they were filled with exhilaration and feelings of carelessness and indifference so much so that in all such cases they were found either with their families or in some bar or club. What was common in their testimonies was that beautiful perfume.

Bruce raised his eyebrows: that kind of robberies stopped abruptly after the accident in Dr. LeGrande and Dr. Isley lab. Now that couldn’t be a coincidence, could be? Who gave the money to the two scientists for their experiments? The facilities they used were particularly expensive and Bruce doubted that any sponsor would want to risk money for two scientists that everyone considered ‘insane’ – not to mention, there was no reference of anyone sponsoring their project and in the facilities’ logs the two scientists were named as the renters.

So they had found the way to self finance their work and those robberies fit perfectly. But then either someone discovered what they were doing and killed them blowing their lab which was a bit impossible because if someone found out what they were doing then he probably would have used whatever they used for his/her own purposes. Or the explosion was an accident because the two of them resisted – yet there weren’t other bodies – or if you crossed out the possibility of a third person’s involvement the two scientists had a quarrel and their conflict caused the accident.

Yes, but where was Isley’s body? Bruce smiled as his eyes scanned the central screen of his processor: among the flood of news articles he noticed that several months after the accident some articles mentioned ‘odd deaths’. Bruce had always a ‘soft spot’ for odd deaths. Well, most of the victims were men but there were also women. They were found half or completely naked in sexual angles but there was no profound reason of death except than traces of urushiol on their lips; this substance was a common one found in Poison Ivi, oak and sumac but in those cases the substance was special because botanologists stated that was a nonexistent combination of Poison ivy, oak, and
However the victims weren’t allergic to that substance and even if that was the case the substance
would have only caused a rush that disappears in two or three weeks. Some scientists tried to analyze
the substance and discover its special attitudes since in this form it wasn’t met in nature but they
didn’t managed much because after a few hours the substance was dissolved. So much so that in
some victims was found only faint traces of that substance.

The interesting thing was that the victims were all associated with businesses and projects that was in
one way or another considered hostile for the environment.

The other striking thing was the victims had something in common: a small rush on their torso
shaped like a poison ivy branch. The press came to call the mysterious killer ‘Poison Ivy’.

Bruce was really intrigued and kept reading.

There was one homeless man who testified that a few hours before one of these murders he saw the
victim, the woman CEO of a company legendary for its environmental fallacies, coming out of her
limo accompanied by a stunning woman: in the lights of the luxury apartment building where the two
women went the man saw that the other woman had long red ruby hair and green eyes.

Of course the woman wasn’t found as if she wasn’t real. The police published her sketch but to no
avail. The murders stopped; at least, the eye catching ones because there were some cases with
similar crimes involving people that didn’t have any connection with environmental issues and of
course they were so ‘ordinary’ that never made it to front page or big articles.

Bruce rubbed his chin: could Poison Ivy, Pamela Isley, Vivian and Diana be the same woman? He
shrugged: there was only one way to answer that. The human eye could be fooled yet his face
recognition software not – he had done that again with Joker and Jack Napier.

His fingers flew over the keyboard entering photographs of Pamela Isley and Diana and the Poison
Ivy’s sketch for comparison. He had no photo of course from Vivian yet he could create one using
the program he had for sketching faces. Bruce pressed his memory for every detail he could recall.

But at the same time he wondered if Poison Ivy could really be Vivian. If the two women were
actually the same then why she didn’t kill Falcone as well? He pressed his lips: he didn’t like killings
but that could have spared him some years of torture…he snorted. Probably not: Chill certainly
would have taken over and he would have kept Bruce as his slave.

She could have approached Falcone with no purpose to kill him. She was clever and she had her
plants to seduce and make him do what she wanted. Bruce remembered vaguely that the time he was
infatuated with Vivian Gotham’s Emperor had signed for projects helping the environment – now
that for Falcone was inexplicable…

Bruce remembered what he saw in his flashback: how mean was Vivian to him. She was mad
because Falcone seemed to be still infatuated with him and her ego didn’t bear that. And then all of a
sudden she was lost from Dolcetto and Gotham: maybe she had obtained her goals and fed up of
Falcone left and something else might have caught her attention.

He looked at the result of his description in the screen: yes, it was exactly as he remembered Vivian –
stunning round face, honey colored long hair and almond shaped eyes of the same color, heart
shaped, rich ruby red lips. Now he had to find out if this Vivian was indeed the Vivian in Dolcetto or
what he saw was affected by his feelings for Diana as Clark had said – and for being sure he had to
take the opinion of someone else, someone who also knew Vivian.
He looked the progress of the face recognition program; it needed some time. So Bruce guided his chair to the lift taking the print of the sketch of Vivian he just did.

He made sure that nobody was around and came out of the passage. Alfred met him in the corridor with an arched eyebrow of disapproval.

“Hm… I see that you took advantage of our absence to work down there. I suppose it is too much for you to get some rest?”

Bruce who was satisfied from what his investigation had revealed was taken aback.

“Mm…I suppose. Alfred, do you know where Mr. Petrou is?”

Alfred sighed.

“He is at the back garden with Mr. Dent and Rachel. They just return from the city.”

Bruce smiled.

“Thank you, Alfred.”

He turned to leave but Alfred’s breath indicated that he was ready to say something so he stopped.

“Sir, if I may…it is too early to run yourself thin - again.”

“But I don’t feel tired, Alfred.”

He found Mr. Petrou and his family sitting around the big rectangular marble table of the back garden. Upon seeing him Rachel stood and gave him a peck which brought a smile on Bruce’s face because she wasn’t the type for these things.

“Thank you” he said.

“You’re welcome” she answered with a smart smile and walked at his side to the table.

“How are you, Bruce?” Harvey asked.

“Fine, Harvey. Mm, Mr. Petrou I would like you to see a sketch.”

“Of course, Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce tilted his head to the side.

“Please, call me Bruce.”

The man smiled and nodded.

Bruce put the sketch on the table and Harvey with Rachel looked as well.

“So Vivian has been finally located?” Mr. Petrou said. “She hasn’t changed at all.”

Bruce felt his heart beating faster: so he remembered right.

Harvey was looking interested.

“This sketch is familiar” he said and Bruce looked at him intrigued. “It was a murder case and a witness had given a description of a woman almost exactly like the one here” he tapped his index
finger on the paper. “We never found her and the case closed. Was she in Gotham? So she is a real person, after all?” he seemed fascinated and then he frowned. “Why are you interested in her, Bruce?”

Bruce licked his lips.

“I had a session with Dr. Hugo Strange and he told me to make sketches with the people who cause me distress during my flashbacks – he claims that it is therapeutic. However I wasn’t sure if that woman was a real person or it was a false memory Crane’s experimentation caused so I had to ask Mr. Petrou.”

Mr. Petrou looked Bruce with sympathy.

“It’s her, Bruce.”

“Thank you, Mr. Petrou; now I feel better for my memory” he grinned “and my sanity.”

“Your memory and sanity are perfect, Bruce. I’m glad I helped.”

He found an excuse to go back inside; his smart phone notified him that the face recognition process had ended. He was eager to see the result and touched the screen to be connected with the central processor: well, the program interchanged the hair and eye color from every different photo and showed that the faces matched.

Now he entered the sketch of Vivian to the program asking not only to find if they match but also to give him Diana’s face with every combination of hair and eyes.

He just couldn’t wait to go to the cave again; the doors’ lift came in front of him without even realizing but…suddenly he was tied lying on that old hospital bed in a dimly lit room – Arkham Asylum: Joker was in the room and he wasn’t alone. Before Joker two men shook from fear…they begged for their lives and suddenly everything filled with hot blood and the bodies fell on the floor still twitching…

Bruce’s breath was caught in his lungs…and his head throbbed; he felt exactly like then, like he was going to faint: the smell of fresh blood made his stomach sick and his vision blurry.

Suddenly, two soft hands cupped his face and the smell vanished.

“Man, ya must be out of yar mind from joy…” Jason said to Dick.

“Don’t try to distract me to win – I’m not buying…”

The two boys were sitting at the living room of the second floor on the small, cozy black sofa playing video-games in the built-in the wall huge flat TV. Dick like his friend was leaned forward with the console clenched in his hands and his eyes fixed on the screen.

Hero bored from the boys’ lack of playfulness was stretching his flexible body licking his pristine white fur, glancing every now and then disapprovingly to his human friends.

“I can squash ya with closed eyes, dude” Jason cackled. “Where’s yar granny?”

“She went to the city with Alfred; she wanted to see in what state the apartment is. She told me that would stay for some hours and take a cab to come back.”
Jason pouted.
“So ya’re gonna leave the Manor?”
Dick pressed fervently the left button of his console and shrugged.
“Eventually…Now that granny is back there’s no need to stay here…”
“Mm…” Jason murmured making a sharp maneuver. “It’s what ya wanted all these months.”
Dick crooked his mouth without answering.
“Yet ya’re not that happy…”
“I’m happy granny is alive and back to me” Dick turned to Jason and then slapped his thigh because he lost. “Fuck!”
Jason sniggered.
“Yet now ya got what ya wanted, betcha ya don’t wanna leave…” he said calm. “It’s like hittin’ a fuckin’ jackpot livin’ with Bat guy.”
Dick pursed his lips.
“I feel like an ass, Jay.”
The boy cocked an eyebrow.
“Then ya feel alright…”
Dick tilted his head on the side.
“Bruce all this time was doing everything for me and I was cursing him and making his life a Hell…” he purged his lips. “I was so blinded…”
“I told ya so…” the younger boy winked but then sad about his friend became serious.
“C’mon, dude…Ya apologized an’ Bruce told ya that’s ok..”
“What else would he tell?” Dick rolled his eyes. “He is so kind and forgiving.”
Jason laughed.
“Who would expect that from freakin’ Batman, huh? An’ who would think that Bruce is…”
Dick hushed him hastily.
“There are people in the Manor who might not know his secret. Jay, he trusted us with his secret and we must not fail him again” the younger boy had sobered and nodded. “I mean myself. He is so humble, self-sacrificing and brave that I’m ashamed for myself…”
Jason patted him in the back.
“Ya couldn’t have known, Dick though I gotta say ya were a total dick…yet ya can make up for that from now on…Sometimes mom cries in the nights an’ when I ask her she says that she was an awful mother an’ then I say to her – hey, mom, ya were never awful yet…there’s always space for improvement; can I eat the rest of the ice cream now? It’d be a nice start!”
Dick erupted in laughter and Jason shook his head.

“She really did some not nice things in the past but she was sick…but now she has changed an’ that’s what counts, man…”

“It was Bruce again that gave a hand to your mother to change her life…”

Dick’s eyes watered and he hugged his younger friend who nodded. Hero seeing that his friends weren’t absorbed in the bizarre thing they were doing till now ran to them and hoped to the sofa rubbing to them.

“I love you, Jay…” Dick said.

Jason looked at him suspicious.

“Cut it! I’m not a gay…” both boys cackled carelessly.

“Bruce, what’s wrong?”

His eyes cleared and he saw Selina and Tony squatted around him, worry carved in their faces.

“You’re ashen, Bruce” Tony said frowned when Selina stood and rushed towards the kitchen. “Do you want me to call Leslie?”

Bruce shook his head and rubbed his forehead.

“I just saw again Joker slaughtering Isaac and Wizze…I hate flashbacks!” he took the glass of water Selina brought to him and drank.

“So he really killed them in front of you…” Tony said.

“And they weren’t the really responsible for the video; the mastermind and the one who caused their death is still free. And I have to find him because these people deserve it.”

Tony nodded and looked his friend in the eyes.

“I’m happy for your change of heart on the matter, but for now you have to rest.”

“I have things to do” he said to both of them and looked at the lift.

“Not so fast, buddy…” Selina’s teasing voice stopped him; it was obvious what he was thinking to do.

“Where do you want to go?” Tony asked and Bruce closed his eyes.

“I have work – important work.”

“It’s always important…” Selina said.

“Bruce, we need to talk” Tony said and Bruce knew that he couldn’t deny them.
So they entered the lift and instead of the cave Bruce ended up in the study.

“I’m all ears” Bruce said casting glances to his smart phone waiting eagerly the results.

Tony sat to the sofa next to Bruce’s wheelchair.

“I was at the Wayne Tower.”

“But it is Sunday, Tony.”

Tony tilted his head on the side.

“I know I work too hard – can you tell that to Peps?” he said leaning to his friend.

Selina walked to him and sat to the sofa.

“To the gist” she looked at the billionaire.

“Yeah…she has a really strong hand so better do what she says” Tony looked Bruce pointedly crooking his mouth and Bruce smiled. “All in all, I spoke with Lucius and…we are ready.”

Bruce frowned.

“Ready?”

“For your operation.”

Now this news should have made Bruce extremely happy; he had imagined the moment so many times. But now…that was…the time was so inappropriate that he felt numb.

Selina felt that something was wrong and leaned to him.

“ Aren’t you happy, sweetie?”

Bruce could see the same question all over Tony’s frowned face.

“I…of course I am but…”

Tony scratched his head and nodded.

“The ‘but’ thing…”

“What troubles you, Bruce?” Selina asked. “Tony, Lucius and Leslie are refining every detail.”

“I know…And I have no doubt or hesitation to do the operation. I’m not afraid.”

Tony pressed his lips: he wished he could share Bruce’s fearlessness but even though he knew that everything was perfect he also dreaded the moment Bruce would enter the operation room especially since that room wouldn’t be the safe environment of Superman’s haven – damn, that alien!

“Then?” Tony asked to escape from his own fears.

“There are things I have to do” Bruce said knowing already his friends’ reactions. “The operation needs time and…and I don’t have that luxury.”

Tony yanked his head and pressed his hair to his scalp with both hands.
“I don’t believe it!”

Selina looked Bruce in the eyes.

“Nothing is more important than your health, Bruce.”

“You don’t want to walk again?” Tony asked.

Bruce licked his lips.

“Of course I want to walk again but the operation would demand much time both prior and after... I don’t have that much time” in his mind another reason twirled that he wouldn’t share with his friends but it was a possibility: what if he never woke up from the surgery? Who would help Clark?

Selina tilted her head.

“What you didn’t understand from the ‘nothing is more important than your health’ part?”

Bruce didn’t say anything just showed them his smart phone turning it with one touch to a tablet so that the screen would contain better what he wanted them to see.

The photos showed Dr. Pamela Isley turned to Poison Ivy then to Vivian and finally to Diana. He watched his friends looking astonished.

“So the Amazon is really an impostor? You finally managed to find her” Tony said. “Who is she?”

Bruce began with the picture of Vivian.

“This woman was named Vivian and she was Falcone’s favorite woman from Dolcetto for a time; then she disappeared all of a sudden.”

“And she appeared again saying that he is a legendary Amazon?” Selina asked rolling her eyes. “She must be a nutcase.”

“Harvey says that she was implicated in some murder case but she was never found.”

Tony widened his eyes impressed.

“She must tell me her secret because she masters anti-aging perfectly – she hasn’t changed much all these years.”

“I think that this has to do with her connection with plants; you see, my memories of her match your description of her apartment – she always were surrounded from plants of every kind and I think that her extreme powers of seduction come from them” and he explained to them briefly what he had found about Dr. Isley. “You see, now why I don’t have time.”

Selina crossed her arms huffing and Tony cocked an eyebrow.

“No, I don’t...”

“I believe she works for Mannheim and they prepare something big since they put Superman under her influence.”

Tony slapped his thighs.

“It is all about him again, huh?” he huffed. “Oh, Bruce...”
Bruce sighed.

“It’s not about him, Tony: think about it. Mannheim builds a mysterious machine, he managed to make Luthor his puppet and put someone to pretend the Amazon only to render Superman useless. He plans something really bad.”

Selina nodded.

“Yes, but why you need so much time?”

“We can bust the bitch right now” Tony agreed.

But Bruce shook his head.

“Do you want a civil war among people’s most trusted heroes? Superman would protect her with everything he has and some will follow him – not to mention that she has considerable powers on her own. We’ll be implicated in a needless conflict serving perfectly their plans and pushing people to doubt and despair.”

Tony rubbed his chin.

“If she is not the legendary Amazon where her powers derive from?”

“Yeah…” Selina agreed.

Bruce didn’t want to reveal just now the truth about Bagdana to his friends.

“From Mannheim: I’m positive he is really that powerful.”

Tony pursed.

“Then we must get prepared; thankfully, we have Luthor and the machine under constant watch.”

“We need Superman fighting with us” Bruce said keeping his composed expression though he truly longed for that.

Selina shook her head.

“Why don’t you show him the proofs?”

Bruce inhaled.

“He won’t believe me – he’d consider it as another scheme to…take him back and he’ll probably get more isolated and hostile towards everyone he till now trusted.”

Tony crooked his mouth with disgust.

“Yeah, it’s a well known fact he is an asshole…”

“Then?” Selina asked.

“I’ll find the real Princess” he said casually.

A laugh left Tony’s mouth and then he choked.

“She isn’t a lost pocket, you know…”
Selina snorted.

“Believe me, Californian boy, you can never find a lost pocket in Gotham…”

“Anyway…What you want to do is finding a mythical island that it might not even exist?” he frowned and scratched his head “inhabited only by half naked women who wait for centuries someone to teach him the art of sex?” he shook his head with conviction. “It’s impossible but count me in!”

Selina gave him a slap in the shoulder while Bruce chuckled.

“And how you can be sure that you’ll find it? It could take years.”

“I hope not.”

Tony leaned to him serious.

“Bruce, you cannot do such madness in your current state: the legends say that they are very aggressive with men” he cocked his eyebrows “which is fine with me by the way – I have a thing for bondage…But you could be hurt much – I think it would be better if you do what you plan after your operation.”

Selina stood.

“Not to mention that this island could not even exist but if it really exist she is not sure that will want to help. And even if everything goes as you want, nothing assures us that Superman would believe that she is the real Diana and not an impostor.”

“Because the alien is obviously that clever…” Tony remarked snidely.

“Not to mention that he with his super senses can’t see what you noticed: the dyed hair, the fake eyes…”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“Tony mentioned that when he confronted Superman in her apartment he noticed some clarity and change to his attitude as soon as Ironman used Kryptonite…”

Tony’s eyes shone wickedly.

“So let’s use Kryptonite on him!”

“Yes, and when we take the Kryptonite away his hostility will be greater…No, Kryptonite might help if things get too nasty yet I think that still if she really exists we need the real Princess not only to bring Superman out of his illusion but also to have her as an ally to what lies ahead.”

Tony pressed his lips.

“I insist that the operation must come first.”

“I don’t have the time, Tony.”

“The machine is still in embryonic phase; if that machine was so precious for Mannheim to make all these burglaries and use his power to release Luthor from jail then he’ll wait till is ready before he acts so we have time…”
Bruce huffed.

The noble knocks on the door broke the silence and Bruce was really glad for the interruption.

“I do apologize for the interruption” Alfred said. “Mister Queen is here, Master Bruce and asks if he can see you.”

“I’ll see him, Alfred; thank you.”

“Don’t think that you slipped so easily, littl’ guy” Tony said as Bruce left the room and then he turned to Selina. “How can you be so cool seeing him risking so much? After what you witnessed?”

Selina understood that he meant the times she watched Bruce being abused. But also she suddenly he had a suspicion that could explain why Tony reached the point of hitting Bruce with a stunning beam to protect him.

“You watched that awful video they broadcasted…”

Tony nodded.

“I wanted to understand what he went through but now… I feel that every time he’ll be again hurt: how you can take that agony, Sel?”

“I saw Bruce being raped, tortured; I watched him crying; in fear; in despair. But also I saw him gritting his teeth and never give up. I saw him becoming the strong man he is; I saw him methodically organizing the defeat of his enemies. So even though I know he is wounded; even though often I see the skinny battered boy in him still I know that he also knows how strong he is and how he knows to fight – he is clever and he always calculate his movements to not find himself again in weakness” she cocked an eyebrow. “And I have always my eyes on him… just in case.”

Bruce was curious to know what brought Queen here – well, that was obvious: the demon wanted to be in constant touch with him; but what excuse he would use this time?

When he opened the door to the drawing room and slithered his wheelchair in closing the door behind him, Queen was upright. The man seemed agitated almost in agony and he held a glass with whiskey. He was turned to the rectangular window overlooking the Wayne grounds but hearing the door opening snapped around.

“It’s kind of early for alcohol” Bruce commented keeping his smirk inside; he knew he had to not show anything about knowing the truth.

Queen smiled and looked at the fine, crystal glass.

“Sometimes it is needed regardless the time of the day” he walked to Bruce, put his glass on the waist table and offered his hand for a handshake.

Bruce took his hand though the realization that was shaking hands with the demon that haunted his life was very intense; however there wasn’t the slightest difference from every other time he shook hands with Queen.

“And this is one of these times?” he asked.

Queen looked at him serious.
“Gotham’s Police announced early in the morning that Joker had kidnapped you and was holding you hostage in the Arkham Asylum.”

Bruce nodded thoughtful but completely calm.

“Well, that’s true.”

Queen shook his head.

“I was in Boston for some business and as soon as I heard it I got in the plane to come back.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“There was no reason for such rush” especially since the demon with the form of Arrow was there when he got Joker – but of course Bagdana wanted to play his game.

Queen slumped in the armchair next to Bruce’s wheelchair and fixed his eyes on Bruce’s.

“Of course there was! I was worried! Why in Hell he has to attack you all the time? Why they didn’t give you a break?”

Bruce smiled: indeed.

“Sometimes I wonder too. But still I think a phone call would be enough.”

Queen closed his eyes.

“Bruce, I told you several times that I care about you” Bruce felt a clench in his guts seeing again the gigantic form of the demon with his mind’s eye; however he sustained his calm face. “The thought of this scum holding you prisoner while you need your medication and you are defenseless…Oh! It’s outrageous! Cowardice!”

Bruce wanted to arch an eyebrow because Queen knew that he was perfectly able to defend himself even now yet the demon played the ignorant. So Bruce did the same.

“I can’t understand why they let that bastard alive!” the older man continued.

Bruce fixed his eyes on him.

“You think that anyone has the right to decide who must die?”

Queen closed his eyes and huffed.

“You’re too lenient, Bruce…” he pressed his lips and it was clear that something was in his mind but he hesitated to utter it. “He touched you?” he asked finally in a whisper.

Bruce jerked.

“That’s too…It’s none of your business!” he snapped with his eyes sparkling and Queen raised his palms calming.

“I’m sorry…I’m sorry…I…it was too indiscreet but this man is infatuated with you: so I fear that he could…It would be awful for you to go through such an experience again.”

Bruce smirked inside: Bagdana new better since he gave him some of these experiences.
“Mr. Queen, I think we told what was there to be told. Thank you for your interest.”

Queen leaned to him.

“Bruce, you try so hard to push me away. I want the best for you; I want to offer you the love you deserve. I’m the only one who loves you truly.”

Bruce crooked his mouth and Queen nodded.

“I understand your disbelief, Bruce, but believe me: I won’t ever betray you; I just want to be here for you whenever you need me; offer you my love…help you heal the wounds.”

Bruce closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I told you several times, Mr. Queen, that these things are not for me. I can’t be what you want and it is better for you to turn your affection somewhere else.”

Queen took Bruce’s hands in his causing a deep frown to the younger man and a instinctive defensive jolt of his back. Bruce noticed that there was nothing betraying that Queen wasn’t really a human and the real Queen’s body had nothing unnatural.

“If only you could give me a chance to prove to you what I said…”

Bruce took his hands away calmly.

“Mr. Queen, you say that you understand me then you should have understood how I’m feeling: I honor your friendship but I can’t give you more than that.”

Queen lowered his eyes and looked at his hands which he had glued together.

“He isn’t going to come back, Bruce” he said in a dead serious voice sympathetic but with a hue of frustration; his eyes were ablaze. “Ever!”

Bruce jerked and narrowed his eyes confused.

“What?”

Queen looked at him and smiled.

“It’s obvious that you wait for him to realize his mistake and come back to you.”

“Who?”

Queen shook his head and chuckled amused from Bruce’s act.

“Superman.”

Bruce clenched his jaw: of course Bagdana knew that he had a relationship with Clark: he schemed everything to separate them. But now Bruce had to do with Oliver Queen. He jerked his head.

“That’s preposterous…”

But Queen cut him.

“Come on, Bruce: everyone saw him bring you to the hospital; last year he was continually moving around you like a fly to honey until he took what he wanted and when he saw something new left
you without a second thought."

“You had nothing with Superman. And actually he saved more times Lois Lane so why don’t you
assume the same for her?”

Queen was adamant.

“He is happy with Diana” he grinned continuing. “He doesn’t think of you anymore not only as a
lover but also as a human being. He could have sensed your distress, your need – he was doing that
all the time last year, didn’t he?” he cocked his eyebrows in sarcasm. “But now nothing…”

It was easy for Bruce to understand that Queen tried to hurt him and make him forget or even hate
Superman in order to find comfort in him.

Queen took his silence for sadness; for a small victory.

“He is an idiot for betraying your love; for causing you such pain…He wasn’t worthy of you,
Bruce” he licked his lips. “I can ease your pain, just let me…” he leaned towards Bruce’s face, his
last words being whispered almost to Bruce’s ear.

Bruce felt a shiver and a trace of the old terror he had experienced in Ra’s’ basement and in Dolcetto.
However he controlled his emotions and looked at the man’s almost pleading eyes.

“Mr. Queen, please” he said quietly and moved slightly his head. “I don’t know why are you so sure
that I had something with Superman – not that it is your business – but whatever you think has
nothing to do with me. Thank you for your concern and for coming here but…” he shook his head “I
just can’t give you what you want and I suggest you stop torment yourself with that. There are
people out there who are better than me and ready to love and be loved by a special man like you.”

Queen’s smile was broad but his eyes were shadowed; Bruce was watching his face. The older man
stood.

“But” he shook his head “I don’t want you to give me anything; your mere existence is the greater,
most precious present life can give me…one of your smiles can be my salvation…” he smiled. “I
don’t want you to give anything, Bruce; for once in my life, I just want to give…Give to you
everything I have…” he lowered his eyes clearly overwhelmed and Bruce sensed that this wasn’t an
act. “I don’t want to make bad use of your precious time.”

Bruce looked at him.

“It’s not that.”

Queen nodded.

“Yes, but I’m sure you need some rest after everything you’ve been through. I want the best for you,
Bruce, and I’m sure that in the end you’ll realize that I mean what I’m saying…”

He offered Bruce his hand and the younger man shook it.

“It was a pleasure seeing you, Bruce.”

Bruce grinned.

“Mr. Queen, it was nice to see you too.”

Queen pressed his lips.
“If only you could call me Oliver…”

Bruce cocked his eyebrows.

“If I knew that you wouldn’t mistake that for something else, I would have made it, Mr. Queen…”

The older man grinned smugly, regaining his usual self confidence.

“I won’t ever stop hoping if that is what you mean. Have a lovely rest of the day, Bruce.”

The room was dark; only the lights coming from the blinds of the window interrupted the darkness and let the shapes inside take form.

But he didn’t need light to see around and for once in his life he didn’t want any of it: he was bored of light. It was a Sunday evening; his favorite time of the week yet today he felt numb. He held a cup of hot coffee and paced aimlessly in the small living room of his apartment. He had chosen to stay in his apartment for a change and think.

Clark recalled his discussion with Lois…He sighed: why for once he couldn’t be left to feel happy?

He slumped to his small worn couch and grabbed his lap top that was tossed on the couch at some point. He opened it to the Planet’s site: the same political fuss he had come to hate but among the latest headlines something caught his eyes.

“Bruce Wayne was Joker’s hostage at Arkham Asylum, Police states.”

In a brief statement GCPD’s spoke woman revealed that the notorious criminal had kidnapped the Wayne heir, 27, the day the attack in New York occurred. Ms. Harper didn’t comment whether the kidnapping was connected with the attack. She only continued to conclude that Mr. Wayne was found in Arkham Asylum where Joker and his associates, Jonathan Crane and Harleen Quinzel, both former heads of the same Institute, were arrested. Mr. Wayne didn’t sustain any serious injury.

Yeah, sure…Clark thought. In Joker’s hands? Of course Bruce could always protect himself but…Only the thought of the criminal laying hands on Bruce made him cringe and be mad.

He shook his head: and he took Bruce’s distress as agony for Thor…

He opened his e-mails without even realizing: among the read messages his eyes focused on one:

Congratulations on your award.

Bruce had sent that after their break up when Clark won the Pulitzer. His eyes travelled to the wall where the prize hang neglected – it certainly didn’t give him the joy it should.

He frowned: maybe he should write something to Bruce? Asking about his health? Like an old friend…

He ruffled his hair indecisive; Bruce wasn’t an old friend…Bruce tried to…He rubbed his upper arm where he still had the scar from Bruce’s dagger. However that didn’t stop Bruce from coming to the party for his awarding and definitely didn’t stop Clark from cornering him in that rooftop and try to kiss him…only to be repelled by the stubborn human. It seems that Bruce wanted to play with him…And he would be very happy to see that he still had power over him, that he could make him think of him over Diana.
Clark closed his eyes and inhaled deeply: Diana’s gracious, gorgeous figure came in front of his eyes; her eyes filled with respect, adoration but also strength and resolution – a proud warrior in love with him – adoring him…and then her perfume of all the flower on the planet.

He was grateful for his eidetic memory because her perfume was always in his nostrils reminding him who was the one who truly loved and supported him in everything. Who made him happy more than any other time in his life.

Clark just couldn’t betray her unconditional love by showing interest even typical for his former lover. Of course Lois and his Ma could not understand this because they hoped to make him ditch her for Bruce.

Suddenly, he heard shootings and screams of terror: his emotional state wasn’t perfect but Superman would prove that he never stopped being people’s protector.

He changed in a flick, opened the window and flew outside focusing on the direction of the screams: Russia, Moscow…As he was heading there it was clear that the shootings came from the Bolsoi Theatre – terrorists. He hurried.

But as he was almost there the screams and the panicked vitals from thousands of people stopped giving their place to relief, exhilaration and joy. Superman could even hear cheering and claps.

He stopped midair and focused his eyes there: on the stage were piled the corpses of hoodied people with their machine guns still clenched in their hands. Among the thousands of spectators there were several wounded but no dead. But what made Superman goggle was the woman floating above the stage like a guardian angel, unscathed, perfect, having stopped the terrorists without a drop of sweat.

The woman he loved. People cheered for Wonder Woman: his Diana. He wasn’t needed there and he was really proud of her and happy that finally the world was seeing the truth he knew: the truth about her.

He turned to leave but soon heard the familiar almost inaudible sound of her approaching; her heartbeat, the seductive sound of the air playing with her shining raven hair, her dazzling perfume. He stopped and turned towards her only to be attacked by her.

Diana wrapped her arms around his back and locked their lips together in a kiss that took his breath away and stopped his brain activity. Her eyes were raging fires reflecting the hotness of her pulsing with passion body.

“Humans are so weak…It’s a relief for me that a being like you resides in Earth” she breathed without stopping the kiss and ruffling viciously his hair.

“Thank God, Wonder Woman was here; Superman doesn’t seem to care anymore…”

Superman’s hearing caught some people saying in Russian; they were using different words but the meaning was always the same.

Diana looked at him with narrowed eyes, concerned.

“Are you alright?”

“They say that Superman doesn’t care for them…” he said with his eyes shadowed.

She smiled and hugged him tighter.
“They are humans! They always whine about something…they judge beings far superior from them according to their petty vices. I wouldn’t pay attention to them” she snorted. “They’re good only to be saved…”

Superman turned his head towards the theater: people were still cheering for Wonder Woman. He didn’t care that they cheered for her; on the contrary that gave him a joy that was flooding his entire body yet there was a small, tiny part of him cringing not because they cheered for Diana but because they were disappointed from him.

Diana tilted her head on the side frowning; she grabbed his hand.

“Forget them! We know what is really important, Kal El” she kissed gently his forehead and Superman felt a pleasant numbness expanding to his entire boy: nothing seemed worthy of his attention anymore – Diana was with him and loved him.

She moved forward taking his hand; she turned her head and locked eyes with him both determined and loving.

“My apartment is our world and my body and heart is your world: the only world worthy of your greatness, Kal El.”

The shine of her eyes and the warmth of her hand were everything he needed. He followed her.
“That is a really unexpected pleasure, Bruce…”

Bruce inclined his head in front of Jor El’s image on his central screen. He knew that although his voice was almost flat the alien really meant what he said.

“Relieved to hear that, Jor El” he answered to the hologram’s deep, respectful voice. “Did you have any news from Kal El?”

Jor El arched a white eyebrow.

“I am afraid that Kal El gets more and more isolated from his loved ones.”

Bruce rubbed his chin thoughtful.

“About that…” Jor El’s serious eyes twitched because he sensed that the human didn’t call him without a reason. “I have done some research and I think that I know the true identity of the woman that influences Kal El.”

Jor El raised his eyebrows.

“Well?”

“Before that” he began keying in “I send you a chemical compound and I’d like you to tell me if you have ever met it…”

“Of course.”

Bruce wanted Jor El to tell him if the substance that was found in Poison Ivy’s victims was in Clark’s body the last time he underwent exams in the Fortress. Yet he didn’t want Jor El to be biased knowing that this compound was connected with the woman who had his son mind controlled. Not that a biased hologram was the most possible thing, yet this hologram was of Kryptonian technology and from Bruce’s experience wasn’t a common reflective hologram.

Bruce wanted Jor El’s confirmation because even if he was almost certain about Diana being Poison Ivy he always wanted to double check. More so since Jor El when contacted the exams found a strange influence on Superman but he didn’t speak about that special kind of urushiol and Bruce knew that the Fortress had a broad, detailed database about Earth’s plants which Superman was collecting for his father’s scientific research.

“I haven’t seen urushiol of such composition in nature yet there were traces of that in Kal El’s system” Jor El said after a few seconds.

*Of course, Bruce thought. Traces as in Ivy’s victims only in this case she needed the substance to linger on her victim in order for the influence to linger too.*

“However” Jor El continued “there was something else that almost covered the compound and made it seem as something different.”

Bruce shook his head.

“That’s reasonable; they needed something that would make a Kryptonian susceptible to that substance that till now was effective only to humans” he remembered again Bagdana’s role in this
and crooked his mouth – the demon knew everything about Superman and already once he had created something that affected Superman vastly.

Yet this time Bagdana certainly didn’t use the same substance Ra’s had applied to Bruce’s body for years turning him to a human Kryptonite and an irresistible magnet for him; besides, Superman’s powers all this time were unscathed and Bagdana knew that Bruce had found everything out: the demon knew that they had isolated the substance so they would recognize it immediately if it affected again Superman. Also, the cunning demon certainly figured out that Superman was by now immunized to that substance – not to mention that that substance was created with Bruce’s blood as basis.

“The woman that presents herself as the Princess of the Amazons is actually a ghost-murderer who used to seduce her victims and under her irresistible attraction lured and killed them with a kiss that pumped urushiol to the victim’s organism” he informed him.

Jor El shook his head.

“But this couldn’t kill Kal El since he is a Kryptonian.”

Bruce nodded.

“If they knew how to adjust her pheromones to affect a Kryptonian into not being able to resist her and how to make the urushiol of her body influence Superman then they could also kill him – but this wasn’t what they wanted.”

“So what do they really want?”

“To humiliate him; to isolate him and then use him” and hurt Bruce into falling to the arms of Oliver Queen.

Jor El arched an eyebrow.

“I think that the most important reason was to separate you two” Bruce jerked inside but retained his cool expression. “The one who conceived that plan probably knows things about you and considered that the best way to defeat Superman was taking him as far away as possible from you. But if she is a human then from where she takes her powers and her weapons? Because her weapons are not of human origin or creation.”

Bruce didn’t want to divulge Bagdana’s role because he wished to test another hypothesis that was nudging his mind. A hypothesis about the third person behind the scheme.

“Jor El, I wonder if you remember the attack on me at Thasos.”

Jor El inclined slightly his head.

“I do…”

“The attackers were beings that definitely were not from Earth; also, the fake Diana arrived on the scene supposedly to save me but eventually she blew them off, obviously in order to cover any traces. Yet I managed to save some evidence which were tested by Lucius Fox who concluded that these creatures were made of matter and elements unknown to us.”

“Extra terrestrial?”

Bruce nodded.
“At first, we had our doubts assuming that the creatures might be result of some illegal experimentation…”

Jor El arched an eyebrow.

“But?” he asked in his wise voice.

Bruce pressed his lips and began pressing keys.

“Can you tell me anything about these?” he sent him pictures of the items that were hidden in LexLabs and Mannheim did everything to take back – he made sure to include shots where the odd symbols were visible.

Though Jor El was a hologram Bruce thought that the always calm reflection of Superman’s biological father became pale.

“Apokolips…” Jor El mumbled and Bruce frowned.

“What is this?”

“A planet. It is ruled by a powerful New God: Darkseid.”

Bruce huffed and rolled his eyes: not another God!

“He musters teleport and telekinesis; he can move as fast as nanoseconds; he can travel through time and send his enemies in dimensions where he traps them; he possesses the ability of mind controlling – in several cases, he mind controlled entire population into getting what he wanted.”

That explained the confusion of the thugs who were arrested either for the raids in LexLabs or the Metropolis’ Station attack. Such a being definitely didn’t have trouble to mind control Luthor into turning him to a servile being and people in high ranks to order Luthor’s release. Also, Bruce remembered when Mannheim came to his office to demand the items: he had sensed something trying to breach his mind, obviously to make him obey to Darkseid’s will. But his efforts failed… Bruce’s hand touched unconsciously the Black Butterfly that rest on his chest – then he had sensed the gem vibrating: perhaps, the gem’s power enhanced his ability to resist.

“But the greatest of his powers are the Omega Beams he launches from his eyes and hands” Jor El continued unaware of Bruce’s thoughts. “He can kill anyone with these Beams but he can also resurrect those who died from them if that is what he wants.”

Bruce tilted his head – the possibilities of having such a being on Earth were more than grim yet he couldn’t help but also snort.

“Don’t tell me…He wants to conquer Earth?” he asked in heavy irony cocking an eyebrow.

Jor El shook his head.

“Darkseid doesn’t simply conquer planets: he destroys them; he turns them to energy dust. He uses the energy from the destroyed planets to force his own order of things – a universe exactly as he wants it. Kryptonians knew about his activities but never took action against him – ignored him and the destruction he was causing reassured from the fact that they were powerful enough for making Darkseid hesitant to attack them” his eyes became reminiscent. “I remember the council of the Elders where I tried to convince them to do something – to no avail: nobody wanted to risk Krypton for the sake of other planets.”
Bruce tapped his index finger on his lower lip.

“Darkseid must know your – the Kryptonians - powers and how Earth’s yellow sun has enhanced those powers in Kal El so he wants to neutralize him first to make the Earth succumb to him.”

Jor El nodded.

“Can you describe your attackers at the island?”

Bruce typed something and the sketch his software had made from the description of the beings which attacked him popped up on the screen. He pressed a key and it was sent to Jor El.

“Parademons; Darkseid’s troops. Why you didn’t show me these earlier?”

“Because I believed that if it was something known to Kryptonians Superman would have recognized the description.”

Jor El nodded.

“Kal El’s Kryptonian education includes so many topics and fields that unfortunately Apokolips isn’t covered yet” he lowered a bit his eyes. “What about the objects: Where were those objects found?”

“In LexLabs: hidden to look like petty things with no value. However someone was eager – to say the least – to get them back.”

Jor El nodded.

“And this is where you join the picture, right? You gained the LexLabs’ ownership and these items as well so if I am assuming right the owner or some of his representatives came to find you” he smiled. “Without knowing that he has to do with someone of the most intelligent people on Earth.”

Bruce didn’t comment on that.

“I think that he came himself” he said casually though Jor El’s expression became something between admiration and terror “he has a human form and an established human identity. What about this machine he builds?”

Jor El smirked.

“The Anti Life Equation. Back in Krypton we had intelligence that Darkseid believed he could suck the energy from all the beings’ emotions and thoughts and make that infinite energy his, using it to build his own reality. Kryptonian scientists never believed that this was even a possibility but it seems that Darkseid has the belief that human beings could ‘help’ his cause… Maybe that’s the reason he follows a rather mild way instead of just destroying the planet.”

“I have to say that the Kryptonian scientists were wrong because Darkseid made everything to take back the items and his human ally, namely Lex Luthor to assemble them.”

Jor El raised his eyebrows.

“Because the machine learns anything from its creator and that is necessary for the machine to be able to absorb the energy from humans: Darkseid chose Lex Luthor to build his Anti Life machine so that the machine would learn the characteristics to absorb from his targets. He must be stopped, Bruce, before he uses the machine: this will make his already immense power greater.”

Bruce shook his head.
“He took the parts but we have everything under surveillance” Jor El’s face loosened a bit as Bruce remembered how Mannheim and the woman with him were not visible during their discussion with Luthor in the lab. “We have the control, Jor El yet I think it’s better to let them continue believing that we don’t know anything – we need to have Superman on our side when the time comes and I’m afraid that if we make hasty movements Superman can be turned against us under Poison Ivy’s control.”

Jor El pressed his lips.

“I can attest to that. What do you want me to do, Bruce?”

“For the time being, nothing. And definitely do not say anything to Superman.”

“Of course. He wouldn’t believe it after all.”

Ending the connection Bruce’s mind was shadowed from the realized now menace. One thing was sure: he didn’t have the time to give to his surgery. It had to wait. After all, what was the meaning of being able to walk again if the whole planet was destroyed?

He thought about Mannheim’s presence at his office; the man’s…well, not exactly a man…his rage; Darkseid certainly could try to fry him with his beams. Of course he sent Gotham’s thugs to scare him but Bruce was sure that if he wanted, the danger he faced would be even worse. And then he remembered the Arrow’s interference. He nodded: Bagdana did want him alive and probably that held Darkseid’s hand. For Bruce it was plain clear that he was Bagdana’s reward…

He looked at the smaller screen on the right: he had programmed his processor to scan world news for any appearance of Wonder Woman or Superman. A good half an hour now the RT was raving about Wonder Woman’s intervention at the Bolsoi Theater where she stopped a sure bloodshed by terrorists – the viewers eye witnesses were describing what had happened and praised Wonder Woman who saved them while once again Superman was absent.

Bruce pursed his lips: he could see their goal. They wanted to degrade Superman in the eyes of people so that in the final hour they wouldn’t hope anything from the hero; also, when they decided to make their movement against Superman nobody would be surprised from his absence or search for him.

On the other hand, they wanted ‘Wonder Woman’ to become a symbol of hope in which people would invest so that when Darkseid made his attack the despair of humans would be devastating seeing their favorite heroine alongside the enemy, determined to exterminate them. Such despair would definitely be precious for Darkseid’s Anti Life Equation.

Bagdana was a precious advisor to the alien: after all, the ancient demon knew perfectly the human nature and Superman. Bruce could sniff Bagdana’s wit behind all these.

He just hoped that he could make it on time and upturn their perfectly set chessboard.

It was already an hour since Tony sat in the stool before the working bench in Lucius Fox’s lab and the older man was perplexed from the man’s quietness. After Joker’s arrest and Bruce’s return to the Manor, Tony was able to resume entirely his work on his friend’s operation; yet this day the billionaire from Malibu was absorbed in reading something in his tablet.

Lucius every now and then looked above his glasses to the younger man but he continued without breaking his concentration. Lucius knew that Tony had many things in his mind and his best friend’s
operation was something that troubled him all the time.

“Lucius, I want to show you something.”

Lucius was eagerly waiting for that in order to be able to help if there was a way.

“Of course, Mr. Stark” he said and left his work on the hologram to sit at the stool next to Tony.

“Read these…” Tony showed with his index finger at the screen.

The younger man was watching avidly Lucius as he was perusing the rather broad data.

“Well?” Tony asked after several minutes when Lucius raised his eyes and took off his glasses.

Lucius raised his eyebrows.

“It’s rather impressive” he admitted and Tony smiled making his eyes shine.

“Exactly. The success’ quotient is remarkable!” he showed again the screen. “Lucius, you see that we do have hope?”

Lucius however seemed thoughtful.

“You are referring to Mr. Wayne’s surgery…”

Tony rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

“Lucius, drop the naïve look: it’s not persuasive at all…Of course I refer to Bruce’s surgery: what else? Someone who has such great record in complex surgeries certainly is the most appropriate for a surgery like Bruce’s. Lucius” he locked eyes with him. “We need the best for Bruce to eliminate as much as possible the possibility of…failure.”

Lucius pressed his lips.

“I understand, Mr. Stark, but we set as a precondition the need of confidentiality for this. You know how Mr. Wayne feels about that.”

Tony nodded.

“His life is more precious. And as you can see part of this work was made with Superman’s contribution thus the presence of alien technology wouldn’t be something new. Not to mention that we can’t be absolutely sure for anyone: even our own team can at some point leak some info.”

Lucius closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“The benefits are greater than the risks, Lucius.”

Lucius cocked his eyebrows.

“This isn’t a decision you or I will make, Mr. Stark. Dr. Thompkins should know too and most of all Mr. Wayne. You know that the final decision is his.”

Well, Tony knew that but also knew Bruce’s stance over this. However he relied on the support from Lucius and Leslie: the three of them could manage to persuade Bruce in the end.

“I made an appointment with Leslie at the free clinic in 30 minutes to talk about this. But your
support on this would be crucial when I show her all these.”

The older man frowned slightly.

“You want to tell me that Dr. Elliot sent his impressive body of work to you but not to Dr.
Thompkins with whom he is working?”

Tony pursed his lips.

“Maybe he was afraid that she would dismiss him because of her favorite patient’s dislike for him –
because of Bruce’s bias.”

Lucius cocked his eyebrows and looked at Tony.

“Bias, Mr. Stark?”

Tony realized that it was a bit hard of a word.

“Okay, okay; but we can’t deny that Bruce doesn’t like the man based on their childhood
relationships.”

Lucius smiled.

“Your friendship is based on that too…”

Tony closed his eyes.

“You’re right…” he huffed. “But I can’t close my eyes and forget such impressive results when my
best friend is faced with such a dangerous surgery” he looked Lucius in the eyes. “Will you come
with me at the clinic? And support my case?”

Lucius inhaled deeply.

“Mr. Stark, you know that I want the best for Mr. Wayne…Of course, I’ll come with you” Tony’s
eyes shone “yet I can’t promise you that I’ll support Dr. Elliot’s involvement – I will speak only on
what we see there: nothing more - nothing less.”

Tony would want more support yet this was fair enough; after all, Lucius was always extra cautious
and Tony appreciated that. He patted the older man’s upper arm.

“I would not ask you more…”

Leslie frowned on seeing the material Tony had for her.

“Thomas sent you all these? Why?”

Tony rolled his eyes; he was sitting on a stool right next to Leslie’s chair behind her desk inside her
office. He crossed his arms.

“Because he knows Bruce’s dislike and despite that he wants to help so he chose to show these to
me instead to give me an idea.”

Something wasn’t right for Leslie and she raised her eyes to meet Lucius’ serious eyes. The scientist
was sitting in the chair in front of her desk watching and estimating without interfering.
Leslie leaned on her chair’s back.

“So all in all he knows Bruce’s dislike and mistrust however he also knows about your agony for Bruce’s life and takes advantage of that to gain through you access to Bruce.”

Tony yanked his head and huffed.

“Leslie, Leslie, Leslie! I know he is using my agony but maybe he truly wants to redeem himself for the way he treated Bruce then. And yes I figured out from the beginning that he was using me but these data” he gestured with his palm at the screen “show something incredible and is the best thing we could hope for Bruce’s surgery.”

Leslie shook her head: he couldn’t blame Tony for his agony – heck! She felt the same agony, as well. Nor she could blame him for wanting Elliot to do the surgery seeing his record of successful operations in extremely difficult cases. Yet she could also understand Bruce’s dislike for this man: even if she couldn’t say that she disliked Thomas Elliot, she also wasn’t very fond of him, moreover to trust him with anything concerning Bruce.

“I admit that Thomas is a great surgeon with an impressive record yet this is something not for us to decide” she said.

Lucius nodded.

“This is exactly what I told him.”

Tony pursed his lips and Leslie locked eyes with him.

“Frankly, Anthony, I’m happy I don’t have to take that decision myself because I’m not sure what to believe about Thomas Elliot.”

Tony closed his eyes impatient.

“I don’t give a damn if he’s a total asshole or not: the only thing that matters for me is to do the surgery that will allow Bruce to walk again.”

Leslie tilted her head and looked at him.

“It’s exactly what all of us want.”

Tony stood.

“Then you’re with me.”

Leslie sighed.

“Don’t do that, Anthony…We want the best for Bruce but pressing him to accept something he doesn’t want will only make matters worse: do you really want him to see us as plotting?”

Tony palmed his face: he remembered the Hell he went through after he stunned Bruce to force his opinion on him.

“Of course I don’t want that…” he huffed. “Hell, for me is worse than for you two because I’ve got already a ‘felony’…But you see that Elliot is the best chance we have right now.”

Lucius Fox also stood.
“I think that this can be solved only in one way: we will discuss this with Mr. Wayne and he will decide. The sooner, the better.”

Leslie nodded.

“Exactly.”

Both of them looked at Tony.

“What? Did you think that I’d do something that Bruce wouldn’t agree to?” he cocked his eyebrows and shook his head. “How such thing crossed your mind?” he asked mocking insult because obviously they were right to suspect him. “To the Manor then?”

“Yes, but we can’t leave all together” Leslie said. “It’ll draw too much attention.”

Tony smirked.

“Not to mention it will be a bit ridiculous…”

Lucius laughed.

“Then I go first.”

As Tony crossed the clinic’s foyer Thomas Elliot was returning from his visit to the patients’ rooms; he wore his white robe and he was followed by Kelly.

Seeing Stark there rang a bell in Elliot; he hurried his steps to meet him.

“Tony!” he exclaimed. “Long time no see…” he gave him his hand. “I didn’t expect to see you here” he frowned. “Is anything wrong with Bruce? I was seeing my patients so I don’t know if something happened in the meantime.”

Tony shook Elliot’s hand giving one of his trademark grins.

“Nah! Bruce is fine – I just visited Leslie.”

Elliot smiled in his odd way.

“Of course! I remember how much Leslie loved both of you…” he frowned and sighed. “But poor Bruce! I’d expect Leslie to get some days off to take care of him after everything he suffered lately. That horrible video! And then Joker…” he shook his head disgusted watching all the time Tony’s cool expression. “You say he is fine? Oh! This is a major relief!”

“Really?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, Mr. Stark” Kelly intervened and a shadow of annoyance crossed Thomas’ eyes “all these days Tommy was very worried about Mr. Wayne. Especially, when police announced that Joker was holding him hostage…”

“I wanted to call or visit” Thomas cut her “but I know Bruce’s sentiments about me so…” he chuckled. “I chose not to disturb him anymore.”

Tony shook his head.

“He is resting.”
Thomas licked his lips giving his eyes warmth and solemnity.

“Everything I learn about Bruce makes me admire him even more... He is so brave and strong! I don’t know what I’d have done if I was in his place.”

Tony grinned.

“Die?” he cocked his eyebrows. “That’s probably how I would have ended up.”

Thomas smiled and Kelly reflected that.

“Tony, did you get those data I sent you?”

Tony acted the surprised as if he wasn’t just talking with Lucius and Leslie about that very subject.

“Mmm... Yes, I actually, try to find the time to read them” he arched an eyebrow. “You understand how it is with all this stuff going on...” he didn’t want to divulge everything to him; he might want to have Elliot for the surgery yet that didn’t mean that he trusted him with everything.

“Of course I do, Tony. I hope you find the time to read them and get in touch for any clarification.”

Tony nodded.

“I have to leave now...” he said. “It’s great to be me but lately it has become a bit tiresome...” he winked to Kelly and she chuckled.

Thomas nodded.

“When you see Bruce, give him my best wishes.”

Tony gave a tight lips grin.

“I will” and he will be sooo happy, I’m sure. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate it. See you...”

Elliot crossed his arms and watched him leaving the foyer: he pursed his lips. He was sure that once Stark saw his work then he’d definitely try to get him for the surgery no matter what and then he’d have a twofold success: a breach that would bring him inside Brucie’s inner circle and maybe a conflict between Brucie and Stark.

Jim Gordon raised his eyes to gaze from his office’s rectangular window the city’s skyline under the grim colors of the cloudy afternoon. He inhaled and returned to the papers on his desk. Reports about the latest developments.

But he had to stop again when someone knocked his door.

“Yes.”

It was his secretary-officer.

“Commissioner, someone wants to see you.”

“Who?”

“Bruce Wayne.”
Jim stood abruptly and walked fast to the door. He came out to the waiting room and saw Bruce.

“Good morning, Commissioner. How are you?” the young man greeted him.

“Fine, Mr. Wayne. Please, come in.”

He made an inviting gesture and Bruce smiled and guided his wheelchair inside. Jim closed the door.

“How may I help you, Mr. Wayne?” he said standing in front of his desk.

“I want to talk to you about Ms. Turner’s disappearance” Bruce said determined but a bit shyly.

Jim cleared his throat and his eyes took a stern hue.

“Hm…I was informed that she reappeared suddenly accompanied by Harvey Dent and his family.”

Bruce nodded.

“Yes.”

Jim cocked his eyebrows.

“It doesn’t seem like a true disappearance after all, huh?”

Bruce tilted slightly his head.

“Commissioner, I want you to understand that we couldn’t have done anything else. Zucco had threatened Ms. Turner and she was panicked – she was sure that he would kill her.”

Jim sighed.

“You could have informed the police about his threats.”

Bruce shook his head.

“We couldn’t, Commissioner. First, we didn’t have any proof and second, he would have left Gotham only to return secretly to realize his threats: as you know, the man had no inhibitions.”

“So you decided to stage a disappearance in order to ensure that Ms. Turner will be safe till police found the truth about Zucco.”

Bruce didn’t lower his eyes and Jim found that he couldn’t be angry at the young man; he liked the determination in those eyes.

“He’d have killed Ms. Turner: he also killed Dick’s father.”

Jim shook his head.

“You still played with the police, Mr. Wayne; you caused an unnecessary procedure.”

Bruce nodded.

“I’m the responsible for this and I’m ready to face the consequences.”

Jim yanked his head.

“Why you didn’t tell the truth to the police?”
“Because if things didn’t happen according to the standard police procedure and Zucco wasn’t persuaded then he could have disappeared before you could catch him.”

Jim took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll happily face the consequences, Commissioner” Bruce repeated with conviction.

Jim looked him.

“You could have at least informed me.”

“You have so many things who demand your attention…” he hesitated before continuing. “And I was afraid that you wouldn’t have agreed.”

Now Jim closed his eyes and then chuckled. That young man certainly had guts! Not to mention stubbornness...

“Well?” Bruce said. “Please, do not press any charges to Ms. Turner or Harvey.”

Jim leaned to him.

“That Dent…Plotting with you behind my back!” he saw Bruce’s face turn a bit pale and smiled to calm him. “Let’s say, that your” he sighed “I must admit that – your clever plan saved two lives and helped find the truth about an old crime.”

“I didn’t do all that; I just panicked and helped Ms. Turner hide, trusting that you will find the truth.”

Jim nodded with a look that said: yeah, sure… Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“I can go in jail if that’s the law.”

Jim chuckled.

“You? No, definitely not” Bruce took a breath of relief. “Just next time, please, do inform me before implementing your plans” Jim had enough secrecy from his caped ally.

Bruce nodded.

“I will, Commissioner; thank you for your leniency.”

Jim shook his head.

“I should thank you for your concern about Gotham’s people.”

Bruce lowered slightly his eyes.

“I’m just doing what my parents would want me to.”

“They would be very proud of you, Mr. Wayne.”

Jim accompanied Bruce till the lift and as he was watching the young heir getting hidden by the lift doors, a thought crossed his mind: despite the fact he had ‘deceived’ police with Ms. Turner’s disappearance, his sharp mind definitely would be useful to GCPD. If only they could persuade him to leave Wayne Enterprises for the police…He chuckled and his officers looked him curious.
Alfred hid perfectly his surprise when he opened the Manor’s door: surprise not for the people he saw but for the fact they had come all together.

“Good afternoon, Leslie, Lucius, Master Anthony” he said with an inviting gesture.

The company greeted him back and Alfred led them inside.

“Alfred, is Bruce here?” Leslie asked and Alfred raised his eyebrows.

“So your simultaneous coming wasn’t a coincidence…”

Tony chuckled.

“No, it wasn’t, Alfred” Lucius answered. “Can we speak with Mr. Wayne?”

“He went to the city but of course you are welcome to wait for him to return” he gestured to the salon for them to sit.

They didn’t have to wait much before the sound of Bruce’s car announced his arrival.

“Master Anthony, Mr. Fox and Leslie are expecting you, Master Bruce” Alfred informed him helping him take off his long coat just before a storming Hero who was following Alfred climbed on his young friend.

“I’m here” Bruce said coming from the corridor with Hero on his lap. “How nice to see all of you here!”

Alfred turned to their guests.

“It’s the perfect time for a tea” the butler said and retreated to the kitchen.

Bruce guided his wheelchair near his friends and let Hero on the floor.

“Well?” he asked. “It must be something really important for you to come all together.”

Leslie sat on the armchair close to Bruce and leaned to him.

“It’s about your surgery, Bruce.”

Bruce turned his eyes first to Lucius and then to Tony.

“Okay…”

“You know, Mr. Wayne, that we are reviewing doctors to equip the team that will perform your surgery.”

Bruce frowned.

“But we have already brilliant scientists, Lucius.”

Tony made a few steps near his friend.

“We do, Bruce, but your case is a unique one…”

“As every case” Bruce commented and Tony licked his lips.

“I mean, very complicated, very difficult and very risky. Given your current health condition we
need really the best people in our team in order to eliminate the risk factor.”

Bruce nodded.

“Which is almost impossible since every surgery, even the most simple, has its risk factors.”

Leslie raised an eyebrow.

“I can’t disagree on that.”

“Well?” Bruce asked Tony.

Tony hesitated but in the end he decided that he had to tell what he had to.

“We think that we have the best candidate for the leader of our surgery team.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Interesting… And who that person might be?”

Tony ruffled his hair.

“First of all, I want you to be your usual calm, cool headed self.”

Bruce looked at Leslie and Lucius, and shrugged.

“Go ahead.”

Tony licked his lips and shared a glance with the other two ‘conspirators’.

“According to his previous work – his impressive previous work in people with complex and difficult spine injuries – the best doctor for your surgery is Dr. Thomas Elliot” he uttered in one breath to get over with it.

As much as he retained his calm exterior, Bruce couldn’t help but feel a stabbing feeling of betrayal.

“Says who?” he asked calm but grim.

Tony took from the sofa his StarkStel where he had ready the data from Elliot’s work. He gave the tablet to Bruce.

“He is a genius in his field, Bruce and he has worked with Superman so he is accustomed to alien technology.”

Bruce was fully aware of that: Clark had told him that night in the greenhouse when he healed his spine’s injury with his precise laser vision. The memory just brought more daggers piercing his guts…

However Tony and the others took his thoughtfulness as a sign of agreement.

“He has an incredible record of near 100% of successful operations” Tony continued fervently encouraged by his friend’s silence; he held Bruce’s upper arms. “Bruce, we don’t have the safe environment of the Fortress to rely on: we need the perfect doctor for this.”

Leslie was watching Bruce’s reactions carefully. Lucius moved closer and sat on the armchair on Bruce’s left.
“He indeed has pretty impressive credentials, Mr. Wayne. I think we should at least consider the possibility.”

Bruce raised his eyes from the screen and looked at his friends.

“Do you want me to trust this man with my surgery…my life…my chance to walk again…my secrets.”

Tony tilted his head on the side and huffed.

“Bruce, even if his well demeanor towards you is only an act, he won’t dare to do something that will endanger your life. First, because his act then will be totally uncovered; second, because he’d want the surgery to be successful for his status and to gain your trust. And third and foremost, because he knows that if something happens to you, I’ll kill him.”

Leslie cleared her throat.

“I do not want to say that I don’t share your mistrust for Thomas, Bruce, but he won’t be alone in that surgery room: I’ll be there too. Also, even if he indeed is two faced and the scum you think, he is a doctor, Bruce. He has given an oath.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Crane and Quinzel were also doctors…” he spat dryly. “He will also understand how my injuries were caused; he’ll find out that we lied and since he’s so cunning to gain the trust of all of you” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose “he’ll put two and two together and figure out that I’m Batman. Do you really want such a secret in the knowledge of Thomas Elliot?”

Tony shook his head.

“First of all, he hasn’t gained our trust; we just see the facts here. Even if he figures out, Bruce, which is not certain, he is bound by confidentiality” he glanced at the other two for support.

But Bruce snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Really, Tony? Confidentiality? After the experiences from Crane and Quinzel?” he shook his head chuckling.

“Mr. Wayne” Lucius said calmly “we are not forcing anything here: we just putting the idea for consideration. It is your decision.”

Leslie inhaled deeply.

“And the exposing issue can apply to anyone involved.”

“But nobody is as wicked as Elliot to think of that possibility!”

Bruce gave the StarkStel back to Tony with his expression filled with conviction. Tony slapped his thighs.

“Littl’ guy, please, give it a thought! I know that you would have wanted your father to operate you and believe me all of us would have been happier if he was here…but Thomas Wayne is dead, buddy…and we have to settle with what is the second best.”

Bruce turned his wheelchair so that he had his back on his friends; his heart was beating fast. Yes, having his father there would have been perfect…His father would have taken care of everything…
Everything would have been safe with him; Bruce wouldn’t be afraid to close his eyes and lose all control for ten and more hours. But his father wasn’t there; he was dead, eighteen years now; dead because of him.

Bruce’s friends were looking at him sure that he was really considering their proposition.

And then Bruce turned slowly his head to look at them.

“I won’t do the surgery” he said calm but adamant making all of them cringe and widen their eyes.

Leslie stood.

“Bruce, that’s just…”

But Bruce cut her.

“I won’t close my eyes knowing that after that Elliot will enter the operation room and have my body at his will.”

Tony didn’t have the strength to stand: this was the last thing he wanted. Bruce had already once suffered because of him and now his reasonable fear about Tony doing again the same thing would stop him from walking again.

“No, littl’ guy, please” he said. “Don’t take that decision: your dream is to walk again – don’t give up on that.”

Bruce locked eyes with him.

“Batman can walk and fight – that’s the only thing I need. Bruce Wayne can stay a paraplegic for the rest of his life.”

“Mr. Wayne” Lucius said appeasing.

But Bruce raised his palm and stopped him.

“There was a little girl in the Children’s Hospital; her name is Lucy Adams and she is paralyzed. Focus your effort on her instead.”

He turned his wheelchair and retreated fast from the salon, Hero catching up with him and climbing on his lap.

Alfred carrying the trailer with the tea came on time to see Bruce entering the lift. He looked at their guests and his heart fell: Leslie was clenching her waist with both hands and pacing nervously; Lucius’ always playful eyes were grim; and Master Anthony had hidden his face in his palms.

“What’s going on?” he asked frowned.

Dick was crossing the corridor when he heard Hero’s distinctive purring. Usually, no sound came from the rooms but the door to the study was slightly ajar. Hero was alone? He decided to take the kitten so that the animal would have company.

Upon opening the door he froze on his heels. Bruce was with Hero; he was facing the window, gazing at the grounds and petting his kitten. He looked so absorbed as if in another world, just his; Dick could tell that he was sad and that he was intruding.
He turned ready to leave the room.

“Is everything alright, Dick?” Bruce turned his face to him and he looked so tired.

The boy looked at him and walked inside.

“No…I just was pacing and I heard Hero and I thought that he was alone. Mmm…I’m sorry for… intruding. I’m leaving now.”

But Bruce shook his head.

“You’re not intruding. Your grandmother told me that she has your home almost ready.”

Dick ruffled his hair uncomfortable.

“Mm…Yeah.”

“You don’t have to be so hasty…you can stay here as long as you want.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course I understand that you’re looking forward to return to your home.”

Dick really didn’t know what to say: if he had heard that a week ago he would have answered ‘yes!’ but now he had mixed feelings.

“No…not really…I mean I’m glad that granny is back but I’m not in a hurry to leave.”

Bruce smiled.

“I’m glad to hear that because this Manor is your home too and will be forever. You and your grandmother and Jason are always welcome here. And I…I’ll be always here for whatever you might need…so do not hesitate. Ever.”

Dick gulped.

“My parents would have been very happy to know that someone like you care about me and granny…And Brian…Brian would have loved you so much” his voice broke a bit. “You do look alike…”

Bruce pressed his lips: probably, that was the reason Joker chose to kill the poor boy. Dick noticed Bruce’s blank eyes and wanted to fix his mood along with Hero who played with Bruce’s fingers.

“Thanks for the visit rights” he chuckled. “You’d have me here all the time! I want to learn more about you and…Oh! Jason wants his ride with the vehicle.”

Bruce smiled.

“I must remember that…” he chuckled but it was obvious that something was off.

“Bruce, are you feeling alright? Do you want me to call Alfred?” Dick asked worried.

“No, Dick…I’m fine.”

“You’re sad: I…I learnt to figure that instantly because…it used to…make me happy” he lowered his eyes. “But now I don’t want you to be sad.”
“Thank you…that alone can make me happy.”

Dick smiled and hesitantly stretched his hand to touch Bruce’s.

“All of us love you, Bruce…well, me lately…I’m a late bloomer…” he snorted. “But you must remember that whatever happens…even if someone of us says something wrong…we…we just…I mean, we don’t understand sometimes but that doesn’t mean we don’t love you.”

“Thanks, Dick” he patted with his other hand Dick’s and on his.

The boy walked out of the room and Bruce took his smart phone from the small table under the window and sent the email he had prepared.

The woman with the skinny jean and black leather jacket had her forest green eyes on the lonely road of the Palisades. She raised her hand hitch-hiking the car she saw approaching.

The red Lancia Y stopped a few meters ahead of her and she rushed graciously there as the door opened and a head popped towards her.

“Hey, Sel. Hitch-hiking can be dangerous, you know.”

Selina smiled and jumped to the passenger’s seat giving a kiss to the driver’s cheek.

“Yeah, for the driver…” she chuckled. “Smart girls know how to choose cars…so can I come along?”

Bruce grinned.

“Sure…” and he started the engine resuming his course.

Selina was watching her friend; his face was absolutely calm yet Selina had been informed by Alfred about what happened.

“Night stroll?” she asked gazing at the first colors of the night falling over Palisades; dark highways under the public lights which were running on both sides always gave her a feeling of freedom.

“Something like that…”

Selina could speak with Bruce more openly than anyone else.

“They upset you again” she said crossing her arms. “Why they don’t understand?” she rolled her eyes.

Bruce pursed his lips.

“Alfred called you, huh? You shouldn’t have left your bike in the middle of the countryside to hitchhike” he widened his eyes for emphasis “Gotham has many thieves, you know.”

“Don’t worry: I left the bike in the safest place” she cocked her eyebrows and looked him in the eyes. “Your cave.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Bruce, Alfred told me everything…He told me that you said that you won’t do the surgery” she said
completely serious. “Sweetie, that is... I mean, it is your decision and I will support you through and through but do you want to tell me what made you change your mind?”

Bruce glanced at her.

“They want Thomas Elliot to do the operation.”

Selina huffed and shook her head.

“Are they nuts? They know that you loath the guy, how do they expect you to trust him with your life?”

“They believe that he is the best there is and that only he can eliminate the perils of the operation.”

Selina shook her head and snorted.

“If you don’t trust the one that is going to cut you open then the perils will only increase. They should have asked a woman about her gynecologist...”

Bruce nodded.

“And there is also my secret: I’m sure Elliot approached Tony only to get access to me and find anything he can about me. Imagine his thoughts when he gets inside knowledge about my injuries and my organism’s condition.”

Selina thought about it – it was cringe worthy: she didn’t like Elliot.

“Do you think that Tony and Leslie gave him any info?”

“No; they wanted to have my consent first. Yet I rather stay paralyzed forever than let him handle my body.”

Selina understood Bruce’s feelings.

“But walking again is your dream, Bruce, and you deserve that – you shouldn’t give up on that whatever they say or do” she pursed her lips. “And I know you always have a back up…”

He turned to her grinning confidently and smartly which made Selina’s hopes flare.

“Oh! You know me so well...” he said and his eyes sparkled.

The first rays of sun burst inside the spacious, modern-decorated living room.

Stephen took the cup with his lukewarm coffee without looking at it, not wanting to stop reading the contents on his laptop screen. It was fascinating and brought him the old feeling of excitement, the same fire that led his life before the accident upturned everything.

He was in his gray pajamas and his had placed his pendant beside his laptop. His cape stood afloat, rigid in the middle of the living room because she didn’t like the coat rack.

His Smart phone rang and thankfully he had finished because he would have been rather pissed from the interruption.

“Strange” he said but then his mood changed from bored to interested. “Mr. Wayne? Okay, Bruce.
Yeah, I’ve just finished reading the files you sent me and I must say…”

The doorbell cut him and this time he rolled his eyes.

“Bruce, hold on a second; someone is at the door” he walked towards the door. He didn’t want the risk of anyone overhearing the sensitive information Bruce had sent him.

He kept the phone stuck between ear and shoulder and opened the door ready to send away his annoying visitor. But as he opened the door he gaped.

Before him with his own Smart phone in hand, was Bruce Wayne on his wheelchair.

“Bruce?” he asked perplexed.

Bruce smiled.

“Good morning. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

Stephen laughed.

“Actually, you interrupted your own phone call” he opened his door for him to get inside and ended the dial.

“Your house is very elegant” Bruce said.

Stephen grinned.

“Kudos to the decorator because I had never the time or the interest to do it myself. Would you like some juice?” he said walking to the wooden bar opposite the whole wall window.

“Thank you, Dr. Strange.”

“From your medication I get that you are not drinking any coffee” he filled a glass with juice and returned to Bruce, gave him the glass and sat at the white leather sofa. “I won’t deny that your visit was a big surprise.”

Bruce sipped the juice and grinned.

“Maybe I should have called first…I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

Dr. Strange shook his head.

“Inconvenience? Not at all” he glanced at his pajamas and laughed. “Although if you had called, I’d have been in a more appropriate attire. Anyway, when you sent me your medical file I thought that you just wanted my opinion through a phone call or mail. If I knew you wanted a more personal discussion, I would have come to Gotham and spared you from the tiresome experience of the flight here.”

“Actually, I drove here” Stephen’s eyes bulged. “Thank you for your concern but I needed some escape.”

Dr. Strange cocked his eyebrows.

“So many hours of driving though…And all night driving. You must be exhausted without the proper sleep.”
Bruce grinned.

“I have a good friend along: she drove some hours for me to sleep in the back seat.”

The older man cocked an eyebrow.

“Good girl!”

Bruce shook his head.

“I owe her my life and my soul; I don’t deserve her…” he cleared his throat to change the subject “Well, what’s your opinion on my case?”

Dr. Strange huffed.

“Oh, Bruce…I had heard some descriptions of what you suffered all these years but those scans and X-rays were really shocking” Bruce’s eyes became a bit blank. “I mean, what these people did to you for eighteen years was there like seeing a movie.”

“A really bad movie” Bruce said dryly but Stephen leaned to him and found his eyes.

“A movie of incredible bravery and strength – a hymn to human will.”

Bruce shook his head.

“And about my spine injury?” he asked wanting to change the subject immediately.

Dr. Strange understood.

“It’s not an injury” he said in his bass a bit know-it-all voice and Bruce frowned inside. “Is a sum of injuries – the worst I ever seen: I wonder, Bruce, what kind of torture can cause such damage” he cocked an eyebrow “even though as a doctor I have seen many grotesque injuries, tortures always appalled me. What they did to you? It seems like you were crushed…”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Let’s say that there weren’t only tortures.”

“Also, your spleen has been removed due to heavy internal bleeding” Bruce nodded “your right lung has signs of collapse and you suffered a great number of fractures in your ribs, arms and shoulder blades; not to mention, your legs and hip. Those energy casts that hold your bones together did a spectacular job: your bones have recovered to an impressive level. And…” he remembered something that made him fascinated “you are a rare case of Chimera: two distinct DNAs in the same body!”

Bruce chuckled.

“I’m glad you remember perfectly the details of my condition.”

“It’s a fascinating case, Bruce” he cleared his throat “I mean, by scientific interest. And it’s a long time since I last worked on something medical related. By the way, it was an honor for me that you asked for my opinion.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side.

“You are one of the greatest neurosurgeons in the world.”
Stephen laughed.

“I was…This is history, Bruce.”

Bruce looked at him and Stephen couldn’t see through that eyes.

“So what is your opinion about a potential surgery.”

Stephen pursed his lips.

“I have read about Mr. Fox’s job on bionic body parts and I’m sure that Stark had perfected that to the level of a miracle in order to enable you to walk again.”

“But?”

“It will certainly be a most demanding operation – I don’t know if ten or twelve hours of surgery will be enough; I’m almost certain that it’d take more” Bruce nodded solemnly. “Your heart is a bit arrhythmic and that’s dangerous; also, your right lung has already recovered from one collapsing and your other lung has also sustained considerable damage which although healed make the lung sensitive.”

Bruce prompted him with the eyes to continue.

“However you had shown a great resiliency and stamina: not only for eighteen years but also more recently when you came out of those lethal injuries even with some alien help…” he said pointedly but Bruce didn’t seem worried. “Even if I’m not still a doctor, I’m loyal to doctor-patient confidentiality” he hurried to reassure his guest. “All in all, Bruce: it’s a surgery with a great risk but I’m positive that your more than capable friends had made everything to decrease the percentage of danger; the decision is only yours, Bruce, but if you choose the most skilled medical team in the world – and I think that every doctor would have ‘killed’ to be your surgeon – the chances of success will be increased.”

Bruce nodded.

“About that…the most skilled doctor in the world” Dr. Strange looked at Bruce “I want you to perform my surgery.”

Stephen choked on his saliva and grabbed his coffee mug to drink some. He was staring at Bruce with bulged eyes but his guest’s eyes were perfectly calm and serious with a power that made a great impression to him.

“You’re not kidding, right?” Bruce shook his head and Stephen brought his palms on his face. “Some time ago I’d be thrilled to hear that, Bruce; my ego would have urged me to accept at once. But now…I’m not a doctor anymore, Bruce: that ended once and for all. If you want I can suggest some brilliant colleagues.”

Yet Bruce’s eyes were still; adamant.

“Your brilliant skills, your talent in neurosurgeon, your genius weren’t lost in that accident” Dr. Strange shook his head.

“Bruce, you’re a great man; a symbol of willpower and survival but we can’t have back some things as much as we want them. Even if I can perform some trivial operations, the surgery you need to undergo will be the most difficult in medical history. You certainly don’t want to trust your life to a doctor that has left all these behind and he isn’t in his prime. I would not want to be the one who will
“condemn someone like you…” he cocked his eyebrows. “Not to mention that if anything happens to you, no dimension will be able to save me from Tony-fucking-Stark. I’m sorry, Bruce, but Dr. Strange is an empty title…”

“But you want to be that man again” Bruce commented and Stephen pressed his hair. “You learnt that you have extraordinary skills; skills that enable you to control matter and time. You sound to me like the best man for the job.”

Stephen fixed his eyes on his legs: well, that young man had a point but still it was…Although his guts felt pleasantly upset, almost aroused on the prospect of something so challenging he couldn’t risk a human life to satisfy his ego.

“I admit that my wizard skills can be quite useful in such a surgery…”

Bruce shook his head.

“It can be very handy” Stephen continued.

“No, Dr. Strange; I wasn’t thinking the wizard; I want just the brilliant doctor.”

Stephen goggled at him frowned.

“Yes, but if…” certainly if something went awry a wizard who can turn back the time to correct things would be really a safety line.

Bruce yanked his head.

“If things don’t go as we want them” he said adamant “I don’t want you to use magic to save my life.”

Now Stephen gasped: he couldn’t believe his ears.

“I don’t want to live fooling the laws of the nature…”

Stephen frowned.

“That’s what a friend of mine says” he raised his eyebrows “Now…you really want me to operate you without my wizard skills?”

Bruce smiled.

“I think that your self-knowledge skills and your quality as a doctor will be enough without your magical abilities. After all, if I have chosen another doctor he wouldn’t be a powerful wizard, right?”

Stephen laughed.

“As far as I know…though we can’t bet on that, do we? But I’ll need time to prepare myself and you; also, I’ll need to be informed about everything your friends have developed. And I want to examine you thoroughly.”

Bruce nodded.

“Certainly. If you want we can return together to Gotham.”

“The sooner I start the better.”
“Thank you, Dr. Strange” he gave him his hand for a handshake.

“Call me, Stephen” he narrowed his eyes and smiled. “You have the ability to motivate people to the best…”

Bruce pursed his lips and shrugged one shoulder.

“Nah…I just ask things…”

Tony paced in the Manor’s salon with Alfred watching him in his usual tranquility. Leslie and Lucius had arrived after him.

“Almost 24 hours, Alfred! Why you didn’t tell me sooner? I’d have…” he raised his palm “wait.” He pressed a button at his wrist watch “Jarvis, find Bruce’s car trace.”

Alfred cleared his throat.

“Master Anthony, I must remind you that you cannot locate Master Bruce’s car even though it’s your creation. However, even if you could, Master Bruce took the red Lancia, obviously for more discretion.”

Tony watched Alfred in disbelief. In the end, he grunted.

“When I took the message to come here – as Leslie and Lucius – I thought that he was here…Why you didn’t tell me sooner, Alfred? So many things may have happened…Shit! Fuck! It’s my fault! Ugh! Why I always do wrong with Bruce?” Alfred was watching calm but clearly amused.

“I apologize for interrupting your self-degrading, quite interesting monologue yet I must inform you that Master Bruce was in the most capable hands so there was no reason to cause you such a distress.”

Tony frowned.

“Which hands?”

Alfred cocked an eyebrow.

“Miss Kyle’s of course.”

Tony took a deep inhale of relief but still wasn’t calm.

“I made him to give up! I killed his dream! Now he won’t do the surgery.”

“Master Anthony, I’m sure that Master Bruce will think it better: he was upset when he said that. And I didn’t raise the alarm about his escapee exactly to let him breathe.”

Leslie stood.

“Alfred is right.”

Tony clenched his waist with both hands.

“I don’t know, Alfred…I’m worried…why he left?”
“To find the best doctor for my surgery.”

Everyone turned surprised to see a smiling Bruce who had just entered accompanied by Selina and Dr. Strange. Tony rushed to him and hugged him; he finally released him still holding his upper arms.

“Thank you, litl’ guy…thank you for not giving up. The best doctor?”

Bruce gestured to Stephen on his right.

“Dr. Stephen Strange.”
“What do you think?”

Tony, a glass of pina colada in his hand, sat at the oval sun chair next to the one Dr. Strange was sitting. On the small rectangular table between them Alfred had brought the doctor a glass of orange juice and some sandwiches; Dr. Strange had sat by the inside pool wanting to watch his new patient’s session with his physiotherapist.

He had followed Bruce’s session with Matt from the beginning wishing to assess fully his condition. Dr. Strange was in the gym while Bruce was exercising in weightlifting, sit ups and walking with exoskeletons. All this time he was keeping notes typing them to his notepad.

Now he was looking at the pool where Bruce swam along with Dick and Jason; the two boys competing with him in spread swimming but soon giving up for playing splashing water to each other and to Hero who was running on the edge of the pool following their course. Laughter was echoing throughout the space.

“Boys! Boys!” Matt said from the brim of the pool clapping. “You’re supposed to accompany Bruce to his exercises…not playing” but then he smiled because hearing all these laughs was great, especially since his patient was laughing along: it was the first time after too long that Matt was seeing Bruce a bit careless. “Never mind…Keep up the good work!” he said and Jason treated him with some water.

“He is amazing” Dr. Strange answered. “He swims like an athlete and that’s pretty impressive considering that he had managed this level only in a few months.”

Tony nodded.

“And he makes it seem effortless; as if swimming with your legs paralyzed is easy…”

Dr. Strange turned to look at him.

“He was freed from Falcone only a year ago and he already managed to help hundreds of people in this city; he was struck again losing his mobility in the worst way yet he fights that and at the same time he is the guardian of a boy that is clear that adores him; as that other boy with them.”

Tony crooked his mouth at the adore thing remembering how Dick was towards Bruce only a few days ago.

“Dick and his friend Jason – Bruce loves them both much.”

Stephen grinned.

“I can see why people love him so much: he is so inspiring.”

Tony raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t let him hear you saying that…He doesn’t like to be praised.”

Stephen shook his head.

“His body is perfectly shaped; muscular like an athlete’s.”
Tony lay on the chair.

“Falcone wanted him like that...he made him work out to get a perfect body.”

Stephen pressed his lips.

“Bruce has some scars that are older than the date of the incident that rendered him paraplegic. Scars from knife wounds.”

Tony sipped from his drink.

“Falcone always abused Bruce” he replied dryly.

“It is odd that he gave scars to the one he wanted perfect for his pleasure.”

Tony licked his lips.

“Falcone’s hatred sometimes overcame his longing; he was short tempered and when Bruce wasn’t able to satisfy every sick desire he had, Falcone was losing control...”

Stephen nodded.

“The traces of all these years’ abuse are evident even in his bones. It’s incredible how a man with such experiences is so dynamic and confident.”

Tony shook his head.

“Bruce buries his experiences deep inside and never lets the pain interfere to his life – he never talks about these things even if we ask him to; yet sometimes his nightmares and flashbacks become too disturbing.”

“I can only imagine.”

Tony frowned.

“Do you think that the surgery has odds to be successful?”

Dr. Strange raised his eyebrows.

“Every surgery has risks and this one is an especially difficult. You know that better than me.”

Tony pursed his lips.

“But I’m sure that you with Fox had created something revolutionary to eliminate the risk to the minimum” Strange added.

Tony put his hands behind his neck and looked at the pool.

“You have total access to our project...However, I’m asking your personal, professional opinion about Bruce: his organism is too battered, his internal organs too exhausted and the surgery is very demanding. I dread that he won’t last...”

“There’s no doubt that what you mention is true yet I believe that he can make it. You don’t?”

“I believe in Bruce and I’d never want him to lose the chance to walk again. But for the first time in my life I want another opinion than mine.”
Stephen nodded.

“I understand how much you love him and I promise you that I’ll do everything in my power for this surgery to succeed. For someone like Bruce I’ll do everything.”

Tony shook his head looking at Bruce who was playing with the boys inside the pool.

“You better…”

Bruce fixed hastily the towel over his pelvis; he was on his stomach at the examination table attached to the gym. After Matt’s massage, Stephen asked to examine him and settled the screen around the examination table for Bruce to strip and cover himself before calling him for the procedure.

Dr. Strange was putting on his gloves when he caught with the corner of his eyes Bruce’s rushed movement to cover himself as better as he could; however, he didn’t want to make his patient feel uncomfortable so looked at his examination gloves.

Bruce grinned.

“I’m sorry… even though my recent life is filled with doctors and examinations I still can’t overcome that reaction.”

Stephen nodded.

“I understand; you don’t have to be sorry. Just relax.”

Bruce let his face touch the mattress and Dr. Strange began feeling his back gently, insisting on the spots were the biggest damage had occurred. He was breathing calmly although a foreign touch was always a shock for his body especially when his neurologist tested his pelvis and legs muscles.

The fact that he could only hear and see the outline of Dr. Strange carefully making his legs move lessened the sense of uneasiness: feeling his ministrations even if completely professional would have elevated Bruce’s distress: he knew that it was stupid of him yet as much as he had learnt to control it he just couldn’t stop the sour emotion from emerging.

“Can you turn on your back, Bruce?” Stephen asked and turned around so to give the younger man the discretion to settle himself.

“I’m ready” Bruce said after he meticulously covered his pelvis; he appreciated Dr. Strange’s discretion.

Stephen continued his examination, feeling Bruce’s torso with his fingers and then using stethoscope. When he ended with the stethoscope the worst moment came for Bruce. Being on his back he could clearly see the doctor’s ministrations first on his pelvis to estimate the damage and the neurons’ state: very careful movements since Dr. Strange knew Bruce’s back story.

And then the doctor began gently making moves with Bruce’s legs testing the muscles and the reflexes. It was awkward seeing your members like this, resembling the parts of a plastic doll – of course, it wasn’t the first time in all these months yet after the days of he being active as Batman what he was experiencing right now seemed like a bad reality crushing to him.

And Bruce was seeing what Dr. Strange saw: the distinct marks of piercing and burning in all these spots where the metallic rods had stabbed his legs: the same excruciating pain pierced Bruce’s brain
although the neurons of his legs weren’t feeling anything.

Dr. Strange met his patient’s eyes as he was examining one of these marks.

“Torture…” Bruce said casually and Stephen pressed his lips.

When his doctor put his attention to the lower part of his legs Bruce could succumb to the senses that was besieging him; senses of that night. The unbearable pain; the feeling of his heart collapsing among crazy beats; his lung being pierced; his body withdrawing; the lack of oxygen; the awareness of the imminent death; the agony from his loved ones’ memories; his torturing need to see them one last time.

“We’re done; you can dress” Stephen’s bass baritone brought him back to reality just when sweat drops began appearing to his forehead; he met the doctor’s eyes that were watching him.

The doctor settled the screen around the table and stayed out to let Bruce put his clothes.

“You can come, Dr. Strange.”

The doctor gathered the screen in a corner and brought Bruce’s wheelchair for his patient to sit.

“Well?” Bruce asked.

“Like the scans showed your bones are progressing impressively; as Matt told me you haven’t lost much muscle mass – almost not at all – which is perfectly reasonable since you are training constantly.”

Bruce grinned.

“Tony talked to Matt about me from the first moment I woke up from coma and Matt worked very hard and patiently with me since I first regained my ability to do exercises.”

Stephen smiled.

“They definitely helped but I think that you did most of the hard work: in a few months time you gained the skills of a Special Olympics athlete.”

“Not that much.”

Stephen tilted his head.

“You could have easily competed in a few months yet we’ll make the surgery and you’ll walk again.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“If that surgery succeeds then many paraplegics would be able to walk again.”

Stephen nodded and cocked an eyebrow.

“Absolutely. I believe that there cannot be an injury more severe than yours” Bruce looked at him a bit frowned and Stephen smiled. “Superman saved you from certain death and his alien technology supported your valiant struggle to stay alive.”

Bruce knew that he couldn’t deny that yet the real circumstances under which he got injured weren’t that obvious to the doctor. He licked his lips.
“He did save me and his technology helped me not die and recover; weren’t for his energy casts I would have been still in a hospital bed completely immobile and wrapped in casts. Not to mention that I’d be dead from the injuries I suffered.”

Stephen pursed his lips.

“The same environment where Superman treated you then it would make the surgery much safer” Bruce shook his head in denial but Stephen insisted. “I caught the news: I know that Superman is now preoccupied with other…things.”

“I didn’t have anything with him” Bruce cut him and Dr. Strange nodded.

“Okay, fine; what I wanted to say is that if I asked him to I don’t think that he would object in using his premises for such a surgery.”

Bruce locked eyes with his doctor and Stephen was impressed with the conviction and intensity in those eyes.

“Superman will stay away from all these. I want this surgery to take place under conditions that apply to every other patient: no special help. Lucius and Tony have made a tremendous job and their job will be accessible to everyone; so my surgery will take place with what those two brilliant scientists have created and its success will be the certificate for the beginning of more surgeries for every individual who needs it. Doing the surgery in Superman’s extraordinary conditions and succeeding won’t have any importance because even if I succeed and walk again that won’t apply to everyone else since you understand that Superman won’t accept his place to become a hospital.”

Stephen was deep in thought: Bruce was right in his reasoning. But on the other hand that was extraordinarily selfless: risking his life so that every person would have the chance to regain its mobility whereas he could just do the surgery in the safety of Superman’s headquarters.

“This is incredibly admirable, Bruce” he said serious. “Putting other people’s wellbeing over yours.”

Bruce chuckled.

“I still have you and my friends – I’m not on my own.”

Stephen grinned.

“I’ll need time, Bruce. To assemble my team and study thoroughly Lucius’ and Tony’s work. Also, I need to discuss things with Dr. Thompkins.”

Bruce nodded.

“That suits me too. I have things to settle before the surgery. So you have all the time you need.”

*His entire world had shrunk into what his eyes were seeing: which was crazy small considering his sight’s range that was literally vast. However the only thing his eyes could see was the gray tombstone in front of him; every other thing obliterated as the letters formed two words: Bruce Wayne.*

*After everything – and he didn’t know what that ‘everything’ was exactly but he knew that it was something containing much, cruel fight – Bruce had died…so simple. Because for Bruce the simplest thing was shedding his blood, sacrificing his life for others.*
He cocked a tired eyebrow: that was what Bruce always did, right? He had almost died some months ago to save some children but Superman made it on time then and saved him...What he failed to do this time.

He stared at his fists and only then realized that around him was dark: the dusk had given its place to night – pitch black with a deep silence that made his spine froze. He was in Clark Kent’s clothes.

Clark didn’t know if Bruce had had the chance to fight at all his injuries to stay alive yet something inside him told Clark that the human wouldn’t have wanted to fight. After all, this world wasn’t worthy of the effort and Bruce was way too tired and disappointed.

From him more than anything…

Suddenly, the darkness of the night became suffocating as if it had swallowed everything, as if there wouldn’t be any light ever again; no warmth, no hope, no laughter...No star in the sky. He looked up and the sky was a stranger without any star without the moon: a void...He remembered the dream he had seen where the star had led him away from the void, from the cold, the hopelessness. But now that star had vanished.

His eyes returned on the name and stayed there fixed until the letters evaporated and two eyes replaced them: two eyes like sapphire seas with emerald stars for irises.

Clark couldn’t stand the way those eyes looked at him, penetrating him to the core; the realization came as an unbearable stone on his insides: he wasn’t going to see those eyes again...his heart screamed as it was pinched by invisible Kryptonite fingers.

“Kal? What’s wrong?”

Superman opened his eyes realizing that the scream wasn’t of his heart but his own and now Diana was leaned upon him with her dazzling eyes filled with puzzlement, concern and a hue of...scorn? Sure thing, he must have looked too weak in her eyes.

“It’s nothing, darling” he smiled appreciating the pleasant feeling of her silken hair touching his naked chest. “Just a nightmare.”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“I wouldn’t believe that someone like you sees nightmares…” she defeated her contempt and smiled kindly. “So what you saw that made you scream like this?”

Superman raised himself in a sitting position and ran his hand through his hair. He had to share with her; she believed in him and he didn’t want to hide things from her.

“I saw that Bruce had died.”

Diana widened her eyes and snorted.

“That’s normal for him, Kal El: unlike us, he is only a human destined to die” she said indifferently caressing sensually the raven hair on his chest.

Superman nodded.

“I know…”

“But you still got distressed…Why? Is he still that important to you that his death would cause you
such reaction?” she asked casually with only a slight irony revealing her annoyance.

Superman understood that she didn’t want to show her jealousy for his intense reaction about Bruce. He wrapped her shoulders with his arm and kissed her lips.

“He is not important, Diana: you are the most important being on the planet for me. Yet I don’t want anyone to die and… frankly I can’t understand why the content of that dream caused such reaction” he shook his head and chuckled.

Diana kissed gently his chest rising with soft kisses to his neck to his mouth till she stabbed her eyes to his.

“Maybe you just want to have his body again…” she said casually and seeing his jerk. “I understand your body’s needs, Kal El: if you long for the human I don’t have any problem with you taking him. You deserve to have whatever you want, Kal El.”

Superman laughed and closed her naked torso in his strong hands capturing her lips in a strong kiss.

“I don’t want Bruce; I long only for you…”

“I’m glad for that because you deserve only the best, Kal El and humans especially this one is so inferior that isn’t worthy even to wash your feet.”

Superman smiled though his heart was again pressed hard in the same way as in his dream; he hated that feeling so he did the best thing he knew that could heal him from everything: dive in Diana’s body and let her perfume clean every unpleasant feeling or thought.

Oliver Queen stood before the whole wall window that revealed Gotham City’s morning skyline. His eyes were blank turned inside thinking his last encounter with Bruce: the human’s blatant refusal of his love. He clenched his fist in the air.

“Why?” he whispered. “Why are you so stubborn and refuse to see the truth?”

Footsteps behind him notified him for a new presence; he didn’t need to turn to see because he knew already. The footsteps stopped right next to him.

“Are you thinking about him?” a female voice thick with irony broke the silence.

He looked at her feeling anger about her cocked eyebrow that almost reached her tiara.

“What are you doing here?” he snapped at her.

She lolled her head to the side.

“Princess Diana is Queen’s friend so she can visit him, right?”

“Your place is next to Superman.”

She looked at the view.

“He gets lost every morning to return at the afternoon as if he works in a humble human office” she answered. “So I can take some fresh air. After all, you certainly have your measures around your place so he can’t overhear us.”
Queen raised his eyebrows.

“That’s true.”

The fake Diana crooked her mouth.

“An easy job for a powerful demon like you.”

Queen didn’t answer and she snorted.

“Don’t tell me you have doubts about the success of your ingenious plan? Superman is completely enslaved to me and thus to you: it will only take your word for me to surrender him to you.”

Queen focused his eyes towards the Palisades that wasn’t visible from there.

“It won’t be long…”

Ivy smiled and touched gently his cheek, taking in the melancholy in his eyes.

“You defeated Superman but you didn’t win what you wanted and that is enough to bend someone as powerful as you” she shook her head. “I don’t get what you guys find in Bruce Wayne…I remember Falcone’s infatuation about that skinny, filthy boy…”

Queen’s eyes took the red, flaming color of Bagdana’s cat like eyes. The menace of his wrath washing Diana’s spine with ice.

“Don’t you ever compare me with that bastard!”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Really? He looked to me like the perfect servant for a demon: a mob boss greedy enough to rob, kill, enslave people and most of all capture a small kid, torture and rape him mercilessly maiming his body and soul. I thought you would be satisfied with Falcone’s performance! Oh! He did great things with that boy’s little body and actually that brat’s body’s only use is to be a sex toy.”

Bagdana’s eyes in Oliver Queen’s face became completely still the red emanating thunders. Diana smirked but the demon grabbed her chin clenching.

“You touched him?!” he insisted.

She rolled her eyes annoyed.

“I did! I was pissed with Falcone’s fixation on him that sometimes surpassed my charm! I was curious about what that skinny thing had to cause such passion: it seemed ridiculous and still seems” she snorted. “I have to admit that he had a great body scent – extraordinary - and his lips on my breasts” Queen’s eyes narrowed to thin flames of wrath “felt like velvet but the major thing is that indeed his ass had an impressive capacity – which must have been of help for Brucie with Superman’s enormous dick…”

Bagdana’s eyes widened like the strike of a lightning but he didn’t hit her.

“Did he remember you?” he hissed frowning since the ramifications of that were more important.
She laughed.

“Of course not! I’m a master of changing faces: Pamela Isley, Poison Ivy, Vivian, Diana…The stupid brat couldn’t remember me. Besides if he did he’d have said to Superman and that idiot would have revealed that to me: the Man of Steel tells me everything.”

Bagdana wasn’t totally convinced yet he counted on the fact that Bruce’s memory of events during his captivity wasn’t perfect: he wasn’t remembering anything about the demon for quite a long time. And indeed if he did remember Vivian and had connected her with Diana he’d have done something to prevent Superman from going to her.

She shook her head.

“I’m deeply sad seeing someone as great as you being like this for the little bitch’s sake; because he was always a bitch, a whore and he still is” she sniggered. “It seems that you’re the only one he doesn’t open his legs for…Have you ever taken even a taste?”

Bagdana clenched his jaw and for a moment everything went dark.

“Don’t provoke me! Remember that your strength comes from me: I can deprive you from it whenever I want and squash you like every other plant.”

Ivy narrowed her eyes.

“Not all my powers come from you…” she said slyly. “The powers you gave me wouldn’t be enough to take Superman away from your little human.”

Bagdana yanked his head.

“That’s why I chose you.”

“Exactly: a goddess of seduction… Though the stupid Kryptonian still relapses into his pathetic infatuation…”

Queen frowned.

“What happened?”

“He had a nightmare; he saw that Wayne died and that caused him a great distress.”

He shook his head.

“I’m not surprised…” it wasn’t easy to forget Bruce; something inside him jerked violently thinking what Superman saw. “Bruce won’t die.”

Diana crossed her arms on her chest.

“He is a human: his destiny is to die.”

Bagdana turned his back on her and gazed at the skyline.

“Not when he becomes mine.”

Diana smirked.

“Are you so sure that he’ll become yours? If Superman’s betrayal and Queen’s love weren’t enough
to make him fall for another human being – because your melancholy shows that you failed – then how do you expect that he’ll do that for a demon? By the way, I can’t blame that bitch for not forgetting Superman: he is really great in sex – I bet that he gave some super time to him. Maybe when all this ends and you get the brat I can keep Superman: you think your boss would object?”

Queen shrugged.

“Tell him yourself.”

The fake Diana felt the change in the air behind her as a form shaped instantly; she turned to see an enormous bluish figure with square features. She pursed her lips but Darkseid’s surprise was greater seeing the Amazon there.

Bagdana took his real form and moved in front of her just in case the New God attacked her. There was no danger of anyone seeing or hearing them because not only the windows were blocking the view from outside but also his power concealed them from everyone.

“I told you that you didn’t have to worry about the Amazon…” he said coldly to his ally locking eyes with him.

Darkseid cackled.

“She was your ally from the beginning?”

The fake Diana moved from behind Bagdana.

“He didn’t tell you? He is a secretive little demon.”

Darkseid grinned.

“How you managed to persuade the Amazon to join our cause?”

Bagdana jerked his head backwards.

“She is not the Amazon Princess” Darkseid frowned and the woman beamed stretching her arms.

“Poison Ivy.”

“She has powers that we needed and I gave her everything necessary to persuade that she is the real Amazon.”

Darkseid nodded.

“And you did a tremendous job, Bagdana, and you too, Ivy.”

She cocked her eyebrows.

“Since you’re here and you acknowledge how precious my work is, our deal with Bagdana was that after the extinction of human filth from this planet I will get the remains so my plants and I could live and thrive: for millions of years humans were destroying and taking brutal advantage of nature. Now, it’s our turn.”

“You can do whatever you want with this pathetic planet after I finish” Darkseid said indifferent.

“I’ll be the beloved queen of nature” she said and her blue eyes shone; Bagdana couldn’t hide his amusement on that. “And I’d like to ask something about Superman…”
“What?”

She narrowed her eyes and waved that off with disgust.

“Never mind! Screw Superman!”

Bagdana met Darkseid’s eyes.

“Superman is enslaved to her and she can bring him to us whenever we want: nobody will give a damn about his disappearance after his indifference during the recent attacks against humans – their greatest heroine now is Wonder Woman and when the time of your attack comes their despair will be devastating seeing her siding with you.”

Ivy smiled wickedly.

“That would be perfect” Darkseid said thinking about the Anti Life Equation: the amount of terror and despair from almost 7 billion humans would give him a tremendous power.

Bagdana stood before him.

“Well? Have I won my reward?” he cocked one of his thick eyebrows.

Darkseid narrowed his eyes and laughed.

“I underestimated your wits, Bagdana: you are a worthy servant of Darkseid.”

Ivy rolled her eyes hearing that yet Bagdana bowed slightly his head keeping his eyes locked with Darkseid which satisfied the New God. The ancient demon knew how to control his wrath and let others insult him as long as he needed them…His price was more than worthy of listening to that stupid God’s bullshit: actually, Darkseid’s arrogance was really hilarious for someone who had watched countless of powerful beings getting squashed into oblivion: they also believed that they were invincible.

“Though” Darkseid said raising an eyebrow “Superman seems to defy a bit your control…”

Clark Kent was walking on the streets of Metropolis, blended with the crowd; his coat’s lapels were raised supposedly to keep away the cold – spring had come yet winter seemed reluctant to depart - but also because he felt the need for being unnoticed. Not that he wasn’t unnoticed in his humble Clark Kent appearance; but he wanted more.

He had his hands deep in his oversized coat’s pockets thinking. He told Perry that today he wouldn’t stay in the office and head for field work. Clark didn’t tell anything to Lois who was glancing at him cold as always. He couldn’t press his presence on her and actually he wanted to be alone without someone who constantly criticized him about his choices.

It was afternoon and he already missed Diana: her warm, strong body; the dazzling feeling of her touch, of her kiss; her intoxicating perfume that filled him with pure happiness… Ugh! His body cried and wanted to drag him back to her…

Yet there he was, walking aimlessly trying to catch anything dangerous so to prevent any potentially dangerous development for people; or finding anything about Intergang which he had neglected lately. And actually he wanted to keep neglecting that and everything else for Diana’s sake yet he felt…guilty. After the nightmare with Bruce he felt guilty for not doing what he had promised his
parents and himself.

Bruce’s ‘death’ reminded him the people who died during the attack in New York while he was watching from afar. Bruce might not be in danger and actually Bruce did have other people to save him if there was the need yet other people did rely on him.

Suddenly, he caught yells, grunts of pain and shootings coming from the other end of the city. The sound of shattered glasses was flooding and the cries of children heartbreaking.

He hurried to a dark, deserted allay and in a second Superman had replaced Clark Kent: he raised his fist in the air and launched to the sky feeling the dark cloud being lifted from his heart with the thought of how proud Diana would be of him…

As he was flying there Superman could see some police cars heading to the same place but the Man of Steel knew that in hostage situations the sooner the calamity ended the better. And it was a hostage situation: his hearing was focused there so he could discern clearly the threatening voices of men and the scared heartbeats of people. There were injured but thankfully no dead.

His sight was fixed to the spot where the incident was taking place so he saw the place before reaching there; a common restaurant opposite a building filled with offices so during this time of the day it was packed with men and women who were dining before returning to their work. However there were also kids as some families had come for lunch as well.

As for the assailants, they definitely weren’t bank robbers: if some robbery had taken place Superman would have heard. Probably some terrorists encouraged by the fact that Superman seemed absent lately decided to spread pain and death.

Well, they’ve made a serious mistake.

As he was almost there, Superman decided to wait before entering. He knew that if he surged inside in their panic or to cause as many casualties as they could the terrorists would fire frantically.

So Superman chose to act differently and turned his eyes into laser vision. It took only a few seconds to melt their weapons with them realizing only when the firearms were useless.

Then he launched himself in shattering the window display and like a twister he tackled the terrorists knocking them out one by one in a matter of seconds.

People were staring with puzzled eyes; everything was happening too fast for them to discern. But suddenly as the last assailant dropped unconscious and the hurricane stopped revealing Superman, a massive cheer erupted along with laughter.

Superman’s smile was huge as he looked at the people whose lives were saved: well, the room was a mess with pieces of cutlery everywhere; upturned tables and chairs; the smell of gunfire was intense and some people were lying down bleeding. Yet the nightmare had ended.

He noticed that some kids were taking video with their Smart Phones as the customers reluctantly at first but thrilled eventually surrounded Superman to thank him.

Police officers surged inside pointing their guns only to lower them seeing every terrorist on the floor and Superman among a cheering crowd.

“It’s safe, lieutenant” the Man of Steel said to the head of the officers I’m here.”
Darkseid stared in the air in front of him and both Bagdana and Ivy saw Superman fighting with ease several thugs inside a restaurant.

Darkseid crossed his arms and looked at Bagdana who immediately remembered what Ivy had told him about Superman’s nightmare with Bruce. His immediate thought was that Bruce’s presence even in his dream had a strong effect on the Kryptonian: even he had underestimated Bruce’s power. He took in Darkseid’s slightly ironic look.

“That would be a start for regaining his popularity…” the New God commented dryly.

“Then we just obliterate him sooner…” Bagdana answered casually and his eyes filled with pure hatred focused on the Man of Steel in the footage Darkseid conjured.

The New God’s grin was broad.

“That was the best thing my advisor ever said…”

“Oh! I love those war councils in the cave! They are so atmospheric!” Tony exclaimed stretching his arms in the air and inhaled deeply only to cough. “Though the air down here is a bit fusty…” he looked at the bats hanging from the ceiling. “No offence…”

But then Hero who was lurking in a stool before the bench made a spectacular jump and landed with a black flying rodent in his mouth; Tony whistled but Bruce who was near took gently his kitten and released the flying rodent that wasn’t injured and flew away from certain death. Selina who was leaning on the working bench laughed.

“An ongoing vicious war!” she said dramatic and exchanged amused glances with Tony.

“Bats are not enemies” Bruce said to Hero who was looking at him displeased. “And this isn’t a war council” he looked at Tony “I just wanted to update you to the data Jor El sent me and the cave processor is the best option.”

Tony made a small circle movement with his head.

“I think it’s high time you focused on your surgery instead as I do…and you’re still keep in touch with the alien’s – how to call it? – surrogate hologram father?”

Bruce let Hero on the floor raising his index finger.

“Behave…or you’ll be banned from the cave” he said warningly but then smiled because he just couldn’t stay angry with his kitten. “Yes, I contact Jor El still because things are serious.”

Tony crooked his mouth, slumping on the stool.

“And your surgery?” Selina asked.

“It can wait” Bruce said bringing his wheelchair to the computer bench. “Dr. Strange needs time to be prepared and if we let things unfold without doing anything the surgery and being able to walk again won’t have any importance.”

Tony frowned.
“Are things so bad?”

Bruce nodded and pressed a key in the keyboard bringing on the central screen the feeding from the building where Luthor was working on the machine that now was three feet high, shaped like an ellipse with the half of its walls ready but still the other half just started; inside a dark blue polygonal rock was pulsing like an inanimate heart. Tony stood and frowned.

“A really mysterious machine…An energy producing module? A new kind of energy.”

Bruce looked at his friend.

“Anti Life Equation.”

Tony pursed his lips.

“The supposed mathematic formula that gives to the one who possess it the power to control every sentient being?” he licked his lips. “Bruce, this is a scientific myth that was never proved.”

Selina shook her head.

“Thankfully…”

Bruce however typed some orders to his keyboard and the strange symbols the items had were shown on the screen.

“You want to tell us that those symbols actually have to do with the Equation?” Tony narrowed his eyes.

“According to Jor El they do. He recognized immediately the symbols as originating from a planet called Apokolips” Tony cocked his eyebrows. “Their leader – dictator – is called Darkseid and he is constantly trying to find that formula to force his order of things to the entire universe.”

“Very original…” Selina slurred rolling her eyes.

Bruce grinned.

“He and his troops have already devastated hundreds of planets seeking for the raw materials for the formula: the materials that will set the puzzles of the Equation to the correct position.”

Tony scratched his head.

“I’d like to hear what ecologists would have to say to that…So this Dark – something has turned his attention to Earth?”

“Jor El believes that this being thinks that humans are the material he was looking for – and that’s the reason he made everything to get back the items from me and to release Luthor from prison: he obviously is years on Earth studying his material. He had brought the items here and trusted them to Luthor so when I got the control of LexLabs he was infuriated.”

Selina who had crossed her arms over the chest raised her palm.

“Wait…So Mannheim works for an alien? Because we know that he was trying to take back those things.”

Bruce met her eyes.
“I believe that Mannheim is just a shirt to cover Darkseid’s true identity — I felt something of his power when he came to my office and it explains the mystery around him and the servitude of Luthor in front of him.”

Tony nodded.

“So they are among us indeed, huh? Alien movies were never my favorite… And if Mannheim is that new UFO on the block then Intergang is run by aliens and the attack on you back in the island was also his doing.”

Selina who was present during the attack nodded.

“Those creatures definitely looked like aliens.”

“Parademons” Bruce added. “Darkseid’s troops.”

Tony nodded.

“That makes perfect sense since you had the items in your possession and he was anxious to get them back.”

“It wasn’t that: he was already launching raids to the LexLabs to get them back – plus, the attack on me wouldn’t have helped his cause the slightest. He attacked me to get to Superman.”

Selina tapped her fingers on the bench.

“Of course” she said “sending the fake Diana to save you so that she starts seducing Superman. He wants Superman under his control when he launches his attack on Earth.”

Bruce nodded.

“He feared and hated Superman more than anything else on the planet.”

Tony snorted.

“I feel so discriminated…” he said with irony.

Selina sniggered.

“We’ll give you an Oscar next year to fix this…”

Tony winked to her playfully and then he hit his palms determined.

“So we know who he is, where he lives and what he plans – let’s get the alien freak” he stood.

But Bruce looked at him calm but definite and Tony pursed his lips.

“Guess not, huh?” he sat again at the stool.

“If we bust him right now, first he will get free easily: one of his powers is to mind control people – he did that with thugs and with highest rank officials to get Luthor released…I felt his manipulative power when he came to my office; he tried to invade my mind to get the items.”

Selina frowned.

“But the asshole failed – he doesn’t know with whom he has to do.”
Bruce rubbed his chin.

“I think that the Black Butterfly worked like a shield.”

“Can we reproduce the gem?” Tony asked. “It could be very useful when facing that monster.”

“I don’t know if reproducing the gem will maintain its unique qualities. Anyway, what I was saying is that he would be free again and knowing that we are aware of his identity and plans he’ll make his attack sooner.”

“You said that he wants his machine ready first.”

“Yes but if he sees that his plans are in danger he can easily conquer Earth first and then finish his machine. The more he remains blind to our knowledge the better for us. We gain more time to organize and recruit our allies.”

Tony nodded with some irony in his eyes.

“Superman.”

Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“I know you don’t like him…”

Selina pouted.

“Tony? Not liking Superman? Oh, Bruce, don’t say that preposterous thing again…” she said snidely and Tony chuckled.

Bruce crooked his mouth.

“If we attack Darkseid now Superman will be manipulated by Ivy to fight alongside them or simply he will be neutralized – it won’t be difficult as he blindly trusts her: both options don’t help our cause. We need Superman with us. Darkseid belongs to a race called New Gods and he is really powerful: Jor El said that he can be incredibly fast; he equals Superman’s power and also have another power nobody else has: Omega Beams which he launches from his eyes to kill his enemies.”

“Great…” Selina commented and cocked an eyebrow. “And till now sounded too dull…”

Tony yanked his head backwards keeping his arms crossed over his chest.

“Still we have so many people with extraordinary skills on our side – Superman is not that necessary.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“You and Lucius took every precaution to make the risk factors of my surgery minimum yet you still wanted the best doctor to perform that surgery in order to eliminate the risk even more” Selina looked at Tony and he rubbed his goatee. “We are talking about the survival of Earth and 7 billion people: would you want to let any risk factors unchecked?”

Tony sighed.

“No, I don’t! The lucky bastard…”

Bruce grinned.
“We need every hour we can get: your mention of reproducing the Black Butterfly is valid but we must find a way to somehow emanate its shielding quality to our allies. And for waking up Superman we’ll need…”

“Kryptonite” Selina completed.

“Perhaps but most of all we’ll need the true Amazon Princess not only to show Superman that his Diana is a fake but also to have a precious ally to our fight.”

Tony licked his lips.

“Supposing that the legendary tribe and their Princess really exists; and if they do exist how are you sure that we can find them?”

Selina met Bruce’s eyes.

“Well, I can’t be sure that I’ll find her but I’ll do my best: I have already gathered references about their locations from ancient authors like Homer, Herodotus, Apollonius Rhodius, Strabo etc. Amazons’ homeland seems to be relocated at times but if we combine the information we have maybe will get close.”

Selina rolled her eyes.

“I hated history in school…”

“History blended with mythology actually…” Tony commented.

“And I’ll ask information from Cassandra and her mother: perhaps they know something more.”

“And when you find the location what would you do?” Tony asked.

Bruce shrugged.

“Batman will talk to her.”

Tony chuckled.

“These women according to the legends are lethal and very hostile to men; you will probably need to fight.”

“I know.”

Tony leaned to him.

“Leave that mission to me, littl’ guy, not only because we can’t risk you get injured again but also because…” he inhaled and twitched his eyebrows suggestively “my charm is notorious…”

Selina sniggered.

“Gossip shows say other things…”

Tony widened his eyes scornful.

“Slandering of the gutter press…”

Bruce shook his head.
“No, Tony: I’ll go myself – you need to stay here and organize our allies. You’re S.H.I.E.L.D.’s director and you can do things without causing panic or drawing attention; also, we need you to perfect our means of neutralizing Darkseid’s machine.”

“Yeah, it is most fortunate that we have the items monitored and our sensors there: I can turn those sensors to means for neutralizing the machine. I’ll also try to find a way to deflect the Black Butterfly’s protection to our allies. But, Bruce, you can’t go there alone: what if she doesn’t believe you and instead imprison or kill you?”

Selina stretched her beautiful body.

“He won’t be alone.”

Tony looked up at her.

“You agree with that?” he glanced at Bruce. “Aren’t you afraid that she may stick there?”

Bruce smiled and Selina snorted.

“Nah… You, boys (except Bruce) might be pretentious, stupid, ungracious, graceless” Tony mouthed ‘thanks’ “but I do prefer a bit of testosterone in my world…”

“What about Oliver Queen? What’s his part in this?” Tony asked frowned.

Bruce pressed his lips; he was fighting with himself whether he should tell his friends the truth or leave it for later.

“Bagdana is working for Darkseid” he said in the end casually though he had caused his friend’s eyes widening.

“But you had defeated him; you sent him to the Tartarus weak” Selina said.

“Yes, but a god could still free him.”

Tony nodded and crooked his mouth.

“Now all the pieces are in place: Darkseid freed the ancient demon to assist him and the cunning bastard orchestrated all this – the Amazon beguiling Superman enslaving him to their will and at the same time breaking your heart.”

Selina looked at Bruce.

“And Oliver Queen? They mind controlled him as well to be their puppet?”

“I’m convinced that Bagdana has possessed Queen’s body to be able to walk among us.”

Tony brought his palms on his face.

“Of course! The fake Amazon came with him; and he is infatuated with you.”

Bruce decided to tell them everything.

“And we can’t rely on the Arrow because Oliver Queen is the Arrow: he had lured Batman to see Ivy with Superman making love that night because he knew that Batman and Bruce Wayne is the same person. That’s why he managed to find Loki’s palace: remember what Thor had said? No mere god or mere mortal could locate it.”
Selina lolled her head.

“And certainly we can’t bust him for the same reason we can’t attack Mannheim.”

“Exactly. We need to move in stealth mode until we’re ready.”

Suddenly the screen on the left turned to live footage from Metropolis and Bruce looked there: he had programmed his processor to scan for any news concerning Superman or Wonder Woman.

The footage showed Superman beaming among exhilarated, clearly relieved people at a pavement outside a restaurant that clearly had been under attack; police cars and ambulances were scattered around and paramedics were transferring injured. The reporter was relaying that Superman’s intervention had saved many people from a terroristic attack.

Bruce frowned.

“You said that they planned to make people lose their faith in Superman but he seems to have ruined their plans” Selina said.

Bruce nodded; his eyes fixed on Superman’s beaming face that made his heart fly.

“That’s bad…” he mumbled in the end.

Selina narrowed her eyes.

“But we want him on our side.”

“They won’t risk their plan’s failure; this will make them act sooner concerning Superman; after all, better taking him away now before he makes more helping people showing that he still cares” he said pressing numbers in his keyboard. “We need to keep Superman away from Ivy till we return with the real Princess – yet if Jor El calls him in the Fortress and tries to keep him there, Superman will suspect and return to her. We need something that will keep him away without raising his suspicions.”

“And what’s that?” Tony asked.

The sound of dialing echoed through the cave and after three times a female voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Martha” Bruce said.
“Bruce, dear!”

The honest joy in that somewhat tired voice made Tony raise his eyebrows surprised.

“Bruce has a good mother-in-law…” Selina whispered to the billionaire.

“If only her son was the same…” Tony snorted.

Bruce brought his index finger to his lips hushing his friends.

“Martha, how are you?”

“I guess fine, sweetheart; and you?”

“Fine. Mmm, Martha, it’s something I want to ask you” he decided to go straight ahead.

“Anything, Bruce.”

Bruce rubbed his chin.

“It has to do with Superman: the Avengers have some indications that he might be in danger from Diana.”

“What?” the woman sounded astounded. “I mean, I Know she is bad yet that she can harm Clark is incredible…”

Bruce looked at his friends.

“They believe that she is not the Amazon Princess and actually is allied with someone who wants to hurt Superman; it seems that she has put him under some kind of mind control.”

A small sigh both from worry and relief came out of Martha’s mouth.

“I knew that my boy wasn’t himself…” she mumbled and Bruce pressed his lips.

“I know you did, Martha.”

“You knew it too, Bruce…you never stopped believing in him.”

Bruce avoided his friends’ eyes feeling uncomfortable.

“Well, Martha, Tony asked me” Tony pouted showing with his thumbs his chest mouthing ‘me?’ “to tell you to call Superman to stay with you for a time; they believe that this woman and her associates might try to hurt him so it is urgent that we make him go away from her.”

A sharp intake of air from the other end of the line.

“Of course…he blindly trusts her so it would be too easy for her to trap him. Do these people know his true identity? Because if they do then they’ll find him easily here…So maybe he will be safer in the Fortress?”

Bruce shook his head: she was right in her reasoning.
“Clark hasn’t brought her to you, right?” Martha confirmed that. “Then he hasn’t revealed to her his true identity. On the other hand, Clark has showed suspicious behavior towards Jor El so if he calls him to the Fortress and attempt to keep him there, Superman will immediately figure out his intention and return to the fake Diana. Instead you can call him to stay with you without raising suspicions; also, Tony told me that he will contact Jor El so that the Fortress’ technology would conceal Superman’s presence to your house.”

“I’m not afraid for myself, dear” she said calmly.

“I know, Martha; you’re one of the bravest people I know. However we’ll take every necessary precaution.”

“I see you keep the promise you gave me” a small smile hued her voice “you still love my stupid son.”

Bruce pressed his lips feeling his friends’ stares.

“I know that he is safe as long as you are here...What else do your friend want me to do? Speak to Clark about the truth?”

“No, Martha; do not tell him anything – if you attempt to tell him the truth about Diana and her associates he’ll react badly; probably he’ll leave and cease to trust you. Tony wants you to just keep him there with you until the Avengers find proofs to show him that she isn’t the real Princess.”

“Fine, Bruce: I’ll do that. Do you want me to do it right now?”

“The sooner the better, Martha: he just saved some people in Metropolis and Tony is certain that the fake Diana and her allies won’t like that and perhaps they’ll try to neutralize him immediately.”

Martha’s voice was determined without indicating any fear though her heart was beating fast.

“I’ll call him right now: I just hope that her influence isn't so strong to affect his love for his mother.”

“I’m sure that nothing can affect his love for you, Martha.”

“Oh, dear...”

“As soon as the Avengers find what they want they’ll come to reveal everything and help Superman see the truth.”

“Fine. Thank you, Bruce.”

“I’m not doing anything, Martha; I just relay a message.”

“In that case, can you thank Mr. Stark for his concern about Clark?”

Tony’s eyes bulged and he pressed his palm over his mouth so the chuckles wouldn’t be heard.

“I’ll do that, Martha.”

“I hope after all these end we’ll see each other again, sweetheart.”

“I’ll be very happy to do that, Martha.”

When the dial ended Bruce remained thoughtful and Tony walked closer.
“I being so concerned about Superman?” he snorted. “You lied to the poor woman…” he shook his index finger with disapproval grinning wickedly.

Bruce shook his head.

“Bruce can’t be investigating things, right? More so taking action…”

Tony scratched his head.

“I’m teasing you, littl’ guy…”

Bruce smiled.

“I know and believe me I would have liked to tell Martha the truth but it’s better if she doesn’t know.”

Selina crossed her arms over the chest.

“The fewer the better” she agreed.

Tony brushed his goatee.

“I’ll make sure that the Kent farm will be a blind spot for every human means of monitoring.”

Bruce nodded.

“And I’ll contact Jor El to cast additional concealing methods in order to block our extraordinary enemies: Superman must stay away from Ivy until we return.”

“In the meantime, I think it will be prudent to ask Dr. Strange’s help with the mind control think” Tony remarked.

Bruce turned his eyes on Tony.

“Not mention anything about me…”

Tony grinned and nodded.

“Don’t worry…But…I’m thinking about the Amazon’s location” he licked his lips. “In a world where hundreds of satellites scan the planet every second and also radars are used from almost every military and common ship how their homeland remained hidden? I mean, maybe they are just a legend? A part of mythology?”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“Even ancient historians spoke about them and Ra’s taught me that ancient Greek historians are the fathers of the modern history science; also, there’s no mythology without a speck of truth. Now if they still exist remains to be find… However – about the fact nobody has found the Amazons – Greece has many still unexplained electromagnetic fields that intrigue the scientists so maybe Themiscyra, if really exists, exploits such a field to remain hidden: you know better than anyone about blind spots for satellites.”

“Something like the Bermuda Triangle?” Selina said.

“Exactly.”
Tony tapped his fingers on the computer bench.

“You’ll still need a jet to take you to Greece and a yacht since you two will explore the Aegean and that means that there must be someone trustworthy to do the driving. You take my jet and Happy will take you there – he can also drive a yacht: a rental one.”

Bruce nodded.

“Lucius will be our driver – Happy may be trustworthy but I don’t want him putting one and one together. Also, Lucius can give us insight about the electromagnetic fields – he has developed software that can bypass such fields into revealing what they hide” Tony whistled impressed. “And if Dr. Strange needs some detailed info about the project both of you developed you can provide them.”

Tony crooked his mouth.

“I feel left out of the party and you should know that for Tony – party animal – Stark this is dreadful.”

Selina smirked and Bruce closed his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Tony, but you’re precious here.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows and nodded.

“Yadda, yadda, yadda…Just promise that when this Darkasshole eats dust you’ll remember the coordinates of that island” he crossed his palms behind his neck and sighed closing his eyes. “I’ll need some vacations!”

Bruce and Selina exchanged amused glances.

Clark’s eyes were focused at the PC screen on his desk where the Planet’s site had on the top of the page his story about Superman’s intervention at the “Dory’s” Restaurant an hour ago. Perry had patted him in the back – his way of congratulating his employees – and now the chief was inside his office enjoying the number of hits their site was getting.

Yet Clark needed to see the coverage from other, neutral sources so he searched the news outlets: he had to fight a huge grin from his face as journalists’ comments were welcoming Superman back. The readers’ comments were between bitterness due to his latest indifference, relief and joy for his return. Clark silently promised to them that he wouldn’t ever close his eyes to their need; that he would be always there from now on.

He had heard the familiar steps before the familiar figure stood above him; he was happy for that but he didn’t look up till Lois was there for sure.

“Good job…” she said a bit indifferent meaning both Clark and Superman and before he managed to answer she walked away towards the door leading outside the reporters’ space.

Clark followed her and Lois stopped in the niche of the closet with the janitorial equipment.

“Don’t expect us to be like before” she said crooking her mouth having guessed her friend’s intentions and thoughts.
Clark closed his eyes and ruffled his hair.

“The fact I broke up with him doesn’t change who I am, Lois, not our friendship; why are you so hard on me?”

She gritted her teeth.

“Because what you did was cruel and my friend would never do such cruelty.”

Clark huffed.

“Please, Lois; you have also broke up with people – that’s life: at some point just you can’t go on as much as you don’t want to hurt the other. He understood that; and you have to know that he was far from perfect in our relationship.”

Lois frowned and narrowed her eyes.

“Do you really want to blame this on him? The world saw you fucking with that bitch on that rooftop” he whispered in case someone overhead them.

He nodded.

“Okay, okay…just don’t call her that: she is not a bitch!” Lois rolled her eyes and looked away ready to leave which Clark noticed. “Let’s put that behind us already! Maybe my behavior was wrong but nobody is perfect, Lois…why can’t you forgive me for once?”

Lois growled and crossed her arms over her chest. Clark smiled.

“Holding a grudge against me won’t change what happened neither would send me back to him…”

Lois cocked an eyebrow in irony.

“I doubt that he’d have taken you back even if you begged.”

Clark chuckled and shook his head.

“Why I would ever want to do that? And beg for that? But I have everything I want and I’m happy at last” he frowned. “I’d never return to that!”

Lois nodded.

“It is official: You’re an asshole and…”

She didn’t end her phrase when Clark’s phone rang; he frowned recognizing his Ma’s tone.

“It’s Ma…” he said to Lois. “Hi, Ma! How are you?” for the first time after months he felt actually good speaking to his Ma – till now his guts were clenched every time he had to speak with her. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Give her my love” Lois said.

“You have Lois’ love – and you too” he said to Lois and frowned; he nodded. “Alright…Yeah, don’t worry, I’ll fix it.”

He ended the dial and looked at Lois’ puzzled look.
“She wants to spend some time with me.”

“Is she ill?” Lois asked deeply concerned.

Clark narrowed his eyes.

“No, if she was, I’d have felt it. She says that she missed me and feels too lonely” he pouted “actually many things have happened lately that created some distance between us.”

His friend smirked.

“That seems to be the case for every person you love…” she raised her eyebrows. “At least, that in the past you said you loved.”

Clark crooked his mouth.

“I never lied about my love, Lois.”

“Tell that to Bruce.”

He didn’t answer; he was tired and fed off by explaining all the time. He sighed because what mattered now was his Ma.

“As a matter of fact I missed Ma too.”

Lois cocked an eyebrow.

“And the Princess? She won’t object? Or you’ll take her to meet her mother-in-law?” she remarked snidely to Clark’s uneasiness.

“He doesn’t know that I have a human mother” he admitted and felt bad even before seeing Lois’ affronted look.

Lois chuckled.

“Of course, the arrogant bitch would have lost her respect for Superman if she knew that he is so much connected with humans! That two common humans saved his life as a baby and raised him like their son – two poor farmers of all people” he shook her head disgusted for the Princess’ contempt and Clark’s compliance with her attitude. “How can you be like that, Clark?”

He didn’t answer.

“You don’t understand, Lois…”

“I understand better than you do!” her inflamed eyes stabbed his. “At least look to make it and visit your mother – you owe her that. After your exclusive with Superman, Perry won’t have an objection.”

Thomas crossed the front door to the clinic’s foyer; it was late afternoon and he had come there immediately after his lecture in the university. To be frank Thomas loathed the place and was bored of his shifts there – especially since they were volunteer job which meant no money. Yet it was something he had to do in order to achieve his goal. And he was certain that he was close to that.

He had no doubt that Stark would press his friends to see how beneficial his hiring would be. And
then all the major players would press Bruce into accepting; the brat couldn’t refuse to them even if he didn’t want Thomas to perform the surgery. In the end, Brucie would have to yield in order to not displease his loved ones.

And once every detail about Bruce was at his disposal then his secrets would be an open book to him.

As he entered the always busy foyer he caught with the corner of his eye Leslie heading to her office. He hurried his steps till he caught up with her.

Leslie was absorbed in her thoughts so Thomas’ presence was a surprise for her. The young man beamed to her.

“Hi, Leslie! Wow! It seems like ages since the last time I saw you…”

She regarded him quietly.

“Well, with us doctors this happens often” she answered and continued her way with Thomas at her side.

“Yeah, I guess you must be extra busy with Bruce’s latest adventure with Joker and the new developments.”

Leslie wasn’t a fool and Thomas knew that so he smiled innocently when she looked at him puzzled.

“*New developments?”*

Thomas shook his head.

“I guess all of you must be in frantic work now that Bruce’s surgery is so near.”

Leslie frowned.

“How did you come up with such an assumption?”

Thomas grinned and shrugged one shoulder.

“Someone like Tony Stark will make everything so that his friend walks again as soon as possible. And Lucius Fox certainly is a great asset. So are we almost there?” he asked with his eyes sparkling like the enthusiasm in his voice.

Dr. Thompkins remained neutral; she could see how interested – obsessed – Thomas was with Bruce’s surgery and frankly she couldn’t blame Bruce for not liking that.

“There is no haste for Bruce’s surgery” she said casually and began walking.

Thomas didn’t believe that but still…

“Have you given up? Is there a bad development in Bruce’s condition that forbids the surgery?” he gave his voice honest concern. “Perhaps Joker did something to him? Oh! That is awful and so unfair! After all this man suffered…” he shook his head.

Leslie set her jaw and locked eyes with him.

“No, Bruce’s condition hasn’t any change. But you know that these things demand time and patience. We won’t risk Bruce’s life in order to hurry things up.”
“Of course! It is my tactic as well. Especially, with my project on complicated spine injuries” he smiled. “I don’t want to brag but with Superman’s precious contribution surgeries that prior wouldn’t even be risked, took place smoothly and 95% percent of the injuries were almost completely restored.”

Don’t want to brag…Leslie thought fighting a smirk. But you do, dear Tommy…

Dr. Elliot decided that he had said enough for the time being.

“Well, I must go to my patients now” he said to her and took his most serious and concerned expression. “I have said it to Tony” he decided that it was better to pick the honesty option “and I’m going to repeat it to you as well: if you need any aid; any assist to Bruce’s surgery…I’ll be more than happy to contribute with my knowledge and experience.”

Leslie smiled.

“I know, Thomas; I’ll remember that, thank you” she continued her way.

Thomas crooked his mouth watching her and then pursed his lips: they really didn’t have another choice so he only had to wait.

“Poems by Emily Dickinson”

It was the first thing that caught Clark’s eyes as soon as he entered his parents’ house still holding his Ma in a one arm hug. It shouldn’t have and frankly Clark felt awkward and uncomfortable because he immediately noticed the book on the antique small round oak coffee table next to her Ma’s favorite light blue armchair.

He had arrived flying, as soon as his working hours ended. Perry – thankfully – didn’t object to his request for a few days’ leave, especially when he heard that it was about his mother: Ms. Kent was often sending homemade delicacies to their editor.

Clark wanted to reach his Ma the soonest: the last couple of months their relationship faced some crisis so he was thrilled when his Ma spoke to him with her old warmth and asked him to come to Smallville and spend some time with her. Perhaps after his latest intervention that saved people’s lives she realized that he was unchanged and maybe he’d manage in these days to make her like Diana.

Clark chose to fly there not only to save time but also to not draw much attention with his arrival: everyone in the town knew him and honestly he didn’t have the mood to speak with anyone.

As soon as he landed inside the yard Martha wearing her wool knitted gray cardigan came out and rushed to him and Superman who on landing changed his clothes into Clark Kent caught her half way and hugged her.

“I missed you, sweetie” Martha told him kissing his cheek and Clark’s heart felt like being put in its right place after long.

“You still have that book?” he asked casually.

Martha followed his eyes to the object that caught her son’s eye.

“It bothers you?” it was Bruce’s gift on their first meeting.
Clark shook his head.

“I thought that after everything that happened…” well, he didn’t know how to finish his phrase; after all, he was at fault for their break up or at least that was what his Ma believed.

Martha pressed her lips.

“It is a gift given with love and I appreciate it. I don’t see a reason to get rid of it because you two are not still together.”

Clark knew that he couldn’t ask that; he was aware of his mother’s affection towards Bruce.

“You’re still in touch with him?”

Martha understood that it was a question that could lead to nasty things if Clark got suspicious about Bruce’s involvement in her request to see him.

“I don’t think that it’s bad to call once in a while to learn about his health: the poor thing is constantly met with misfortunes.”

Clark nodded thoughtful.

“No…I guess it’s not bad…”

Martha smiled relieved and detached from her son’s hug.

“Sit down and I’ll fetch your favorite apple pie: I just took it out of the oven.”

Clark’s smile was broad.

“The smell was torturing as soon as I crossed the state’s borders! I thought you’d never say it! Do you want me to help?”

“No, honey. I’ll bring everything.”

Clark sat on the light blue couch unconsciously choosing a safe distance from the book as if it was contaminated. However it took only a few seconds to realize that the book still carried Bruce’s special, rare perfume.

He closed his eyes pissed: he didn’t want to be haunted by that human! He thought of Diana…he missed her already yet his Ma was really important and she deserved some attention too: after all, with Diana he was sharing every day and even if he didn’t like to think about that: at some point his Ma would be gone while Diana would at his side forever.

He stubbornly ignored the book and looked elsewhere, his gaze wandering to the home of his carefree childhood. So many fond memories; he grinned but it was a sad smile: moments that wouldn’t come back…Despite the bitter taste in his mouth Clark was happy for being there after all these months: he felt that he needed some change in scenery and his parents’ house and the farm was perfect.

Martha returned carrying a tray with two mugs with hot coffee and two plates with tantalizing apple pie that made Clark’s mouth water. She placed the tray on the table and sat next to her son. She caressed his raven hair and he smiled.

“I thought you were pissed with me?” Clark asked.
Martha pressed her lips.

“How can a mother be pissed with her only son?” she replied. “I was worried, Clark.”

He looked her in the eyes.

“I told you that nothing had changed in me.”

She nodded although things had changed in her son but thankfully they were results of external influence so they could be stopped and reversed.

“You can’t blame a Ma for worrying…”

Clark kissed her palm.

“No, I can’t, can I?”

“You’re my good boy – of course you can’t…I thought you were eager to test my pie?”

Clark cocked his eyebrows.

“I do!”

He grabbed the plate and began devouring the delicacy under his Ma’s warm stare.

“I’m glad you’re here, honey…I’m glad I can take care of you like the old times…”

Clark smiled.

“I’m glad I returned, Ma.”

“Master Bruce is not here at the moment, Mr. Queen” the butler’s thick accented voice echoed through the dark, humid cave.

Bagdana stood in front of the round shaped underground lake staring at the contents of his memory reflected on the waters: his last meeting with Bruce.

“Do you happen to know when he is going to be back?” he asked with Queen’s voice speaking to the air sending his voice to the phone back to his penthouse.

“I am afraid that I do not have an answer to that, sir. Master Bruce is out of Gotham for business. Would you like me to ask him to call you when he returns?”

“I’d be grateful, Alfred. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome, sir.”

He ended the call and grunted displeased.

“To what do I owe your new visit so soon after our last one?” Bagdana asked without turning his back to acknowledge the presence in his cave.

Ivy walked towards him and only then the demon wearing his real form turned to her.

“You’re looking for your naughty pet?” she asked with irony clearly having overheard; she cocked
an eyebrow. “When all this ends and you have him in chains he won’t be able to wander around even with his stupid chair.”

Bagdana narrowed his eyes.

“Mind your own business” he hissed quietly but the effect was rather chilling. “Which brings us back to what you’re doing here.”

She gave him the piece of paper she was holding.

“What’s this?” he asked frowned.

Ivy smirked.

“Our plans must be delayed…When I returned to my apartment Superman wasn’t there for the first time after he ditched Brucie. Instead I found this on the table.”

Bagdana perused the words scribbled on it and looked at his ally.

“So he has something to do and he will be away for some days?” he cocked an eyebrow and pursed his thick lips.

Ivy narrowed her eyes.

“Do you think it is suspicious?”

The demon rubbed his chin.

“Perhaps he indeed has things to do…. But as you said it is the first time he does that and I don’t like it coming after he saved those humans.”

Ivy cocked her eyebrows.

“He bothered with them only because I wasn’t there to dissuade him…”

Bagdana smiled.

“But he also left for a couple of days clearly defying your charm and his addiction to you…”

She fumed annoyed and yanked her head.

“That’s not true!” she clenched her fist. “He left but that doesn’t mean that he will last much without taking his dose of me” she narrowed her eyes. “Soon he’ll come back desperate for my perfume and my body.”

The demon shook his head and turned to the underground lake before him.

“Hours have passed that he is away…” he said thoughtful.

“There’s just no way he overcame my charm!” she hissed insulted and twitched the golden lasso in the air whipping the rocks.

Bagdana smirked on this reaction and nodded.

“I’m sure, my dear…”

Ivy somewhat calmer walked closer to the natural pool and gazed inside; Bagdana had already
obliterated Bruce’s reflection from there so Ivy saw nothing.

“Can you locate him?”

The demon crooked his mouth.

“No” he saw Ivy frowning. “But that’s not saying much: the Kryptonian has ways to conceal his whereabouts even if he doesn’t do this consciously.”

Ivy snorted.

“Darkseid won’t be happy about this development. He reminds me of a mutated giant Smurf that crushed into a truck…”

Bagdana chuckled.

“Why don’t you say that to him?”

She pouted.

“I never insulted people for their appearance…even if I killed them. What will happen if Darkseid finds out about Superman’s departure? He’ll believe that we failed and won’t grant us our rewards.”

Bagdana waved that off.

“We don’t have to spoil his good mood…nothing happened and Superman will come to us now or later.”

Ivy hit her foot on the stony ground.

“I’d prefer to end this sooner than later: I have some millions of oppressed organic souls to liberate.”

Bagdana raised his palm in a waiting gesture.

“Patience is a valuable virtue, my dear: after all, plants survive for ages just with being patient and resilient. If we make a hasty movement Superman could suspect something.”

She chuckled.

“He is an idiot, totally dependent on what I say to him.”

“I won’t risk it: this business is too important for me.”

Ivy cocked an eyebrow.

“Because of Wayne” she snorted.

“Exactly” he replied casually. “We’ll wait and make him come to you.”

Bruce gazed at the sapphire blue waters that covered the horizon in every direction. The light sea breeze caressed his face cooling his skin pleasantly since it was spring but still the weather was a bit cold even in Greece. He had climbed the ramp Lucius had installed to connect the cabins with the deck and now he was standing near the edge.

It was Wednesday. Tony’s jet landed on Athens Monday morning and they immediately headed to
Marathon to visit Cassandra and her family.

Cassandra translated Bruce’s request: to learn anything they knew about the location of the Amazons’ legendary island.

Bruce was looking at Cassandra’s mother without hiding his eagerness and the woman smiled faintly before speaking. Cassandra after her mother finished turned to Bruce.

“She says that her knowledge about the island is too limited: she had heard the old ones discussing that this island was almost invisible, hidden by energy.”

“Electromagnetic fields” Bruce remarked and Cassandra nodded.

“Right. Nobody was certain about the exact location but they assumed that it must have been somewhere between Evia and Skyros (the Amazons used to take their horses from that island); there the electromagnetic fields collide. However nobody ever tried to find them because really there was no reason for that.”

Lucius who was watching the discussion intervened.

“I know about the electromagnetic fields of the area but they cover a really large span so if you have anything more specific I’d be grateful.”

Yet Cassandra’s mother looked sad when her daughter translated. Cassandra was shaking her head hearing what her mother was saying.

“I’m sorry but she doesn’t know anything more.”

Bruce pressed his lips and lowered his gaze which didn’t evade Cassandra’s mother who took his hands in hers. Bruce raised his eyes and met the woman’s gaze.

Cassandra’s mother touched the spot where the Black Butterfly was under his blouse and said something.

“She says that you must trust your instinct: you’re the bearer of the goddess’ sacred gem; you’re her chosen so if someone can find their island…that’s you.”

Well, that wasn’t very comforting for him because although he trusted his instinct in every case, in this one he’d prefer something more concrete. At least, they had an area to search.

Cassandra’s mother sensing his distress suggested that he should visit the ancient temple.

“Let the energy of the temple fill you and guide your steps…”

And he did so. He spent a couple of hours in the ruins along with Cassandra. He didn’t plan to stay so long but the place had such tranquility, piece and energy that Bruce realized how much he needed and stayed there literally soaking in them reluctant to leave that state of mind after the storm he had faced all those months.

Lucius and Selina had stayed out of the temple, near the car.

When they returned to the house Cassandra and her mother insisted that they stayed there for the night Cassandra pointing out with a smile that it’d be very handy since they certainly wanted to pass unnoticed from the local media.

They did stay and Lucius used the time to make the arrangements so that the yacht they rented
waited for them at the bay of Marathon; to the side that wasn’t visible from the land. They’d use a rental boat to reach it.

The next morning they thanked the two women for their hospitality and Bruce stayed behind as Lucius and Selina went to the car. He thanked once again Cassandra and her mother for everything and the older woman touched his hand and smiled.

“You will make it, son; the goddess’ blessing is with you. I know you’d do everything for the world’s best and that makes me sure that everything will end as you want them” Cassandra translated.

As he watched the sparkling Aegean waters Bruce wished he had the same confidence with Cassandra’s mother. But several hours later onboard and they hadn’t found anything; Lucius was constantly scanning the area they crossed with his software that bypassed the electromagnetic fields. Yet its range wasn’t too broad so they needed to be in the island’s broader area to manage to see it which was like seeking a needle in a haystack. And his instinct wasn’t very talkative: how it could be?

He always had some facts on which his instinct relied. Now there weren’t any facts…

Bruce inhaled deeply the salted air and closed his eyes: so many things depended on their success. Darkseid’s defeat, the world’s survival, Clark’s life…

He opened his eyes and gazed at the clear blue horizon: unwillingly, he remembered the days he was doing the same thing sat in the round balcony of Tony’s villa in Thasos. He was gazing at the sky expecting to see Superman’s figure approaching…He remembered the joy every time he saw the beloved dot getting bigger and bigger…

He averted his eyes: that was over.

He rubbed his forehead feeling a headache developing rapidly. Maybe there were no Amazons after all…Maybe Bagdana just used a charming legend to seduce Superman.

Even if that was the case they would still fight: they had their weapons and the most important they knew what was lurking in the shadows; also, they did have the machine’s control.

However he needed the Princess Amazon to be real and help them because first she would be a valuable ally and second because she would show Superman the truth about Vivian and bring him to their side where he belonged.

To their side, not to him…Bruce pressed his lips: there was no way back to what they had with Clark even though these crystal waters reminded him all these beautiful moments in their island…He shook his head: this had no importance.

He felt two soft hands putting a jacket over his back and he turned to see Selina.

“Alfred told me to look after you” she said and sat down. “It’s beautiful, huh?”

Bruce smiled.

“Yes…It feels like home - oddly.”

Selina hugged her knees.

“They say that the perfect place for vacations is where you feel like your second home – and our stay in Thasos was perfect so the place became like a second home to you. Plus, one of your DNAs
comes from here…”

“Right” he said and looked ahead.

Selina pursed her lips.

“You know, I feel for Tony…”

“For missing the Amazons” Bruce chuckled.

“No for feeling bad about you not focusing on resting and exercising. You should have been back home doing your exercises and gathering energy and strength for that fucking operation.”

Bruce met her eyes.

“If Darkseid wins it won’t matter much if I become a paraplegic or a walking slave to Bagdana.”

Selina gulped uncomfortable.

“Don’t say that not even for a joke…” she said fighting the freezing feeling in her spine. “And I know that you would never become a slave.”

Bruce inhaled.

“I won’t…” he said quietly but adamant. “But you understand why what I’m doing now is more important than my surgery.”

Selina shook her head.

“And it’s him in the middle” she said.

Bruce closed his eyes.

“It is important that he is freed from her influence.”

Selina smiled fondly and raised her hand to hold Bruce’s.

“He is important to you.”

Bruce met her dazzling eyes.

“Please don’t go there…It is over – I told you before; but Superman is great and the people need him…” he sighed. “If only we had something about the Amazons’ island…”

“The lady said that you must trust your instinct and the Black Butterfly.”

Bruce crooked his mouth.

“I prefer more concrete things; I trust my instinct but to have a hunch I need something tangible…” he huffed.

Selina pouted.

“I’m sure you’ll find the way…”

Bruce looked at her.
“What did you say to Steve?”

“What we agreed: that you had some business out of Gotham and I would go with you.”

Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“I feel bad for disturbing your life every time…”

Selina frowned and showed with her hand around.

“Being on a 45 ft brand new yacht in the middle of gorgeous scenery and sailing for a fascinating adventure it’s hardly a disturbance; more of the grand gift in a lottery” she rose. “Shall we?” she asked looking at the cabins and Bruce nodded.

In the study, they found Lucius leaned above a detailed map of the area which he had crossed with his own map which showed the electromagnetic fields; the map was a perfect reproduction of an ancient map of the area. The scientist was drawing lines with the compass and the protractor. Next to the map was placed the laptop where image from Lucius’ software was shown; the image was the result of filtering the area from the fields. Till now the image on the screen was the same with what they saw with their bare eyes.

He turned to acknowledge the two youths smiling.

“Did you enjoy the view?”

The yacht was stationed. Lucius knew how to drive it and when he needed to do something else, he was putting the yacht in the auto pilot with a system he had developed; it was easy to attach the system to any yacht since it came like a USB stick.

“We would have enjoyed it more if we had seen a shore filled with anciently dressed women” Selina said casually sinking in the white leather sofa and Bruce nodded.

Lucius laughed.

“Yes but then we’d have to fight them…”

Bruce grinned.

“That’s a possibility but I hope we manage to avoid that.”

“I’m not afraid” Selina said cocking an eyebrow.

“Of course, Miss Kyle…” Lucius replied. “I brought some food from the kitchen; I thought that you’d be hungry and Mr. Wayne needs to take his medication.”

Bruce chuckled.

“Don’t tell me…Alfred cornered you as well?”

Lucius laughed.

“Cornered is an understatement, Mr. Wayne…”

“Thanks, Lucius” Selina said grabbing a bowl with pasta from the shining wooden table.

As Bruce was eating he remembered what Clark had told him about the Black Butterfly’s reaction to
the energy field in the Fortress. Indeed, he had read that gems had their own energy flow and the
Black Butterfly wasn’t a common gem so it had more energy than the others.

He let his plate on the small table and Selina looked at him worried.

“What is it, Bruce?”

Lucius straightened his body from studying the map and looked at Bruce.

“I know I’m not the best cook yet I hope it didn’t make you ill?”

“I’m fine and the food is great” Bruce said and moved the chair to the big desk where the map was
laid. “While being on the deck the Black Butterfly was exposed to the area’s magnetic field that
means that the gem was - let’s say – charged. Also, Black Butterfly has its own energetic qualities.
I’m curious to see the results.”

He pulled the pouch from under his blouse and took out the beautiful gem.

“If only…” he whispered and brought the gem over the map closing his eyes and thinking hard their
quest.

He touched the gem on the map keeping his eyes closed in deep focus. He emptied his mind from
everything except the island and sensed the vibrations of the gem. He wasn’t hearing anything apart
from the sea hitting gently the yacht.

And then he heard his friends’ sharp intakes of air.

“I don’t believe it” Selina whispered.

“Of course!” Lucius said. “The gem works like a compass!”

Bruce opened his eyes and saw the point of the triangle shaped diamond pointing to a spot in the
map. Lucius hurried to take a pencil and mark it.

Bruce looked at both his friends.

“Let’s try it!”

Lucius drove the yacht towards the location and Bruce with Selina were watching avidly the laptop
screen where the software fed the image of the area without the electromagnetic fields’ interference.
Few hours had passed and Bruce was fighting his disappointment setting his jaw determined.

“We’re almost there…” Lucius said returning to the study.

The Afro-American didn’t receive an answer and he saw both youths staring the screen amazed. He
ran there: the filtered image showed a land covered with green while the common image showed
only water. The scientist smiled: how convenient! It was a spot of the Aegean Sea where boats
almost never approached.

Clark was leaning on his father’s old wooden working bench behind the barn where his tools were
still waiting for him. His heart beat painfully as his eidetic memory brought back the figure of his
father repairing or creating things in this very bench to fix the farm’s premises.

He was just an annoying toddler running around him watching with curiosity what his father was
doing and pestering Jonathanto let him help. Jonathan used to smile and promise him that he’d help some other time and that now he really needed a glass of cool water and that was enough for little Clark to run back to the house and bring water. Jonathan knew that his boy was extraordinary strong but he didn’t want to risk him getting injured by one of the tools.

Clark smiled bitterly and looked the horizon at the direction of the town’s cemetery: his long distant vision permitted him to see Jonathan’s plain grave and the wild flowers he brought him this morning when he visited with his Ma.

It was his third day here and he was satisfied. His eyes caressed the sunset colors in the sky that had only a big fluffy pink-velvet cloud; the sun had set and the first dark blue had blended with the pink. He inhaled deeply.

But suddenly he frowned: memories flooded again his mind; memories that he didn’t want but also he didn’t feel like pushing away.

His arms felt lovely; they had a weight that made his heart blow with warmth. He saw again himself months ago carrying Bruce bridal style out of the house. They had just visited his Ma and promised her that they’d return for Christmas.

His Ma brought a blanket to wrap Bruce meticulously so he doesn’t get cold during the flight back to Gotham. The human had thanked his Ma smiling but he didn’t let Superman hold him too close to his chest; Bruce was still angry with him and slowly detaching…

But during the journey back to the Manor Bruce had fallen asleep and he was so beautiful that Superman was watching him speechless…though even in sleep the human still kept his head away from Clark’s chest. For the first time after months Clark felt nostalgia that only Diana could cure because Diana was his real love.

Bagdana materialized suddenly in the middle of Diana’s living room; she was surprised but contained it with a cocked eyebrow. She was watering her plants kissing the leaves.

“Welcome” she said. “You should have called – I might have had someone who shouldn’t have seen you.”

Bagdana shook his head.

“You’d have informed me if he had returned.”

She nodded pouting and caressed elegantly the leaves of a dwarf rose.

Bagdana walked to her.

“Two days have passed. I won’t wait anymore: Superman must get out of the picture.”

Ivy smiled.

“It was ‘bout time! Do you know where he is?”

Bagdana pressed his lips.

“No, he is concealed” he smirked. “But that is no problem: he’s been exposed to you for months so it should take only a flight around the States for you to lure him out of his hole.”
Ivy smirked.

“I like it when you’re so determined!”

Clark felt his body revolting: there was his beloved perfume in the air but it was coming from far away. His heart beat faster: nostalgia and need became torturing – Diana was somewhere: not close but he could feel her; her body called him and he wanted to be with her. Clark could sense her longing for him: he had abandoned her – his one true love and she was looking for him crazy from the same craving that burnt his insides.

He had still the image of that day in his mind’s eye: Bruce sleeping like an angel in his arms but keeping his head away. No, Clark realized now, Bruce wasn’t sad for Clark’s behavior: he just longed for another man – Thor – and Superman’s hold disgusted him.

He span and Clark Kent dressed in his red plaid shirt and weathered denim gave his place to Superman; his legs had left the soil on their own volition.

“Clark, where are you going?”

Martha had seen him from the kitchen’s window and his sudden change made her pale. She rushed outside to stop him before he flew away.

Superman turned to her smiling but his eyes were already elsewhere determined-possessed.

“I must leave, Ma.”

“No, Clark! For your own good, don’t leave!”

Superman bit his lip impatient but kept his smile.

“Don’t worry, Ma: it something I must do and then I’ll be right back to you” he said and sped away not giving his mother the chance to say something.

Martha’s breath became constricted; her heart sank as her son’s figure was fast vanishing in the darkening sky.

“No, honey…” she hoped against hope that it was some emergency that called her son away but cold fingers had grabbed her heart fortelling something really bad for Clark.
Lucius didn’t want but as a reasonable man accepted his young employer’s logic. Bruce asked him to take the chris-craft and return to Athens; the yacht would remain anchored where it stood right now: in a safe distance where the Amazons couldn’t see it; waiting their return.

“If the Princess accepts to come with us I wouldn’t want her to see you and connect Batman with Lucius Fox because it will be obvious then that Batman is also connected with Bruce Wayne” Bruce had explained shortly.

If everything went according to their hopes Batman and Catwoman would accompany the Princess to the yacht where Tony would wait for them – after Bruce’s notification that the Princess accepted to help – and Bruce Wayne with Selina would return to Athens where along with Lucius they would take the jet with Happy as pilot to return to Gotham. Tony had developed a prototype small jet that could land to the sea as smoothly as on the ground.

Lucius shook Selina’s hand and then Bruce’s.

“Good luck and be careful.”

Selina smiled.

“We always are…”

“Of course, Miss Kyle!” Lucius mimicked her grin and turned to Bruce. “For whatever you need contact me immediately.”

“Thank you, Lucius.”

“You’re always welcome, Mr. Wayne” he answered and descended the ladder leading to the small white chris-craft boat that was attached to the yacht.

Lucius set the craft’s course and turned his head to see the two youths on the deck – Selina standing and Bruce on his wheelchair - watching him moving away; he always felt some fear when he departed from Bruce. It was a residual from the nights the young man sneaked out from Falcone to meet him to plan their action; the time was limited and filled with anxiety and every time Bruce left Lucius wasn’t sure that Thomas’ son would stay alive to meet him again…Falcone’s brutality after all was evident on the youth’s face.

“Time to dress up?” Selina turned to Bruce as soon as the only thing they could see was the froth Lucius’ chris-craft was leaving behind.

“I think it’d be better to wait till the night falls” the sun was already setting sprinkling abundance of red and gold to the glimmering waters; Bruce looked up to two seagulls who cried. “To our good luck it is a night with a new moon so darkness will be our ally. Do you like night swimming?” he grinned.

Selina shrugged thoughtful. She didn’t have any seconds thoughts about Bruce’s involvement since her friend’s ability in swimming even as paraplegic was impressive even without the enhancement the armor offered.

“As long as the sea is clear of sharks…”
Bruce cocked an eyebrow and chuckled.

“A cat is afraid of fish?”

Selina snorted.

“Well, a cat doesn’t like the tables turned.”

Bruce smiled.

“Then it is a good thing that Aegean doesn’t have sharks…”

They returned to the study cabin and settled around the laptop that showed many different shots of the island.

“They have guards patrolling” Selina said pointing with her index finger at the red heat dots around the perimeter of the beach.

“They patrol on horses” the bleeping red spots showed two different presences, one on another. “The indications show that their armory is obsolete but I have no doubt that it’s still very lethal.”

Selina raised her eyebrows.

“Have you ever been scratched by a woman? Even a woman’s nails can be lethal – I know from the yells of those I scratched.”

Bruce shook his head.

“We don’t go there to fight.”

Selina looked at the thermal dots.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we won’t have to…We will be stealth but that can’t last much since you want to talk to the Princess.”

Bruce nodded thoughtful clenching his chair’s armrests wishing he was in perfect condition just in case. Selina brushed his upper arm.

“Before we leave you should take your medicine.”

He smiled.

“Of course” he consented.

“Do you see him coming?”

Bagdana’s voice echoed in Ivy’s ears as she floated aimlessly on the American sky. She was far from Metropolis because her favorite place wasn’t in that city and Ivy wanted everything to be done there. And of course the demon didn’t object.

“A demon is an agent of free will…” he had hissed slyly when she told him her intentions.

His voice reached her from his cave.

“Not yet but I’m sure he is on his way. Nature is my ally and I have every bush, weed, flower or
grass emanating my perfume so wherever he might have been my calling reached him. And he simply can’t resist my calling.”

“You are the goddess of Nature, my dear!” Bagdana remarked with his slight irony.

Yet Ivy didn’t give him any attention: she was sure that the demon believed that otherwise he wouldn’t have chosen her. Ivy was aware of the demon’s preference for Gotham – besides, his obsession with Wayne was an indication. So now she could explain how Bagdana approached her while she lurked in Gotham’s wings. He studied the city and her residents so he knew the power hidden in Poison Ivy’s body.

Her confidence was justified: she might not have had Superman’s super sight yet she made out a dot in the horizon approaching fast. Well, it didn’t look like an airplane and as the popular quote went:

“It’s a plane!
It’s a bird!
No, it’s Superman!”

She smirked and took off flying equally fast supposedly searching frantically for him; Ivy gave to her features a hue of agony never forgetting her resolute, full of power expression, worthy of an Amazon.

Superman’s heart that was already beating quickly with longing from the moment he smelled Diana’s perfume now beat even faster because all of his senses were put on fire taking in her signals that first were distant but now were approaching rapidly.

Not that he had any doubt that he’d find her: he could sense her breath, her heartbeat, the heat of her needing, powerful body… And now as he was approaching, Superman saw her flying to him. He sped.

They collided in the middle of the morning sky and Superman saw fireworks as Diana grabbed his face with both hands and captured his lips almost violently pumping her taste in his thirsty body. Superman never needed oxygen but in this case he felt the air being drawn out of his lungs.

He followed the rhythm of her lips and the grinding of her lustful, strong body on his; her half naked pelvis and her thighs was so heated that he could feel it under his uniform. Her body was vibrating from longing. But his also.

“I missed you” she said in her strong, adamant voice as if she uttered an order. “You left a note and just vanished and that pissed me off!” she grabbed his testicles so violently that he ached but also felt his entire body paralyzing pleasantly as she immediately caressed his sensitive parts with her unique way. “You can’t treat like this the leader of the Amazons.”

Superman cupped her face with both hands.

“I had to, Diana; but I’m sorry for upsetting you…” he attacked her lips and she bit him. “I missed you too… I want you…”

Truly, his body wanted hers right now, right there; in midair, among the midday sky’s clouds; careless of anything. She clenched his hair and yanked his head sucking brutally his neck.

“I have the perfect place, Kal…” she whispered in his ear wrapping her leg around his hips and rubbing their groins together. “There I’ll show you how much I missed you…” she licked his earlobe
fully aware that this melted the Man of Steel.

Superman yanked his head backwards and sighed: returning to Metropolis seemed so time consuming and his body just couldn’t bear the delay. Besides he was thinking to have some time with Diana and then returning to his Ma after explaining to the Amazon that there was some emergency.

“To your apartment?” he almost complained.

Her blue sparkling eyes were filled with irony when met his.

“I doubt you’d last so much, Kal…No” she shook her head. “Somewhere better.”

“Why not right here, right now?” he wrapped his arm around her waist and glued their hips together.

The Amazon’s face became authoritative, strict.

“Because I say it and you know that whatever I’m saying is for your best, Kal, Lord of the Krypton. Unless,” she cocked an eyebrow and her eyes filled with irony “you don’t trust me.”

Superman locked eyes with her.

“I trust you with my own life.”

Diana smiled.

“You’re right to…”

She slipped from his arms and began flying Superman following until he reached her and stayed by her side. They were exchanging glances every now and then filled with love and heating passion.

“**Well done, my dear!**” Bagdana whispered to Ivy’s ear.

Two eye shaped slits watched through the thick foliage of the forest. The night was extremely dark since not only the moon was at its circle’s start but also there were clouds covering the stars. Another pair of eyes watched too next to the first pair.

Batman had adjusted the light of his lenses to be discreet to not draw attention and Catwoman wore her night vision goggles.

The island’s mainland wasn’t dark at all; the main soil streets leading to the city and the temples situated at hills all over the island were illuminated by 7 feet tall stony pillars that had on top oval shaped vessels with oil that burnt fire since dusk fell. The city was also filled with lights either from the same kind of pillars or from lanterns that hang from every building. Even the beach was abundantly illuminated by torches scattered on the sand.

However for Batman and Catwoman who for all their lives were used to pass unnoticed even in the electric lights of the modern cities it wasn’t difficult to blend in the shadows and take cover in the woods; the already fallen night was a big help.

The patrols around the beach perimeter of the island were constant yet they chose the moments the horsewomen turned their backs on the spot to slip from the sea to the forest. Their equipment permitted them to remain underwater waiting for the right moment. Of course, the horses would neigh if they sensed any presence but both Batman’s and Catwoman’s armor had the means to
conceal any traces of human presence.

The clever women had predicted that someone might have managed to lay his feet on the beach and had dag big holes throughout the sand covering them with sea weeds so if someone passed unnoticed from the patrols to end up in the bottom.

Yet they didn’t know Batman’s scanning technology that even while underwater had already showed them in a detailed blueprint the dangerous traps.

The trees after the beach were scarce – cut on purpose to not offer coverage; not as dense as in the mainland yet for them even those were enough: both Batman and Catwoman climbed to the first tree and then jumped from branch to branch like cats till they reached the thickest part of the forest.

As Batman had landed on the wood’s soil right next to Catwoman, he looked at her puzzled: she took off the flat shoes and wore her long, high heeled boots that she carried with her in a small sack where she now put the flat shoes.

“I don’t believe it…” he whispered flabbergasted and Catwoman turned to him shrugging.

“I can’t function without the proper equipment…” she winked.

Batman grinned and gave his hand to Catwoman to help her stand.

“And I was curious about what you were carrying…”

“Curiosity killed the…bat…” she chuckled.

Looking for the legendary Princess they followed the massive lights that indicated the city of the Amazons without ever leaving the coverage of the virgin forest.

It was still early in the night and some Amazons were returning to the city carrying tools of farming: they had seen some fields in their way that were prepared for the seeding. Also, other Amazons on horses were returning to the city having ended their shift in patrolling the beach. The city was surrounded by enormous stone bulwark with turrets where Amazons were situated like in the open gates.

“Their armor isn’t exactly how westerns had imagined it, huh?” Selina whispered.

Batman nodded.

The Amazons who were returning from farming works wore plain creme colored tunics that ended to the knees and left the arms uncovered. It was clear that farming was something that the Amazons were doing also in shifts because the farmers were equally muscle bound as the guardians; under the abundant lighting of the pillars their bulging muscles shone from the thin layer of sweat and dust.

Those who were guarding the gates and the turrets wore white tunics knee length covered with thick layers of brown leather shreds; it was a light armor with a thin, leather thorax protecting their chest and a nest-like metallic fabric dressed their tracheas to the clavicle bone; the wide leather belts wrapping their waists had the head of goddess Hera in the center. Their arms were naked except than long brass bracelets that began from the wrists and went through the entire forearm. Helmets covered their heads leaving their eyes and chins out while a blue with white forelock waved to the night breeze. They wore flat sandals and their calves were protected by metallic solid greaves that reached the knees.

They were holding long spears and from their belts hang long, straight sword in their cases.
“You think we should enter the city?”

Batman looked at the city and then Catwoman.

“No; I don’t want them to feel attacked. We should wait to locate the Princess and speak with her.”

They both narrowed their eyes seeing some armored Amazons leading back to the city a pack of little girls no more than eight years old. Clearly they were out for training.

“They have children without men?” Selina asked. “In vitro fertilization? They are so developed?”

“Ancient writers say that Amazons made wars with neighboring tribes and used the captives for breeding.”

Selina chuckled but stopped abruptly seeing Bruce’s set jaw; she remembered that Talia Al Ghul had treated Bruce like this when she captured him.

“Others say that they had a kind of agreement with a neighboring tribe, the Gargareans and once a year the Amazons went there for… reproduction.”

“Nothing of that can apply nowadays…” she said.

Batman nodded.

“Do you feel excited for discovering their secluded world?” Selina asked. “I mean, it is unbelievable that we are here and seeing these things – I feel as if I have travelled in time.”

He shook his head.

“It is interesting but I’ll feel satisfied only if the Princess agrees to help us.”

They stayed there for another two hours. Switching to long distance vision they could watch the city.

Batman was used to wait patiently for his mark so when a tall, sturdy woman crossed the gates heading outside and the guardians saluted her hitting their fists on the chest and bowing slightly their heads, his senses tensed and he could tell that the same was true for Selina.

The young woman was the same height as her soldiers but unlike them she had her black hair in a tight bun behind her head. She was dressed in a long plain sleeveless tunic that reached her feet which were dressed in flat leather sandals. Between her hair something shone in the dancing lights the flames on the pillars cast and Batman shook his head showing Catwoman the golden tiara. In the middle of the triangle front, a ruby emanated sparkles: it was like a star with sixteen rays.

“It is different than the star the fake had…” Selina whispered.

Batman nodded.

“Exactly. The Latin historians spoke about the star and the modern interpreters thought that it was the common star Western civilizations use but the Princess is a Greek so the star on her tiara would be the Greek Helios or Star which has eight or eighteen thin rays: the four rays in the center longer than the rest.”

“How you know all these?” she asked impressed.

Bruce pressed his lips.
“Ra’s Al Ghul loved ancient civilizations…”

Selina pursed her lips understanding how painful the memories must be for Bruce.

“The guardians don’t call her Diana.”

Batman nodded.

“Diana is the Latin translation of Artemis; the Princess of the Amazons is named Artemis yet the ancient Latin historians quoted the name translated so most people knew her name as Diana.”

“Bagdana didn’t know that?”

“He did but humans didn’t so he followed the popular beliefs.”

“He didn’t imagine that Al Ghul educated you that good or that you’d suspect his trick and made your research.”

Bruce gave a nod and focused on the Princess.

Her dressing was civilian yet her waist was bound with a thin brown leather belt from where a long, straight sword hanged over her right thigh.

Selina pointed to the Princess’ left thigh where a glowing gold rope hanged rolled.

“The real thing…” she whispered and Bruce nodded.

The Princess with slow pacing walked away from the soldiers and the city. Bruce and Selina followed through the forests’ shadows.

As they moved the Princess’ destination became visible: a medium sized temple made of Doric tall pillars. She climbed the twenty wide marble steps that led to the entrance of the temple and moved inside. Bruce remembered another similar temple ‘he’ had walked in…it was in his dream, where he became one with the high priest of Nemesis.

They both could see inside with the long distance vision their armors provided so they saw her crossing the tiled isle leading to the altar at the far end; the temple was illuminated by oval shaped golden vessels where fires were burning. Under the pale light and the shadows an enormous ceiling tall statue made of brass marble stood: it depicted a sturdy man with a perfectly shaped body and the armor of a Greek warrior; he held a large, round shield with the Greek Helios in the center and a sword. His head was in a helmet from where two bright eyes stabbed his guests; he looked around 40 years old.

“A male god in the island of the Amazons?” Selina asked Bruce.

“He is Ares, the Greek god of war: he is considered the father of the Amazons…”

“Right…” Selina chuckled. “Our little excursion became an educational trip…”

Bruce grinned.

The Princess took from the floor a 3 feet, lean golden leathern oil flask and began spilling slowly red ruby wine to the altar under the Ares’ feet, whispering some words in a tone like a hymn.

“We can approach her now” Selina said.
But Bruce shook his head.

“It is a very personal, worshiping moment: I don’t want to intrude.”

Selina sighed.

When the Amazon came out of the temple and began descending the steps Bruce turned to Selina.

“It’s time…” he said.

Selina touched his upper arm.

“Perhaps I should do this?” she said as Bruce locked eyes with her. “You know, girl to girl.”

“If we do that, when later I’ll enter the game she will think that I used you to trick them and she’ll become hostile.”

Selina tilted her head.

“I get it – a man using a woman: feminist crap..! Boring…Anyway, I’ll jump if she dares lay a finger on you.”

Batman grinned.

“Don’t you think I can handle it?”

Selina crooked her mouth.

“Women are tough subject, sweetie…”

Batman nodded and moved slowly, stealthily towards the path the Princess followed back to her city. Selina waited a few moments and followed too.

In a turn of the roads, the trees shaded the path and the light from the pillars’ vessels became dim. Bruce looked at the woman who walked under the tree he was on and graciously slipped down, landing on his feet behind her. He stretched his posture seeing the woman halting and tensing.

She turned slowly to him, a small grin on her beautiful face. Her dark blue eyes flashed determined in the dim light.

“Επιτέλους…” she said.

Thor in his divine garments stayed behind as the rest of the Avengers left the meeting room in the Avengers’ Towers. Nick Fury was the last to walk out. Tony had informed them about a new menace but couldn’t give more details right now; he just asked for vigilance and set the entire global S.H.I.E.L.D. organism in alarm.

The director remained in his seat on the head of the board table absorbed in his tablet’s contents. Thor approached and looked: it was an awkward oval shaped machine covered with strange symbols. He frowned seeing Luthor in a white robe working on it.

“It has to do with that, right?” he inquired quietly. “The menace.”

Tony raised his eyes on him.
“Yes” he answered casually. “An extra terrestrial extra powerful being wants to destroy the Earth and use that machine to absorb dark energy from humans” he crooked his mouth. “I know…I hate movies with aliens too…”

Thor frowned.

“Why you didn’t tell us?”

Tony arched an eyebrow.

“Because Bruce uncovered their scheme and he believes that we must wait.”

Thor was trusting Bruce yet he didn’t want any threat against humans staying active for much.

“We could attack right now and destroy that thing” he showed the machine in the screen.

“Bruce wants every available power the Earth has assembled before we tackle this.”

“Every available power? All the beings with powers are here and we have Superman and Wonder Woman.”

Tony pressed his lips and stood.

“You see, that’s our problem: we don’t have Superman and the Amazon.”

Thor narrowed his eyes.

“She is not the real Amazon” Tony met the god’s eyes “and she holds Superman under her control – she is the enemy’s agent. That’s why Bruce wanted us to wait.”

Thor shook his head. He knew that this woman had something bad.

“Wait for what?”

“For him and Selina to bring the real Amazon and show Superman the truth. He went to find Themiscyra.”

Thor fist his hand: Bruce was a paraplegic and the quest was dangerous: the Amazons were really hostile.

“Why didn’t he wait for me to go along?” Thor asked exasperated. “Maybe they would have listened to me.”

Tony pouted insulted.

“He didn’t take me along! Why would he take you? He didn’t want to make the Amazons feel threatened.”

Thor closed his eyes and sighed.

“They shouldn’t have gone alone…”

Tony arched his eyebrows and patted him in the back.

“That’s Bruce…”

Tony’s StarkStel rang and he eagerly accepted the call, Thor watching.
"It was Lucius Fox. They have found the island” the billionaire said with a smirk.

Superman saw the building and sensed Diana’s joy; she was slowing down heading there. It was a building made from transparent plexiglass filled with pots and plants. He frowned filling an annoying clench in his guts.

Yet Diana turned to him smiling waving to him to follow as she landed graciously. He landed by her side though the view of the building made him uncomfortable.

Diana grabbed his hand and Superman’s hesitation vanished; she smiled again to him and walked inside, Superman with her.

As soon as they were inside, Diana looked around and her eyes filled with joy as if she was seeing beloved friends. Superman gazed around the hundreds of different plants that had flooded the space without any order leaving only a narrow strip at the center: bushes reaching the ceiling, roses spreading right and left intertwining their branches with weeds and other plants; stems everywhere with thick leaves hiding the sun’s light.

He felt a bit dizzy but before he addressed that his mind travelled fast: he found himself inside another greenhouse, abandoned from long ago but still tidier than this. He saw again the working bench with an oil lamp shedding dim light to the dark room.

Bruce had the Wayne Enterprises’ translator software attached to his cowl so he understood that she had said ‘at last’.

“Δεν είμαι εχθρός” he growled quietly the translator having given him the words he should use to express in Greek what he wanted.

“Speak in your language” she retorted in English. “From your accent I can say you’re an American.”

“How do you know?”

She tilted her head on the side.

“From time to time we visit the world of Men; many foreigners come to Greece – it’s not difficult for me to speak your language. As for not being an enemy, I’ll be the one to judge that” she pressed her lips and her eyes flashed. “I felt a presence haunting my steps – a demon like creature…” she registered his appearance and took out her sword pointing it to him. “Maybe when I slit your throat I’ll see what lies under those clothes because I believe you’re nothing else than a man dressed up in a ridiculous costume.”

Bruce expected to be seen like a threat and be sneered but remained calm.

“I’m not here to fight with you.”

She frowned.

“Of course! You’re just a coward crawling in the shadows waiting to hit when your opponent has her back turned.”
With two rapid movements she tore her tunic in both legs’ sides to not be thwarted in her movements from the fabric and with an impressive jump surged against Batman.

Bruce rolled his eyes internally as he avoided her blade with a swift movement to the side: nice! both fake and real Diana shared the same feelings about him.

“If I wanted to attack you I’d have done it immediately, don’t you think?” he asked her retaining his tranquility.

But she without stopping brandished her sword aiming his head and Bruce dodged.

“How did you find our island?” she gritted her teeth.

“It’s a long story but what matters is the reason…”

The woman made a twirl around her axis that a professional dancer would have envied and this time made to hit him with her forearm where her golden bracelets shone; Bruce knew that those were lethal. He jolted his hand and his gloved forearms stopped hers hardly containing her force for a second but feeling great pain; she growled and pushed more Bruce feeling as if facing Superman. He used his legs to push her feet of the ground but she losing her balance made a jump in the air and landed some inches away ready to launch a new attack her head leaned towards him and her jaw set like a lioness before her pray.

Bruce feeling the burning pain her bracelets let to his forearms stabbed his lenses to her. His jaw was set, emanating equal determination.

“Instead of fighting you can listen to me for a moment.”

“Who are you?” she asked with her eyes blazing.

“I’m Batman.”

“That’s ridiculous! You don’t bear such names in the world of men. You hide your identity because you’re a foul man!”

She stormed again at him with her sword descending rapidly to his neck; he trapped it between the edges of his glove but she moved the blade horizontally and released it cutting several of the gloves’ edges.

“I won’t let anyone hurt my sisters” she hissed moving again the sword to his head.

It was inches before hitting him and Bruce didn’t know if the cowl could contain the hit so he used his secret weapon. He clenched his jaw and stopped the blade just a breath before it sliced his head: a loud clang and a lightning like flash cracked the silence as two blades collided. He saw the Princess’ eyes widen in surprise and awe seeing what had stopped her blade.

“Where did you steal that?” she asked watching the shine of the diamond blade.

“The Dagger of Justice came to me, Princess Artemis.”

The Princess gritted her teeth.

“Liar: you can’t be worthy of that Blade! You stole it!”

She detached and stood looking at him; Bruce straightened his body and put the legendary dagger back in its case that instantly returned to its place, back to sink in his right thigh’s armor piece.
“I didn’t steal the Dagger: you know that nobody can yield its will if the Blade doesn’t accept them. We need to talk, Princess. I’m sorry for being so stealthy but there was no other way to speak to you.”

Suddenly, she crashed her bracelets together and a blast hit Batman sending him feet away; thankfully, he took in her intention and prepared himself propelling with the force of the blast and landing smoothly on one knee. He could attack her before landing but he didn’t want to answer to her hostility with attacking.

He raised his eyes slowly stabbing his lenses to her determined but also impressed dark blue eyes.

“I won’t fight with you, Princess.”

He saw the flaming string dancing in the air and immediately his torso was wrapped in a glowing lasso that made his body feel with burning heat.

The Amazon approached him straightening her impressive body proudly; he regarded him strictly.

“But you’ll stop lying. What’s your name?”

Bruce felt something warm flooding his mind yet his thinking wasn’t altered.

“I’m Batman.”

The Princess frowned surprised.

“That can’t be! Nobody can resist the Lasso of Truth; even Zeus himself…” she blinked. “Unless…” her eyes flashed “you’re a warrior of Nemesis – only her followers are immune to the Lasso’s power.”

Bruce remembered Darseid’s failure to penetrate his mind and thanked silently the Black Butterfly safely stashed over his chest, under the armor.

“Now you know that I’m allied with a goddess, can we speak?” he inquired stabbing his lenses to her.

She withdrew the Lasso and put it back in her waist. But she still held her sword as if considering if the new development could establish trust with the newcomer.

Suddenly, the Princess herd a whipping sound and felt something coiling around her sword pulling it away before she could focus on keeping it. She turned around to see her new opponent only to see a lean body in black somersaulting in the air heading on her.

The Princess avoided the legs that aimed at her and her opponent landed smoothly on the terrain. The Amazon squinted on the woman before her.

Batman walked forward standing on the Amazon’s side.

“It’s alright, Cat” he said to his friend who yanked her head proudly and focused her blazing green eyes on the Amazon.

“She hit you with a blast and was ready to slash you with her sword…” Selina gritted her teeth.

“We reached an understanding” Batman said.

The Princess looked at Catwoman’s stiletto heels but didn’t linger there unwilling to express her
puzzlement.

“Cat? I see the reason for the name. You work for him?” she asked with disapproval and Selina rolled her eyes.

“Ugh! I hate old fashioned feminism… The fact I’m on a man’s side doesn’t I work for him. He is my friend: we work together.”

Batman raised his palm in appeasement.

“Catwoman is aware of the situation and she joined the mission.”

The Amazon looked at him.

“Speak! What situation are you raving about?”

However Batman had caught the dozens of feet that were approaching their location running; in a couple of seconds they were surrounded by Amazons both in warrior apparel and in tunics. All of them held swords or spears pointing at them but their eyes were more lethal than their shining weapons. The blast from their Princess bracelets had brought them there.

Yes, it was night and the storm was raging outside, the wind howling on the walls of the greenhouse. There was a metallic closet at the far end and an old rectangular stove where flames danced behind its rectangular smoked glass. He had lit the fire because…No, Superman didn’t feel the cold neither was afraid of his soaked suit. Yet someone else was cold and drenched and that someone was vulnerable to illness.

His red cape was missing from his shoulder…He looked; till then he didn’t turned his eyes there because he sensed that someone’s uneasiness.

Superman straggled to keep his eyes from bulging. Bruce wrapped in red, his red cape, was an incredible sight. The red flattered the youth – not that he needed it…- creating a gorgeous contrast with his brunette hair and his pale porcelain flesh which in the scarce spots not covered from the fabric was brushed from the soft light of the lamp and the heater revealing his Star’s aura. And his body’s intoxicating perfume undeterred from the clothes, mingled with the rain’s scent almost fogged Clark’s reasoning.

He wished his cape wasn’t so big that Bruce couldn’t cover almost his entire body except from his feet and neck; also he detected a pouch hanging to Bruce’s chest. But seeing Bruce’s suspicious eyes and the way he clutched the cape more to his body Clark gulped and smiled kindly, running his hand to his wet locks.

“We must dry your hair…” he mumbled shyly. “Do you mind?” he inquired and when Bruce just nodded, he began blowing tenderly warm air till Bruce’s locks dry shone like silk.

“Well, now we need to find you a place to sleep…” he stuttered proud for his work and under Bruce’s testing eyes he opened the metallic cabinet and retrieved two blankets in fairly good condition.

Clark turned to Bruce cocking an eyebrow.

“You and your mom were sleeping here too?”
Bruce looked at the cloudy angry sky from the greenhouse’s transparent roof.

“Sometimes at the noon or when we heard that there would be shooting stars…Here the sky is more clear…not tonight of course…”

Superman spread the blanket and gestured to Bruce who lay down hesitantly minding the cape and hastily tightening the fabric when feeling it slipped from his naked body. Clark bit his lips for this reaction of a person being many times forcibly naked in front of hostile stares; and for the pain he could detect in Bruce’s perfectly unfazed features. He tucked in the younger man with the blanket and Bruce looked him in wonder.

“I can leave if you want… you know… to feel more relaxed and sleep.”

“Never mind…I can’t sleep either way; Alfred gave me sedatives but they didn’t help…”

And then Clark had an idea: he began re-playing with a tender whistle the melody of Bruce’s favorite lullaby as he had memorized it from that night in Stark’s house. Bruce’s eyes widened.

“It’s…”

“Hush, Star… let sleep come.”’ Lean on me and rest…Let me carry the pain…

It was a matter of minutes before Bruce succumbed to exhaustion settling in fetal position; he was still shivering and his temperature hadn’t risen to normal. So Clark hesitantly and carefully spooned him feathery wrapping him in his hot body to transfer his warmth to him.

He sighed and fought the temptation to kiss that velvety cheek that glowed softness, the silken eyelashes brushing smoothly his cheekbone. Clark’s lips were pulled to that flesh but he clenched his jaw and stopped himself, feeling sweat drops in his forehead. He yanked his stare to the gloom sky that was devoid of any star. It didn’t matter: he had the most beautiful star in his arms.

“You need to stay away from me, Clark; at least, till you fight off the addiction” Bruce had said determined.

Clark’s eyes shone.

“There’s no addiction! What I feel for you is true!”

“Let me melt the ice, Star and illuminate your haunted heart…”

He knew he was almost begging but Clark didn’t feel ashamed; he had his eyes closed and sensed his Star trembling as if ready to cry. No, please, don’t cry, Star; let me try… His head leaned over Bruce’s face and his Star’s breath excited his needy lips.

Bruce saw Clark’s lips approaching his but didn’t jerk to avoid them; he felt numb and just didn’t want to fight that safe paralysis.

Clark touched his lips to those velvet soft lips and moaned from being finally allowed to do that without his Star resisting and fighting him. He began massaging gently exploring, feeling Bruce’s open eyes on his which remained closed to suck the dream-like sense.

Bruce panicked and averted slightly his lips but upon realizing that the pleasant paralyzing wave began leaving his body as Clark sighed and began reluctantly taking off his lips, he returned his lips to Clark’s.
Clark’s eyes watered and his heart gave multiple joyful jolts feeling Bruce’s lips finding again his. Shyly, testing, so incredibly soft that Clark’s body felt goose bumps and followed the younger man’s initiative reminding himself to be extra cautious to not panic him again.

But his hands on their own accord cupped the back of Bruce’s head relishing the silken locks caressing greedily while his other hand touched gently the human’s jaw to deepen slowly, carefully the kiss.

Clark’s tongue wanted to explore Bruce’s mouth - not invade like the last time - yet Clark restrained himself in case the human felt threatened; instead he trailed soft – he used his entire skill to be as soft as the breeze – kisses along Bruce’s velvet cheek to his cheekbone opening his eyes exactly when he kissed the chiseled bone. Bruce’s eyes sparkled, the emerald star inside dazzling Clark; the sapphire orbs were puzzled but definitely not frozen in terrible memories and to his excitement the pupils were dilated – his Star was shyly enjoying his ministrations.

His heart beat joyfully yet he noticed that Bruce was still clenching tightly his cape and if he did even a small wrong move he would fly away.

“*I can show you how it is to be loved*…” Clark whispered purposely looking all the time to Bruce’s eyes giving him the ability to check his honesty. “*If you want...If you allow me*…”

...The last thing Clark had expected and hoped happened. Bruce hesitantly and slightly trembling touched his lips to Clark’s stunning him. Clark despite his surprise and mind numbing enthusiasm noticed that Bruce had his eyes closed softly controlling his breaths: his Star was struggling with his demons… He felt awed and awfully weak to help as always when concerned Bruce.

Bruce huffed and pulled his lips causing Clark’s heart sink. Clark felt the whim to lock his lips with Bruce’s showing him that it was okay. Yet he knew better than doing that; he closed his eyes, breathing forcibly calmly though his body and heart was in agony and waited.

Bruce took a deep breath, caressed Clark’s cheek, holding more relaxed the cape, and brought again his lips to Clark’s with renewed determination. Clark’s heart returned to its place but he still didn’t make a move, his hands trembling at his side enjoying Bruce’s exploration and soft, extremely sensual touch both of lips and hand.

And then as Bruce’s lips became braver and bolder, Clark began moaning and wrapped gently his hand around the younger man’s shoulders. The Man of Steel opened his eyes which glimmered from happiness and found Bruce’s sparkling ‘Kryptonites’ staring at him inquiringly.

“You make me happy, Star...I love you…”

Bruce’s moans through the kiss it was enough for Clark to take him in his arms and lay him on the blanket. Bruce’s eyes with their irresistible defiance pierced Clark’s eyes and Clark was ready to be kicked away.

“You said you could show me how it is to be loved” Bruce had said determined.

Clark grinned broadly and let his body touch Bruce’s without letting his weight fell on the human. He trailed kisses to Bruce’s jaw line and nibbled his neck that to his delight arched to allow him better access and…oh, God! Bruce moaned when Clark’s mouth sucked his collarbone; yet his hand was still holding the cape and the Man of Steel was rasping, his heart beating frantically eager for what he desired so many months and finally was so near…

Bruce read Clark’s eyes and Clark realized.
“Let me worship your body…” Clark’s voice was cracked from passion and arousal and Bruce just released the fabric which slid a little but didn’t reveal flesh.

Damn that cape! Clark thought and Bruce chuckled giving him the unsaid permission to do what he wanted so much. However, Clark grateful for Bruce’s trust took gently the younger man’s hands and led them to his suit’s unseen spots that allowed the fabric to roll off his body. Bruce’s eyes widened surprised and a bit overwhelmed but Clark brought that palms to his lips and kissed them softly; then he guided them in lowering the upper half of his suit till the hips.

Clark smiled fondly seeing Bruce’s awed stare; it was so cute seeing that child-like expression.

Bruce rose and caressed with shaking hands Clark’s breasts sending shivers in Superman’s spine and causing his blood to boil from that explorative, shy and bold at the same time hot touch. The Man of Steel was watching without breathing Bruce feeling his body which welcomed him and asked for more. When his Star touched his incredibly soft lips to his pectorals, kissing it was too much…

The Man of Steel hugged Bruce’s body and laid him gently on his back ‘trapping’ him between his naked arms; he bent his powerful body like a snake without falling on Bruce and brought his face above Bruce’s.

“Tonight, I’ll worship you…”

He began unwrapping gently, respectfully his cape that stubbornly clung to Bruce’s body - not that he blamed his cape...but he still envied that piece of Fabric that maintained more contact with Bruce than him. It felt like unwrapping his gift from Santa Claus, slowly revealing the younger man’s body.

Clark wanted to taste every bit of Bruce; to have him in his body, in his cells. He watched mesmerized as the human’s glistening torso stretched in a majestic arch, his neck bent throwing his head back his brunette sweaty locks glued in his face. His Star made a sound between moan and sob and hot, sweet liquid filled Clark’s mouth and mind.

Bruce’s head remained slightly suspended; the young man awed from the feelings, the elation and the disbelief that this really happened. Clark cupped the back of Bruce’s head and brought their bodies to glue, savoring the seductive way his Star’s body trembled in the orgasm’s aftermath making the human’s aroma richer and the feeling of his red hot sweaty flesh paralyzing. His lips massaged his Star’s jaw and mouth, meeting his sparkling eyes.

“I told you you weren’t crippled…” Clark let his voice manifest his feeling of triumph.

But Bruce felt Superman’s trapped demanding erection.

“You need to…” he whispered blushing.

Clark shook his head.

“There’s no need… I won’t penetrate you…I can manage…I won’t hurt you.”

“You would never hurt me” he answered stilling his eyes in Clark’s fueling his passion.

He had to prepare his Star if he was to show him that making love is something beautiful, worth of repeating and not cause him to withdraw. Oh! Bruce’s thighs were so tight and so armonical shaped with lean, strong muscles that radiated warmth from the sweat that glistened. He didn’t want to grab those thighs and just hastily spread Bruce so he massaged the taut flesh from the knees to the hips and Bruce grunted only to moan, groan and breathe shallow when Clark began nibbling the inside of his thighs that began trembling uncontrollably.
Only then Clark opened gently his legs revealing his opening. Rao! He wanted to surge inside and claim Bruce forever but the youth’s sharp intake of air, as if he read his thoughts stopped him; he rubbed soothing and arousing circles to Bruce’s underbelly and penis causing him to close his eyes and sigh.

Clark applied much aloe to his ready to explode member, applied with massaging motions aloe to Bruce’s insides and then held gently his buttocks to spread him a bit more. Those buttocks were hell, more than he haddreamt, taut and soft making his hands shudder and his spine jolt violently into thrusting his penis inside Bruce; he hardly stopped his length from pushing too deep and too harsh hearing Bruce’s heartbeat flaring.

Bruce closed his eyes and tried to breathe calmly though Clark’s length filling him was his entire world. As Clark began thrusting incredibly gently but stimulating at the same time, electric currents ran his spine making him convulse; his body was waking, enjoying what for years was meant to cause him shame and excruciating pain. He wrapped his legs around Clark’s firm glutial muscles doing shyly the rubbing dance that excited so much Tony. It was exciting to know that this powerful being was nestled between his legs holding back his own satisfaction to not hurt him and he wanted to show his gratitude for that.

Clark moaned surprised but surely grateful for that gift that made his penis go frantic; he began grunting and established a stable pace careful to not hit the newly fixed part of Bruce’s spine, stopping his body from succumbing to the need of using its full energy.

Bruce clenched his jaw and focused on the reassurance that Clark’s crystal clear blue eyes offered as every thrust brought the hero’s hot body to rub with his.

“You can’t imagine how gorgeous you are, Star…” Superman rasped.

He nibbled Bruce’s jaw line and breasts as the younger man’s head lolled backwards overwhelmed by the hotness in his anus that spurt to his groin to burn his spine with violent jerks that Superman’s body absorbed. And then Clark felt the sweat on Bruce’s body freezing and his breath halting; the sapphire-emerald orbs were drenched in dread. Clark knew that his Star returned to his horrific past to one of these sessions of brutal rapes.

Clark cupped Bruce’s face as their bodies were united and kissed him.

“Look at me, Star; it’s me, only me, I won’t let anyone harm you. You’re safe…” he whispered in the tormented man’s ear and Bruce shook violently on his body till his eyes refocused on Clark’s.

Bruce began breathing again clinging desperately on Clark’s shoulders, his head resting on the crook of his neck like a child, his soft exhales causing goose bumps to the Man of Steel who continued thrusting rubbing Bruce’s pelvis and back to make him relax his muscle that clenched now ached from the friction.

Bruce felt again his crippled penis growing hard and jolting, a hot wave rushing to explode; he tightened his grip on Clark’s shoulders because this still scared him as much as it filled him with elation. And then he heard a scream of outrage from the guts of earth mixed with a deafening thunder and he knew it was his demon. He hid more his head in Clark’s body: Bagdana couldn’t touch him there.

Clark came when Bruce did gaping at the most beautiful view of the world: Bruce’s orgasm. He stayed inside his beloved body savoring Bruce’s writhing after the orgasm and his rasps and groans and then purrs; he kissed his Star’s drenched locks. How could he thank him enough for that present?
They stayed like this for much time till Clark felt Bruce’s breath feathery light and his heartbeat peaceful in sleep. He pulled himself begrudgingly from Bruce’s body holding the younger man. Then he leaned him gently back on the blanket but Bruce half asleep raised his silken eyelids a bit.

He watched hypnotized as sleep brushed his Star’s face softening more his features. And then he began cleaning Bruce’s body with his tongue gently, tenderly, careful to not disturb his much needed rest. Bruce’s magical taste and then his own seed flavored by this unique man’s sweat were incredible. He slithered his tongue in every corner, every inch not leaving one drop trying to soothe his hunger and thirst, to take Bruce inside his body, as the dry soil absorbed the cool rain... He finished the job drying Bruce’s body blowing gently warm air.

“I love you, Star...” he murmured over Bruce’s eyelids and a faint smile brushed his Star’s face.

He was enjoying Bruce’s naked body when the younger man turned on his side, covering with his thigh his genitals and hugging his chest unconsciously – Clark was sure that little Bruce slept that way trying to warm up in his frozen cell.

And then Superman’s eyes widened awed as silver light caressed Bruce’s naked body; he yanked his head to the glass roof to see the moon shining having escaped the clouds. Clark’s fingers ran Bruce’s body line from his shoulder to the hips, to his thighs to the toes, the void of the chopped big toe hurting him...

He wrapped his hands around Bruce’s chest and closed his eyes letting the thrill, the happiness, the relief, the sense of completion fill his body that the more he was close to Bruce the more felt like charging, his powers greater than ever.

“I won’t let anyone harm you again...” he breathed in Bruce’s ear.

Clark shook his head as the night became morning and the dimly lit greenhouse turned into the chaotic greenhouse. Diana was looking at him confused.

He realized that he had no job there; his entire body vibrated from the need to leave and return where he belonged; to the one he belonged to: the one he had hurt. He had to explain to Bruce but first he needed to be again near him. His body felt drained from energy as if his long absence had secretly stripped him from vitality.

Superman turned his senses on finding Bruce’s vitals; he was desperate and his despair culminated as he failed to find those beloved sound...It couldn’t be: Bruce’s vitals were nowhere in the planet! Either he wore his Batman armor – which was impossible since it was daylight – or Bruce was… No! He couldn’t even think about that...

He saw what he had seen in his dream: the warm, bright star leading him out of that terrifying nothingness...Bruce in the middle of the light. And then he saw again the gravestone he had dreamt; Bruce’s name on the gray stone piercing his heart...

Superman turned on his heels storming at the door ready to leave for Gotham.

“Where are you going, Kal?” Diana asked with her strict and caring voice.

“Where I should be, Diana; I’m sorry...”

He turned to see her; he had to explain but then...

He frowned: suddenly, he could see something odd in her shining raven blue hair...there were traces of hair dye. He remembered that Bruce had warned him.
She was really an impostor!

Ivy saw the realization in his eyes and smiled.

“What’s wrong, Kal?” she asked slyly.

“I’m out of here!” he ground his teeth and stormed towards the door.

Only to realize that he couldn’t speed as he used to; he narrowed his eyes his heart beating heavy and fast; his power was fast slipping away from his body…However he pushed his legs to leave from there feeling sweat spurting all over his face enhancing the feeling of illness. He huffed, understanding: Kryptonite.

He pressed his legs to move and he remembered Bruce’s paraplegia: he never till now had realized how titanic Bruce’s effort was…

Suddenly, he felt his legs even heavier, thwarted in their effort. But there was something else holding him. He looked his body: his legs and arms were wrapped from several plant stems that dragged him down, joined by other rope like stems coiling around his torso. He clenched his jaw and fists trying to fight but the strength of the weeds along with his weakness made him fail. He was dragged down, on the weed covered terrain.

Superman saw Diana smirking; she had her arms crossed over her chest looking at him with content and a gleeful shine that made Superman grit his teeth angrily.

But he was crashed to the floor covered from weeds that pinched his body with an invincible strength; the spots where the stems touched him felt like burning and he realized that the plants had Kryptonite: that wasn’t normal.

Diana walked arrogantly towards him and stood right in front of him towering him with her muscle bound body that now made Superman sick.

“You see now what you and every other ignorant human are blind to: nature’s power!” she cocked an eyebrow; her eyes were caressing the green waterfall with an abnormal affection.

“Who are you?” Superman asked trying to struggle but realizing that his struggle made the clenching stronger.

She cackled.

“Oh! I’m just another existence that goes unnoticed like all these beautiful souls…” he saw Superman’s puzzlement and snorted. “Okay, then…All this time, I figured you’re not so bright after all…”

In front of his eyes the Amazon Princess was transformed into a modest woman in white robe; she had her blond hair in a tight bun and glasses hiding her light blue eyes. She cocked an eyebrow.

“I was humble Dr. Pamela Lilian Isley whom everyone jeered because she gave plants the respect they deserved…And then I believed in a man who said that believed the same with me… only to abuse what he told me that he loved: he used me and the plants’ strength for his own stupid ambitions and when I confronted him, his stupidity made the lab to explode. It wasn’t the first time humanity disappointed me…but nature never did. My life was saved by the dying plants that gave me their powers and qualities.”

Superman was sure that those qualities were in fact due to the chemicals that were freed during the
explosion.

“When I realized that my friends, the plants, had saved me, I decided to be their champion; their protector against the humanity’s cruelty. I changed many names and forms as the nature does…”

The glasses vanished and her eyes became honey colored as her hair that fell free in curls on her back; she was dressed like a woman of cabarets and Superman gulped remembering Bruce’s flashback: the woman from Dolcetto.

Ivy shook her head.

“I was born and raised in Gotham so I started from there: killing those bastards who tortured and killed my friends – trees, bushes, flowers: innocent victims to people’s greed… It was easy: seducing them with the feromones my friends had endowed me with and killing them with the plants power: natural poison… The press finally recognized me with my real name: my destiny. And then I became Vivian to infatuate Gotham’s king into helping nature: take the Lilian and change the ‘l’ with the ‘v’ from Ivy: my real name” her eyes flashed angrily. “Because, Superman, the woman who defeated you is Poison Ivy!”

The clenching from the hundreds of different stems became harder and Superman goggled seeing the view in front of him.

The prostitute transformed. Her honey colored hair became a flaming red and her long locks like a waterfall covered her naked back. Her entire breathtaking, curvy, porcelain body was almost naked: small leaves assembled covered the lower part of her groin’s V only to expand with lean, thread like stems that hugged her pelvis’s bones to wrap sensually her thin waist; other green stems no thicker than strands began from her belt to end up to her round, rich breasts covering only the nipples with diamond shaped green silver leaves. Her long, shapely legs were bare apart from large leaves that covered her calves.

She stretched to the air her long naked arms that were adorned with thin stems with small leaves that wrapped like snakes around the skin.

“Do you like the real thing, Kal El?” she asked jeering stabbing her forest green eyes to his; her heart shaped green lips revealing her pearl white teeth in a triumphant smile.

“Why you did that?”

She tilted her head on the side and clenched her waist with one hand.

“To give nature what she deserves after ages of oppression…”

Superman shook his head remembering how many times he saved the environment from pollution: he glared at the plants – how ungrateful!

“I know that nature suffers from some humans’ behavior but killing me won’t help you in anything” he was puzzled; okay, she had some strengths connected with plants but how did she manage to imitate the legendary powers of Diana.

She smirked.

“You don’t but he will…”

Superman’s eyes widened seeing the air floating to materialize a new presence: he knew him and now everything was cast into the light of truth.
Bagdana’s enormous body stood in front of him in his granite color, dressed in black leather pants and a black leather vest. His silver spikes instead of hair shone but his eyes gleeful shine was more intense as his smirk that carved his face.

“Bagdana…” Clark whispered. “You did everything to take your revenge on me because Bruce chose me instead of you. But you could have caught me without this circus – it would only take some Kryptonite.”

Bagdana laughed.

“Sure but you would have strong help, right? And you would have escaped and I would be again defeated. To win a war you need cunningness…patience…strategy. And I’m a master of these. You see” he walked slowly towards his fallen enemy “I was the breeze that whispered in Julius Cesar’s ear: divide and conquer…” he whispered with glee leaning above his captured enemy. “I’m a master of deceive so I implemented that: I knew that if I wanted to win definitely I should take you away from your allies.”

Superman understood from his words that he hadn’t told Ivy about Bruce being the Batman.

“And I did that” Bagdana continued “bringing to the fore a breathtaking legendary creature that certainly would infatuate you and make you detach from Bruce and therefore your allies. And leaving me the space to console the broken heart.”

Superman gritted his teeth seeing Oliver Queen replacing the demon.

Superman shook his head: really cunning. But Bruce had suspected that: he couldn’t have succumbed to Queen’s advances and maybe was on their tracks. But the demon seemed completely ignorant of Bruce’s suspicions so it was better if he didn’t reveal anything to them.

“And at the same time you hurt Bruce…” he said and Bagdana cocked an eyebrow.

“Actually, you did that.”

Superman licked his lips, the pain becoming worse as the feeling of sickness. The demon was right: magic and feromones apart he was the one who hurt Bruce.

“You were defeated” Clark said to him. “You were imprisoned in Tartarus, you couldn’t escape…”

Bagdana crooked his mouth and Oliver Queen became again the dark creature.

“There was someone who could free me…” he chuckled “for his own interests of course…”

Superman frowned: this wasn’t good. His entire face was contorted in disbelief watching a third presence materializing. His body screamed from the Kryptonite inflicted pain and both demon and Ivy smirked.

A warrior in full gear detached from the others and raised her sword.

“A man has invaded our island. Kill him!”

The Princess looked surprised as her warriors launched their attack against the newcomers yelling their combat screams. She knitted her eyebrows and just stepped aside leaving space to the clearance
they had reached fighting.

“A man. Has invaded” Selina rolled her eyes avoiding a spear thrown at her. “From a society of women you’d expect to not ignore a woman…”

Batman found this amusing yet he hadn’t time to chuckle. He dodged the spears that came at him jolting his body to the air.

The Amazons had swarmed the place and their blades shone as the clouds had dispersed revealing the stars. Batman didn’t want to hit them; he didn’t want to show aggressiveness but as he landed there was no choice but to kick stretching his legs on both directions throwing away the first ones to attack him; their bodies pushing away those behind them.

Catwoman slashed her whip hitting a charging Amazon and sending her to crash on the ground. She didn’t have any problem to hit a woman especially when she was lowering her sword on her head. Selina dodged and kicked the woman in the belly sending her to crash on her comrades.

Batman saw the woman who ordered the attack charging at him with her sword ready; the blade was coming to his neck so quickly that resembled a lightning. The last moment he caught the blade between his palms causing the woman’s infuriated, shocked scream; she tried to overcome his resistance to free her sword. Her strength was great yet Batman managed to hold and the Amazon realizing kicked him in the belly hoping that his surprise would yield his resistance.

However Batman twisted his hands taking advantage of her effort to kick him to throw her sword away. Her hatred was obvious in her eyes when she jerked both hands to punch him only to be stopped by Batman’s consecutive blocks with his forearms.

Several Amazons surrounded him attacking simultaneously as he fought her leader. Batman continued to block his opponent’s hits with his palms using his legs to kick the warriors who attacked from the back. He thanked his friends for the armor that enabled his legs to move because other than that he couldn’t feel anything there even though the Amazons hit him.

He jerked his head backwards to smack the head of one behind him who had attempted to headlock him and clenching his jaw boosted himself to the air twirling using his movement to propel the warriors who were on him.

His movement had thrown the commander of the Amazons away and she landed on her feet; she was ready to attack again but she looked amazed at the creature fighting them: his wings was spread and in the night he looked like a giant Bat or a winged creature of justice.

Yet Amazons weren’t afraid of anything; she clenched her fists and jumped to attack the creature that fought her sisters.

Selina elbowed the woman behind her and punched the one in front of her right in the nose kicking at the same time another one coming from her right. She wanted to run to Bruce and help: he shouldn’t get hurt and these lamias were real bitches.

Batman was descending rapidly back to the ground; he gathered his wings to envelop several Amazons and threw them aside. But as soon as they were out others went on him; he needed to stop this.

He took a smoke bomb from his belt and threw it between his feet obscuring their view and surprising them just for the second the time he needed to jump to another spot.

Batman stood some feet away ready to speak but the woman he had confronted surged again at him
brandishing her sword giving a war cry that really made the blood run cold.

“Ἀντιόπη, μη! Σταματήστε την επίθεση!”

Both Selina and Bruce could hear the words translated so they knew that the Princess at last ordered her comrades to stop.

The Amazons obeyed puzzled and looked at their Princess; Selina found the chance to walk casually among them to come to her friend.

“She didn’t want her sisters eat more dust…” she said dryly lolling her head to Batman.

Diana walked in the middle of the battle scenery and addressed her people.

«Αυτός ανήκει στην υπηρεσία της Νέμεσης.»

Selina rolled her eyes meeting Batman’s lenses.

“At Nemesis’ service?” she asked exasperated. “Oh, boy!”

“It’s better than all this fighting” he replied. “There are more important things right now than exchanging punches…”

The Princess touched the shoulders of the woman she had called Antiope.

“They are not enemies…” Bruce and Selina understood what the Princess said locking eyes with her lieutenant. “They didn’t want to attack us.”

Suddenly, the circle of the still suspicious women broke to reveal a woman with black hair streaked with thin gray, dressed in a deep red long tunic with golden streaks at the sides. She wore a plain, unadorned gold tiara and her blue eyes were filled with wisdom as she regarded the scene.

Diana detached from Antiope and met her.

“Queen Hippolyta” she said with respect.
Ms. Turner’s small blue Ford stopped in front of the Wayne Manor and both Dick and Jayson jumped out carrying their school backpacks. While Ms. Turner drove the car to the parking they climbed the stairs and Dick made to ring the bell however Alfred caught with him and opened the door.

“Good afternoon, Master Dick, Master Jayson; how was your school day?”

Jayson crooked his mouth.

“It was a SCHOOL DAY: so there can’t be much originality ther’” he spat. “All in all, twas shit.” Dick chuckled and Alfred took his mock strict expression.

“I must kindly request of you to mind your language, Master Jason.”

Jason tilted his head on the side.

“As if ya never felt like shit in school...” Alfred couldn’t fight a grin and Dick elbowed his friend who looked him surprised. “Wha’? Ya think that he has forgotten ‘cause it’s been ages since?” he asked as they moved inside.

Now Alfred didn’t manage to hold a chuckle.

“No, Master Jayson; although indeed too many years have passed I do remember some bad school days.”

Jayson cocked his eyebrows.

“Some?”

Alfred didn’t reply.

“The lunch is ready, young masters; so if you please, you can wash your hands and come to the kitchen.”

He made to leave for the kitchen but Dick cleared his throat and the butler stopped.

“Is anything the matter, Master Richard?”

“You had any news from Bruce? Days have passed since he left...”

Jayson crooked his mouth.

“He feels guilty an’ fears that his past ill thoughts an’ wishes will have an effect on Bruce...”

Alfred eyed the boy with understanding.

“Is that so, Master Richard? Then I must tell you that nothing of what you said or thought can harm Master Bruce: your heart is pure, Master Jayson, so your thoughts can’t make any harm” he cocked his eyebrows. “Besides you have regretted those now.”

Dick wasn’t relieved.
“Did he call? How is he?” he insisted.

“I didn’t speak with him because he is very busy but I did speak with Mr. Lucius Fox who is with him and he told me that Master Bruce is alright.”

Dick shook his head.

“Is a Batman related mission?” Jason whispered in conspirator mode.

Alfred narrowed his eyes.

“You understand that I can’t answer that” he replied in the same tone and winked.

Dick shook his head: he really missed Bruce – he wanted to talk so many things with him.

“You think it will be long before he returns?”

“I cannot give an answer to that, Master Richard.”

The boy sighed.

“At least, granny accepted to stay here a few days more – I wouldn’t like to leave without seeing and speaking to him…”

Alfred smiled; Harvey and his family had moved to the city and he was glad that Ms. Turner and Master Richard would be staying a bit more: his young master’s absence would have reminded him a lot of those dreadful years of Falcone’s rule when Alfred there was indeed the keeper of a mausoleum.

But what made him happier was that the boy had grown such affection for his young Master. And Master Bruce needed that after everything that happened the last months.

“I assure you, Master Richard, that he will be also happy. However even when you and your grandmother move back to your own apartment you can still come whenever you want to the Manor; and of course you can talk with Master Bruce as much as you want. Which is also true for you, Master Jayson.”

Jayson scratched his head.

“I hope when he returns he will be so happy to remember that littl’ ride…”

Dick laughed but then looked Alfred in the eyes.

“It must be so hard for you to wait for him here…”

Alfred smiled kindly to the boy.

“It definitely is, Master Richard.”

A gigantic blue figure stood before Superman, towering, shedding him under his shadow that made his spine froze in its menacing aura. Superman rarely felt fear and always was about his loved ones’ wellbeing – he was invulnerable after all. Now however was different: the Kryptonite had drained him of his super powers and the weeds and plants were suffocating him keeping him completely immobile, more effective than titanium shackles.
Even in this position his major fear was still about his loved ones, about the people who were in danger by this being. He clenched his jaw and his trapped fists making a desperate and hopeless effort to escape and face the new threat. However he was weak and ill from the Kryptonite and the vicious plants crushed him more, digging their stems and thorns into his vulnerable now flesh.

The big square face of the newcomer was carved by a smirk and Superman glared at him, simultaneously estimating the stranger. He was taller and broader than Bagdana and his sturdy, square bluish body almost reached the ceiling. His legs and arms were like pillars bound in bulging stony muscles. His eyebrows were hairless as his head and his eyes glistened in a flaming red.

“Kal El of Krypton…Superman of Earth” the newcomer rattled between his teeth.

Superman felt relieved because this being didn’t know his human identity – otherwise he’d have bragged about that: Bagdana hadn’t revealed that and that meant that his Ma and friends were safe from this man’s revenge. Suddenly, he froze: but he knew about Bruce…

“You’re really pathetic” the bluish giant said smugly and Ivy chuckled while Bagdana was completely indifferent – even impatient as if he was in a hurry to do something more important.

Superman’s chest was contrived because he knew that Bagdana’s only interest was getting Bruce.

“Trapped from…plants!” the giant laughed. “Falling so easily to the trick… I always knew that Kryptonians were all talking and bragging but deep down they were useless worms. I intended to prove how worthless they were destroying their planet but your sun caught me in that – saving Kryptonians from the shame of their defeat and robbing me from my triumph. But now I have that will change: I will show how inferior are Kryptonians by destroying the people the last Kryptonian bragged that he protects and then I shall destroy him too eradicating that breed from my new world.”

Superman clenched his jaw and shook his head trying to ease his neck from the choking of all those thick and thinner stems that were wrapped around like a green noose.

“Who are you?”

The blue giant cackled and stepped even closer, bringing his enormous foot over Superman’s chest, stepping and pressing him to the weed covered ground almost squashing him. Clark bereft of his extraordinary strength and invulnerability felt his muscles and bones protesting from the pain and inadvertently his mind went to that night an entire roof crashed over Bruce; his Star must have been in crucifying pain. He grunted causing the blue giant’s smirk.

“I am Darkseid, the ruler of Apokolips and the master of the Universe.”

Ivy leaned to Bagdana.

“This was an animation show of ‘80s…I preferred Thundercats though…” she snorted and the demon chuckled.

However Darkseid had his eyes locked with Superman’s. The latter’s face was drenched in sweat from the pain both the Kryptonite and Darkseid’s weight caused.

“I can kill you right now, pathetic Kryptonian; a blink of my eyes is more than enough to turn you into dust…Ending that stinking Kryptonian breed from my world.”

Superman’s defiance shone in his eyes.

“Do it then!” he spat in his enemy’s face.
Darkseid stabbed him with his eyes and the pain in every one of Superman’s billions of cells became unbearable to the point of screaming; a scream that Clark barely managed to turn into growl. The New God clenched his enormous fist next to the hero’s head clenching his square jaw.

“No; it is too easy for you” Superman slightly frowned but at the same time made his stare defiant; Darkseid smirked. “You will first see this planet enslaved, succumbing defeated under my feet…” Darkseid had promised to give this planet to Ivy so he on purpose avoided using ‘destroyed’.

Superman set his jaw with determination.

“You can’t win! You might have caught me but there are many great people out there who will kick your sorry ass!”

He had barely ended his phrase when Darkseid’s heavy foot kicked him in the face and weren’t for his weed bindings he’d have crushed to the opposite wall. His cheek however was sliced and he felt the first known sense of warm blood slithering his skin.

Both Batman and Catwoman regarded casually but estimating the newcomers: behind the circle of the gathered Amazons, new presences cast their shadows over the clearance. They had come along with Queen Hippolyta: they were Amazons on horses, dressed in plain long sleeveless tunics in dark blue color. These women were much older than the rest, their beautiful faces were wrinkled not much but enough to indicate that they were elder. However, their battling abilities weren’t compromised: they held their unadorned wooden bows with the stings stretched ready to launch the metallic pointed arrows to the uninvited guests; under the light the torches some of the Amazons on foot were holding, their blazing, glaring eyes were already shedding daggers to their targets waiting for the order.

Selina leaned slightly to Bruce.

“You can smash their arrows with your Batarangs in a few seconds and I can do the same with my whip…”

Batman kept his eyes on the Princess who was talking with her mother.

“Yes but I want to believe that we won’t have to…” he whispered.

Queen Hippolyta walked graciously towards the two strangers with Diana on her side. The older woman looked at them.

“A really unusual pair of warriors…” she said.

Selina cocked an eyebrow.

“I can’t see the reason we are unusual: a giant Bat and a Cat kicking asses…” she pouted.

“They didn’t attack us” Diana said. “They claim that they just want to talk to me.”

The Queen nodded.

Selina crossed her arms on her chest; Bruce considered it a good sign that the two women spoke English to be understood by their ‘guests’. However he didn’t move forward since this might be interpreted as lack of respect.
“Queen Hippolyta, I’m Batman” he said calmly. “I’m sorry we disturbed your peace but it was necessary.”

The woman named Antiope rushed there with her eyes angry.

“Man, kneel before Queen Hippolyta!”

Bruce rolled his eyes inside because this phrase always caused him more laughter than anger yet Selina’s reaction wasn’t so mild; she frowned and moved furious against the woman, causing the nervous movements of the archer Amazons.

“What’s your mouth, sister!” she purred unfazed by the arrows ready to pierce them. “He won’t kneel before anyone!” Selina knew how many times her friend had been forced to do that and other things connected with that.

“I didn’t demand it from you” Antiope retorted “but he is a man: not kneeling before the Queen shows his lack of respect.”

Selina was ready to answer but Batman looked at her calm communicating with her. Batman focused his lenses on the Queen and the Princess.

“I deeply respect both of you but I won’t kneel because kneeling is an indication of servility not respect” he saw Hippolyta’s eyes flashing but not with hostility. “I never kneel before anyone.”

“He is arrogant” Antiope said detaching from the glaring battle with Selina.

Batman turned slowly to regard the General and then back to the two leaders.

“I’m not arrogant; just dignified. And the people who deserve respect don’t feel the need of seeing people on their feet.”

Diana grinned satisfied while Hippolyta’s face was unreadable. In the few seconds that followed the clearance fell in complete silence which was disturbed by the sounds of the forests’ animals and the wind’s blow between the leaves. Batman and Catwoman felt the stabbing eyes of the Amazons on them.

Hippolyta turned to the archers on the horses and with a stare they lowered their bows and put them back to their shoulders.

“I would never expect to see kneeled him who is the bearer of the Dagger of Justice” her eyes locked with Batman’s lenses.

Then as if she had seen what she wanted the Queen exchanged a meaningful gaze with her daughter and then regarded their guests.

“Our city’s gates will open to admit you.”

“As prisoners?” Selina asked aggressively. “No way!”

“Losers: all of them” Darkseid said with contempt and smiled. “You expect the Avengers to stop me?” he cackled stretching his posture keeping his foot on Superman’s chest. “How pathetic! Relying on others to do your job” he cocked an eyebrow “especially a bunch of amateurs…They were almost beaten by that pathetic so-called god, Loki; his petty army was a joke in front of my
troopers and weapons and his powers are only a drop in the ocean that are mine! Who is going to pose a worthy resistance?” he snorted. “The Amazon?” Ivy laughed. “The world will freeze seeing its protector siding with me…Flash? I’m faster than this bug…”

Superman thought of someone who was a threat for every evil being whatever its powers: a creature lurking in the shadows waiting to open its wings and bring justice on them.

Darkseid cocked his eyebrows.

“Oh…So is this your greatest hope? A little Bat? This Batman seems to have everyone’s high respect” he turned to look at Bagdana and Superman realized that Darkseid had seen inside his brain since he immediately spoke about Batman: fortunately, he hadn’t thought about Bruce at the same time. “He is the most pathetic of the lot…absent all the time doing nothing…I doubt that he’d even dare to leave his nest trying to hide from Darkseid’s power when your lousy world falls apart…Because except than my troops I have a second army ready to unleash terror when my attack starts: the lowlife of Metropolis…” his smirk became wider. “Using humans’ own deficits to squash them.”

Superman’s eyes widened; he suddenly remembered the mobsters he was watching all these months: their chats about their powerful leader who wasn’t afraid of Superman; of their cleaning attacks against every rival gang; the mysterious releases of gangsters from jail; the attack at Metropolis’ subway station where the fake Diana appeared suddenly and kissed him…Finally, it made sense!

Darkseid nodded smugly.

“Exactly! Intergang” he read Superman’s mind. “I’m the leader but you were too preoccupied all this time to search for me and putting that lousy gangster to lead the attack at the station persuaded everyone and you that he was the leader. My dear fake Amazon took care to close his mouth forever”.

He turned to look at Ivy and Superman found the chance to think how right Bruce was to doubt that Edge, whom Ivy killed there, was indeed the leader.

“They would have never followed you!”

Darkseid turned to him cocking an eyebrow.

“Why because I am an alien or because of my blue color?” he asked in irony. “I doubt that…Humans are greedy: will make everything for the right price ignoring their fate in the end…Yet I didn’t consider the scum of this planet worthy of seeing Darkseid in all his glory – so I became a human, not that they ever saw me yet I needed to blend with humans to learn about them: suck their dark elements” he took the form of Mannheim.

Superman squinted: he had seen that man in a few photos but nothing more.

“Brunno Mannheim?!”

“Bravo! As humans say…An ordinary business man. There are so many odd humans out there that my mystery didn’t make an impression…and I have my time to make my study and conclude that this lousy species is perfect for the job.”

Superman didn’t like that. He shook his head feeling awkward as the blood from the gash in his cheek slithered to join that from his lips.

“What job? A planet must be perfect to be…’honored’ with your conquest?” he asked in deep irony.
Darkseid lolled his head to the side.

“Conquering planets it is nothing for Darkseid: I could have turned this planet into dust whenever I wanted; yet what interests me is to get the energy that lies inside humans’ subconscious: the dark energy that will make me the master of Anti Life Equation and will enable me to create a new universe. My machine is almost ready” he said sucking Superman’s angst “Luthor is working day and night serving his master.”

“You released Luthor from prison. Of course! Luthor was bound to be in this!”

“He is just a pawn: he is a human – he needn’t to know much; he’ll do his job and then he’ll be exterminated like the rest of his breed. When Luthor finishes my machine then I’ll unleash my power over Earth” Superman felt his sweaty body going frozen just from the power that vibrated that voice; Darkseid clenched his fist in the air. “I want you to watch as your fellow heroes get killed one by one and then as I’ll drain humans from the valuable energy that lies in them leaving them empty carcasses… I want you to watch all these; I want the last son of Krypton watch as another people gets eliminated because he was worthless as his ancestors who couldn’t avert Krypton’s destruction and their own extinction.”

Clark remembered what he have heard months ago in a bar from two of Mannheim’s thugs: their intention to torture Bruce in front of his eyes to make him suffer; he remembered the recent attack against Bruce in the Palisades from thugs; they had manifested signs of brainwashing too. So Darkseid had his eyes on Bruce whether Bagdana wanted the human for himself or not.

“You ordered the attack against Bruce Wayne at Palisades…”

Darkseid nodded.

“Yes. That human is too arrogant: he had the parts of my machine since he got LexLabs and he was refusing to give them back. He needed some punishment but in the end I took what I wanted whether he wanted or not.”

Darkseid turned his back on Clark to look at Bagdana and Clark found the chance to take a deep breath because knowing Bruce and his thoughts about the Intergang, maybe he had suspected something about the parts and had kept some control?

“My valuable demon wants your human too much” Darkseid said. “Waye is a strange human being indeed…”

Bagdana looked him frowned: he never liked Darkseid’s interest in Bruce. And neither Superman liked it.

“Leave Bruce alone!” Superman yelled to both of them. “Bruce won’t become your reward” his eyes found Bagdana’s cold yellow irises. “Bruce will never accept to be your slave!”

Bagdana covered the space that parted them with two strides and his granite colored body became the shining green of Kryptonite that immediately made Superman’s pain more than ever. The hero screamed till his lungs were empty from air.

The demon leaned to him and grasped his neck choking him bringing their eyes to lock.

“Bruce is mine!”

“He doesn’t belong to anyone!” he screamed as the pain became even stronger.
Darkseid laughed and shook his head with contempt for the sight.

“All these for a human – a cripple human, that is…” he uttered with disgust and Superman managed to think how wrong Darkseid was to underestimate Bruce. “You’ll be transferred to my base” Darkseid said keeping his enormous back turned to Superman and Bagdana. “I shall provide you a most convenient stay there until everything is done and you meet the rest of your worthless breed’s fate.”

Superman knew very well how ‘convenient’ that stay would be…

Hippolyta smiled.

“You are not our prisoners but our guests.”

Selina looked at Bruce with her eyes narrowed: it could be a trap and she could tell without seeing her friends’ eyes that he was thinking the same. Yet Batman yanked his head.

“I’ll be honored to be your guest, Queen Hippolyta, Princess Artemis” he turned to Selina waiting her response to the invitation.

Selina crooked her mouth.

“Alright. I just hope you don’t have any ill intention.”

The Princess smiled friendly and made an inviting gesture as the Amazons moved to open the closed circle around them.

Batman and Catwoman began walking since their hosts waited for them to go first; Hippolyta with the Princess followed them and then the rest of the Amazons. The women on horses were the last to follow.

The marching was silent disturbed only from the hissing sound of the air moving the thick foliage of the forest, the screeching sounds of the forests’ animals and the howls of wolves on the mountains that stood guards on the perimeter of the island.

Selina leaned to her friend.

“I feel like the mouse being invited to dinner by the cat…”

Batman grinned.

“It must be an awkward feeling…for a Cat” he replied and Selina felt rather than saw an eyebrow being raised.

She pursed her lips.

“I hope we are not the meal…” she snorted. “For their sake!”

Batman pressed his lips.

The gates opened to welcome them and they followed the central street that led to the palace that was situated in the heart of the city.

The sideways streets were narrow and surrounded by houses that were the same square buildings
without any distinction of wealth or social status. Batman located near the center of the city two enormous rectangular buildings with guards in their entrances: his guess was that these were some kind of storages – the one for food and the other for armory.

The waving light from the fires on the stony pillars that were situated densely to the two sides of the street made the oval small stones that covered the ground shine.

Over the city’s citadel a temple towered the city; it was made from white marble that glistened like pearl among the fires that burnt in its perimeter of round shaped pillars.

“The temple of Hera” the Princess told seeing Batman looking there; she had moved so to be at their side.

The palace wasn’t an impressive building to show off the ruler’s status and power; it was slightly bigger than the other residential buildings and its entrance was made of two Doric marble gateposts that surrounded a heavy oaken door.

The two warriors who guarded the entrance holding spears saluted their leaders by hitting their fists on their chests. A motion that always made Selina roll her eyes.

“A bit pretentious, don’t you think?” she whispered to Batman’s pointy ear.

“It’s just their code of demeanor…”

The floor shone under the abundant light of the torches that was positioned all over the two walls that surrounded the wide corridor. It was a marble floor in golden color adorned with scenes of battle. The walls were bare of any depictions.

They followed the main corridor that led to the throne hall but Batman estimated the sideways smaller corridors that led to the other rooms; at the end of the corridor stood a stair with wide steps that led to the upper level. He wanted to have an image of the building just in case they needed to escape which he didn’t want to happen but he knew he had to be prepared for everything.

The throne hall was vast; the walls were covered with weathered weapons that either were relics or loot from great battles. In the far end, opposite the entrance that was guarded by two Amazons, stood the throne made of wood adorned with golden designs; on its right stood another throne that certainly was of the Princess. In front of the two thrones on the shining floor was an enormous mosaic depicting the same star on Diana’s tiara. On the right of the thrones was a long, rectangular table with rectangular stools.

In the perimeter of the hall, in equal distance between them, were place human-sized statues of the twelve ancient Greek Gods and Goddesses. The beauty and reality of the statues were impressive.

The Princess upon entering the hall whispered something to some Amazons who had rushed there as soon as their leaders arrived. The women left immediately and Hippolyta turned to her guests.

“You must be really tired from your journey here: it will be an honor to share our humble food and wine with two warriors like you.”

Batman bowed slightly his head.

“Thank you, Queen Hippolyta, but the reason of our trip comes before food and rest.”

The Queen eyed her daughter and Diana nodded courtly.
“Princess Artemis told me that you are Goddess Nemesis’ warrior which is apparent from your armor” she smiled and gestured with her palm to one statue that was positioned at the far left corner, behind the other gods’ statues, cast in the shadow: it was a winged goddess that brandished her sword ready to punish the wrong doers; her eyes and facial expression was calm but determined.

Bruce remembered the statue he had seen in the temple of his dream.

“Everyone wise enough respects goddess Nemesis and lets her guide from the shadows her demeanor through life” the older woman said regarding the statue. “The coming of someone affiliated to her means that something grave is happening. She guided your steps here.”

She walked graciously and sat to her throne. In the mean time, Antiope still in her armor minus the helmet entered the hall and behind her the elder Amazons take their places surrounding the hall. Under the rich light of the torches the beauty of the women was striking as her well trained, hard bodies.

Bruce could play the card of Nemesis’ representative which would help his cause yet he didn’t want to lie. He realized that both Hippolyta and Diana regarded him.

“Queen Hippolyta, I must admit that I don’t know if the goddess has guided our steps here neither if she wanted us here. I like to take the full responsibility of my actions so it was our decision that brought us here to alert you and specifically Princess Artemis about the developments in our world.”

Diana’s beautiful eyes focused on him.

“Nothing that happens out there can have anything to do with us: for your world we are just a legend; people completely ignore our existence.”

Batman shook his head.

“Not anymore. Not since the Princess of the Amazons appeared to our world.”

A shocked murmur crossed the hall and Diana frowned.

“What?”

Batman bent his forearm and brushed a spot: instantly, images appeared in the air from the micro projector that was adjusted to his armor. Another surprised hiss ran the space.

They saw a woman stopping a train stopping it before crashing in a cliff; they saw her even using her bracelets to repel thugs.

Queen Hippolyta’s eyes widened while Diana’s hands clenched into fists seeing the black-blue long hair of the woman, the blue eyes, the tiara and the lasso curled in her belt.

“Obviously your visits to our world are not so often” Selina said raising an eyebrow.

Diana shook her head absorbed in the images of the fake.

“No; we come to your world once in four years.”

Selina snorted.

“Don’t tell me: for the Olympics?”

“No, for reproduction” the Princess answered and looked at Bruce with her face distorted in disgust.
“That impostor claims that she is me? She is dressed like a whore!” she cast a glare to the swimming suit-like costume the fake Diana wore which led her entire legs naked and hardly dressed half of her big breasts.

Selina sniggered.

“I won’t argue with that…Minus the ‘like’: she IS a whore.”

Batman pressed his lips.

“That’s right, Princess: she pretends to be the Diana of Themiscyra.”

“What about her powers?” Hippolyta asked. “How can she have the powers Artemis has?”

The Princess looked at Batman frowned.

“She is allied with powerful beings that plan to conquer the planet; her allies instructed her into acting like the Amazon Princess and gave her powers along that completed her own.”

“And why using my name?” the Princess gritted her teeth and Batman knew that this was the sentiment of everyone in the hall; the Amazons were affronted that someone impersonated their Princess.

Batman brushed his forearm and the next video played in front of the Amazons’ shocked eyes; this video was painful for him too. On the night skyline of Chicago, among the skyscrapers Diana and Superman hovered embraced with their bodies glued, in a passionate kiss that made the crowd underneath them cheer.

Selina huffed exasperated.

“She copulates with Superman?!” Diana exclaimed.

The word she used made Selina snort.

“More like she fucks Superman!”

Batman cast a sideways glance at his friend who shrugged; he then turned to Diana.

“I see you know Superman.”

Antiope stepped forward.

“We know about Superman but nothing about you” she gritted her teeth while her black eyes sent daggers to him.

Selina crossed her arms over her chest, lolled her head towards the general and rolled her eyes.

“He doesn’t like the limelight…”

“My work has nothing to do with cheering and cameras” he said flatly and Hippolyta nodded.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less than the warrior of Nemesis” she remarked.

Diana however was impatient.

“What Superman has to do with the involvement of my name in this?”
Batman looked at her.

“The conspirators believed that Superman is the main obstacle in conquering Earth so they brought to the fore a legendary Amazon, a gorgeous heroine who fights the evil like Superman intending to enslave him to her will and in the end capturing him so he couldn’t help the Earth when the time comes. One of her own powers is to seduce her victims and enslave them under her will; of course in Superman’s case her own mind controlling strength was amplified by her allies.”

Diana’s lips were pressed in anger.

“Darkseid. This is the alien being that wants to destroy Earth” Batman added. “And when he launches his attack the Princess of the Amazon” he scowled “the impostor, will join him in smashing the planet’s defense, discouraging the humans who will see their heroine, the one they now call Wonder Woman, killing them alongside the so-called New God.”

“She disgraces the name of the Amazons and of our Princess” one of the elder women said.

But Diana was calm.

“How did you figure that she was an impostor?”

Batman shook his head.

“Noticing some things: the star her tiara has is not the Greek star; also, her hair had something that betrays that the color is artificial. Her entire demeanor…”

Diana shared a look with her mother.

“And why did you come here?” Diana asked.

Batman set his jaw.

“To inform you about what happens in your name and hoping to have your alliance and help in the war that it is coming.”

“That is a war that has to do with the world of men, not ours” Antiope replied. “We can defend our island if that so-called New God tries to attack us.”

Batman looked at her.

“He is not a common warlord: he belongs to a race called New Gods and he possesses great powers. When he hits it will be to everyone’s best interest if our strength is united. If what you call ‘the world of men’ falls then the fall of your world will be easier since Darkseid would focus all his strength against you.”

“You are part of this world” Selina spat “the fate of this world will affect your island too.”

“He might not even find Themiscyra” one of the elders commented and Batman’s dark stare was cast on her.

“You don’t understand: Darkseid doesn’t care about conquering the planet and being its ruler – he will eliminate this planet entirely. It is what he does: he destroys worlds.”

Antiope looked at her Princess who was deep in thought.

“Amazons are not afraid to fight” Hippolyta said.
“But are you willing to fight alongside men?” Antiope asked her Princess.

Diana yanked her head.

“One of this men” she looked at Batman “was chosen by Nemesis” she said. “If the goddess can trust a man why I cannot?”

Selina made a step forward.

“What you call the world of men is hardly that: there are also strong, independent women who fight equally to the men” she cocked an eyebrow showing herself with the eyes “obviously.”

Batman stared at the Princess.

“Will you join our cause?”

“This woman challenges me” Diana said glaring at Ivy in the video. “She dared to impersonate me and defame the name of the Amazons.”

Batman slightly yanked his head feeling encouraged but the Princess narrowed her eyes that shone smartly.

“What if I deny helping you?”

He set his jaw.

“I’ll return and fight with all my friends and allies to protect our world and yours.”

New murmurs scattered to the room and Hippolyta yanked her head raising her palm silencing immediately her sisters.

“You’ll have your answer tomorrow” Diana said locking her gaze with Batman’s lenses.

Selina huffed frustrated but Batman nodded.

“Now I think that our guests should eat and rest” Hippolyta said and stood.

During their discussion the table on the left was prepared for dinner: large brass plates with roasted meat along with loafs of bread and vessels with wine were placed there waiting.

Selina looked at her friend.

“You don’t have an appetite, right?”

Batman pressed his lips.

“No…” he whispered “but we will insult our hosts if we skip that.”

Selina shrugged.

“Then try to enjoy the meal” her eyes were warm. “You need to eat.”

“You too.”

At the table the Princess looked again at Selina’s heels.

“I’ve seen many women wear those in bars and other establishments of recreation but fighting with
them?”

Selina took a mouthful of fine roasted wild sheep that was hunted on the mountains of Themyscira and shrugged.

“Haven’t you seen dancers or acrobats doing their stuff on heels? Plus, those heels are a really lethal weapon if you know how to handle it” she tilted her head towards an Amazon she had confronted previously and cocked her eyebrows pointedly; the woman’s face had some nasty scars from Selina’s razor sharp heels.

Diana grinned.

“I might consider that…”

Catwoman pouted.

“Just stick to your guns, gal!”

The music from the harps and flutes was beautifully relaxing yet Batman was tense every now and then taking a bite and sipping from his bronze mug. His mind was already working his back up and how he could persuade Clark that the Diana he knew was an impostor.

Hippolyta looked at him.

“Your mind is troubled.”

He looked at her.

“The world is faced with a great danger.”

Hippolyta nodded.

“You are a truly great warrior: your world is fortunate to have you defending it.”

After the dinner, Diana herself guided them to the guest rooms but Selina insisted on staying with Batman.

“You are a couple?” she asked.

Selina rolled her eyes.

“No, we are friends; more than friends: siblings” she spat.

Diana smiled and turned to Batman.

“I wish I could give you the answer you want right now but there are matters I must consider.”

Batman nodded.

“I understand.”

The room was spacious with too few furniture: a plain wooden bed with unadorned posts, a small rectangular table and two chairs; a sofa consisted of leather fabrics and a lit fireplace completed the room’s appliances.
When they were left alone Selina turned anxious to Batman.

“Now we are alone: Are you alright? They were vicious out there. Are you in pain?”

He smiled.

“Half of my body can’t be in body if I wanted to… As for the rest, it’s fine.”

“Yes but still you might be hurt. They hit yours legs: take off the armor plates to have a look.”

Bruce looked at his legs which weren’t feeling anything. His armor indeed bore marks of blades; he might have some bruises but he honestly right now didn’t care.

“No; I don’t want to take off any part of the armor.”

Selina frowned.

“You think they are watching us?”

“No but still I think it’s better to stay like this. But you need some rest.”

She snorted.

“Really? You need that more” she leaned to his ear “sweetie” she whispered.

Batman gave a crooked smile.

“I’m not sleepy; I’m perfect sitting here.”

Selina huffed and slumped beside him on the leather cushions that made the sofa.

“The night will be long…”

“I wish we had the answer right now and we were on our way back: the time works against us.”

She patted his back.

“You worry about him…”

Batman huffed.

“At this point I’m worried for everything.”

Selina leaned to him touching her upper arm to his; she smiled.

“Imagine those cold Amazons making a pass to the bystanders in a bar…I wish I was on a corner hearing their come-on…” she chuckled trying to fix Bruce’s dark mood.

He smiled and patted her hand.

“The Amazons are so beautiful that most men wouldn’t mind anything else.”

Selina shook her head and huffed.

“If I judge from Gotham’s males…”

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Lois was at the bistro café near the Planet’s building; after the work she used to go there with some of her colleagues. Her phone’s ringing cut something she was saying and looked at her phone rolling her eyes frustrated. But seeing the caller’s ID she frowned and excused herself going out to speak.

“Martha?” she greeted without hiding her puzzlement.

“Hi, dear” the older woman said “how are you?”

“Mmm…fine and you?”

“Fine…” there was some urgency to her voice “Lois, is Clark with you?”

“No, he is supposed to be with you?” Lois’ eyes were frowned: what had that stupid farm boy done this time?

“He was but he left saying that it was an emergency but hours have passed and there’s nothing in the news so I thought that he might have come to you.”

Lois bit her lip angry with her friend.

“No, Martha; he hasn’t come to me…but I have a hunch about his whereabouts and the person he is with” she cocked her eyebrows “I came to know Clark’s emergencies the past months…”

“Wonder Woman.”

“I’m afraid so, Martha…”

“And you’re right to, Lois; if that is true…” the older woman mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing, dear, nothing” she wasn’t sure if it was prudent to bring Lois to this yet. “Enjoy the rest of the day.”

Lois frowned sensing that there was something more.

Antiope approached her Princess. Diana was standing on the balcony on the back side of the palace, gazing at Hera’s temple. The night was moving towards the dawn.

“You’re really thinking of their proposal?”

Diana nodded and Antiope closed her eyes.

“We don’t have anything to do with their world: we have survived through the centuries with you and Hippolyta as our leaders. We’ll make it this time as well.”

“You saw that woman who impersonates me: they gave her my powers to fool people and defame my name and us. She became Superman’s whore in order to lead him to the death so that her ally destroys the world.”

Antiope stretched her arms.

“What do you care? We know who you are and our people are the only thing that matters.”
Diana looked her in the eyes.

“What do you propose then?” she asked locking their eyes.

“Hold them here. The Cat is definitely one of our own that lost her path. And the Batman…keep him here: he is a great warrior and the fact he bears the Dagger and defies the Lasso manifests that he has special qualities. You can copulate with him and breed invincible new Amazons.”

Diana pressed her lips.

“He is Nemesis’ warrior: even if I try, I doubt I can hold him against his will. And the same goes for the Cat.”

Antiope yanked her head.

“Then let them go and focus on preparing ourselves for the war that’s coming.”

Diana held Antiope’s shoulders and looked deep in her eyes.

“This is not a war we can win alone, Antiope.”

“That is right” Hippolyta walked quietly to them from the interior. “We have our responsibilities in that world, Artemis.”

When the first colors of the dawn entered the guest room Bruce stood from the sofa he had spent the night sleepless.

The singing of the birds outside was really mesmerizing since the nature was blooming as the spring had made her first steps yet Bruce’s mind was too shadowed to fully appreciate that.

Selina who also didn’t sleep stood too stretching her body.

They had decided that they would leave in the morning whatever the Princess’ decision might be.

Coming out of their room they met a patrolling Amazon. Bruce already knew that Hippolyta had let their room unguarded since he didn’t sense the presence of guards outside.

“Can we see Queen Hippolyta?” Bruce asked in Greek.

The Amazon gave a sharp nod.

“The Queen is at the Hall. Follow me.”

They found the Queen gazing her island from the arch shaped window on her throne’s right. She was thoughtful but as soon as she heard footsteps entering the hall, turned.

Bruce and Selina greeted her and she replied accordingly.

“I see you wake up early” she told them leaving the window to come towards them.

“We need to leave immediately” Batman said. “But first I’d like to thank you for your hospitality.”

The woman grinned raising her eyebrows.

“Even though our welcome was hostile? You two are great warriors and I feel privileged for meeting
you…whichever Artemis’ choice is.”

There was some melancholy in the woman’s wise and rough brown eyes.

“We really hate it that we might become the reason your daughter leaves” Selina said understanding but Hippolyta waved that off, shaking her head.

“Artemis is a great warrior and a protector of her sisters but now the time might have come to meet her destiny; to become something more…and for a mother that is the most important thing: seeing her daughter becoming what she was born to be.”

Batman set his jaw.

“You always spoke with great wisdom, Queen Hipolyta. The world would definitely benefit from you and Princess Artemis.”

Hippolyta looked him in the eyes.

“I don’t know what my daughter will choose but you have my best wishes for your fight.”

Selina raised her eyebrows.

“And your alliance?” she asked hopeful.

“That is not only for me to decide.”

Bruce heard the determined steps behind him.

“You have my alliance” the Princess’ determined voice echoed through the hall and both Bruce and Selina turned to her.

The Princess regarded them with eyes shining with resolution.

“I’ll come with you.”

She was dressed in her war armor: a red tunic reaching her knees covered with shreds of brown leather; her torso was tightly wrapped in leather and her wide leather belt had in the place of her navel the head of Goddess Athena. Her arms were uncovered apart from her bracelets and her long shapely calves above the flat brown leather sandals were dressed in gold greaves engraved with the head of Medusa. Her sword hanged to her right and her Lasso on the left.

Her hair was free on her back and two braids created a wreath on her forehead in the middle of which stuck out the point of her golden tiara with the red-ruby star shining in the light of the dawn.

Selina pursed her lips and shrugged.

“I approve the attire…it sure does an effect…yet we’ll need something more…casual.”

The three of them were crossing on foot the island’s road leading to the beach. The departure of the Princess had caused the stares of the Amazons in the city and those they met on their way. Yet nobody spoke though Bruce could feel the emotional tension.

The Princess had spent some time with her mother before leaving yet the departure happened with a typical grabbing of the forearms. As soon as Diana accepted to come with them Bruce alerted Tony.
Selina regarded the Amazon between them.

“Nice touch” she said.

“Thank you” Diana replied.

The Gothamite cocked an impressed eyebrow: the Princess wore a skinny jean that highlighted her perfect lines and a white turtleneck, long sleeve sweater with black sneakers completing the image. Her hair was tied in a loose ponytail.

“I told you we are visiting your world so we know how to dress to pass unnoticed.”

Batman looked at her.

“It must be difficult to leave your homeland.”

Indeed, under the sun’s light Themiscyra showed off its entire beauty: trees and fields everywhere covered with the first multicolor flowers leading to steep mountains still white from the snow that glimmered under the clear blue sky.

Heading to the beach, they crossed the forest from a different side from that Bruce and Selina had taken when they came. At some point, they heard the sound of great amount of water falling and the Princess showed them the big waterfall in the middle of the great forest; a waterfall fell from a hill more than 100 feet high into a crystal lake that was created from a sparkling river that came down from the mountain.

Diana gazed around.

“It will be always with me in my heart…but some things are more important.”

Batman nodded.

“You are always deep in thought” the Princess told him.

“He is” Selina agreed.

“There are many things to consider in this battle” Batman answered.

“But first” the Amazon said “our transportation.”

Batman nodded.

“There is a yacht waiting for us at a distance: the Cat and I will swim there; you can fly, right?”

She smirked.

“I can but there’s no reason for you to swim…”

In the beach, a small boat with sail was waiting for them.

“My sisters will take it later.”

“Tony Stark knows everything about the threat and you” Batman said after they sailed and the Princess regarded him a bit displeased. “He is the head of the Avengers, a team of special people protecting the planet. He will wait us there with his hydroplane. It is okay with you if you travel with him to the States?”
Selina rolled her eyes thinking of Stark with this gorgeous woman and almost chuckled.

The Amazon shrugged.

“No problem…And you two?”

“We must settle some things on our way back but we will meet again.”

“I sure hope so” she answered. “People in your world know me as Diana so from now on I must answer to that name” she cocked an eyebrow.

Batman worried that she might ask his real name as a token of mutual trust but thankfully she didn’t.

Approaching the yacht Bruce saw Tony’s hydroplane.

When they ascended the ladder to the deck two men waited them with eagerness etched to their features: Tony and Thor. Bruce frowned surprised seeing the God there.

Thor immediately focused his eyes on Bruce trying to see any indication of injury or weakness but he didn’t show any worry just nodded courteously welcoming them.

He stood before the Princess and hit his fist on the place of his heart.

“Princess Diana, I am Thor from Asgard. Honored to meet you.”

The Amazon answered with the same greeting.

“The fame of the Thunders’ God had reached the Amazons.”

Tony raised an impressed eyebrow regarding the Amazon’s clothing and of course her beauty but a glare from Batman’s lenses made him clear his throat and take his most serious expression – the one he had for appeasing Pepper.

“Tony Stark” he introduced himself “and Ironman” he shook his head “I guess my…fame hasn’t reached Amazons, huh?” Selina chuckled and Tony cleared his throat “very delighted to meet you” he said politely stretching his hand which the Amazon grasped making Tony inhale sharply from the strength.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. Stark” she replied.

_I hope she means that…_ Tony thought cocking a mental eyebrow.

Tony looked at Batman: the billionaire had already scanned his friend’s body and thankfully there was no indication of a serious injury.

“Cat, Batman” he addressed them coldly mimicking Fury’s way the first days of the Avengers.

Selina smirked and Batman didn’t react and turned to Diana.

“I wish we could be along your journey to the States, Princess.”

But she waved that off.

“I’m sure you two have something very important to do…” her beautiful almond shaped eyes met Batman’s lenses. “I hope we meet again soon.”
“Indeed we do have something important to do” Selina said when the hydroplane with Thor, Tony and Diana took off “put you to sleep.”

They went downstairs and changed their armors, showered and wore clothes; Bruce immediately slipped to his wheelchair which made Selina frown because usually he delayed that. She caressed her friend’s still drenched hair.

“You can speak to me, Bruce.”

He raised his eyes to her and grinned.

“It’s nothing, Sel…I’m just tired…”

Selina however knew that for Bruce to admit that ‘tired’ was just an understatement.

“Very well, sweetie. We’ll eat and then we can sleep for the rest of the journey: Lucius auto pilot will take us back.”

“There’s no need for auto-pilot” a cheery voice came behind them and they turned surprised to see Lucius.

The scientist widened his eyes and pouted.

“You really didn’t expect your loyal employee to leave his boss like this…”

Alfred opened the door for his young master and Selina to enter. He was beyond words delighted and relieved to see them back; the butler was anxious to begin taking care of his exhausted young Master. Because although Bruce was hiding that perfectly Alfred could see the hue of fatigue in his eyes.

“Master Bruce, Miss Kyle, I am so delighted to see you; did you have a nice time?” he wasn’t going to ask in the open about the Amazons.

Bruce grinned and his grin became a huge smile when he saw Hero running the corridor, his right leg slipping on the shining surface, to climb rapidly to his human's lap and chest licking his cheek.

“Very nice” he answered half laughing from Hero’s ministrations.

“He is exhausted” Selina said to Alfred pointedly.

The butler was ready to say something but the phone rang and he went to answer.

“Master Bruce, Ms. Kent would like to speak with you.”

Bruce frowned; the hollow feeling that haunted him through their journey back had rapidly changed into pinchers crushing his insides.

“How are you, dear?”

Bruce could tell that the woman tried to sound casual but there was a hue of deep sadness in her voice.
“Martha, are you alright?” he asked without delay wanting an answer to that torturing premonition.

“He left, Bruce; and he hasn’t returned.”
Chapter 80

“I’m sure they haven’t killed him; we’ll find him…whatever it takes. I promise you, Martha.”

With these words he had reassured Martha before they ended their dial; she sounded somewhat comforted…But he?

Bruce had driven his wheelchair immediately in the cave despite Alfred’s and Selina’s stares of disapproval that they didn’t outer. He had already touched Hero on the floor and thankfully, Selina’s phone rang conveniently before she followed him because at this point Bruce wanted to be alone; and Alfred – well, Alfred always wanted to be discreet and wisely was granting him the space he needed.

He brought his wheelchair in front of the erect, human size case with his second armor; the one he had with him in Themyscirra was still packed. He stared with pressed lips: he had messed things up because he wasn’t himself anymore – he might have been wearing the armor every now and then, patrolling at times but still he wasn’t what he should be.

Bruce inhaled deeply; suddenly, the accumulated fatigue from the last months and the journey to Themyscirra and back crushed painfully on the healthy part of his back. Healthy because Superman took him to his Fortress and saved his life…

He ran his hands through his hair and his eyes fell on his unfeeling legs. He rubbed with both his hands but there was no sense from there; even though he might have done movements and fighting with his legs thanks to the armor or his mind’s control still the feeling was absent even when he was hitting his opponents: after the conflict with the Amazons he noticed some nasty bruises which he hadn’t felt during the fight or afterwards. So even if he moved normally this came every time to remind him that he was still cripple.

And this impairment was the obstacle that all this time didn’t allow him to do what he should. He clenched his hands into fists and punched both his thighs hard in hopes of feeling something. Again growling in frustration and despair. To no avail…He repeated again and again gritting his teeth. Nothing.

He growled a second time and some bats thrashed in their sleep on the ceiling since it was still afternoon. Bruce bit his lip and let his heart beat fast from frustration.

He promised Martha that her son would be back to her…but could Bruce guarantee that? In this condition? He closed his eyes and huffed.

“To serve the greater good you have to make compromises every now and then, Bruce…” a sly, warm, filled with sarcastic fondness voice whispered in his mind.

He felt a frozen snake slithering the length of his healthy spine.

“You know deep inside that I’m right…” a lion like face became visible with a cocked eyebrow highlighting the man’s confidence. “You have great weapons at your disposal, Bruce – weapons that not only will save Superman but also can guarantee the victory over Darkseid; you will save humankind, Bruce. You know of which weapons I speak…” he chuckled. “The Dagger of Justice chose and answers only to you…the Black Butterfly is happy to reside on your chest and” he smirked wickedly “I cannot blame her…As for your strongest weapon…” now Bruce could see Ra’s’ eyes stabbing him like when he was just a weak boy worshipping him; Ra’s shook his head.
“Oh…you know that weapon too but you deny use it…stubbornly…stupidly: hiding behind naïve moral inhibitions to cover your own fear. Because I know you, Bruce; the only thing that you truly fear is of becoming a monster: you know your strength and what heights this strength can reach… and you are scared…terrified that you’d fail to control that power; you’d fail to control yourself…”

His cackle hurt Bruce’s mind. Ra’s’ eyes became dead serious now, bereft of their usual sarcasm.

“This is stupid, Bruce; and my student – my best student – isn’t stupid. You know that you can control the power…you know deep inside that by using the weapon, the knowledge you rendered useless, you will do only good: you’ll make a better world; you’ll eliminate the evil…You’ll save people’s lives; lives that if you continue to be stupid you’ll fail to save…His life…” he hissed and his eyes shone gleefully. “You know that if you selfishly deny using the power that was given to you, he’ll die…Can you stand this? Can you live with this?”

Bruce’s eyes were completely still focused in front of him, in the void but seeing inside him; Ra’s nodded smiling.

“You’ll insist on being so selfish to let your fears kill the one you love? The people you brag that you want to help? Because you know that it’d be your failure if this happens: if Darkseid prevails; if humans die; if Superman dies…No, Bruce” his eyes sank into Bruce’s with that seriousness that always made him shudder. “Use the Water of Immortality, child: heal your wounds, defeat your weakness…become what is your destiny!…Save him…”

Bruce inhaled deeply with determination and yanked his head; he gazed at his dead legs: he didn’t have the luxury to wait for the surgery. His special armor and his mind power weren’t enough anymore.

He guided quickly the wheelchair towards the niche the rock wall made at the right arch before the cavity opposite the computer bench; his arm moved on its own accord to slip inside the small hole that led to a safe-sized cavity where he held his treasures. He grabbed something and took it out. He hugged the object with both hands; he almost felt it vibrating though he knew that it was his imagination: his heart was beating fast blurring everything else in his head.

Bruce looked at the object: a small common vial one of those that were used for eye drops. On purpose, so that if anyone reached it to not realize how special its content was…

His breath quickened. He was scared of this liquid; Ra’s was right: his fear could condemn Clark and the world. He could use it once to regain his functionality and help Clark and in the battle.

Damn! He was sick of this wheelchair! Of being dependent on his armor’s applications.

He could fight the temptations the power of the elixir would raise; he could conquer them as he had done till now…

The Water of Immortality in its purest form lay peaceful in its unadorned vial waiting to be used; such power can’t stay unused.

He opened the vial and breathed calm…it was just a decision, a motion and he would be ready for everything.

But suddenly he saw again Ra’s; his face was his entire world as his master was pinning him to the wall with his fervent, passionate desire to get everything his student’s body had…His cruel laughter.

“You thought that you would be restored to your throne? I’ll keep you forever. Gotham and its people will be destroyed and then I’ll take you with me…”
He saw again the TV set showing Tony tied up in a chair covered in blood with the marks of torture on his face.

“Please, Master; it was my fault: punish me, not him…”

“But I will punish you, child: by killing him. This is the worst punishment for you! You won’t ever dare to try escape because you’d know that another one of your loved ones will follow Stark…”

He saw Ra’s walking towards the cushions where Bruce was putting on his training tunic on his just used body; his master’s smell had sank in his cells; his body still burnt where he had touched: yet Bruce dressed himself indifferent as if he was just waking up to go to school, having buried the pain, the disgust.

“You gave me once again pleasure, child, but this doesn’t prove your obedience; you know that after your sin, I’ll never trust you again.”

“Please, master, forgive me…”

“You know I can’t do that, child” he smiled benevolently but Bruce knew better “Go find Bane.”

“As you wish, master.’’

Al Ghul ruffled Bruce’s sweaty hair.

“I want to reward him for his loyalty to me. You will grant him your body…” Bruce’s eyes widened in horror, his entire body froze “and I’ll watch.”

“But, master, he hates me…”

The older man laughed, his eyes shining satisfied.

“Then, you’ll have to... persuade him” he fist Bruce’s locks fiercely “because your master wants to see you getting fucked by someone else…”

Bruce closed his eyes and shook his head to stop his mind from continuing…to not see Bane fucking him because Al Ghul wanted. Yet his mind excavated something else: he saw the yellow eyes of the demon.

He was tied spread eagled in the basement’s floor; he had been blindfolded but the demon freed his eyes. He remembered the pain of being torn apart, of dying in the demon’s paroxysm… He remembered when he grabbed the sword from the training room’s wall and slashed his jugular because Ra’s had given him to a demon…Ra’s had used then on him the Water again to heal his wound before he bled to death…

He remembered the child in his dreams; his master violated him again stealing from his body to create a child as he wanted it. Ra’s had used the Water many times to become immortal and establish his corrupt idea of justice to the world. His justice that included abusing a weak child, torturing him, threatening him, taking everything from him; sacrificing him to a demon for more power. Because the constant use of the Water made Ra’s believe that he had become a god, that he had every right to impose his way of things; the ‘immortality’ the Water had been granting to him made him arrogant.

Bruce pressed his lips: he remembered the countless times when after his training Ra’s took him to the bath tub and washed him with an awkward concoction saying to him that this would heal his wounds…Without his knowledge or will Bruce had already consumed the Water many times – not in its purest, strongest form but still…if the chronic use of the Water played a role into Ra’s’
corruption then… Bruce corked again the vial putting it back to the cavity. He closed his eyes: he wouldn’t become like Ra’s.

The grinding sound of the lift echoed in the cave and Bruce guided his chair away from his safe.

Selina came out of the lift.

“Sorry for being late but after hanging out with so many women I needed a great dose of Steve…”

A frown formed in her face seeing Bruce’s paleness.

“Are you alright, Bruce?”

Bruce gave her a tight-lips smile and moved his chair to the computer bench. Yet Selina wasn’t persuaded; she followed and sat at the stool beside him.

“No, you’re not… You should be resting surrendered in Alfred’s care: that trip was big, not to mention the adventures it contained.”

Bruce shook his head without looking.

“Enough of this resting thing! I lost too much time with this shit.”

Selina narrowed her eyes and grabbed his upper arms to make him look at her.

“Your health is what matters, Bruce.”

Bruce lolled his head on the side and closed his eyes.

“I’m healthy enough; there’s no need to lose more time. It’s my fault things came to this: I’m too slow and I’ve messed things up! I’ve got to act.”

“Messed up?!” she widened her wyes. “Thanks to you we are aware of the menace; we know what they are planning; his machine is under monitoring and the real Amazon Princess is on our side. Without you we would be in total ignorance and unprepared for Darkseid’s attack.”

“Clark is in their hands or…worse and this is my fault! I shouldn’t have let him leave: I surrendered him to Ivy’s intentions.”

Selina licked her lips.

“I understand your worry about him but this wasn’t your fault: he chose it!” she saw Bruce shaking his head in disbelief. “If you had tried to keep him then you know that he would have done something awful” Bruce lowered his gaze – he knew that and it was the reason he broke up with him: if Clark continued to be in a relationship that he didn’t want then the emotional conflict would have exploded. “He could have killed you” Bruce jerked on that but Selina continued before he could protest “he did injure you.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, he…”

Selina stabbed him with her eyes.

“You might have hidden it from everyone to not spoil Superman’s reputation but I am Selina: I know when you’re injured without seeing the wounds.”
Bruce didn’t argue; he just opted to change the subject.

“We need to move quickly” he pressed some keys on his keyboard and images of fire and explosions filled the screen.

The scenery definitely wasn’t from Earth albeit very dark and already deformed from the war that was taking place. A scene taken out from Hell and nightmares.

“What’s this?”

“Jor El sent me footage from Darkseid’s wars: Jor El was collecting information about Darkseid in Krypton believing that at some point he’d attack Krypton as well but the other lords didn’t want to risk a war against him.”

Selina tapped her bottom lip with her index finger.

“Tough job, huh?”

Bruce nodded but he didn’t say anything because the sound of the lift signaled someone’s coming. Alfred holding a silver tray waited for Tony to come out first and then followed. The billionaire dressed in jeans and an orange sweater strode fast to them.

“Finally, I can speak to you two free!”

He squatted and hugged Bruce.

“How are you, buddy?”

“Fine” he answered smiling.

Tony exchanged a glance with Selina and Alfred.

“You should be resting though…” he said.

“And eating” Alfred intervened placing the tray on the bench. “I brought you some sandwiches but you should eat a proper meal, Master Bruce.”

Bruce shook his head and then rubbed his forehead.

“Let’s forget about all these and focus on the important things.”

Tony who had stood crossed his arms over his chest and crooked his mouth.

“Superman is no longer at his mother’s house” Bruce said for Tony who wasn’t there when Martha called. “He left and didn’t return so probably he is taken” he added coldly.

Tony rolled his eyes.

“He couldn’t control his dick even for so little?”

Selina cocked an eyebrow.

“He reminds you of someone close to you?”

“Nah…” Tony replied ruffling his hair after some seconds of deep thinking.
Bruce was happy that his friends had still the mood for jokes but he didn’t have time.

“The thing is that now they have Superman it is very possible to unleash their attack soon.”

Tony nodded in full serious mode.

“Luthor seems to have made a lot of progress with that machine.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“Exactly. We need to gather our forces and plan our action.”

“It would have helped a lot if we had a token of what we are dealing with. I mean Darkseid’s troops.”

Bruce pressed a key and in the central screen images of Darkseid’s parademons came to the fore.

“They’re called Parademons – thankfully, Jor El has a lot of material for Darkseid. And we have also samples of his soldiers’ DNA” Bruce said. “When they attacked me, Ivy took good care to vanish any trace yet during their assault they had grabbed me so I had some of their DNA on me and also when she blew them up some of their remains were scattered to the clearing. I gathered them and gave them to Lucius.”

A wicked smile carved Tony’s features.

“Then those Parademons would not know what hit them…I can make our weapons able to kill them easily.”

Bruce rubbed his chin and it was clear that an idea had popped in his mind. Tony narrowed his eyes understanding.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’ll tell you but not now; at the time being you must inform the Avengers with every detail.”

Tony shrugged.

“At last…Would be a guest appearance of Batman this time?”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“I don’t want them associate Batman with Tony Stark and connect Bruce Wayne with Batman.”

Alfred stared at the screen.

“Shouldn’t the global governments be informed as well? I think that that kind of threat would need the planet’s united forces.”

The others looked at him and Bruce nodded.

“Certainly but first we must make sure that Darkseid won’t be able to read the minds of leaders because not only he will realize that we are aware and strike at us before we are ready but also he will control their minds into not helping us or even stab our backs in the battle.”

Tony raised an eyebrow.
“And that’s where Dr. Strange and his team enter the stage, huh?”

“Right” Bruce said.

Selina turned to Bruce.

“Do you want the Avengers to learn about the real Princess?”

“Yes but they must not move against Ivy yet” he looked at Tony who rubbed his chin and nodded.

“Where’s the Princess?”

Selina chuckled.

“Don’t tell me you managed to piss her so much that she ran for it?” she said to Tony who rolled his eyes.

Alfred cackled a bit but got a hold of himself fast.

“C’mon! I was my finest gentleman self…”

“Bloody Hell!” Alfred exclaimed and Tony cast him a glare.

“As soon as we landed in New York she asked me to take her to a bank which as a perfect gentleman I did. Can you imagine what she did?”

Selina tilted her head and raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t tell me she robbed the bank?”

Tony laughed and slapped his hand with Selina’s.

“Good one, girl! But no…” he mumbled a bit disappointed. “You remember that big rucksack she had with her?” and when they nodded “she had gold and gems which she sold in the bank in exchange with money” he cocked his eyebrows. “With the crisis they don’t ask a lot when it’s about gold and gems… She took the money and stashed them to the same rucksack.”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“I do imagine the reaction of those who would try to rob her…”

Tony nodded.

“Anyway, she thanked me for my contribution and took a cab and left me like a loser.”

“Like?” Selina chuckled and Tony glared at her. “And? You followed her?” she continued unfazed.

Tony shook his head.

“She managed to disappear.”

“Then it’s a good thing I have the means to contact her” Bruce said. “We made arrangements on our way to the yacht.”

“She gave you her number?” the billionaire asked exasperated.

“Mmm…Something like that: I gave her a beeper gadget and she took it.”
Tony pouted and nodded.

“So an Amazon Princess gave her phone number to the Batman and not Ironman: what’s wrong with girls these days? Maybe I should paint the armor black?”

Selina winked to him.

“Black is classic, honey…”

Tony looked at the orange sweater he wore disgruntled but then raised his head and spread his arms.

“Yeah…But orange is the new black, right?”

Selina shook her head amused.

“What about, Mr. Kent?” Alfred asked reading Bruce’s sad eyes.

Bruce inhaled.

“I’ll take care of that.”

Tony didn’t like that because he didn’t want his friend being anymore exposed to action that might injure him more…or worse. However he chose to not comment for the time being.

“Meanwhile we must be very careful” Bruce said “we must not let the boys or Ms. Turner suspect anything; we don’t want to spread panic.”

“Yeah, I’m…what? Six years younger? When I’ll be eighty and you are exactly as now, I’ll look like your grandfather.”

Clark almost choked before his smile lit his face and he tightened his two arms hold on Bruce’s back, kissing Bruce’s hand that softly touched his shoulder.

“So you’re telling me that you intend on us being together for sixty years?! That’s great! That’s…”

Yet Bruce sobered and his eyes darkened; some sweat drops appeared on his forehead.

“I didn’t mean it that way…” he turned his head on the side to avoid Clark’s elated eyes and his hands dropped from Superman’s shoulders. “It’s too difficult to say something like this…”

Clark narrowed his eyes: of course, it was too difficult for Bruce to make such long plans concerning love and he didn’t want to scare him. So he cupped his face and smoothly brought it to meet his.

“You’re right, so we go one day at a time, huh?”

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded.

“With what I said I didn’t mean that I wouldn’t want that…but…”

Clark nibbled Bruce’s lips.

“Sssss…I know; don’t worry about anything…” he kissed him again. “Now let’s have that shower because I don’t want you catching a cold standing here naked.”
Clark watched the water soaking Bruce’s locks and plastering them to his forehead and cheeks; streams were already running the younger man’s chest and Clark despite the fact he was also under the water felt getting hot. He took gently the bath cream and the sponge from Bruce’s hands, his Star eyeing him inquiringly but also playfully.

“Let me do that…” Clark breathed in a deep voice “please…”

Bruce just nodded and Clark tossed the sponge on the floor; he filled his palms with the cream that every time its smell dazzled him: the same cream Martha Wayne bathed her little Prince.

He applied the cream with gentle, round movements first at Bruce’s breasts, his eyes constantly on the younger man’s eyes sucking the slight changes that indicated his pleasure. He brought his body closer to Bruce’s and lowered his palms slowly, smoothly to spread the cream to Bruce’s abdomens.

Then he kneeled and gingerly spread the cream over Bruce’s pelvis willing himself not get carried away and touch his thirsty lips on the younger man’s groin; however he had to constantly lick his dry lips. He sighed only internally casting a longing last glance before proceeding with Bruce’s hips, thighs, knees, calves and feet always extremely slow for Clark’s standards wishing to drag those moments.

Upon finishing his work, he stood sticking his body to Bruce’s and locking his eyes with his; he could hear the younger man’s heartbeat speeding. He nibbled Bruce’s lower lip, his hands resuming their round rubbing movements on the human’s breasts teasing the pink nipples.

Bruce closed his eyes sighing and then stabbed Clark with his eyes.

“If you continue like this you won’t clean me…”

Clark closed his eyes and grabbed Bruce’s waist sucking desperately his collar bone.

“Maybe I like the taste of salt on your flesh…”

And then with a sudden but careful movement turned Bruce around to his back, swallowing his ear.

“I have to clean you up, huh?” he whispered letting his rasps wet Bruce’s ear.

He poured some more cream to Bruce’s back and smoothly with massaging movements applied it first at his shoulders descending the length of his arms and then his shoulder blades and lower…He could hear Bruce’s slightly uneven breath but when his hands reached the younger man’s glutians he could hear only his own rasps: applying cream to Bruce’s wet buttocks that had regained their enticing shape after the incident was…torture…and Clark was sweaty without the water spraying him being of any help since immediately the water turned into steam.

Bruce chuckled obviously feeling Clark’s torment even though he couldn’t sense his twitching groin over his buttocks; Superman bit softly the crook of his neck causing a moan which made the Man of Steel smile satisfied. Kneeling before Bruce’s back side was demanding and Clark’s running sweat was more than the shower’s water – not to mention how hot was in there… But Clark was responsible and would finish his job whatever the cost.

He had a triumphant smile on his face as he stood and turned Bruce to be again face to face. His Star was blushed too, his long eyelashes half covering his orbs longingly.

The younger man locked his lips with Clark’s claiming the super human soft warmth of his body. But the Man of Steel detached to Bruce’s almost hurt frown and Clark hastened to caress his lips with his thumb.
“Your hair have salt…Is how Alfred busted me.”

Bruce kissed Clark’s thumb and sniffed at Clark.

“It’s an amateur’s error…” he snuffed at Clark.

Clark tightened his grip on Bruce’s waist bringing him closer; his eyes shining fervently locked with Bruce’s.

“I had you naked in front of me…salt was connected with other things than covering my tracks…”

Bruce brushed with both hands Clark’s broad shoulder blades and pressed his lips.

“You’ve got me naked right now…What are you thinking?”

Clark felt that Bruce was trying to seduce him but…Rao! … Bruce didn’t need to seduce HIM. He was struggling every second to restrain himself and Bruce’s desire that he had to deny made this nightmarish. He gulped: Bruce’s health was above anything else.

“To wash your hair!”

Bruce’s eyelids almost covered his sparkling eyes and Clark’s heart clenched. Yet he knew that it was for the best. He poured shampoo on Bruce’s locks and began massaging smoothly staring all the time at his Star’s closed eyes and feeling the younger man shaking a bit.

“We’re ready” he huffed.

Bruce’s eyes opened with a dark shine.

“No, we’re not” he growled and shook his head “your turn…”

Clark raised his hands almost panicked, shaking his head in denial.

“Oh, no, no, no…” he had retreated.

Bruce was looking him with the stare of a hunting wildcat and that stare was…just…irresistible. Clark’s eyes widened seeing Bruce’s hands approaching him.

“Please, Bruce…If…if your hands touch me I won’t be able to hold back…It’d be too much…”

Bruce smirked, his stare always predatory, the wet locks stuck on his temples framing his beautiful eyes.

“And I’ll shatter…”

Clark licked his lips and ran his hand through his soaked hair which was a mistake because Bruce used the handles of the special railing to push himself on Clark’s chest. The surprise and his overall condition were such that Clark lost his balance and terrorized realized that he was falling. Terrorized not for himself – porcelain couldn’t hurt him – but Bruce was falling too. He grabbed the younger man’s upper arms to make sure that he’d have Clark’s body as a cushion.

The landing wasn’t too bad and Clark was happy because the oval shaped tube was spacious enough to contain him and the porcelain hadn’t cracked. He turned to look at Bruce, his body clang to Clark’s chest.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” he cried exasperated. “Are you OK?”
And then he noticed two things: Bruce’s amused, smug look and that the water had stopped. Now Clark was pissed! He did it on purpose!

“You tripped me on purpose to fall!”

Bruce rolled his eyes and caressed the wet hair in Superman’s chest causing goose bumps to Clark’s spine more so when he focused on the feeling of Bruce’s pelvis on his groin.

“Of course” he answered nonchalant “I think you forget that I’m Batman.”

Clark stretched his neck and sighed.

“I’m under a human so this human can only be Batman but…”

“No more buts” he retorted sharply and Clark felt with dread the thing he was most afraid of: Bruce’s body slithering on his, driving each of his cells crazy; his bodily perfume enhanced by the fresh aroma of shampoo and cream mesmerizing Clark’s brain into ordering full surrender.

And what was that? Bruce’s fingertips touching feathery and moving on his ribs slowly finding his abdomens and brushing skillfully each layer which pushed his hips to move upwards; motion that became a violent writhing when Bruce’s hot, velvet lips touched his navel and then nibbled and sucked his rippled flesh. He gasped and raised his torso though his head was heavy with flooding stimulation.

“Wh…what you doing?!” he gasped almost panicked as much as his lungs.

“You’re afraid that you will shatter my paralyzed lower body…however my upper body functions perfectly…” he said slyly and Clark was reminded of Selina: those two could easily have been real siblings, he thought fleetingly.

“I doubt it!” he snapped. “Especially your brain!”

Bruce narrowed his eyes and – damn! - that look was a turn on…

“You’ve been suppressing your needs too long…and mine…” for the first time Bruce’s sharp cheekbones were colored pink.

“You don’t have to do this…” he almost pleaded. “I know how horrid this was…”

Bruce’s eyes flashed angrily as he realized what Clark wanted to say: his past.

“Exactly: I don’t have to do it – I want to do it. So: shut up…” he pressed his palms on Clark’s oversensitive breasts and pushed him down brushing his nipples that traitorously had erected; the most powerful being on Earth unable to stay up. “Let control to me!”

Immediately his eyes protruded feeling feathery fingers trailing slowly and gently his pelvis’ V downwards to open slightly his thighs. Bruce’s fingers caressed the soft flesh at his inner thighs ascending to his hipbones sending electric currents to his spine.

A surprised moan burst out of Clark’s mouth before he could think about it and then his torso arched: his own body rebelled against him… He groaned and his heart gave a thud… Oh, my God! The softest sensation he ever had: lips made of velvet, hot lips were planting small kisses following the V of his pelvis making his groin twitch in hungry anticipation as the tender kisses approached his length only to continue with his pelvis’ other side.
“B…Bruce…” Clark really didn’t know what he wanted to say and those lips that now kissed sucking tenderly his flesh cast his mind in a fog of pleasure and his length in derangement throbbing more madly every time Bruce let a puff of hot air from his lungs caress Clark’s hot flesh, denying the contact.

His loud whine wasn’t flattering for the Man of Steel but Bruce’s magic fingers – as if his lips working his pelvis weren’t enough – brushed not very softly, not very hard his testicles and then nibbling causing Clark’s eyes roll inwards and his fists clench. He was already huffing and puffing without Bruce having touched his impatient length; his slightly open legs trembled uncontrollably – causing vibrations to the tub - and he was afraid of hitting the younger man.

“Oh…Bruce…Please…” his voice was too husky, too weak and he meant to ask Bruce to stop so to not get hurt by his unchecked boiling body. But those rosy, soft lips began trailing with pecks his throbbing length and new waves of hot sweat ran his face, body and especially the inner of his thighs. “Ppplease, Star, MORE!”

Clark huffed and puffed supported in his forearms, his torso semi raised: how much more Bruce was going to torture his hurting member by just making small sucks and strolls through his throbbing length; he felt the big vein there ready to explode when Bruce’s slightly rough tongue licked the entire length.

“Star…you’re killing me…” he whimpered; the fact that Bruce’s breaths were calm as they burned his hot flesh pissed him.

Clark felt a smile on the soft flesh that tortured him and then his already hard member was welcomed in Bruce’s hot mouth and the Man of Steel just slumped on the hot porcelain, surrendering to his tormentor. His head lolled backwards and his eyes were closed, he sighed satisfied.

But then he jerked upwards, his back making an arch as Bruce’s lips were massaging in a steady rhythm strongly and then softly his sensitive member, the beating vein there bombed like his heart and lungs. Bruce’s tongue took action only rarely just to enhance the effect of his lips’ massaging moves; slowly upwards causing new streaks of sweat in every pore of Clark’s body – his face was stressed and his neck arched with its veins bulged giving loud rasps and sobs that became cries when Bruce’s nails brushed a bit rough his swollen testicles. Fire was breaking his bones...

Clark’s hips were jerking upwards, thrusting in his mouth. Clark couldn’t stop his hands from cupping Bruce’s hair but thankfully he managed to restrain them from dragging Bruce’s mouth.

Bruce continued pumping with his lips the flaming flesh that boosted from the powerful hips thrust faster and more frantically almost desperate. His experience told him that soon his lover would reach his climax and braced himself. But then Clark’s gentle hands caressed his locks and cupped his face drawing him upwards to nestle in his safe chest just before Clark’s torso arched more and the Man of Steel cried his explosion.

Clark’s chest was heaving following his frantic respiration and heartbeat and he cuddled the younger man. Bruce clung to him and kissed lightly Superman’s broad chest, letting his cheek touch the bulged breast.

The first thing Clark saw as soon as he managed to persuade his eyes to connect with the world leaving their pleasant mist was Bruce’s soaked messy locks. He kissed the top of his head and tightened his one arm hold but Bruce didn’t lift his eyes. Clark caressed Bruce’s sweaty, cold cheek tenderly and sparkling eyes locked with his.
A faint smile was carved over Clark’s lips, his joy written in his closed eyelids which then began trembling.

“Her hair give out a shine that it’s not normal – looks artificial like in dyed hair” Bruce’s serious voice came to his ears from a tunnel.

And then he saw himself snorting and rolling his eyes. Really, Bruce?

“Because you know everything about female hair, huh? Why on earth a goddess would dye her hair?”

Bruce nodded, licking his lip.

“Exactly! That’s what raised my suspicions! Unless, she isn’t who she says and wants to impersonate the legendary Amazon Princess.”

But he wasn’t convinced.

“If her hair was dyed I’d have detected that, Bruce; and I didn’t.”

“Maybe you can’t…I mean when she is around you’re changed…you admitted that yourself. And those four days she wasn’t around you, you were perfect but as soon as she appeared at the Tower…” he huffed. “You changed.”

“Perfect means glued to you?” Clark spat and even he realized that this was a stab to Bruce’s heart.

The younger man lowered a bit his eyes.

“No…It was you that considered that kind of your behavior abnormal…Also, her eyes are odd…”

“I repeat that if her eyes were not real I’d have found out first: I’m the one with the 100 different kinds of vision.”

Clark cupped Bruce’s face with both hands and placed him gently on his back; he nuzzled his cheek.

“You need some sleep to clear your head from this night’s shit and Stark’s poison because I’m sure that your brilliant logic mind can’t believe such nonsense” Bruce narrowed his eyes angry. “You were a hero tonight, Bruce; don’t tarnish it now.”

“If someone needs to clear his head, this is you, Clark!” Clark had retreated a bit but still kept his arms on both sides of Bruce’s torso as if trying to trap him – a deep frown formed in his brow from the human’s reaction. “This is why I asked you to stay away from her! You too believe that you’re not yourself lately” he huffed slowing down. “Everything started when she appeared.”

“But I’m alright – Lucius confirmed it. It was just a difficult period, nothing more” Bruce was staring him in the eyes. “If you calm down and don’t let others influence you, things will be normal again.”

“You’re the one who gets influenced – that woman has a bad effect on you and you need to stay away from her till we figure out what’s going on. Jor El told you that he needed time and daily tests to be sure. But until then I think it is safer if you stop interacting with her.”

“Safer for whom? Your beaten up sense of security? The fact you’re fixed in that chair has made you insecure” he saw Bruce’s eyes widen more shocked than angry. “If your self-esteem wasn’t so battered you wouldn’t see Diana as a threat.”
The shine of Bruce’s eyes sent shivers to Clark’s back.

“Safer for you…” Bruce didn’t want to retort to what Clark said about him because he felt so dried from his words that it seemed totally unworthy of even replying. “I don’t feel threatened by her” for the first time his eyes moved softened. “I feel that you’re the threatened here…”

“If you want to persuade me to stay away from my friend you must give me a solid reason and not mumbo-jumbo bullshit: you’re just embarrassing yourself, Bruce – you’re a detective and yet you make horrible points out of your grudge for Diana because we danced a couple of songs. What?” Clark asked narrowing his eyes puzzled from Bruce’s blank eyes.

“Nothing…” Bruce pressed his lips .

Clark nodded taking Bruce’s silence as a sign of embarrassment for his attitude.

“You realize that you’re pushing me away?” Bruce said to him with a steady voice.

Bruce was right, Clark thought.

The bangs from the thunders were creepy.

“Your smell was strong under the bridge, lingering there: a smell indicating great sexual satisfaction…” his voice was creepier than the thunders but Bruce was calm.

“I didn’t even see the rainbow bridge you mention…and…Clark, get a grip: you accuse me for something that you say that has happened two days ago but you imagined it today! That’s crazy!”

Superman growled frustrated and cupped Bruce’s face panting angrily into his eyes.

“Crazier than you accusing Diana of being an impostor just because you think her hair is dyed? Crazier than you claiming that she was one of Falcone’s whores based on a nightmare – if that was a nightmare and not another fairytale you made up to frame her!” the wind howled wilder than before and made the downpour whip the window.

Bruce supported himself to his elbows and rose a bit before Clark forced him back down pressing his weight on the human’s torso.

“I didn’t lie! Mr. Petrou…”

But Clark had had enough and didn’t let him continue.

“You slander her – a noble, brave warrior – of being a whore while you are the whore!” the thunder’s bang was scary yet Clark’s words hurt more Bruce’s ears.

Superman screamed as the pain of what he was re-experiencing intensified the excruciating pain from every cell in his body that felt as if burnt one-by-one. He opened his eyes hoping against hope that he’d see Bruce’s sad eyes again and apologize to him – admit that he was right: this woman was an impostor and she had put him under mind control - he loved only him; make his Star shine again with happiness.

But instead of those mesmerizing eyes vibrating red light blinded him and made every inch of his bones feel like shuttering and melting. That bright red light was his entire world inside that rectangular transparent column they had put him in; Superman knew that this light was draining him from his powers as if the Kryptonite chains that bound his wrists and ankles weren’t enough. But this red light was even worse: burning him like a sun exactly like the yellow sun of the Earth was doing
but instead of filling him with life, energy and joy, this sun was destroying him slowly and painfully. Every moment he felt millions tiny rods piercing every minuscule part of his body…

His face felt heavy with sweat as his entire body that suffered under his suit that it didn’t defer from a costume made from melt, hot iron. His locks had stuck everywhere and contributed an awful itch.

His breath was pressed with the air being always short – or that was his impression. His chest felt crushed under an invisible huge weight that caused his heart beat faster than ever exhausting him more…

And to add to all this nausea was really torturing making his head hurt as if it was going to blow.

He knew he had to get out of there in order not only to save himself but also the world… and Bruce: he was scared that Darkseid would capture Bruce and torture him to cause pain to Superman.

“I wouldn’t have a problem making Superman’s bitch squeal and beg as I rip his asshole…”

He frowned as his fogged mind brought back this rough voice from a bar in Metropolis; Superman remembered that it was one of Intergang’s members Clark Kent had followed there.

*His companion had cackled.*

“He is a cripple – won’t feel anything below the waist!”

“But he’ll feel everything above the neck!” Stitches winked wickedly and laughed which his friend mimicked. “Maybe the boss plans to do that in the end, after he…”

“Ssssss!” Alistair hushed him hastily.

“It’d be the perfect punishment for Supes… watching his slut gangbanged to the death by his partying enemies” his sly eyes found again Bruce on the screen and Clark’s heartbeat became so strong that he thought that everyone in the room heard.

Alistair was thoughtful.

“It’s not so easy: that whelp has more protection than S guy himself. Iron man is his best buddy and he drags along the entire Avengers’ circus. And Gotham has Batman guarding her property.”

“Boss seems confident” he shook his head “I bet he doesn’t chicken to attack that bitch and after his scheme unfolds nothing would save this bitch…”

Clark’s heart screamed from agony and beat even faster: it was clear that Darkseid had this in his plans and that just couldn’t happen: Bruce had suffered too much in his life to be tortured like this because Superman loved him…He coughed…*Loved him*…he pressed his lips: it was love what he did to Bruce? He growled…He knew that he had made Bruce feel pain and now he couldn’t help him; he couldn’t run and inform them for the danger.

He inhaled trying to find the air his lungs needed but it wasn’t enough and his lungs cried; his head hurt as if Thor’s hammer had crushed there. Clark closed his eyes attempting to smooth the nausea that hit his body like a tsunami, to control some of the pain…

Perhaps Bruce knew already about the threat because he had suspected that Diana was an impostor. And Bruce never ignored his hunches…unless he was so disappointed from him that he stopped bothering with the issue. No, no…please, Bruce must have continued searching; he must have found out everything…
Bruce should not be captured by Darkseid and his minions…Clark couldn’t breathe properly; his terror and panic making his weakness worse…

He heard the heavy footsteps only when they were to him: his sensitive hearing wasn’t working and his sight was worse than the human sight – reasonable since he was chained with Kryptonite under that strange red light. Clark was surprised from the sudden footsteps because his column – cell was situated in a wide, empty corridor with no guards near or any other presence.

He tiredly raised just his eyes because he couldn’t move his head at all. The horrible bluish giant was towering him although Superman was suspended inside the column above the floor.

Clark made his weak stare determined, angry about the smug grin plastered in Darskeid’s square face and the contempt in his red eyes.

“Pathetic Kryptonian! Here, crying for your fate and the end that awaits your friends…”

“Is everything alright?” Dick asked shyly popping his head from the door looking at Bruce who was in front of the fireplace in the leaving room of the second floor.

Bruce smiled and Hero jumped from his lap to run to Dick.

“Of course.”

Jason moved inside the room first.

“Course everythin’ ‘s alright, dummy…He is a tough nut!”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah…I suppose” he chuckled and moved the chair towards the sofa where the boys settled.
“Thank you for staying here a bit more, Dick” he said and looked at Jason “and you, Jason, that didn’t forget us.”

Jason shrugged.

“Ya’re unforgettable, man” he said and lowered his tone “a giant bat isn’t somethin’ common, right?” he winked and Bruce grinned.

“You don’t have to thank me or my granny, Bruce, for anything. I wanted to stay more…I lost so many time being mean to you – I just want to…”

Bruce pressed his lips and shook his head.

“I want you to forget all about this, okay?”

Jason crooked his mouth.

“He was a total dick an’ now he feels guilty; he’d learn to listen to Jay next time…”

“Sure” Dick said. “Any news on your surgery?” he asked Bruce who licked his lips. “I bet you can’t wait to walk again…you deserve to walk again.”

Bruce smiled and petted Hero’s belly the kitten being curled on the blue sofa.
“Actually that will have to wait.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

“Is there some worsening?” Dick asked with his breath halted.

“No, I just have some things to take care first.”

“Batman always is busy” Jason whispered.

Dick pressed his lips.

“You’re always thinking the others more than yourself…you should take care of yourself, Bruce.”

Bruce cast a fleeting glance at the horizon from the rectangular window of the opposite wall.

“I am but some things come first because they are more urgent.”

Jason scratched his head with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Mmm…’bout that” he pursed his lips and exchanged a conspiratory glance with Dick “we were thinkin’…”

Bruce frowned suspicious and both boys licked their lips.

“…that we could help…I mean with Batman’s job…not that ya need any help but when ya’re too busy we coulda…”

Bruce huffed and his face became strict.

“No way!”

Dick gulped.

“We won’t be a pain in the ass!”

Bruce shook his head: that was the last thing he needed.

“You’re too young to be in this shit!”

Jason crooked his mouth.

“I know much ‘bout this shit, man…”

But Bruce cast him a glare that was worse than Batman’s lenses and Jason swallowed hard.

“Don’t remind me that!” he snapped widening his eyes. “I know what you’re doing out in the Narrows after midnight!”

“Ooops…” Jason said and Dick elbowed him mouthing ‘I told you so’.

“You can’t do Batman’s job and emptying stores…” Bruce stabbed him with his eyes.

Jason took a matter-of-fact serious expression.

“It’s the financial depression that leads youngsters to the crime” he recited some bullshit he had heard on TV and Dick chuckled. “If Bat guy hires me I’ll give up my previous job.”
Bruce massaged his forehead that throbbed from a mild migraine.

“You will give up that because you deserve better…” Jason smiled believing that he meant being Batman’s assistant “but neither you nor Dick will meddle with these things.”

Dick closed his eyes.

“But we have done it already sometimes…”

“And we saw where that led…” he meant the time when Batman intervened to save them.

Jason raised his eyebrows.

“Even Supes has his bad days…Ouch!” Dick kicked his ankle to stop him.

Bruce froze hearing about Superman.

“You can train us” Dick intervened. “I know that martial arts are better to be taught from a young age.”

Bruce remembered his own training.

“Forget it” he said calmly. “Focus on your school and you, Dick, have gymnastics. You are an aspiring athlete, you have a brilliant career before you” he turned his wheelchair towards the door.

“You, boys, deserve a better life” he looked at them and both boys suddenly remembered that he was fixed on a wheelchair for months; probably, he’d have died that night if Superman hadn’t made it on time.

Bruce as if he had read the boys’ thoughts nodded and left the room, Dick and Jason realizing that Bruce would never bring them in something that could claim their life.

It was true but Superman thought that he wasn’t going to give the freak the satisfaction.

“You won’t achieve anything! You will be defeated!” he spat in his face through the transparent wall before him.

Darkseid cackled and cocked one of his hairless eyebrows.

“You invest much to your lame allies to cover your insufficiency…But you are fooling yourself…”

The sky was a dirty gray without sun or clouds…This was Washington and wasn’t...He could see the White House but its dome was shuttered leaving the pillars supporting half of the dome; flames had engulfed the dirty building.

The skyscrapers everywhere in the big city were in ruins, smoke and dust hovering over them; fires burnt everywhere and explosions every now and then cracked the desperate screams of people; screams indicating excruciating pain as the smell of burning flesh and blood proved.

The streets were flooded…but what ran the streets wasn’t water; was blood, dark red blood mixed with body members or entire corpses…

Army aircrafts were burning on the streets baring the mars of crushing…

Green creatures with arms and wings beginning from their shoulder blades flew over the city
everywhere destroying with their guns everything that still was standing; at some spots new screams erupted and between clouds of dust and smoke Clark could see Darkseid’s creatures jumping on humans digging their thousand razor sharp teeth tearing them apart.

A kid no more than 5 was crying as fire had engulfed him and nobody was helping – around him were only bodies…Bodies of civilians and police officers or soldiers who have tried to help: deformed, burnt bodies and faces distorted in absolute pain and horror as their eyes were ripped from their sockets.

Clark clenched his bound fists: where was all the heroes?

He saw Ironman barely hovering over the Hell; his red and gold armor was emitting smoke; it carried marks of burning; sooty; from the way he was hovering it was obvious that he had no strength left from the struggle. Yet suddenly he sped determined.

Clark saw Darkseid sending beams with his eyes to a skyscraper turning it with a horrible explosion into stones and metal; the gloating giant saw Ironman approaching and sniggered deflecting with his arms lazily every missile and laser beam Ironman launched against him. And then as the hero reached him and the canons in her armor were heard loading Darkseid stretched his enormous arm and grabbed him from the neck bringing him to face him.

The New God blew on Ironman’s face and his face plate evaporated leaving Tony Stark’s face exposed; the billionaire was exhausted, his eyes hollow without any trace of his old playfulness; his expression was determined. He spat on Darkseid’s face and the giant clenched more the human’s neck choking him slowly making the human’s eyes pop out.

Clark’s chest was clenched: he never liked Stark but he didn’t want him to die.

“Tony!” Captain America’s voice cracked the white noise of screams and explosions.

Steve was fighting in the midst of at least fifty green creatures; his suit was torn and burnt; his mask ruined revealing the wounds on his face. Yet seeing his friend dying he clenched his teeth and launched his shield against the New God.

But Darkseid laughed; with a creepy crack he snapped Stark’s neck with one hand and caught the shield with the other. He threw Ironman’s lifeless body in a pile of broken human bodies and squeezed Steve’s shield staring at him.

Steve growled and jumped on a pile of crushed cars to launch himself against the New God kicking some flying aliens in his way. But as he was ready to hit the giant Darkseid moved his arm and slapped him away like a fly crushing him to a standing building.

“No!” Thor roared and clenching his jaw launched his hammer to Darkseid’s head but the New God grinned and looked at the thunder the hammer looked like in its momentus.

Thor’s eyes widened seeing his hammer exploding in chunks as white beams met it; he moved his hands and thunders hit Darkseid’s body. The Asgardian charged at him.

But as the blond god was on him Darkseid’s body sucked the energy of the thunders his bulky form increasing in size and radiating blue sparks; with a rapid movement the bluish giant grabbed Thor’s face with one hand and launched beams from his eyes blowing the god’s head.

Clark’s eyes widened and despair crushed his suffering existence; he heard Darkseid’s roaring laughter in his head: the New God could penetrate his mind and show him what he wanted. Darkseid wanted to break his spirit; make him desperate, hopeless.
No way!

All these weren’t true, Superman filled his mind with this thought; it was just Darkseid’s hopes, his wishes…but in vain. Darkseid couldn’t win! The bluish freak was fooling himself believing that he’d manage to defeat so easily all these great heroes. However Clark stopped his brain from thinking that Bruce was probably privy to Darkseid’s plans and preparing his defeat.

Darkseid grunted frustrated because his captive didn’t sink in this hell; Superman hadn’t believed him and resisted.

“You won’t be able to touch them!” Superman sniggered. “You just hope and wish and dream but deep inside you know that you will be defeated! You can’t make me despair – as much as you want – I know humans, I know the heroes; you can’t kill my faith!”

Darkseid pressed his lips and a gleeful grin was plastered over his face.

“Is that so?” he asked sarcastic raising his eyebrows.

All of a sudden, it was all dark with only one form discernible. Clark squinted: it was a chair and his heart began beating fast because he knew… He knew that perfume. The chair came nearer and then the one who sat on turned slowly his head. Bruce was so beautiful even in the darkness…Bruce was a star himself…so beautiful that Clark hurt.

“He is too beautiful” Darkseid’s rough, bass voice said. “Even for the great Darkseid!”

Superman’s eyes stabbed his captor.

“Leave Bruce out of this!”

Darkseid smirked and tilted his head.

“Too late for that…”

_Superman was inside his column-cell, bound spread eagled in his Kryptonite chains, erect, washed from that weakening red light. But his cell wasn’t in a corridor, a building._

_He didn’t have any mood to move his heavy head or open his eyes: the pain was intolerable and even the small intakes of air that sustained his life deteriorated it._

_However, Superman knew that he was somewhere outside near the sea because he could hear the waves hitting the shore. What stroke him was that there wasn’t the characteristic salty smell of sea or the sound of seagulls or the pleasant breeze…Only the stench of sulfur and the hair rising howls of Darkseid’s creatures._

_But he didn’t care to open his eyes and see…_

_Ruckus…Footsteps of many people and loud curses and jeers…and under the noise, a scared human heart. Superman opened his eyes._

_It was a vast area that once must have been an idyllic beach. But now it was cast under a pitch black sky that was disrupted by dark purple shreds and fires suffocating the last oxygen intensifying the hotness of the atmosphere and the smell of sulfur. There was no sun, no stars…The sea was dark red and smelled of stall blood._

_His cell was positioned in the edge of the clearing with his back to a granite, dark green steep cliff_
exactly the same with the opposing cliff that hugged the clearing.

But what mattered was in front of him: a battered human bearing the marks of blows on his face was dragged by thugs Superman knew in front of Darkseid’s dark blue granite throne that suddenly emerged before the line of the blood sea.

“No…” he mumbled.

Screams…screams that made his blood stop flowing.

Bruce was suspended in the air from his wrists that were bound together with something that was…flames… his torso was naked and the bottom half of his body was still dressed in blood stained rugs that must have been expensive trousers. His arms were stretched to their limits like his entire torso that manifested its beauty. His head was bent over his chest and Superman could hear his tired breath being interrupted by sobs and moans of pain.

But then a creepy sound made Bruce jerk his head backwards howling with all his might…his body convulsed as if hit by electricity. Superman’s entire existence bled with this heart wrenching scream; an awful woman who in human years would have been at her 50s hovered behind Bruce. She had curly gray hair that danced around her head and she was dressed in blue attire.

She was cracking up in hysterics as the thing she was holding crushed on Bruce’s back again making the human scream and cry; his torso convulsed more intense from the pain as blood and pecks of flesh flew around from his back. But there was also the smell of burning flesh because the thing that woman used was made of fire and thick metal…

No, it was another creation of Darkseid to break his spirit. Bruce would never…

“What? Haven’t you heard him scream like this?” Darkseid jeered. “Is that why you doubt that this pest screams like this? You haven’t seen the video?”

The video…

Falcone and Chill in a room…Falcone’s office. A skinny boy no more than eleven dressed in rugs was kneeled before the mobster; his lips were swollen and bled…

Falcone grabbed the boy from the upper arm and shoved it to his desk; the boy pleaded with him but the mobster lowered the boy’s pants and underwear. The boy screamed as the older man pushed his erection inside him with a abrupt motion that made the skinny body tremble.

And then the boy was sprawled on the table, tied spread eagled; he was crying because he knew what was going to happen. He screamed; he screamed desperately as Chill penetrated him with a huge dildo defeating the resistance from the narrow opening, tearing the flesh. The boy screamed more and his screams shuttered Clark’s chest because he knew that Chill continued pushing the object inside the boy’s tender insides…

“Did you see the video?” he heard Lois asking him.

“No; I’m happy, Lois and I don’t want anything to ruin that for me.”

Clark bit his lip hard; his eyes watering from the boy’s torture and from shame for his indifference.

“The human is made to be tortured…” Darkseid hissed.

“No…” Superman shook his head though that hurt. “You won’t get him – EVER!”
The New God chuckled.

Bruce was on the black sand, untied but it was obvious that his legs were useless; his back was a huge wound that bled to the floor; patches of ripped flesh hanged revealing the white of bones; deep burnings marred the few patches of flesh that had stayed on the body.

His head was touching the hot sand because he didn’t have the strength to hold it upright; Clark could hear his rugged breath, his heart beating tired, his sobs.

Suddenly, steps echoed through the space and Bruce’s body tensed. His head jerked upwards and Clark saw his beautiful eyes being swollen, watering; his face was pale shining from sweat; his drenched locks were framing his features making him even more gorgeous.

But the sapphire seas of his eyes were desperate, filled with panic as the steps materialized in people that surrounded him like hungry wolves. Superman recognized among the crowd of thugs those he had heard in that bar.

No…

Bruce’s scared eyes found Darkseid who was sitting to his throne watching with a satisfied smirk.

“Please…” Bruce begged as he did in the video and Clark knew that this time it was real not Darkseid’s imagination.

“You won’t harm Bruce” Superman spat at Darseid managing to escape from the images he had planted in his mind. “Bagdana wants Bruce as his reward – you won’t damage you ally’s prize…” you can’t torture him… he almost pleaded in the depths of his existence.

But his captor grinned smugly.

“The demon is just another servant and this human is not his; is mine to handle as I wish” Superman’s chest clenched more painfully than anything the Kryptonite could have done to him. “I’ll grant my servant the human when I consider it proper, that is to say: after I’m satisfied enough with his suffering and your humiliation…”

“No!”

Darkseid from his throne made a small nod and one of the thugs grabbed both of Bruce’s arms stretching them behind his back and raising him up. Superman from his cell could see Bruce’s terror in his eyes.

The thug held Bruce and another came before him smirking.

“Superman’s whore… Let’s see what he found in you…”

He began bitch slapping Bruce to the face till his head stayed on his shoulder; he stepped aside for the next who punched him in the guts till blood spurted from his mouth.

At least twenty thugs beat him and when they were bored they threw him to a rock in the middle of the beach to storm at him tearing his already rugged pants. Bruce although half conscious screamed from the roughness of their ministrations but more from the realization of what was to follow.

Superman saw Bruce’s beautiful buttocks naked.

“I knew his ass must be gorgeous” one jeered.
“Let’s see his asshole now!”

“Please, no; I didn’t know who you were…” Bruce’s eyes focused on Darkseid who was grinning, pleading with him and now Clark couldn’t remind himself that this was a lie.

Darkseid’s eyebrows rose.

“That doesn’t change your behavior, does it?” Bruce gulped and Darkseid smirked. “Feast on him!” he growled to his servants.

“No!” Superman cried from his cell as the thug who had grabbed Bruce first, clenched his thighs and spread him.

He lowered his zip and thrust in Bruce at once causing a scream that was silenced when another thug pushed his length inside Bruce’s mouth.

Superman’s face was distorted in pain and hatred watching weak as the two scum thrush hard and fast simultaneously at Bruce’s anus and mouth making the human convulse like a dying fish.

The minutes of torture seemed like hours before the thugs finished one after the other. More than twenty bastards took their turn on the weak human...

But then they threw Bruce on the sand and made him fall to all four laughing at his bleeding anus and mouth before starting all over. Bruce made to resist but the one behind him clenched his hair and yanked his head backwards giving space for two others to punch him relentlessly to his belly and face.

Bruce was half unconscious when the thug let him fall on the ground; they forced him on his knees and hands again; the thug behind him opened his thighs wide and penetrated him so cruelly that Bruce screamed; another one grabbed his hair and raised his head to push his erection inside his mouth.

Superman wished he had died…Seeing all these thugs two at a time violating Bruce so cruelly, so violently that the bleeding now had begun like downpour. His thighs were filled from streaks of blood that ended to the black sand. And blood was spurting from his mouth since those thrusting in his mouth were vicious.

It was hours of these…and then Bruce’s eyes closed and Clark knew that it was over…Bruce’s heart had stopped.

“You see” Darkseid said “I can give the pest to my servant whenever I want; it doesn’t matter if he dies because for Darkseid death is nothing.”

Darkseid stepped down from his throne and walked arrogantly to the lifeless body of the human. He looked with contempt at Superman and with his foot raised a bit Bruce’s chin; he exhaled to the human’s face and Bruce’s eyelids trembled before opening; but there was no happiness for being alive only dread.

Darkseid’s eyes stabbed the human under his feet.

“You’ll have to beg for this present to be awarded to you, pest…” He turned to the smirking thugs. “The party is not over.”

“No…” Bruce whispered as Darkseid walked out of the way for their servants to grab again his captive. “Please, no!”
Darkseid grinned to Bruce’s increasing panic as he was pushed on the rock spread beyond his limits to take inside him what the cackling thugs were holding.

“You’re used to that, huh, bitch? The bigger the better, right?” it was a pole – like rod pushing Bruce’s bleeding opening tearing it more, gashing his flesh.

But the human’s eyes had locked with Superman’s since the thugs dragging had brought him in front of the hero’s cell.

“If you want that to end” Darkseid hissed to Bruce “your lover must beg me.”

Superman closed his eyes: he didn’t care for humiliating himself if that would save Bruce.

“I beg you” Superman said “spare him from that…Please…Have mercy…”

Darkseid yanked his head backwards and cackled.

“As you wish, Kryptonian…” with a wave of his hands the thugs were thrown to the granite cliffs surrounding the beach.

For some minutes only Bruce’s rugged breath was heard hued by choked sobs; his body had spasms. Darkseid walked to him and grabbed him from the back of his neck raising him to the air so their faces were close.

Superman remembered how Darkseid had blown Thor’s head and his heart stopped; no, he couldn’t kill Bruce…

“But you begged for his suffering to end.”

Darkseid blew and Bruce cried but it wasn’t one final cry before death; Bruce screamed more and Superman could see strange symbols being engraved over Bruce’s forehead with melt, hot gold – the smell of burning flesh was torturing and the sound of the skin churning worsened it; something like a word was carved in the human flesh but Superman didn’t know what it was; he cared for the blood that slithered from the symbols to Bruce’s distorted in pain features.

“Look at me” Darkseid hissed to Bruce’s closed eyes and he obeyed.

Superman was sure that the New God was going to unleash another torment to Bruce.

Suddenly the New God captured Bruce’s lips and sucked passionately as if drinking something he was thirsty for.

“Now you belong to Darkseid…I’ll unravel your mystery…”

“No!” Superman yelled and fainted with his fists clenched desperately in his unbreakable green bindings.

Bruce thrashed on his bed; even in his sleep, in the deep darkness of the master bedroom he knew what that ominous thing that haunted him was. But what made him writhe on his mattress was worse: was pain not physical but deep in his soul; it was agony that constricted his breath and heart. It was the suffering of someone he loved more than his own life.

He jerked upright as the suffering he was feeling reached a peak; his eyes opened with a gasp leaving his mouth. For some seconds his eyes stayed completely still focused inside. He realized he
was drenched in sweat.

Hero curled on his lap worried and Bruce caressed his head.

“Hold on, Clark; I’ll come for you.”
"I don’t want to let Bruce pray to all the men who drool on him and if he finds out about us, he’ll break up with me."

His own voice echoed awkward as if it belonged to a stranger in the depths of his mind and that night’s downpour that washed Gotham’s rooftop and him wasn’t the reason.

"Break up with YOU?! C’mon, Kal El…As if you’re a human loser and Wayne has the right to dump you. You know my opinion about Wayne and that he is unworthy of you but since you want to keep him he can’t do otherwise! You deserve whatever you want, Kal El: you’re the Lord of Krypton. And a pleasure slave is a luxury you definitely can demand."

Diana’s voice – or the voice of the woman he knew as Diana – tortured his ears. Her arrogance, malice and poison dripped from every syllable she uttered and Clark wondered how he hadn’t realized then.

The cave was the same as he remembered it yet the feeling was different…Batman was standing before him, cold, distant; it was the first time he was seeing Batman standing after the disaster in that factory – after months. The new armor enabled him to stand and walk.

“You were right for the tests I didn’t do in the Fortress” Superman said to him casually.

Clark knew that there was something treacherous and devious in his mind that made him now, after so long feel embarrassed, ashamed.

Batman raised his head pursing his lips.

“I should have done them – I was stupid. But it’s not too late. We can do them now” Superman continued.

Bruce’s eyebrows arched.

“We?”

Superman nodded smiling.

“Yes…that’s the reason I took a leave. We’ll go together to the Fortress to have my tests done”

Now Bruce frowned.

“Why am I needed for that? You’re a big man” he asked coldly.

“I want you to see with your own eyes that I’m not fooling you again.”

Bruce twisted his eyebrows and shook his head.

“If you say that you’ll do it I don’t need to come and see.”

“I also hoped to have some days just for the two of us” Bruce opened his mouth in realization and nodded “Like the good old days…to escape from all these. Your bedroom there waits you…Remember?” his voice became touched and sensual.

Hearing himself again Clark felt the nausea more torturous than ever.
Now that he re-watched these moments he could see that Bruce remembered the days in the Fortress and these memories were salt in the human’s aching heart yet he isolated this weak member of his body.

A smirk carved half of Bruce’s face.

“And” he pierced Superman with his eyes “you’ll lock me there and threw the key, right?”

Superman pressed his lips and his eyebrows formed an ugly frown: Bruce was so clever. Damn!

Bruce nodded.

“So that’s the plan, Kal El? Imprison your human slave not allowing him to pester you constantly about the supposed Diana?”

Superman regained his calm expression and stared at Bruce innocently but Hero’s constant growling was very talkative.

“You’re not my slave, Bruce; you’re my lover” he said sensually and made to fly to him but Bruce’s cold glare stopped him.

“Not anymore, Superman” his voice was icy and fierce.

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“... you stalked me last night! You should have stayed on your bed since” he cocked his eyebrows "I supposedly hurt you but you wore that suit and followed me to watch my every move!”

Bruce grinned and shook his head.

“Don’t be more ridiculous than you already are!” Superman clenched his fists ready to attack but he restrained himself gritting his teeth. “But when you choose the City Hall’s rooftop to get laid then it is like you’re begging for Batman to see you.”

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“After that you realize that you have no place in the Manor or the cave again: as a matter of fact, after you leave, you’d find that both places are from now on inaccessible to you. You made your choice and I respect that, Clark; now it’s my turn.”

He turned to the computer bench, his back a clear sign of dismissal. However, Superman was determined to not retreat so easily: he couldn’t stand the thought of Bruce being obtainable for all these men surrounding him. The images of Thor fucking him under the bridge, although he knew that weren’t true, haunted his mind.

“Don’t you dare blame this to me!” Superman roared and several bats startled flew from their positions yet Hero didn’t even glance at them gritting his teeth and growling at the alien, his eyes sending daggers. “You never believed in this relationship! Though you knew that the devious plan of Al Ghul threw me to your feet, not only you didn’t thwart me from slipping in a relationship with you, but also enjoyed having me burning from desire and not satisfying me!”

Bruce’s eyes were wide, emotionless, still, looking at the days of the past...at the Fortress, at the island...

“You never invested in this! You always expected me to do everything – to offer you my love. And
now with the first difficulty you put an end to what we have! You wear this armor to confront me because you’re afraid to do it as Bruce Wayne because Bruce Wayne is a scared brat who in the first ordeal whines and sniffs and runs away!”

“I saved your life, you ungrateful bastard!” Superman roared.

Bruce didn’t turn to see him just yanked his head.

“I know and I’ll be always grateful to you, Superman. But that doesn’t mean that I have to tolerate you telling me lies, accusing me for being so filthy to cheat my loved one and fucking me worse than you’d do with a plastic doll” he finally turned to look him in the face calmly but resolute as granite.

Superman was shocked then at how stony that face was; how determined those eyes were and at the same time bereft of any emotion. And now even more…regret stabbing his chest.

“Stay away from me and Gotham” Batman growled in his raspy, cold voice.

Superman shook his head and smirked.

“You can’t keep me away from Gotham” he chuckled. “I know the true condition of Batman and he isn’t as formidable as he was” he licked his lips. “You think that you can intimidate Superman?” he cackled. “Please, Bruce: your armor might be able to make you stand and walk but your legs are useless! You’re a cripple!”

Bruce’s hand like a flash threw something so fast that Superman saw just a blur and realized that it was a knife only when the blade cut his upper arm ripping his suit, grazing his skin and spurting blood drops. It hurt like Hell.

Clark remembered the ancient dagger: the Knife of Justice…Indeed, it served him justice for his behavior.

Even now the scar on his upper arm burnt stronger than the overall pain over his entire body.

In the same blur, the knife hit on the rock wall behind Superman and scratched again Superman’s upper arm before ending up to its master’s hand. Bruce caressed the blade and placed it in his belt. He stabbed with his eyes Superman who was squeezing the wound to stop the blood: It was so obvious that the Man of Steel was completely unused to these things. And the skin wasn’t healing itself like it should because this wasn’t a usual blade.

“I warned you about the Knife…And you’re right: my legs are useless but my hands are still quite skilled with knives.”

Clark could feel the rage that consumed him that moment, a stupid rage; he had felt insulted because Bruce had figured his intentions and didn’t fall for his scheme; because the human kicked him out. However now as he re-lived all these, there was no trace of anger only sadness, despair for what he had done – what he had lost. But most of all, he was sad because now he could feel what he had denied to feel that day: Bruce’s hurt…

He gritted his teeth determined to overcome the pain and the weakness in order to escape his prison and go back to warn about the danger…to kneel before Bruce and ask for forgiveness.

He clenched his tied wrists yet the pain intensified and his body felt electrocuted by a thousand volt before going completely numb; his head rolled to his chest as he was short of breath…He couldn’t
escape…

The padlock made a clack and the lid moved slightly so Clark lifted it. He squatted and began pulling out the items: his clothes that he had taken to the Manor when he was with Bruce: well, that was to be expected.

Under the clothes, folded in its minimum size of a medium cube was the wheelchair he had created for Bruce. He pressed his lips and for some seconds his mind dag and brought to the fore memories from the Fortress; however he crossed them out determined before they formed. Now Clark got why Bruce used the retina recognition system for the box’s security: he couldn’t risk someone opening it and seeing the alien object. Bruce still protected him and his secrets.

He took out the cube and placed it in the floor. Then there was a small, plain square box made of wood.

Clark narrowed his eyes. Bruce sent him Kryptonite? He shook his head snorting: no, not Bruce; besides he’d have felt it immediately since the box was wooden and the content wasn’t Kryptonite.

He took the box and opened the lid; he sighed: it was a metallic frame – round shaped and plain, black platinum from an unknown yet vein in Siberia.

He collapsed to the floor and squeezed the jewel in his palm closing his eyes. He saw again Bruce’s naked chest: broad, soft, toned with a shining charm touching his skin: a big black diamond sparkling inside its black, sleek nest of the platinum frame.

“Damn, Bruce! You should have kept it! It was a gift...” he sighed and then licked his lips and saw inside the box.

The last thing was a folded white, silken handkerchief. Curious he unfolded the fabric and his heart hurt as if a punch was delivered right to the pulsing muscle.

At this moment the punch was even harder…

A pressed flower like those that people collect putting them in books.

Clark recognized that flower: it was the rose Clark had brought to Bruce from Japan that morning after he had spoken badly to him. Clark wanted to make amends with him and reassured Bruce that he still loved him; that nothing had changed because of Diana.

Clark couldn’t send anything back to Bruce because Bruce had given him the most precious thing, the one thing that couldn’t be returned: Bruce had given him his vulnerable heart, his pure love and he had torn both into pieces…

He sighed and moaned: if he could just turn time back to stop himself from acting like this…if only he had fought stronger against Poison Ivy’s control…

Suddenly, Clark knew he wasn’t alone despite the fact he hadn’t looked up or heard anything due to the fact he was absorbed in his thoughts. Yet he had no mood addressing his visitor: for certain, more taunting…

“You don’t have the curiosity to see who visits you?”

Superman pressed his eyelids on the eyes: it was the only thing he could do to let his anger out. He hated that smug voice…But he couldn’t give him the satisfaction that he didn’t dare to look him in the eyes – even in this condition.
He raised his head loading his eyes with pride and contempt.

Bagdana smirked narrowing his eyes.

“I see you stupidly spend your few drops of strength to play the hero…” he shrugged. “Whatever: I know better. You’re scared, Kryptonian; scared beyond words. What? Pain is too hard for someone who till now was invulnerable? I guess it was too easy to play the hero when there was no real danger to you, huh?”

Superman narrowed his eyes.

“I never played the hero, demon: I wouldn’t expect from someone like you to be able to discern that…As for pain and invulnerability, you’re no different: playing with humans’ vulnerability when you know that you can’t be hurt” he knitted his eyebrows “or can you? Maybe there is a Kryptonite for you too?”

The demon laughed although inside Superman’s words had stung – he knew about pain but this wasn’t the Kryptonian’s business.

“Nice…Play with words if that comforts you at the moment but as the time goes by and you digest what is happening, you won’t have any mood for provoking.”

Superman gulped: the demon had one thing right – there was no time for word games.

“It’s you who doesn’t realize what’s happening, Bagdana!”

The demon frowned and Superman inhaled deeply to gather some strength and some air to continue.

“You’re helping a powerful, vicious being to destroy humans.”

Bagdana crossed his arms and smirked.

“So what? Through the ages humans have proved that they are worthless – I admit that they gave me fun at times but that doesn’t mean that they should continue to exist” his face became darker and his eyes flashed. “They should have ceased to litter this planet ages ago…they killed Lilith…” he wouldn’t admit the pain they had caused him. “And it was someone similar to you that seduced her and led her to death…”

Superman saw and heard the pain in the demon’s eyes and voice; a spark of hope lit in his heart.

“And this time you are the one who leads the one you say that you care about to death – worse than death.”

Bagdana clenched his jaw: he knew that he was talking about Bruce.

“Nonsense!”

Superman shook his sweaty head and felt dizziness pushing him to fainting.

“No, please, Bagdana! Listen to me: You can’t trust Darkseid with Bruce! You didn’t reveal to him my human identity which would have endanger my mother and my friends.”

The demon cocked an eyebrow and laughed.

“You’re trying to turn my own weapons against me? Make me turn against my ally? I didn’t reveal to them your human identity because that would have made Darkseid snub at you and lose his
interest saving you from his wrath; as for your human loved ones…” he snorted “they will die one way or another. Besides it was very entertaining knowing how much you hurt them with your attitude and that you ditched them for Ivy’s sake!”

Superman closed his eyes desperate.

“He won’t give you Bruce! He is intrigued! He wants to find everything about Bruce; he wants to have him for himself!” he saw with hope Bagdana’s cat-like eyes filling with something like knowledge, suspicion. “Yes, he showed me! He’ll torture Bruce to make me suffer…Please, Bagdana: you can’t let him put his hands on Bruce; you can’t let him torture Bruce: he has suffered too much already!”

Bagdana snorted and lolled his head on the side casting him a sideways glance filled with sarcasm.

“Do you care?”

Now Clark beyond weakness and illness and pain felt rage: did that awful demon doubt his love for Bruce?

“Of course I am…I love him.”

Bagdana yanked his head back and his gigantic body shook from his cackle.

“Love?” he shook his head “people like you use that word all the time without knowing the meaning.”

“And a demon like you knows the meaning?” Superman chuckled and his eyes narrowed to slits.

The demon smirked.

“Oh! I see you have wiped from your memory the things that don’t suit you, huh?”

Clark became even paler: it was true – all these hours, days, months (?) he was there, he always stopped his memory from slipping far down in the darkest depths of his mind, where he knew that his worst recollection lay hidden.

“What are you talking about?” he mumbled.

“But you know even if you deny it…” Bagdana abandoned his ironic, jeering expression and became dead serious – his eyes completely still. “I felt his pain, his despair that night; his bleeding heart; I heard the cracks when his heart broke…Haven’t you?”

Superman’s short breath stopped; his memory made to show him what the demon was talking about but he again blocked the images.

“You made me do it! You and that woman; you used magic and I don’t know what other shit to make me hurt Bruce.”

Bagdana sniggered.

“Cheap excuses! I know all about this…” he cocked his eyebrows and waved that off with contempt “I make humans throw their responsibilities to others all the time. But I see that Kryptonians have the same traits…” he cocked an eyebrow. “If your love was real no magic, no feromone could have broken that.”

Superman tried to breathe normally.
“You were influencing me to behave like this: Ivy had manipulated me to imprison Bruce…You weren’t afraid that if I had imprisoned Bruce you’d have lost him?”

Bagdana smirked.

“Because you are an idiot that doesn’t make me one too…We both know who Bruce really is: his willpower, his intelligence, his defiance, his strength of character. I knew he wouldn’t fall to your stupid trap and to whatever tricks you’d use. Besides Bruce knew already about your fucking session with Ivy on that rooftop.”

Superman frowned: indeed, Batman had seen them but how Bagdana knew that he had seen?

“How you know that?”

Bagdana’s eyes shone gleefully and before his eyes Superman saw Bagdana taking the form of an archer dressed in dark green, with a hood casting in shadow his face. He had heard descriptions of the Arrow.

“You are the Arrow?!” he knew that Bagdana was Oliver Queen but that he was also the Arrow was something new – of course now made sense that the night of Joker’s attack at the Avengers’ Tower the Arrow had come to protect Bruce.

“Obviously… Well, that night the Arrow met by chance Batman and led him to the rooftop to see you in full action with Princess Diana.”

Superman’s dizziness became overwhelming, his head screaming from pain: that was diabolic! That plan was so tightly woven that nobody could have figured it out.

“Then what was the point of making me try luring Bruce in the Fortress and imprison him?”

Arrow pushed back his hood and Superman saw Queen’s blazing forest green eyes rolling.

“Bruce wouldn’t have fallen to your trap but the rupture between you two would become abysmal: indeed. He ousted you from his life once and for all.”

Superman closed his eyes feeling the sweat that was covering his body becoming thicker. He had been caught like a fly in the spider’s web. However what mattered now was Bruce and Bagdana was the only one who could save him from the fate Darkseid planned for him.

“Still you can’t trust Darkseid with Bruce.”

Bagdana returned to his real form and looked Superman deep in the eyes.

“A demon never trusts anyone…Darkseid might be strong but in the millions of years of my existence I have seen countless beings more powerful and more special than him being defeated and exterminated by their own arrogance.”

Hope ignited in Clark’s chest.

“Then you are against him?”

Bagdana’s mouth formed a nasty, gleeful smirk and his eyebrows twitched.

“You wish…You hope that by being afraid for Bruce’s fate I’d turn against Darkseid and permit you to try gain Bruce back…How stupid of you! Bruce’s destiny is tied with mine: he belongs to me and I belong to him. No Superman, no Darkseid can change that…”
The demon turned to leave choosing to walk the long corridor instead of just vanishing.

“Just” Superman shouted and Bagdana stopped “just don’t let them get Bruce…” he breathed with his quivering voice and fainted as Bagdana’s eyes became the flaming red of his wrath.

“Not this time…” he hissed clenching his fists without looking at their prisoner.

Thomas Eliot was at his office in Leslie’s free clinic; he was reading on his computer an article on a scientific journal before his visit to his patients. He was bored beyond words from his presence at the free clinic yet he was patient especially now that he was so close to succeed his plans: he was sure that one of these days Leslie or Stark would announce him that they want him for Brucie’s surgery.

The knock on the door made him raise his eyes a bit annoyed; he called them in. It was Kelly and he immediately got up to go to her. He had to keep her happy while he needed her.

“I’m sorry if I’m bothering you, Tommy…”

He hugged her waist though she definitely was bothering him yet Thomas wasn’t a fool to say that to his minion.

“Don’t be ridiculous, dear…I told you that you don’t have to knock the door…” he nibbled her earlobe and the girl giggled.

“I thought you’d want to know that Dr. Thompkins has a visitor…” she mumbled closing her eyes enjoying Dr. Elliot’s ministrations to her ear and waist.

Thomas frowned.

“Visitor?” if it was someone they knew the nurse would have told the name.

“I think I have seen him somewhere but I don’t remember…”

Thomas cocked an eyebrow: he didn’t expect anything better from that dumb chic…

“It’s okay, babe…” he withdrew his hands from her waist. “I’m afraid we have to stop for now…” he said feigning sadness to Kelly’s miserable expression. “I have to visit patients but I promise to make up to you in the night…” he winked smiling and the girl seemed happy again.

She mimicked his smile, fixed her hair and cleared her throat.

“Right…I must be to the ward…oh! I can’t wait for the night!” she gave him a peck in the lips and left.

Thomas rolled his eyes and waited till the sound of her footsteps vanished and got outside. He was curious to find out who the visitor was but he couldn’t burst inside Leslie’s office because Thompkins wasn’t a fool and would immediately realize that he was watching her.

So he walked towards the corridor of her office and waited hidden behind the turn of the wall. In order to not cause suspicions, he made small walks and returned.

When after a good hour Leslie’s door opened, Thomas halted his breath. Which exploded when he saw the man who came out. His eyes widened and then narrowed: Stephen Strange? Here?

He back stepped so that he could bump into them at another moment ‘entirely on chance’.
Strange and Leslie was deep in conversation but in a whispering mode so that nobody could hear. Thomas having distanced a good deal began walking towards them.

“Fancy that!” he exclaimed when he ‘came across’ them in his stroll; they hadn’t noticed him till then and looked at him a bit surprised. Thomas noticed a slight smug grin on Dr. Strange’s face upon recognizing him: they weren’t the best of colleagues… “Dr. Strange in Gotham of all places!”

Leslie regarded Elliot over her rectangular glasses calm but a bit annoyed.

“I see you know each other” she commented.

Dr. Strange stretched his hand and Thomas shook it smiling.

“Of course” Strange said gazing at Thomas with an eyebrow slightly arched. “I had the honor to meet Dr. Elliot in many conferences and I have to admit we had some intriguing arguments in the past…”

“Which were very fascinating and I missed them so much now that Stephen is not a part of the neurosurgery society anymore” he said feigning sadness although he felt a cruel satisfaction for rubbing that in the face of the arrogant bastard.

Stephen grinned and his still eyes stabbed Elliot’s.

“I’m sure you do, dear Tom…But, please, do not be so sad: it’s bad for your health” he said sardonically.

Thomas narrowed his eyes but kept his ‘sincerely’ sad face.

“I was very sorry to hear about your tragic accident and your impairment that bereft us of your unique talents.”

Dr. Strange raised his eyebrows and cast Leslie a fleeting glance which she met.

“I guess that’s life, huh?” Strange smiled.

Thomas nodded cocking his eyebrows.

“Is someone close to you treated in the clinic and you came to visit? I’ll happy to attend personally to him or her now that you can’t.”

Dr. Strange grinned because he understood Elliot’s intention to taunt him for his inability to be a doctor anymore.

Leslie yanked her head; she had understood Elliot’s intentions too and she was really pissed.

“Dr. Strange is not here as a visitor.”

Thomas looked at her puzzled and smiled uncomfortable under Strange’s mocking stare.

“I don’t understand…”

Leslie gave a tight lips smile and Dr. Strange cocked an eyebrow.

“He is the leading surgeon of Bruce Wayne” Leslie said casually since Bruce had told her that he had no problem for the information to be disclosed.
And the result was definitely worth it, Leslie thought. Elliot was great in hiding his real emotions and feigning others yet this time the information came entirely suddenly and he was outright dumbstruck. It was obvious in his gaping mouth and goggling eyes. Even his face’s usual rosy color had been replaced from paleness.

“I…” he smiled trying to hide his rage for all his plans being upturned.

“Are you alright, Thomas?” Dr. Strange’s usual baritone was deeper than ever. “Do you need my medical assistance?”

But Elliot didn’t answer, totally engrossed in his shock and outrage.

“I don’t understand: Dr. Strange is…I mean after his accident he is incapable of operating, much more performing a highly demanding operation like the one that Bruce needs…” he looked at Leslie. “Bruce’s condition demands a top notch surgeon and Dr. Strange – I’m sorry, Stephen – he has months to operate, not to mention his impairment. Leslie, I can’t believe you made that choice!”

Leslie narrowed her eyes.

“First of all, I wasn’t the one who made that choice and second, are you even suggesting that YOU care for Bruce more than I do?”

Thomas smiled realizing that he was carried away and had gone too far.

“Of course not, Leslie…Everyone knows how much you love Bruce” he calmed himself. “Whose choice was then?”

Leslie looked at Stephen urging him to speak.

“Bruce Wayne” Dr. Strange answered with his bass voice hued with amusement.

Now Elliot felt like boiling with anger: that brat! That stupid brat found a way to humiliate him! He slapped his thighs and shook his head.

“Oh, Leslie…Really? You believe that Bruce could take such a crucial decision?”

Leslie crossed her arms over the chest; her jaw was set.

“You know perfectly well, Thomas that in such difficult cases what matters is the patient’s wishes. And I think that Dr. Strange is indeed a rather brilliant choice.”

Thomas felt his blood reaching his ears filling his head with hotness.

“Certainly! But if it was made a year ago not now. Stephen, how could you accept knowing that you’re not in your top condition? Bruce can die during that surgery…it takes only a tiny slip.”

Leslie pressed her lips annoyed but Dr. Strange was calm and even amused from his colleagues’ displeasure.

“I think you are not in a position to know my condition right now, Thomas” he twitched his eyebrow sarcastic “I never chose you as my doctor, after all. I’m sure that Mr. Wayne really would appreciate your concern but…” he narrowed his eyes. “Are you a relative?”

“No.”

“Then it’s none of your business!” he spat widening his eyes and glancing at Leslie who was furious.
“Shall we go, Leslie?”

She nodded.

“Sorry for leaving your pleasant company, Thomas, but we have somewhere to go with Stephen.”

He grinned.

“Understood…”

Stephen smiled to him.

“We’ll have the chance to meet again now that I’ll frequent in Gotham…Happy to see you again!” he said sarcastic.

“The pleasure was all mine” Thomas replied swallowing his anger and watched them heading to the exit.

Thomas ran both his hands in his hair; his plans were totally screwed! How on Earth that brat came with Strange. His heart beat fast with the realization of how amused Brucie would be from his humiliation.

When Alfred answered the door he knew already that it was Leslie and that made his upset worse although he kept his collected demeanor. However for someone who knew him as perfect as Leslie it was easy to discern that something was off.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Thompkins, Dr. Strange” Alfred didn’t know that Dr. Strange was in the second car that entered the grounds.

“You know me?” Stephen asked perplexed.

Alfred grinned.

“Both Master Anthony and Master Bruce speak very fondly about you, sir; I’m honored to meet you at last.”

Stephen smiled.

“Well, I’m pleased to meet you too, sir…”

“It’s Alfred. Please, do come in” he opened the door wide to let them in and guided them to the great salon their feet echoing on the glistening floor.

Leslie met her friend’s eyes asking discreetly what was wrong.

“Have a seat, please” Alfred said typically. “May I offer you some tea?”

Dr. Strange glanced at Leslie.

“Alfred, we are here to see Bruce; I know we didn’t call first but I supposed that after his trip he’d have stayed at home to get some rest.”

Alfred didn’t answer for a few seconds and Leslie frowned.
“I’m afraid that your assumption was wrong, Dr. Thompkins. Master Bruce had to leave again from Gotham…some urgent matter concerning Wayne Enterprises.”

Stephen raised his eyebrows.

“We should have called after all… Mr. Wayne is a very busy man.”

However Leslie who knew everything about Bruce didn’t take it so lightly and worry began slithering in her mind yet she couldn’t ask in Dr. Strange’s presence. Alfred headed to the kitchen to bring the tea.

“Is everything alright, Leslie?” Dr. Strange asked with a slight frown.

She grinned.

“Nothing, Stephen, nothing.”

The ring of a cell phone broke the silence and Stephen took his phone out of the inside pocket of his blazer.

“Dr. Strange speaking” he narrowed his eyes. “Yes, Tony…yes…hm…I suppose I can be there.”

Alfred placed the big, oval silver tray with the tea on the classic coffee table sharing a glance with Leslie.

Dr. Strange ended the dial and looked at them.

“Thank you for the tea, Alfred: everything looks delicious but unfortunately I have to go. Tony Stark wants me in New York, at the Avengers’ Tower.”

“At least, have a cup of tea before leaving.”

“Next time, Alfred.”

“As you wish, sir.”

He led Stephen to the door and then returned to face Leslie who had stood and was looking at him.

“What happened? Where’s Bruce?”

Alfred pressed his lips.

“The morning I went to wake him up because he hadn’t come for breakfast: I supposed that he was so tired that he slept in. When I entered master bedroom I found Hero sleeping on the bed with that note in his front legs.”

Leslie took the paper Alfred pulled from his vest’s pocket.

“Alfred, I had to leave. Sorry for not saying anything…Do not worry.”

“That boy is crazy!” Leslie gritted her teeth. “What has in mind?”

Alfred looked at her calm though his blue eyes were bad.

“There was some bad news as soon as Miss Kyle and he arrived.”

“What this time?” Leslie huffed exasperated.
“Mr. Kent has disappeared and Master Wayne is very worried. The Tumbler isn’t at the cave along with the armor.”

Leslie rubbed her forehead.

“Then it is obvious what he is up to…” her sigh of frustration came like a growl. “Batman is eating alive our boy, Alfred” Alfred just pursed his lips without speaking. “He should be more concerned about his health!”

“There is a major threat, Leslie. It seems that something really dangerous is coming.”

Leslie snorted and shook her head exasperated.

“When it doesn’t?!” she spat. “So many fucking super heroes out there with stupid super powers why should our injured boy run to do their job?”

Alfred huffed and shook his head.

“Because none of them is Master Bruce” he replied calmly meeting Leslie’s eyes. “Because Master Bruce was the only one who suspected the scheme and the one who discovered everything.”

Leslie yanked her head back and closed her eyes: Alfred had a point though she understood that the Englishman shared the same feelings with her about that.

“Perhaps Selina knows where he is?”

Alfred shook his head.

“I have the belief that this time Miss Kyle isn’t with him.”

“You think we should inform Anthony? Just in case?”

Alfred inhaled.

“That would be against Master Bruce’s wishes and I believe that it wouldn’t be of any help.”

Leslie rolled her eyes.

“Don’t tell me…Of course he didn’t take his medication with him…” she huffed.

Alfred shook his head.

“He did take them with him, Leslie.”

“Then thank God for small miracles! But next I see him I’m gonna chain him to his bed!”

Alfred cocked his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

“I doubt that this would be enough, Leslie…”

The meeting in the top floor of the Avengers’ Tower began late after midnight because they had to wait for every member of the team to arrive - plus Dr. Strange. For the first time, the whole wall windows were covered with the special invisible material that offered additional protection from
potential monitoring.

That alone was enough for everyone to feel that things were serious.

The same grim expression was in every face around the table as Tony presented in a hologram the information they had on Darkseid and his plans. He even presented the footage from the Darkseid’s wars in other planets courtesy of Jor El’s archives: Bruce had asked him to show the material. Even the blue gigantic figure alone was enough to cause uneasiness, especially when just the beams from his eyes had such destructive power.

“Where did you find that footage?” Nick Fury asked rubbing his goatee.

“I don’t think that my sources have any importance right now” Tony answered glancing at Peppers.

Natasha stretched on her chair’s back.

“I think they do: you’re talking about an extra terrestrial menace and these images can’t have been taken by a human; so if another alien gave them to you how can we trust them?”

Tony met her shiny eyes.

“Because that alien is Superman’s father.”

Silence fell to the table and glances were exchanged.

“Superman didn’t help us when Loki attacked” Steve commented.

Tony nodded.

“Superman is compromised but not his father.”

“How do you know he is compromised?” Dr. Banner who usually didn’t speak intervened.

Tony wished he could share with everyone Bruce’s contribution to all these.

“The Amazon Princess who became his ally…”

“And not only that…” Natasha commented and Tony crooked his mouth eyeing her.

“…cast him under mind control into isolating from his true allies and luring him to Darkseid’s trap.”

There was disbelief in the people around the table but Thor stood.

“That woman is not the real Amazon Princess.”

The others looked at him now.

“And” Tony continued tapping his fingers on the table “we know that they have already captured Superman.”

Steve got up and looked at Thor.

“How you’re so sure that the Amazon is not real?” he turned his gaze at Tony who crooked his mouth.

“Themyscira and the real Amazons were found; and the real Princess as well” Tony said through pursed lips.
“Found by whom?” Fury inclined a bit his hand looking sideways at Tony.

Tony looked at Fury’s wicked eye reading the man’s suspicions.

“That doesn’t matter” Steve said “since we are positive about that: so we arrest that woman and attack Darkseid to kick him out of the planet and save Superman.”

Thor inhaled deeply. After everything Superman had done to Bruce, he didn’t feel very warm about that…

“We have to wait” Tony said. “Darkseid is not an enemy you fight easily – we need preparation.”

“Maybe we don’t have the time!” Steve said.

“We do” Tony retorted. “His ignorance is our greatest weapon and asset right now: he thinks that nobody knows about his plans and that his attack will find us unprepared so he moves slowly waiting for his machine to be ready.”

The hologram showed Darkseid’s machine and Dr. Banner got up and approached intrigued studying carefully the oval shaped black vibrating construction that now was six feet height.

“All Life Equation machine” Tony remarked. “Darkseid more than conquering Earth cares about sucking from humans the energy he believes they have in their subconscious which would allow him to unlock the Anti Life Equation into establishing his order of things to the universe.”

Natasha whistled.

“It gets better and better!”

“We have time till his machine is finished.”

“You are really saying to wait for his ultimate weapon to be ready to evaporate us?” Steve asked.

“The machine is under my monitoring” Tony replied confident. “If we attempted to destroy the machine now we would be probably defeated” Dr. Strange gave a court nod. “Darkseid has the power to manipulate people by penetrating their minds: our attack would be met not only by his troops but also by friendly shots as the alien would manipulate the world leaders into fighting us with their countries’ army.”

“Then what do you propose?” Steve asked crossing his arms over the chest.

“In the time we have I count on Dr. Strange on applying a protective wall over the minds of leaders so that Darkseid will be unable to read their minds and control them.”

Dr. Strange pursed his lips.

“I’ll do my best but this can’t be easy.”

Tony pursed his lips.

“Then we’re lucky we have you…and your friends.”

Dr. Strange laughed.

Tony turned to the others.
“Also, I’m adjusting our weaponry into being effective against the alien’s troops.”

Dr. Banner stared at him.

“That will need material from those troops.”

“Which I have” Tony answered not wanting to hold back his smugness even though he thanked Bruce for that.

“How?” the scientist asked.

“Some months back Darkseid in order to introduce Diana to Superman he staged an attack against Bruce” Tony noticed the astonished looks of his teammates – it was the first time this fact was revealed. “You know how the boyscout used to run when someone was attacked – the fake Diana was there before me or Superman and she ‘saved’ Bruce blowing up the odd creatures that had attacked him; to cover the traces that would lead to Darkseid. Then I thought that these creatures were the result of some illegal experiment and gathered samples from the area were their remains were scattered; also, Bruce’s clothes had some material too since the creatures had grabbed him.”

Tony for the first time in his life felt embarrassed because he was taking credit for someone else’s work. The confident smirk over Fury’s face made that worse since Tony could hear his thoughts about Bruce being mentioned AGAIN.

“When Jor El analyzed those samples recognized that they were parademons – Darkseid’s troops” he cast Pepper a sideways glance seeking support and she gave him a small grin. “I’m using that material to adjust our weapons against them.”

“I’ll help you” Dr. Banner said and Tony nodded to him appreciatively more because he wasn’t doing questions.

Steve walked to him.

“What about the real Princess? Is she willing to fight with us?”

Tony patted Captain’s shoulders.

“She left her island to come to our world: Diana of Themyscira is really pissed that a villain impersonated and defamed her.”

“So we wait” Steve said pressing his lips.

“As soon as Dr. Strange finds a way to protect the world leaders from external manipulation we’ll alarm them about the danger so that they will secretly ready their armies and set protection measures for civilians. Of course our weapons will be finished by then.”

“What about Superman?” Thor intervened grimly.

Tony who shared the god’s feelings about the being that caused such pain to Bruce raised an eyebrow.

“We can’t rely on his help: we’ll have to save him.”

Thor nodded.

“Asgard’s help will be with Earth.”
"The more the better" Natasha remarked. “Especially, since Superman is out of the game and I have no trust that the Amazon will help us in the end.”

Tony frowned.

“Think positive for once, dear.”

Natasha smiled.

“I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth…so I’m realist.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“So we prepare ourselves for war” Steve turned resolute to his comrades. “Darkseid is fooling himself if he thinks that this will be an easy war.”

Fury approached Tony with a suspicious look in his face; he leaned to his ear.

“Very inspiring, Mr. Stark…yet I can detect someone else’s influence in all these…” he winked with his unique eye and left to organize his agents.

Tony crooked his mouth.

“You still underestimate me, Nick?”

Fury chuckled.

“No, Tony: you are an ingenious scientist and inventor; one of the most intelligent people of the planet” he pursed his lips. “But you’re not a detective… And this case has many gaps…” he nodded. “Congratulate him on my behalf next time you’ll see him.”

Tony twitched his eyebrows.

“There is no need for that: I’m present” he pointed at his chest. “Thanks anyway…”

Fury chuckled.

“Nice, Tony” he patted his upper arm and walked outside to organize his agents all over the planet.

An outraged, jealous Superman was the most terrifying thing to face but Matt wouldn’t flinch; he strengthened his body in front of Bruce.

“Superman, stop!”

Bruce on his wheelchair was between him and Superman, not a flinch of fear in his voice facing the most powerful being on the planet that was angry as Hell.

“Matt, you can go” Bruce said to him calmly without breaking eye contact with Superman whose face was still contorted.

“I’ll call…”

“You won’t call anyone” Bruce ordered. “Everything is alright – I’ll see you tomorrow.”
“What do you think you’re doing?” Bruce asked after Matt closed the door and the sound of his steps vanished.

Superman squinted and his face muscles’ spasms made him almost ugly.

“That’s my question!”

In a flash he grabbed Bruce’s upper arms and lifted him from the wheelchair covering the distance to the master bedroom in less than thirty seconds and settled the human in a sitting position on the bed. Bruce’s stare didn’t flinch even though Clark could see that this time he could feel the bruising grasp on his upper arms that Superman didn’t let go.

“Can you calm down and release my arms?” Bruce asked completely unfazed by Superman’s panting breath that burnt his face as his enraged eyes locked with his calm ones.

But Superman didn’t seem to have listened at all.

“Is that why you made all these fuss about me and Diana? Is this why you made me feel ill? To run around doing tests letting you free to fuck with your physiotherapist?!”

Bruce’s eyes widened.

“You still smell Falcone on me; if what you say was true you’d have smelt that as well” he controlled the feel of insult that boiled inside him.

Superman laughed really snidely.

“You’re cunning! You definitely found a way to cover the smell of fucking with him!”

“You’re out of arguments already, babe? Matt, you won’t tell anything to Tony or anyone else” he mimicked Bruce’s voice. “Bruce, there is nothing to be ashamed of in that – you didn’t do anything wrong” he did the same with the physiotherapist’s voice. “I think it’s pretty obvious – I’m not that dumb, you know…He is fucking you months now and he wanted to tell Tony and the others but you didn’t want because Stark would brag and mock me and you didn’t want me to know! You want the blond hunk who is a human like you but you don’t want to lose Superman either” Bruce was staring at him with eyes unreadable like shining walls.

“You consider me a slut, then…” he said so calm that Clark even in his enraged condition was baffled.

Superman shook him.

“I heard you, Bruce! Damn it! I saw you!”

“What you saw?”

“You pants unbuttoned and he fondling your thighs! Fire him right now!”

Bruce yanked his head in defiance.

“He only does his job.”
“Oh, yeah?” Superman snorted. “And what’s his job? Giving you blow jobs, as right before I came in? You might not feel anything but I’m sure he definitely had a helluva party!” he hissed.

It stung because it was unprecedented; the pain wasn’t much but the shock was greater; he didn’t see it coming but Bruce had just slapped him in the face. He looked at the human who ground his teeth, his hand left on the mattress carelessly.

“Scan my groin, you fool! Is there any signs of saliva?”

“Then what he was talking about? Why he was fondling you?” his voice was still raspy.

“He wasn’t fondling me: he was massaging the cramps in my thighs’ muscles. The muscles three days now are contracted…badly.”

The shock of Bruce’s slap was nothing in comparison with that: Clark quickly scanned Bruce’s almost naked thighs and ruffled his sweaty hair. Indeed, the muscles in Bruce’s thighs were like stones from cramps that remained unrelieved for three days …

Thirst was torturous and hunger was piercing his guts…Superman wasn’t dependent on food and water but now under the effect of Kryptonite and the red sun-like light these first known feelings became additional tortures.

His eyes were closed, his head touched his chest as he didn’t have the strength to held it upright. But the worst torture was his eidetic memory: he snorted…it was ironic that the only super skill he was left was his memory only to remind him of his dreadful sins and torment him more…

“Clark…” but Clark continued probably believing that this was a moan. “Clark, I’m not in the mood…”

Now that hurt…But Clark understood Bruce’s hesitation: he just had a nightmare and he was still upset. He lifted his sweaty face, his messy hair framing his fevered eyes and regarded Bruce’s so beautiful, so irresistible face…

…it was ironic that the only super skill he was left was his memory only to remind him of his dreadful sins and torment him more…

“…beautiful beings like Wayne are made only for being used for pleasure and nothing more.” Diana’s voice fell like thunder in his horny mind and Clark in his cell felt embarrassed.

“I’m here for that, babe…” Clark panted because his groin was really impatient, throbbing viciously. “I’ll change that mood…” he cocked his eyebrows “this is a job for Superman…”

His hands grabbed on their own accord Bruce’s waistband and lowered at once both pants and underwear and…oh! His groin relished the contact with that soft pelvis! So much that he inhaled deeply and his mouth was suddenly sucking Bruce’s abdominals panting because his length was already erect and he wanted to get more from that shivering, so pleasantly cold body.

“I need you, Bruce…” he whispered huskily. “I need to be inside you again…Your body is sacred: a temple of Sun – I need that energy you give me…And besides you don’t feel anything below the waist…I’ll do everything…”

“Not tonight, Clark…” Bruce said not too loud because Clark even in this state could hear everything.

Clark heard but his body’s screams were ferocious and his length throbbed hungry and painful…

“That was his best trick! Persuading the others that he is a wild mountain to conquer!” Diana’s solemn, scientific voice told him again.
Clark hated himself for even hearing that woman.

Bruce’s eyes widened when instead of Clark detaching himself, he saw Superman’s head covering his genitals and heard the so familiar sound of powerful fingers clenching his thighs and his anus being spread.

Clark held Bruce’s thighs bringing them to touch his hips: he needed to feel real contact as when his body rubbed with Diana’s hot, strong, delicious, round shaped hips. But Bruce wasn’t able to do it himself so Clark would do it for the weak human: he began rubbing the unresponsive thighs to his stretching the anus he wanted to conquer.

Bruce clenched his teeth and grabbed Clark’s wet locks using them as support to heave his torso.

The smell from Bruce’s entrance was so intoxicating, alluring him to cross that mystic entrance that avoided for four torturous months…His fingers clenched stronger the dead thighs as his frantic heartbeat buzzed in his ears…His length was drawn there like the metal to a magnet, like a fly to the fire…Bruce was pulling his hair; Clark smiled: of course, once again he managed to help Bruce overcome his past and moan for more, even though he wouldn’t feel his ministrations in his rectus.

Clark wanted to cry to Superman to stop that madness because he was hurting Bruce.

But then the pulling became stronger and Clark sensed anger; he raised his glimmering eyes, his hands were holding Bruce’s legs up…Bruce’s grim, flashing, angry eyes sent a stone to his chest.

“Not tonight, Clark!” the voice wasn’t too loud but strength and resolution made it pure steel; and the emerald stars in Bruce’s orbs was like molten gems ready to explode. Not only anger was there but also bitterness.

Among the ruckus of chats, laughter and music of the hotel room Clark’s eye caught something that made him feel excitement. He left his Pulitzer on a table and hurried to catch him as he was guiding his wheelchair to the lift.

“Bruce” but Bruce didn’t turn and continued his course to the lift.

Clark easily caught up and stood before him. Their eyes met.

“I didn’t expect to see you here...”

Bruce lolled his head.

“It is a hotel and I had to stay somewhere to attend the LexCorp’s annual board meeting.”

Clark nodded: as a journalist he knew all about that.

“I saw you watching when I received the prize...”

“I heard the fuss and approached...”

Clark smiled and Bruce’s heartbeat elevated before he ordered it to calm in order for Clark not noticing.

“So...you want to tell me that it was random?” he asked smugly.

“Of course not” Bruce wasn’t going to lie.
“I saw your smile before…You need to smile more, Bruce…”

“Mind your own business” he spat.

But Clark was hearing again Bruce’s voice from better days:

“I’ll stand by you throughout this, unless you decide otherwise…”

Superman saw Batman gazing at the sparkling city of Metropolis from the rooftop of LexCorp’s building. On the street the annual party for bidding farewell to the year was taking place.

He knew that Batman would hear the movement of the air and Batman didn’t need more to understand; the Gothamite made to leave but a force gently but unyielding carried and pinned him to the wall.

Batman’s lenses locked with Superman’s blue eyes.

“You banned Superman from Gotham but you act in Metropolis – my city. Double standards?”

Batman yanked his head.

“It’s Gotham’s business” he growled.

Superman knew that Bruce felt the urge to push to escape remembering that night that Superman used him in the most brutal way…

“You know that you shouldn’t wander like this…” Superman whispered to Batman’s artificial ears “it is too dangerous – you may get injured again.”

“Mind your own business” Batman retorted through gritted teeth.

Superman however leaned closer to his face and his lips almost touched Batman’s exposed skin.

“I hate that this armor doesn’t let your body’s perfume off…” his lips came even closer and Batman almost closed his eyes because his body shivered remembering the times Superman had kissed him. “I missed you…and I know you missed me too…otherwise you wouldn’t have come to the ceremony…”

Superman almost captured Batman’s lips which craved to be kissed yet Bruce defeated himself and the Man of Steel twitched a bit looking perplexed into the emotionless lenses and then at his left rib. He smiled: the Blade of Justice was touching his skin ready to cut. He looked again at Batman’s clenched jaw.

“I still have the mark on my upper arm…” he smirked but then turned to Bruce’s face. “We still can be together…Diana won’t object.”

“But I will! Back off!” Batman growled determined and Superman feeling the peak of the dagger pricking his rib relented a bit. “Look elsewhere for a mistress!”

No, Bruce couldn’t forgive him for all these. He was sure that Bruce had given up on him long ago. There was no hope for Earth…
It was way past midnight and the big city vibrated with sounds, multicolored lights and motion – as every other great city that never slept.

The grandiose building of Central City’s National Bank was peaceful, empty of customers and employees waiting for the morning to regain its liveliness. However in the dim night lights that illuminated the vast main hall five figures dressed in black and wearing ski masks slipped heading to the basement where the vaults were situated.

At the corner in a pile the three security guards lay unconscious bound and gagged.

The five shadows ran the stairs to the basement and began their work on the central vault which was their main target. Their movements manifested skill and knowledge so it was a matter of seconds before the rectangular titanium door opened with a clack causing satisfied and greed grins to the robbers.

The one who seemed to be their leader opened the door and looked inside with a greedy shine in his dark eyes. He turned to the others and waved them to go inside.

They were ready to walk to the interior but a whoosh sound swept through the long corridor and before the thugs could register what was happening the two of them were launched to the walls knocked out.

The leader turned immediately his gun at the red blur which was now hammering the other two thugs. However as the two thugs flew through the air to crash in the walls by the blur’s tornado movements, the leader felt a hard kick on his wrist that pushed the gun away.

Before he even uttered his curse the same red leg that had kicked his wrist kicked also his head and then his torso to finally sent him to the vault door opposite the open one.

The blur stopped moving to see the result of his work: a man of average height, slim but muscle bound was revealed. Dressed in a skin tight red uniform with a yellow big lightning across his chest; his head was covered with a red hoodie leaving only his eyes visible. A satisfied grin carved his face seeing the thugs knocked out but then police sirens came from outside and he sped crossing the building in barely a second and passing the police vehicles that were now halting before the bank.

The red blur stopped inside a dark alley. Without a sign of fatigue he just stretched his body. But instantly he frowned, feeling rather than hearing a second presence; that was impossible since nobody was able to follow or even catch him with his eyes. He could run and avoid the presence in the alley but he was curious: only Superman could catch up with him and he was sure this wasn’t he, so he had to see with who he had to do – besides he could lose him at any time.

He turned slowly and his eyes widened.

The presence made a step out of the shadow that covered him and the man in red pursed his lips impressed and flabbergasted.

“Batman in Central City?”

“Flash” the dark creature greeted him in his raspy voice.

“Well, that’s an honor…” Flash said “yet…catch me if you can!”

He sped up vanishing in a second and Batman shook his head.

A big grin was plastered over Flash’s face when he stopped his running on a rooftop overlooking
Central City’s main avenue. He definitely wanted to speak with Batman but first he wanted to test and challenge him. Of course he was sure that the guy from Gotham would be unable to find him yet he was going to locate Batman himself – after all, he could cross the entire city in a minute.

“It’s not the time for games.”

A growl made him literally jump from surprise.

Flash turned on his heels and goggled at Batman.

“How?”

“Rooftops are my element” he answered casually and walked towards the ledge.

Flash shook his head and licked his lips.

“No, I mean…How did you find me? Nobody can catch my speed except Superman.”

Batman wasn’t going to reveal him his secrets neither that he was able to follow him around since his body while running reached a temperature unique not only for humans but also for anything: artificial or not. And once he could trace the Flash’s route it wasn’t that difficult to speed the Tumbler accordingly.

“Things are bad…”

Flash looked at him.

“I suppose…for Batman to leave Gotham and come to find me. Superman does that usually. By the way, Superman told me that it was you that picked me for the operation against the League of Shadows. I was flattered; really…I was following your activity in Gotham and – wow! – not even Superman wanted to mess with that shithole and you managed to clear the city from Falcone and then the world from the League…”

Batman hadn’t time for this.

“It’s about Superman” he cut him abruptly.

Flash understood that he had been bubbling and blinked.

“Yeah…Right…I suppose since he isn’t the one to come. Mmm…he is busy, huh?”

“No, he is captive” his lenses stabbed the young man’s eyes which bulged.

“But how? He is the most powerful being on Earth and he has Diana with him.”

Batman gave a court nod.

“Exactly. She is an impostor; her mission was to seduce Superman into rendering him unable to fight back when taken to her ally.”

Now Flash gaped.

“This is…unbelievable! I fought with them: she…she was saving humans; she…loves Supes.”

Batman straightened his head.
“During the attack at New York neither of them showed up – she dissuaded Superman from coming to aid.”

Flash shook his head: he never liked that.

“Tell me more…Who’s doing this?”

“An alien from the planet Apokolips – he’s called Darkseid and belongs to the race of New Gods. He destroys planets trying to find the necessary energy to activate the Anti Life Equation exterminating life and establishing his order of things. Earth is his newest target and he wanted Superman out of his way to attack.”

Flash frowned.

“Is Superman still alive?”

Batman nodded.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I know!” he spat confidently and Flash didn’t feel like arguing.

“Let’s take them then!” Flash made to go but Batman seized his upper arm.

“We need to be careful. This requires careful organizing and patience.”

Flash rolled his eyes.

“I’m not that good in waiting…”

“You’ll have to…Be ready and vigilant for the right moment.”

Flash pressed his lips and nodded.

“Diana however…maybe she is not an impostor – I mean, I saw her; her powers are real –how do you know she is an impostor? Perhaps she is the Princess of the Amazons and we are screwed.”

Batman’s lenses seemed to shine more.

“She is an impostor” he repeated. “Poison Ivy it’s how she calls herself.”

Flash licked his lips.

“I don’t want to sound…whatever…but how are you so sure?”

Bruce rolled his eyes underneath the cowl.

“Because I found the real Diana!”

“Yes!” Flash made a gesture taken from sports. “Now we’re talking!”

“Be ready for my signal” Batman said calm.

“Look, I want to thank you for trusting me and…I never believed that freaking Batman will speak to me” he looked at the starry sky upturning his palms “you know, up close and personal: you are a
legend after all – something distant and intangible” he lolled his head “so you coming to Central City
to find me it is…”

He turned where Batman stood till then only to be met with air as the Gothamite had disappeared…
Flash sighed.

“I said too much…again” he scratched his head. “Wait…What signal?”
Chapter 82

He downed the handful of pills in one swift motion and drank a big gulp of water from the bottle that till now lay on the seat next to his. He reclined to the back of the driver’s seat and let his head rest on the leather.

The cowl was made to not give much weight yet right now he still felt it like a real burden to his aching head. He could have pulled the cowl off since the Tumbler was in complete stealth mode that made it invisible to any tracing gadgets and he had parked it in an abandoned industrial area outside Central City making sure that nobody was around. Yet he didn’t do it; he just couldn’t afford to let Bruce and his pain come to the fore.

He knew that if he succumbed then it would be difficult to continue; he was so tired and his back ached. Thankfully, he had taken his medication when he left the Manor and the painkillers were really a blessing right now.

Batman took a deep breath, let the air fill his exhausted torso and exhaled slowly. Several times till he mastered control over the pain and fatigue.

Then he opened his eyes; he hadn’t time for rest though the idea of his waiting king sized bed back in the Manor was more than tempting. However there were more important things than his pleasure.

He sat properly and touched the Tumbler’s control panel where all the indications was illuminated with a light blue color; in the big rectangular screen in the center he could see the news from the biggest news’ outlets.

His lips crooked a bit reading the headlights about Wonder Woman’s latest spectacular rescue: a big high res picture of the stunning Ivy posing in the suit of the Amazon Princess was in the midst of the article. Her lips were in a tight determined line yet Batman could see the shine of satisfaction in her eyes as the crowed in the ground was cheering the flying goddess…

Of course…she continued to play the savior of the human kind not only to make people forget about Superman and his absence but also to make her fans fell in despair seeing her joining Darkseid’s army. Neither she nor her allies knew that the real Diana was privy to their fraud and was watching.

Batman was very satisfied that the Princess didn’t hasten to confront and expose the impostor. The truth was that Batman from the first hours he spent with her felt that he could trust that the Amazon would do the right thing even without him explaining the situation or having to make his point across. She was clever and she knew the virtue of patience.

On the other hand Batman noticed a tiny news mention about a woman that was saved when a gang attacked her in Metropolis; the victim and the police didn’t know who stopped the assailants since the woman was in shock during the attack and the culprits were still unconscious.

Batman grinned: Diana might have stayed on the background without attracting much attention yet that didn’t mean that she would have let her joints get rusty… The mention was in so small letters that nobody else would notice.

Then he touched some points in the screen and a flood of data came over: it was from Gotham’s MCU and they concerned Isaac, the hacker that had broadcast the video with Falcone’s abusing Bruce Wayne. Batman had promised that he would find who implicated Isaac and Wizze to this because the culprit was responsible for their deaths at Joker’s hands.
He believed that the best way to reach that person was by following the strings from the known people of the case and there were three: Isaac, Wizze and Ewan Ferguson the late attorney of Roth Pielser: the man for whom Falcone had shot that video… Pielser had told that the auction and the sale were done through his lawyer since he was in prison.

What the three of them had in common? They were dead. So there was no chance to interrogate them into getting some insight. However their history and activity was still there and he had to rely on that to find how the mastermind approached them and therefore his identity. He didn’t think that the president of GTV had something that would lead to the mastermind: his channel was just picked to be hacked. The same went for Pielser: it would be stupid of the mastermind to go to the prison to meet the pedophile and impractical.

Take Isaac first. The mastermind must have had some knowledge about Isaac’s skills in hacking which was intriguing and potentially useful since the youth had no prior arrests for his activity. The culprit must have had some kind of interaction with the man which led him to find out his special skills.

The envelope that contained the CD with the video didn’t have any DNA traces according to the police’s report and the address was typed so there was no handwriting for analysis. So the only way to identify the culprit was to search Isaac’s acquaintances or contacts.

Batman touched the screen and a new window opened with photos of students of Gotham’s university who had some relationship with Isaac; superficial, nothing so close that could be classified as friendship or romantic affair. The youth was a loner filling the time between his classes and lab hours – he was a brilliant student according to his marks and his professor’s testimonies – with working on his computer. After the revelation that he was the one who broadcast the video the Cyber crime unit managed to identify his traces in several cases of hacking that till then had remained unsolved.

So the one who had the CD had discovered his skills before the police did. Perhaps some of his hacking victims who possessed the know-how to trace the hacker…He scanned through the long list of the individuals and companies or banks Isaac had hacked and immediately something stood out: LexLabs.

Batman frowned: Luthor hated Bruce Wayne more than enough to do this and he had connection with Falcone so that he could have found about the existence of that video. Also, Luthor had the know-how to locate the hacker and expose him which he didn’t…

It could be Luthor but Batman wasn’t convinced. Luthor was in jail the time the auction took place: he couldn’t know. Not to mention that he had other things more urgent to engage his mind – one of them the pressing and demanding Mannheim. And there was the mind control from Darkseid who certainly wouldn’t let anything distract Luthor from building his machine.

He rubbed his chin and opened the window about Ferguson touching the link on the screen. He died in a car accident one month before the broadcasting. He had many shady clients so his ‘accident’ could have been the work of anyone. The lawyer’s shady partnerships made him an expert with dark net where after Pielser’s request he organized an auction to sell to the highest bidder Falcone’s video.

The announcement was also in police’s file of the case:

“Watch Bruce Wayne lose his virginity…”

A hot iron spear pierced his skull and nausea slapped his stomach; he closed that window and continued with the lawyer’s background.
Ferguson lived alone; he was married once but his wife suffered a severe stroke that left her quadriplegic and her traces were lost from then. They weren’t divorced but there was no mention of the couple being somehow together either.

Batman was sure that there was something that must connect those Isaac and Ferguson; a person who could know both even though the two were so far physically and in matters of interests and lives. If he had the time he would have gone to investigate both Ferguson and Isaac’s residences; the first lived in his own house and the second’s apartment was held by the police so that no new renter would stay.

He pressed his lips…If that storm passed and Darkseid’s threat was neutralized then he would do that but till then he had to limit his research to information stored in archives and logs of any form.

The beep for an incoming call didn’t startle him; he had requested this dial and was waiting for it.

“Jor El” he greeted when the AI’s hologram face appeared on the screen.

“Batman, you requested to talk to me.”

Batman nodded.

“I want to ask you to implement the Fortress’ power in the battle against Darkseid” he said flatly, Bruce’s usual shyness left out. “Also, I wonder if you have a way to create something that would give the impression of Kal El’s DNA.”

Jor El’s calm face was carved from a subtle smile registering the transmission from firm but shy Bruce to the blunter Batman.

“The Fortress’ existence is tied with Superman’s wellbeing and his wellbeing is inseparable from the planet’s survival. So it goes without saying that you can count on the Fortress’ resources to help you to your fight. Also, I can create that hologram you ask.”

Batman set his jaw.

“Thank you, Jor El” he said respectful.

“You don’t need to thank me. You were the one who first suspected Kal El’s condition and thanks to you I had the opportunity to confirm that.”

Batman shook his head pressing his lips.

“In the message I left you I informed you that Kal El was taken so I didn’t manage anything – I failed to protect him.”

Jor El smiled with a confident way that puzzled Bruce.

“But your concern for him was that gave us the knowledge about the scheme that was developing around him and thanks to you we know what happened to him and who is responsible so he has the chance to be saved. Otherwise Kal El would have been doomed as the entire planet.”

Batman couldn’t share Jor El’s feelings.

“My son is blessed he has you protecting him; I’m certain that you will find and save him, Batman” he grinned. “I’m honored to be on your side at the time of battle…I wish I could do this not only from afar but also in presence.”
Batman pressed his lips in a tight line.

“I’ll feel your presence on my side all the time, Jor El.”

The Kryptonian inclined his head and their dial ended.

Batman estimated that it was almost the time if what he was told was true. A red light lit in the control panel indicating a presence approaching from the sky; a presence that obviously didn’t intend to hide from him. Then it was true.

“You have just to think my name and I’ll come.”

His body felt like burning; sweat was running abundantly under his sticky suit. It was like he was inside an oven with the red light barbecuing him slowly… making the nausea a flood that soared his insides from his stomach to his head. His head was so heavy that if he had the power he would have caught it from his neck. He hardly breathed the mimic of air that left him desperately wanting the real thing…

Water…It was the first time he wished so much for that life giving liquid that till now wasn’t too important for him. He understood humans’ need and his now was even more torturing.

He didn’t have the strength to raise his head from his chest or open his eyes…or clench his fists to try to fight the pain. He could only grunt when the constant piercing pain sometimes reached unbelievable peaks making the unbearable even worse…

“I wish some day you feel the same pain you inflicted to that honorable soul!”

Superman frowned hearing that voice coming from the depths of his mind and it didn’t take a second before he saw the face that went with the voice. A sturdy, tall man with golden long hair and blue eyes; his face was distorted in anger. Thor was floating in front of him with Mjolnir still emanating sparkles mirroring the god’s feelings.

A shudder ran Superman’s spine realizing the meaning.

“How could you, Superman?”

“I…” Clark tried to answer to that accusing voice that although came from Thor’s lips seemed like coming from his own consciousness.

But he realized that Thor couldn’t hear his regretting voice; instead he saw a powerful Man of Steel rolling his eyes and smirking.

“An Asgardian god must have better things to engage himself than my sexual life” he cocked an eyebrow. “Unless my sexual life affects you…” he hissed.

“Not only you were giving Hell to Bruce but also you cheated him in that gross way” Thor spat and then chuckled. “It is ridiculous that you made a scene accusing Bruce of having an affair with me when you were the one who was doing that: very evil…” he shook his head in disappointment.

“You’re falling from your moral pedestal, Superman.”

Superman fisted his hand.

“Because I ended my relationship with Bruce? Because I found my true love? Your sucking up to
Bruce makes you lose your grip, Thor” he hissed “you better stay at Asgard and…” he narrowed his eyes “why not taking Bruce there to devour him?” he grinned. “I know you want it.”

Thor’s lips trembled in anger and disgust.

“Is this what you were planning to do with Bruce?” Superman’s stare fell and Thor nodded. “You didn’t end your relationship as a true man would do realizing that he had feelings for a third person; instead you treated Bruce cruelly. A man in recovery, vulnerable due to his impairment; you made his life a Hell accusing him of adultery while you were preparing to cheat him…”

“I wasn’t preparing…”

But Thor didn’t let him continue.

“I doubt you’d have told Bruce about your affair with Wonder Woman if he hadn’t seen you…and you’d have continued fooling him. He is a great man; he didn’t deserve to be treated like this, Superman. You broke his heart, a heart that was already wounded – that’s a deed of a lesser man.”

Clark gulped the drops of hot dry saliva that had remained in his paper like mouth: a lesser man, indeed.

The Man of Steel snorted.

“We both know who he really is…and he isn’t exactly the Little Red Riding Hood who needs your protection.”

Thor’s eyes sparkled.

“Exactly because we know who he is and you know better than me what he’s been through, you should have been more careful with the heart he gave you and not rip it in pieces.”

Superman shook his head and rolled his eyes chuckling.

“You should thank me instead of berating me because what happened suits you perfectly…” Thor frowned puzzled. “I know you desire him: you fell for him since that day in Mt. Marcy, when Bagdana stripped him and you saw his body naked– I bet the way the demon handled his naked body fascinated you and fired your interest in the mortal” Thor was staring at him disgusted. “Well” Superman made a wide gesture “I cleared the path for you: poor Bruce would need your powerful shoulder to cry on and when his head leans on you it won’t be difficult to you to get access to other more tantalizing parts of his body.”

“You don’t realize in the least what have you done, don’t you? You shattered Bruce’s heart and now to save the last remnants of his tender heart he built an impenetrable wall not allowing himself to love again.”

His chest was pressed from an insufferable weight and then his heart was stabbed with a Kryptonite knife. He had done that…

The door at the driver’s side rose for Batman to step outside. The armor led his feet to touch the ground as his mind ordered and then he stood to meet Thor who just landed.

Suddenly, his vision became blurred and the dusty ground seemed to come at him; he wasn’t taking any info from his legs but he knew he was falling and there was nothing he could do to prevent that.
The ground returned to its right place and he was upright again; through the buzz of his ears he had heard the rushing movement towards him and now he felt two strong hands clenching his forearms supporting him.

He raised his lenses to meet Thor’s blue eyes that were filled with worry. Batman straightened his body and politely but resolutely took his arms away.

“Thank you” he said.

“Are you alright?” Thor asked keeping his hands close to Batman’s ready to catch him.

“Fine. I tripped.”

Thor realizing Bruce’s uneasiness withdrew his hands. He frowned.

“I don’t think you’re fine. You may not be wounded but you’re exhausted. You should be resting” he said with a warm voice but Batman’s expression was determined. “I can take you back home.”

“I wouldn’t call an Asgardian god for something that the Tumbler can do – I know that you have more important things that demand your attention.”

Thor tried to read the emotionless lenses and the set jaw he could see.

“Nothing is more important than you. I think that you should get back and have your rest.”

Batman crooked his mouth.

“We, humans, are more resilient than gods give us credit.”

Thor pressed his lips.

“Yes, but you have limits…and I don’t want you to break those limits.”

Batman pressed his lips.

“The planet is threatened; I can’t stay afar and watch.”

Thor shook his head.

“You unveiled their plan and notified us for the danger; you gave us inside to their power granting us the chance to build our defense. You found Themyscirra and the real Diana persuading her to be on our side. Now you can protect yourself and let us do the work for a change.”

Batman smirked.

“That’s the diplomatic way to say that you, gods and super powered heroes don’t need me?”

Thor’s face became stony and his eyes perfectly still. He inhaled.

“We need you more than you can imagine…” he said in a dead serious voice that made Bruce cringe with what hinted; Thor licked his dry lips and gulped realizing how his words had upset his friend.

“I must go to Asgard” Batman continued without replying anything to what Thor said.

Thor’s eyes widened; that was something he never expected to hear.

“What? I mean you know that I guarantee that Asgard will help Earth.”
Batman nodded.

“I know and I appreciate that. But I need you to take me there.”

Thor nodded.

“May I ask the reason?”

“You’re entitled to this. I want to speak with Loki.”

Now Thor’s eyes bulged and then narrowed under his knitted eyebrows.

“Loki? Why? This is…”

But Batman didn’t have the luxury and the time to argue that.

“I need him on our side.”

Thor laughed and shook his head.

“You forgot what he did to…Bruce Wayne? Because of him Joker ran loose; he killed several people and then Loki helped him kidnap and torment Bruce. How can you rely on his help?” he sighed. “I always defended him; I always wanted to believe in him but after what he did to…Bruce Wayne” he shook his head. “No more” he huffed. “I…I loathe him.”

Batman set his jaw. He knew that nobody was watching or listening to them so he could speak freely.

“He did the things you say but thanks to his involvement I found out that Bagdana was the Arrow.”

Thor even though he was the god of thunders felt as if he was hit by one.

“Bagdana? No way… I saw him incarcerated in Tartarus…”

Batman crooked his mouth.

“He knew that I’d ask you to look for him and he tricked us. Remember that Loki’s palace couldn’t be found by a mere god or by a mere mortal? When Dr. Strange found his palace the Arrow was always there ready to kill Loki with a golden arrow…”

Thor gaped as he remembered the legends he had heard in Asgard for the archer who killed gods with his golden arrows: the god, the demon called Bagdana.

“The left handed archer” Batman nodded. “This information led me to realize the whole scheme because the Arrow is Oliver Queen the one who was saved by Princess Diana: she supposedly came to our world to accompany and protect Oliver Queen. I was already suspecting that she was a fake yet this revelation made everything clear. How she could manifest the legendary powers; how her feromones along with Bagdana’s enchantments put Superman under control.”

Thor was impressed yet Batman continued.

“Loki tried to take me away from Joker but the jester caught up with him and rendered him weak: Joker almost killed him.”

Thor crossed his arm on the chest and shook his head. He didn’t know all these however:
“That makes you believe he will help? How can you trust that he wouldn’t stab us in the back and join Darkseid? I know you like to give a second chance to people but…”

Batman raised his palm.

“Can you take me to him?” he inquired abruptly.

Thor huffed with the man’s tenacity.

“You need Odin’s approval; the jail is under his control.”

“Fine” Batman replied unfazed and locked eyes with the god. “Take me to him.”

Thor smiled with his friend’s resolution in the prospect of having to face the most powerful god of Asgard. There was no point in trying to dissuade him. He stretched his hand and Batman looked at him.

“I need to hold you in order for you to be transferred along with me.”

Bruce was reminded of the Harry Potter movies he had watched in Tony’s house in Malibu: it was so odd that their reality had blended with what they considered just imagination.

Batman grabbed Thor’s forearm.

“This isn’t you, Clark; you know that I’m not enjoying this…”

Bruce’s voice was pressed: he had managed to maintain his tranquility though his face was pressed to the mattress and…

“No!” Clark yelled and shut his memory before showing him the rest of that night.

However he couldn’t stop a flash cracking his mind: two sapphire – emerald eyes filled with sadness behind the strength and determination.

“May I call you Star? Your eyes are like star sapphires” Superman’s voice said shyly but it echoed from so far that it hardly was heard.

The same eyes that were cast fearful on the frozen, snow covered ground rose slowly to look at Superman shyly; a faint smile caressed Bruce’s bruised face.

“I’ve been called worse…”

Superman’s heart relished relieved on the sparkle of happiness in those melancholic eyes; remembering the relief he had felt that day. The bliss of being at last able to approach the youth who had won his heart.

“She is my Star!”

Clark’s miserable existence cried hearing his own voice this time filled with confidence and stupid happiness addressing the woman he was holding in his arms wanting everyone to know how he felt…

He shook his head mouthing ‘no’ – he couldn’t have been so stupid…so cruel… Because he was sure that Bruce had seen…now, after so many months Superman realized that it was obvious in
Bruce’s eyes that day in that Metropolis’ hotel.

“So you’re not carrying a Kryptonite dagger like Stark to stab me?”

Catwoman shook her head and then stabbed him with something green that wasn’t Kryptonite but was more acid: her emerald eyes.

“I could…and it’d be a small punishment for you” her eyes were lost for a moment and then she gritted her teeth. “But you don’t worth it…” she said curling her lips in disgust.

Superman frowned; his eidetic memory played before his mind’s eyes that night in Gotham that Selina shot Chill killing him.

“Chill was worthy and I’m not?” he demanded chuckling but he felt insulted being considered lower than that monster.

Catwoman yanked her head rolling her eyes.

“You wonder? Are you THAT stupid? You’re worse than Chill, Superman! He was torturing Bruce for all his life but unlike you he didn’t make him open his heart only to butcher that precious heart!” she narrowed her wild eyes. “You’re more brutal than Chill because he never gave Bruce happiness only to push him to the abyss afterwards!”

Superman’s face became pale and his eyebrows knitted together.

“How is he?” he asked in a throaty voice.

Catwoman snorted.

“You ask if the wounds you inflicted on him after he trusted you with his body have healed?”

He didn’t believe that Bruce would have told to anyone, even to someone like Selina who was more than a sister to him.

She regarded him appalled and pursed her lips.

“No, he didn’t tell me anything – yeah, it’s that easy to figure what you’re thinking; he’s still protecting you…But I know when Bruce is in pain: I can read his eyes, his face, even though he knows how to pretend. You should be ashamed of yourself!” she lolled her head on the side and pointed her hand to him cocking an eyebrow. “Look whom people consider their protector!” she let her arm fall and slapped her thigh “I don’t want to waste even my saliva to spit your face!”

Selina was so right: he wasn’t worthy even to be spat.

“I wish some day you feel the same pain you inflicted to that honorable soul!”

Thor’s enraged, disgusted voice filled his cell.

“You’re worse than Chill, Superman!”

Selina’s saliva that never came made the red light burn him and the Kryptonite chains melt his flesh…

He was… He was worse than that monster and what Darkseid was doing to him was only a small punishment: he couldn’t tolerate himself.
Odin’s unique eye twiched impressed for a second before taking its usual strictness seeing Batman imposingly crossing the long, wide marble isle to his throne. There were men and women – all of them esteemed Asgardians - situated in the room who gazed at the stranger with animosity and shock that was turned into outrage when they registered Thor coming behind him; it was obvious that the god of thunders had brought him here.

“Leave us!” the elder god order in his rough voice.

His eye passed the mortal to stab his son.

“Why did you bring him here?”

“Great Odin it was an urgent matter” Thor replied bringing his fist to his heart.

“I asked him to” Batman replied. “Earth is in great danger and I needed to see you.”

Odin frowned.

“My son is enough guaranty of my help to your planet.”

Batman understood Odin’s anger but frankly he didn’t have the time to consider that.

“I know and I’m grateful for your generosity and your patience to tolerate my presence here but there is something else.”

Odin snorted.

“Tolerate? I don’t have any tolerance!”

Thor cast a sideways glance at the mortal to see his reaction to Odin’s really intimidating anger yet Batman yanked his head setting his jaw.

“Then you’d want to get rid of me as soon as possible.”

Thor was amused by the man’s unfazed stance but hold his chuckle.

Odin touched his back on his high, engraved throne and regarded the Batman in front of him.

“I can get rid of you by exterminating your insulting existence” he said quietly but more threatening than before.

Batman nodded.

“You can but you didn’t because you know that I wouldn’t ‘insult’ you with my presence if it wasn’t really important. And you want to know what this is.”

Odin stayed silent for a few seconds caressing his white beard.

“What do you want?”

“To speak to Loki.”

Now Odin met his son’s eyes and stood determined.

“No way, mortal. You were permitted to my palace but it stops here: Asgard’s business is not your
Yet Batman yanked his face backwards and stabbed Odin with his blazing eyes that suddenly weren’t hidden from the lenses that Batman had just deactivated; Odin frowned from the power and determination that gaze hold.

“I won’t go anywhere! You have my respect and appreciation for your willingness to help Earth and for bearing with me to your palace but I won’t leave till I see Loki.”

“That’s preposterous!” the elder god yelled and Thor felt like the entire place shook.

Yet Batman remained unfazed.

“Your audacity is outrageous, Bat! You’re in no position to speak like this!”

“You can kill me if you want but I’m here for my fellow humans and I won’t stop trying till I manage to save them or I’m not able to fight anymore… But I know that you want Darkseid to be defeated as much as I do and you deep inside understand that it isn’t audacity or disrespect that drive my behavior.”

Thor looked at his father; his expression saying that he was with the human. Odin cast a glimpse at the blue and green planet outside his arch shaped windows and sat at his throne.

“Do you expect from Loki to help your cause, Bruce Wayne” he used on purpose his true name meeting the human’s clear, beautiful eyes that sparkled with willpower. “You forget what he did to you?” he lolled his head on the side. “You really believe that Loki will be of help to your cause? A being so villain and petty that used his powers to attack a disabled human and surrender him to a foul creature who knew that was going to torture him?”

Batman didn’t seem influenced from the use of his real name.

“Loki did this but he also tried to help me when he realized what Joker was doing to me… His deeds were monstrous yet they helped me find the truth about Darkseid; I believe that if you give Loki his powers back this time he will contribute to save Earth.”

Odin’s unique eye became blank in deep thought.

“I’m sure” Batman continued “that you want your son to redeem himself and prove that deep insight never betrayed your trust. Give him the chance to do it.”

Thor made a step forward.

“When I was a misguided, arrogant man you were right to punish me but then you gave me a second chance granting me my powers back, father. Loki deserves a second chance too – especially, if he is going to help us bring down Darkseid.”

Thor’s eyes met Bruce’s and the human gave him a tight-lips smile.

Odin remained skeptical.

“Be it. If you believe that that being can help you, be my guest” he shook his head. “I believed in him; I raised him like my own son and look what he did” he pressed his lips. “He is rotten: he wouldn’t care about your cause – he won’t even accept to help.”

“If he does, Odin, are you willing to give him his powers?” Batman asked. “Loki and his unique
skills are crucial to our battle.”

Odin snorted and cocked an eyebrow.

“Crucial?”

Batman nodded.

“Fine then. I you manage to make him align himself with your cause I’ll return him his powers…but my eye will be always on him because he proved that he is a sneaky creature.”

Batman gave him a court nod.

“I’m grateful, Odin” he brought his fist to his heart and turned retreated from the hall.

Thor made to follow him but heard his father descending the steps to his throne and stopped sensing that he wanted to talk to him. The younger god turned to his father.

“I can see why you are so…” he grinned “devoted to this mortal. This man has inside him such fire that can blind even the god of thunders…”

“I deeply respect Bruce, father; I’m delighted you understand.”

Thor felt his cheeks reddening and just nodded, exchanging a last gaze with his father before leaving the room.

“DONUTS?!”

The empty, emotionless eyes he had seen in the Pulitzer party in that hotel of Metropolis were now filled with child-like enthusiasm, carelessness and bliss. Clark couldn’t stop a smile grazing his hot face even though his heart was sank in misery and guilt …

Clark couldn’t expect such enthusiasm for some humble donuts.

“Well, there’s a bakery in Metropolis that makes the freshest and most delicious donuts in the States: I bought them right when Ms. Rose took them out of the oven.”

But Bruce had already grabbed one and began gulping greedily.

“Don’t tell me Ms. Rose sells donuts to Superman?” Bruce mumbled chewing. “Imagine the huge advertisement for her!”

“I didn’t think of that…” Clark answered chuckling. “It would have given me free donuts for life…But only poor Mr. Kent is her customer! There’s milk too.”

Clark just goggled mesmerized.

“You really missed donuts, huh?”

Bruce halted his greed seeing that Clark wasn’t eating.

“You won’t eat?”

Clark smiled.
“I’m getting my fill…” he answered the meaning clear.

Clark brushed Bruce’s hair.

“You trusted me” he said solemnly. “You let me touch you even though I had attacked you. Even now I don’t feel worthy of your trust or your gift… Of your body on mine…”

But Bruce interrupted him claiming passionately his lips, answering that way to Clark’s guilt. And Clark melted letting Bruce do as he wanted with his lips, he just savoring the sensations.

When Bruce freed his mouth Clark sighed.

“If you don’t start eating, there won’t be anything left for you…” Bruce warned taking another donut filled with vanilla cream and covered with white chocolate; he moaned from delight and Clark felt tears from glee.

“Are you happy?” Clark’s eyes flickered between hope and fear.

Bruce lowered his eyes and Clark’s breath was caught in his chest.

“It’s difficult for me to say: what happiness is…” he chuckled. “After so many years I forgot how it is…Yet I think that what I’m feeling now…is happiness… I feel…free, like flying” he locked eyes with Clark who was paralyzed and turned his head to let him breathe.

He took another donut and smiled to the Man of Steel.

“If you don’t start eating, you’re going to starve…”

But Clark grinned elated.

“Oh! I’m not going to be hungry ever again…” I’m filled with gorgeous images - images of you…”

Indeed, even now he licked his dry, torn lips and his mouth filled with the taste of donut mixed with the taste from Bruce’s lips…that was heaven…

Ms. Rose smiled relieved.

“Now, let’s get your order…” she opened the window display and the delicious smell of the store became heavier, really mouth salivating. “Mmm…let’s see: ‘Prince’s donuts’ as usual?”

Ms. Rose had named that flavor ‘the Prince’s donuts’ out of a whim and she was so right! But today there was no need for Prince’s donuts…

“No, Ms. Rose…Just my usual…”

No, please…he begged his memory. No more…

“Don’t stop smiling, Star… You lighten my world…”

Bruce’s eyes flashed.

“How can darkness bring light to the sun’s life?”
Superman closed his eyes and caressed Bruce’s cheekbone.

“You’re the meaning of my life; I love you from the first time I laid eyes on you. I still jolt in my sleep having nightmares that you died that damn night…”

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“We’re here for swimming…” he snapped releasing Bruce’s lips and the younger man looked him exasperated.

“But I’m not wearing my swim trunks!”

Clark tilted his head on the side regarding wickedly Bruce’s body, his eyebrow arched.

“Actually… I was counting on that…”

He pushed the cardigan off of Bruce’s shoulders and moved to strip him from the rest of his clothes but Bruce twitched causing Clark’s squinting.

“Not in front of Hero…”

Clark chuckled even in his pitiful state remembering how he bribed the kitten with a container with baked salmon.

“Now” he had inhaled deeply “about that swimming…”

And in a second both Bruce and himself were bare naked: Clark took in Bruce’s impressed stare on Superman’s broad chest with the bulked pectorals that were covered with raven hair: Bruce had seen him naked again but every time was as impressed as the first. Clark blushed and beamed because he was thrilled that Bruce longed for him.

“You like what you see?” he smiled and caressed the pink shade over Bruce’s cheekbones.

Bruce locked eyes with him and smiled shyly.

“You’re perfect…”

Clark cupped his cheeks and claimed Bruce’s lips sucking as if finding water after days in the desert and caressing with his tongue the younger man’s cavity. Without unlocking their lips he lifted gently Bruce in bridal style and brought both of them in the water, he walked, his feet sinking in the soft sand and reached the point where the waters deepened with their light emerald color becoming sapphire blue. He tested first the water’s temperature because even if he had scanned it beforehand he wanted to be sure before putting Bruce in. He knew how sensitive he was.

Bruce held Clark’s upper arms and released them as the Man of Steel lowered him slowly flat in the golden-orange hued waters that his upper body sensed that were pleasantly warm. His hands immediately stretched over his head to swim but Clark was holding gently his back with one hand while the other touched the younger man’s chest.

Bruce looked at him.

“Just relax, Star” he used his hand to stretch Bruce’s legs and held his body flat on the water’s surface.

“Easy for you to say…” Bruce snorted and moved his arms gently in the water to stay afloat but Clark touched his face and slowly lowered it more for the water to rinse his hair and reach his ears.
He then smiled reassuringly to Bruce who kept his stare on his crystal blue eyes.

“You trust me, right? Close your eyes and focus on the sound of the sea…”

Bruce huffed.

“Do I have a choice?”

Clark chuckled.

“You’re Bruce Wayne, Batman: you always have a choice and the means to assert it but…” he kissed softly the place where Bruce’s heart beat so pleasantly strong “I think that you will consent…”

Clark’s lips on his flesh sent shivers in the healthy part of his spine and he closed his eyes though Clark felt still the tension in his body. Bruce breathed the way Clark knew that it was a relaxation technique.

Clark couldn’t stop himself with Bruce teasing him like this; playfully, carefree. He wrapped his hands around his armpits, lifted him and kissed roaming his abdominals as the salty sea water ran down. He had his eyes closed devouring the sensation of the wet taut flesh and the sound of Bruce’s heartbeat and giggles.

“So you can’t handle tickling, huh? Smart ass?” he growled unwilling to part with Bruce’s flesh. He had almost lost the man and that had left a tight feeling inside him that he fought all the time to ease.

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“So much for your bribe” Bruce snorted “Hero wants to come to us…”

The black and white kitten stood right where the wave splashed the shore and stared at them. Clark smirked.

“But cats hate water!”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“However, this cat fights it…”

Hero ran backwards when the waves hit the shore but instantly as the waters ebbed chased them moving his paw aggressively. Only to retreat hastily when the wave came back at him to charge again as the wave withdrew.

Clark watched Bruce’s eyes fill with love and warmth as he laughed with his kitten’s doings. Bruce realized and stopped abruptly stilling his eyes on Clark’s solemn ones.

“Promise me that you won’t stop laughing like this…” Clark sighed.

Bruce tilted his head on the side and blinked.

“If I laugh like this all the time, I’d be facetious…”

“No, you’ll be happy…” he touched feathery the wet locks that had stuck on Bruce’s eyes framing them; he leaned and captured the younger man’s lips almost aggressively.

The bliss, the happiness, the fulfillment of that moment made his aching body find relief and his heart
felt light again.

“*You doomed everyone who would truly love Bruce and you took from him the chance to find the happiness life owes to him! How can you be so cruel?*”

Clark stopped breathing and frankly that would have been the best for him: fainting or dying not thinking anymore of the damage he did to Bruce. The happiness evaporated like his body was slowly inside that cell…

“You’re preposterous! A scum! You’re a complete asshole! Few months ago you were melting for Bruce’s love and whined about his refusal to open up to you; you were complaining because he thought that your feelings weren’t true and when he accepted your love you betrayed him with the first chance! Do you realize what you have done to him? He isn’t going to open his heart to anyone again! You like that, don’t you? You enjoy the hurt you caused, you miserable scum! You like the idea of Bruce not finding the happiness with anyone else! Selfish bastard!”

Lois’ enraged voice sounded exactly as his conscience.

“Bruce needs you!” she sounded really worried and angry.

Clark shook his head.

“He doesn’t: the Avengers are guarding him and Thor…” he smirked. “I bet Thor tracks his vitals all the time.”

“Like you did?” she remarked snidely. “You can’t be sure, Clark: how can you gamble his life?”

“Superman is not welcomed in Gotham: the city and Bruce have their protectors. It’s over!” he murmured and smirked. “You want me to go there in hopes of reconciling with him but that won’t happen, Lois. You have to accept it!”

Lois’ eyes flashed and her lips stretched in wrath.

“NO, I don’t want you there for reconciliation because you’re not worthy of Bruce! Asshole!” she spat and returned furious inside.

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“Are you crazy? Why you didn’t go to New York? People died, farm boy! People who would have been with their families now if you had helped

Clark crooked his mouth and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You don’t understand, Lois; after all, you always respect only your own view of things.”

“What?” the woman was enraged. “MY VIEW OF THINGS?! And what should I have understood other than you turning your fuckin’ ass to innocents screaming for help?!”

“Avengers didn’t ask for my help, Lois! If they wanted me there; if they did care about people they would have called me; but they believed arrogantly that they could make it by themselves – so I’m alright with my decision: that will teach them some humility. You really can see the devious politics of them?”

Lois huffed and rattled her teeth.

“Are you nuts?! Or are you high? You really expected an official invitation?” she laughed but her
wrath was such that the laughter was cut sharply. “I bet Flash didn’t wait to be invited…This wasn’t a reception, farm boy: this was an emergency!” she fumed. “Remember when Stark, the arrogant, air head tycoon came to your aid at Metropolis’ attack? You had invited him?””

“You’re not yourself, Clark: the man I knew would never have ignored calls for help even to his own death…You’re ruining yourself, farm boy…”

And then another voice filled his mind bringing sweet warmth and more sadness. The voice that filled his happy childhood- his innocence.

“Bollocks!” the old lady shouted and Clark was stunned because he had never heard her like this before. “Your father’s and my greatest fear was that your unique powers would eventually ruin our sweet, good hearted boy: during his last moments, Jonathan asked me to always protect you from the wrong choices; from being corrupted. And I failed!”

“While you were with Bruce you were helping everyone; you were shining like a true sun…now… now you hide the light in you: the light that you permit being little by little put out…I wish I was stronger and better to have managed to protect you…to not lose my only son.”

His Ma loved so much Bruce and she was right.

“Even Superman went awry…”

“The only one that is losing his path is you, Clark.!

“I want us to be friends, Lois.”

“My friend is lost…”

He heard again New Yorkers speaking about his absence during their need; expressing their sadness.

Superman gathered the few drops of courage he had and yanked his head only to be attacked by an aggressive wave of excruciating pain.

He had betrayed everyone that loved him; he caused his loved ones pain; he let innocent people die…

They were right: Clark had died, Superman had died…Nobody would ever care about his fate and they were right to do so. He was alone because he chose that.

“I’ll stand to your side throughout this, unless you decide otherwise…”

Bruce wore under his armor a jean and a long sleeved T-shirt because he was certain that Odin would let him speak to Loki – there was no other option. He wasn’t going to speak to Loki as Batman.

They couldn’t bring his wheelchair along so the only way was Thor holding him in his arms. Bruce always felt uncomfortable when someone was holding him like that except if it was Tony or…But he could tell that Thor had no problem with that.
“Thank you” he said to him.

“Don’t mention it” Thor answered.

Loki’s cell was in a tall, slim tower without any embellishments; just dark blue steep granite. Thor crossed a dark, narrow corridor drenched in darkness that only Mjolnir’s blue light illuminated. He stopped in front of a black door without window or hinges.

Thor didn’t have to do anything before sounds like huge padlocks being unlocked echoed through the corridor and the door opened; he walked inside.

Loki frowned hearing the invisible padlocks of his cell’s door unlocking and his eyes widened seeing his visitors.

“The honey moon suite is in the next building!” he uttered chuckling. “So you decided to make it formal? It was about time! I was shipping you ages ago!”

Thor stared at Bruce and then turned to his brother.

“Bruce wanted to see you.”

Loki looked at Bruce not changing his position; he was sitting cross legged on the stony floor of his small, empty cell.

“Oh! The sun wanted to enlighten my humble new residence!”

“Can you leave us?” Bruce asked Thor and the blond placed him carefully on the only thing in the cell: a square rock.

“If he attempts anything…”

“He won’t…” Bruce mumbled quietly.

Loki cackled and Thor left.

“Are you paying back my visits to your dungeon?” he asked when they were left alone.

Bruce wanted to be fast.

“I’m here to ask you something, Loki.”

“Asking? From me? Look at me, babe: I’m in a dungeon, without my powers and though I’m not chained” he lowered his voice to a whisper “big, bad Odin has spells in the space not allowing me to do much. Actually, I think that chains would be better… I have a soft spot for bondage…”

Bruce shook his head.

“You can be outside this dungeon and get your powers back.”

Loki tilted his head to the side and looked Bruce slyly behind his raven hair.

“Once I could take any form I wanted…mmm…I wonder…maybe someone is making fun of me taking the form of little Bruce?”

Bruce huffed.
“No. I’m Bruce Wayne and I came here to ask your help. Earth is in great danger, Loki.”

The mischievous god raised his palms in surrender.

“I didn’t do it this time.”

“Yes but this time you can help so this threat is defeated.”

Loki arched an eyebrow and regarded Bruce twitching his mouth in disbelief.

“Tony told me that an alien called Darkseid is ready to launch an attack on Earth. He is really powerful, a New God and has captured Superman; Princess Diana was a fake, an ally of his set to trap Superman. Darkseid will erase Earth and slaughter humans.”

“Wow! And where I come in this?”

“You can help in this fight. You created that gas that weakens super powered beings; you can take any form you want and you can mind control the others.”

Loki pouted.

“And not only these… Stark knows about you being here? Because last time I saw him he almost killed me.”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“No, he doesn’t.”

Loki yanked his head and laughed.

“Then it is your initiative with my dear brother? And why you think I would accept to help; I might not care about humans or Earth: have you thought of that? Not to mention that this Darkshit you say might eat me for breakfast.”

“You are more than Darkseid’s breakfast. You possess great power.”

Loki groomed his hair with his hands.

“Possessed.”

“If you’re willing to help Odin will set you free and give you back your powers” Bruce said determined and Loki frowned.

“Oh, boy! You spoke to big ol’ Odin – wow! You’re more than it meets the eye, huh, kid?”

Bruce gulped.

“No, I’m just scared…”

Loki stared at the human who was pale like that time he had found Joker ready to rape him in the cell of his tower. Well, he had tried to help that human then yet…

“And why do you think I’d care about Earth? I attacked the planet.”

“I think that you are capable of great things, Loki – good things. And I know that deep inside you’re not that evil. When Darkseid’s green creatures attacked me you protected me; when Joker tried to…
use me, you stopped him and dressed me ready to move me to a warm, safe place, remember? If you
don’t remember I do… You can prove to anyone that you’re more than they think.”

Loki noticed the detail about Darkseid ordering that attack against Bruce in the island.

“So Darkshit has you on his target?”

Bruce didn’t expect to hear that and licked his lips.

“I…I don’t know. But the important thing is that he won’t stop in Earth: he wants to bring the entire
universe to its knees and establish his order of things.”

Loki rolled his eyes.

“Like a James Bond villain: no originality” he tsked and narrowed his eyes. “Why doing it to prove
anything? I don’t care what the Asgardian losers think about me!”

Bruce locked eyes with the raven haired god.

“Even better!” he said slyly. “Do it for the fun of humiliating an arrogant giant blue God who thinks
that he is superior to everyone!”

Loki smirked and his eyes shone.

“Now you’re talking!” and then he frowned “you said…blue?”
Chapter 83

Kelly was sitting with her legs folded on the white L leather couch in Thomas Elliot’s vast living room. The girl was staring confused her boyfriend who was slumped in his leather chair behind his elegant desk. From the moment she arrived he settled at his desk in the right corner of the living room and didn’t move from there.

She didn’t know a lot but she was sure that this had to do with the man that visited Leslie Thompkins two days ago. Since then Thomas was avoiding her; he came to the free clinic for his shifts yet they didn’t talk and even worse he cancelled their dates.

The young nurse decided that she had to find out what was wrong and even help if she could because this sudden change of behavior wasn’t characteristic of Thomas. She felt that something had upset and made him sad and perhaps she could do something.

So she came here even if he didn’t answer her calls because she was worried. He opened, greeted her but nothing more…For the last hour Thomas sat in that chair silent.

His mood was definitely more than gloomy: he didn’t speak to her; he barely glanced at her. He was clearly sad and angry. He had on his priceless, shining, rose wood desk a bottle of whiskey and sipped once in a while from the square crystal glass until it was empty. Then he was refilling it.

He wasn’t drunk but Kelly hadn’t seen him drinking so much till now. He was staring with blank eyes on his desktop computer’s screen and gritted now and then his teeth.

Kelly couldn’t bear seeing him like this; she had come here to offer her help, to do something for her boyfriend and sitting and watching wasn’t an option. She left her place on the couch and slipped to his desk carefully; not that he would have acknowledged her anyway; he was too absorbed in his thoughts.

She approached him and wrapped her arms around his neck tenderly. He didn’t seem startled but didn’t glance at her either. Kelly pressed her lips but didn’t give up: she touched her lips to his ear inhaling his perfume that she adored.

Only then Thomas looked at her; hard at first as if he was ready to attack her – Kelly felt her blood running cold although she knew that he wasn’t capable of such deeds. Thomas understood and smiled caressing her forearm on his neck.

When he heard his door bell and saw that stupid nurse Thomas was really pissed: what that bimbo needed more than the cancellation of their dates to realize that he didn’t want to see her anymore? But no, she was from that kind of women that once with a man stick to him no matter what. And he was Dr. Thomas Elliot: certainly the little slut wouldn’t let such a catch to slip from her net…

She had come to his apartment to play the worrying, the carrying while in reality she just wanted to keep him in her loop…Ugh! Thomas wanted so much to curse her and sent her to the Hell so that he would be alone with his plans and thoughts…yet he knew that it was still too early for that.

Thomas knew to be patient in order to achieve his goals and in this case this dumb broad might be still of use…so he swallowed his irritation and contained himself only to give her the silent treatment and focus on what really mattered.

“I’m sorry, babe” he said sweetly and met her lips with his. “I’m bad to you tonight…” no mood to entertain you…
“Don’t say that, Tommy…It’s just I feel you’re sad for some reason and…you don’t deserve that. And…and I want to help…If I can…”

Her eyes fell on the screen where photos of Bruce Wayne and articles recent and past were all over. Thomas caught her gaze and smiled.

“Yeah…he is the reason I’m in no mood tonight” he chuckled. “And yesterday and the day before yesterday…”

Kelly frowned: as far as she knew Thomas hadn’t met Bruce Wayne those last days: how Bruce Wayne could have affected him so much?

“But you two didn’t meet lately” she uttered what she was thinking and Thomas cackled.

“He doesn’t need to meet me to make me feel bad” he said holding Kelly’s hands that were still around his neck.

Kelly shook her head.

“Tommy, I really don’t understand why he has such influence on you to…to cause you such sadness even without interacting with you. Why is he so important to you anyway?” she was thinking that this reached the verges of obsession but she didn’t say it.

He chuckled and withdrew his hand from hers. It was obvious what she was thinking.

“I’m not a pervert, honey” he said sarcastic with the boredom from her useless presence peaking. “I just wanted to redeem myself for what I had done to him during our childhood” his eyes found the young billionaire on the screen. “Bruce was younger than me but he was a child with above average intelligence so we were in the same class at the school for gifted children; I was a kid from a troubled family faced with an alcoholic father…” he chuckled “not that this is an excuse but witnessing all the love Bruce was getting from his parents and everyone else – listening everyone speak about the Prince of Gotham praising his beauty, his sweetness, his goodness, calling him an angel…you understand?”

Kelly was staring at him with her brown eyes wide.

“People were so stupid, so unfair: they kept adoring and praising a boy that had everything! He was just a spoiled, pampered brat while I was struggling hard for everything I achieved… but still I couldn’t get the attention, the love he had… that made me hate the stupid prince of Gotham; I envied him because he had everything I didn’t. He was happy; he was loved by everyone…”

He arched his eyebrows meeting Kelly’s eyes that now seemed sympathetic.

“I know, it was crazy but I was in great suffering and Bruce…he was so happy pampered in so much love and adoration!” he shook his head “you probably don’t understand and I don’t expect you to…”

Kelly shook her head in denial and caressed his shoulders.

“No, Tommy, don’t say that…I do feel for you…”

Thomas grinned with a shine in his eyes that Kelly didn’t understand that was gleeful. Of course you do, honey…he thought rolling his eyes inside.

“So I had no choice but to…I tormented the poor boy…I was calling him names; I was bullying him; I even torn his favorite toys knowing that this would hurt his dumb heart; I made his life in school
and everywhere else a hell…” he laughed. “It was unfair but then seemed so right…I felt so good; like having my revenge over society’s injustice. But then Bruce’s parents were murdered and he disappeared only to be declared dead a few days later… I felt awful…I didn’t realize the reason then but gradually I understood how unfair I was to him; how bad I was…and his horrid end in the hands of those thugs” he inhaled deeply “I was feeling as if I had caused it to the poor boy that in fact did nothing wrong to me.”

He kept watching Kelly’s reactions and thankfully the dumb thing seemed touched by his confession.

“Since then guilt burnt my insides and urged me to become something useful to the society so that even in that way I could redeem myself…but it was never enough…The boy with the wet eyes when I destroyed his favorite staffed toy kept haunting me” giving such pleasure…

Kelly caressed his hair and Thomas gulped his snigger.

“And then one day after eighteen years I learnt that Bruce was alive and Falcone had kept him as his slave all these years; the details of the abuse and tortures my victim faced came like blows to me…I felt like a warm remembering how I was envious of his happiness those days…My envy then could have jinxed him…” he chuckled “I know how crazy that sounds… but since then I made my goal to meet him again and ask him to forgive me and perhaps be his friend now…”

Well…not exactly friend.

“To help him fight the trauma” by getting him inside a good loony bin where he always belonged. “And find that old happiness I marred then with my malignity.”

Kelly pouted and kissed him softly in the forehead.

“You’re so sweet, Tommy…”

“But I hesitated…I didn’t have the courage to move: Bruce would be right to not want me near him. After all the trauma and pain he suffered from Falcone Bruce would rightly want only his most beloved and trusted people around him – a wounded puppy” that I’d happily kick.

Kelly shook her head and Thomas sighed.

“When a new tragedy found Bruce and he was seriously injured and fixed in a chair I clenched my jaw and I decided to come back in Gotham and help him overcome this new calamity: it was the only way for me to breathe easier; to restore some of the bad I did. I tried…I tried to approach him; I offered him my friendship, my services – I have a vast experience with complex spinal injuries: I can give him back his mobility. I spoke to Leslie and Stark…But still…Bruce spat my offer and chose Dr. Strange, someone who is clearly unable to be a surgeon anymore…only to humiliate me because there can’t be another reason for choosing someone incompetent like Dr. Strange.”

Kelly gulped and Thomas nodded.

“Bruce found his chance to take revenge for what I did to him in our childhood” he arched his eyebrows and pressed his lips. “I don’t blame him: now it’s his turn – now I regretted everything and I opened my heart to him he can pay back my childish wrong deeds. After all, Bruce never had the chance to mature emotionally and mentally – a traumatized youth can be so immature and vicious against whoever he deems his enemy.”

“Tommy, I know it is hard for you…but it is his right to choose his surgeon – and I’m not sure he wanted to take some kind of revenge.”
Thomas felt anger boiling in his blood: stupid bimbo! He ruffled his hair.

“I know, I know…perhaps you’re right – sometimes I think too that I’m exaggerating but you haven’t seen his eyes when we are alone: so defensive, so hostile…” he huffed and shook his head. “He had more than enough and I understand his reactions yet it hurts because I really wanted to help; I offered him my emotions and he stepped on them crushing everything. He humiliated me.”

The young nurse pressed her lips.

“I know how you feel, Tommy…but there is nothing you can do about this; you are a great doctor and you have helped so many people. Nobody is going to give a damn about what you did when you were a child – a child in pain that is. So just forget Wayne and the surgery; go on with your life, Tommy.”

He smiled and caressed the back of her hand and then brought it to his lips to kiss the soft skin.

“I never give up, babe…” he said with a gleeful shine in his eyes and Kelly smiled believing that that meant that he actually considered what she just said.

“I intended to come to Gotham to meet you.”

The night had just fallen and although Metropolis was vibrant at night as in daylight this part of the city, near the docks, was quiet and relatively dark: like the forest that hides a monster ready to attack.

“I’m glad you didn’t” a low growl answered from the shadows. “Gotham is watched.”

“So you came to Metropolis to meet me” Diana dressed in plain jeans and a long sleeved white T-shirt walked towards Batman in the depth of the dark alley; her long black hair fell freely to her straight back. “I guess the phone you gave me sends a tracing signal, right?” she smirked.

The alley was littered with garbage and a cat hastily ran away. The light from the public lights reached the space weak, incapable to do more than form more shadows.

Batman stepped out of the shadows and his lenses met her eyes.

“Actually, the phone is untraceable; I couldn’t risk losing your trust by monitoring your moves.”

She cocked an eyebrow.

“Then how did you know that you’ll find me in Metropolis?”

Batman walked closer to her: she was at his height.

“Ivy is in Metropolis and I knew you’d want to watch and know everything about her; also, I read in the news about someone who saved a woman who was attacked: someone so strong and fast that nobody could describe.”

Diana smiled and Batman tilted his head.

“And I do have your number so once I got here I contacted you.”

“I tried to be as stealthy as possible when I saved that woman – I hope that this didn’t ruin your plan for secrecy.”
Batman shook his head.

“No” he said sharply “actually I wanted to thank you for not acting against the impostor right away. I understand how difficult might be for you to watch her posing as yourself and not confront her.”

Diana shrugged.

“I know that patience is the key of the victory. However you didn’t ask me to not act though you wanted to stay inert.”

Batman crooked his mouth.

“I would never patronize you; I was sure that you would understand our need for time before striking. I believe that we share the certainty that your sudden appearance during the fight would be a fatal blow at them.”

Diana nodded.

“Keeping a secret ace in the sleeve…Attacking εξ απίνης…”

“The element of surprise…” Batman said the same thing in English.

The Princess of the Amazons arched her eyebrows.

“You know the ancient writers?”

“My teacher adored them” he answered “and he was right.”

Diana narrowed her eyes.

“Careful estimation and planning… Preparation time is crucial and our enemy shouldn’t get a hint that we know his intentions before the time comes. On the other hand, I have time to get precious information.”

Batman looked at her without commenting and she continued.

“You were the one who managed to free Gotham from the rule of Falcone, a powerful mobster whom nobody else dared to face” she grinned “then you united the super powered beings of the planet in order to vanquish the League of Shadows. I’m impressed: truly, a warrior of Nemesis.”

Batman set his jaw.

“You give me more credit than I deserve.”

She inhaled.

“I doubt that but I admire your modesty” she inclined her head. “You know that Superman has disappeared.”

The Gothamite nodded.

“They got him, right?”

“That was their intention from the beginning.”

Diana crossed her arms over the chest.
“Planting a fake Amazon to impress and eventually seduce him to take him away from Bruce Wayne.”

Bruce frowned under the cowl; he didn’t want Diana give attention to Bruce Wayne.

“There’s no proof that Superman had anything with Wayne. But yes, they sent Ivy to impersonate you and by using feromones and spells they managed to control him. Their goal was to isolate Superman from his allies and humans so that when he was captured nobody would search for him. Darkseid had an old grudge for Kryptonians and he considered him the biggest obstacle to his plans.”

“But we know the truth so we can save him.”

This was so appealing to Bruce: saving Clark from pain. But they had to be careful.

“Not yet” he said nonchalant. “Any movement on our part will alarm Darkseid about being aware of his menace and plans; so he’ll attack us sooner before we are ready.”

Diana nodded and Batman yanked his head.

“I’ll take care of Superman.”

Diana cocked an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

“I was thinking…” she said. “As you said Superman’s love for Wayne wasn’t proved yet it would suit Superman perfectly.”

Batman shrugged.

“Superman’s taste isn’t my concern.”

“I read everything I found about Wayne…A child that watched his parents getting murdered; a child that was held slave by his parents’ murderer faced with constant horrific abuse. A boy growing up alone fighting not only his loss but also the cruelty of the people around him. How this boy survived? The pain, the despair, the tortures, the malnutrition…” she frowned. “Even a fully grown up warrior would have a hard time surviving more so a small boy…Bruce Wayne not only survived but also he became a charismatic man who took over his parents’ enterprises and helps people around him… despite the evil that still threatens him: this Joker who kidnapped him recently; that horrendous video that was broadcasted showing him being abused. This man is really remarkable, a real fighter even though he doesn’t use his fists or weapons…I’d like to meet him.”

Batman set his jaw.

“Once the truth is revealed everyone would want to meet the real Princess, so perhaps you’d have your chance. Yet I’m not here to speak about Wayne.”

“Why not? You did save him” she said stabbing him with her beautiful, shining eyes.

Bruce didn’t have time for that and he was really exhausted: he had taken more painkillers after he returned from Asgard but their effect was ending. The pain all over his back crawled slowly to the surface.

“Gotham is my interest.”

The Amazon cocked an eyebrow.
“You intervened to stop Falcone from escaping with him as hostage.”

“As you said my goal was to stop Falcone and prevent him from harming another person. I don’t care about the identity of people in danger.”

Diana narrowed her eyes.

“Of course. How’s the Cat?”

“Fine” he opened one of his belt’s compartments and gave her a USB stick.

She took it.

“I guess you know how to use a laptop since you’ve efficiently searched for information” the Amazon nodded. “In this stick you’ll find everything known about a gang that acts in Metropolis, Intergang – they meticulously have neutralized every other gang of the city and acquired weaponry and ammunition.”

“This gang is related with Darkseid.”

Batman nodded.

“The gang is his. He was in Earth years watching and organizing; he used his mind control powers to make the authorities release thugs he needed in his gang. He also manipulated others to join Intergang or acting according to his wishes. Eventually the gang dominated Metropolis’ underworld.”

“Superman was mind controlled by Ivy so he didn’t care a lot, huh?”

Batman shook his head.

“Much of this info is from Superman’s initial research but then as Ivy’s influence became stronger he didn’t have the chance to search more.”

Diana nodded.

“You want me to keep an eye on Intergang because our enemy will definitely use the thugs to create casualties and diversion, right?”

Batman tilted his head.

“The Amazon Princess knows so many things about warfare that there is no need for me to want or ask something from her” she grinned acknowledging Batman’s diplomacy in addressing an Amazon leader. “After the government is informed about the threat then police will handle that and we will focus on the Darkseid and his minions. Before that our forces will assembly to organize our battle moves. In the meantime, Tony Stark adjusts their guns to be effective on Darkseid’s parademons; Dr. Strange forms a mind shield so that Darkseid can’t see in the minds of the world’s leaders and control them – this will enable us to set the governments’ security forces in action; Flash is already informed and so are the Avengers and Asgard.”

The Princess nodded and locked her eyes with his lenses.

“Darkseid set his pawns on the chessboard and you are doing the same…” she saw that Batman was ready to retort to that and yanked her head. “I know natural born generals when I see them…and you are one” she inclined her head. “I’m honored to fight along with you.”
Batman brought his fist over his heart.

“The honor is all mine, Princess. We are blessed we have you on our side.”

The unbearable heat had been replaced from bone crashing cold; he could hear his own teeth rattling…

Hopelessness was eating his insides like erosion: he had the distant awareness that it was something the Kryptonite and the red radiation do to him yet he didn’t have the power to fight it off. He was so weak…and in pain. He had done so much evil that was robbing him from every mood to try and overcome this pathetic state: he deserved that torture and more – he deserved to rot there slowly drowning in his own filthy existence. No, no…This was what his enemies wanted: him stuck in depression and self pity not trying to fight his fate…

How could Bruce fight that for eighteen years and then fight and defeat all his enemies?

He let his head roll to his shoulder. Not that he could do anything even if he didn’t feel like that: the Kryptonite chains and the red radiation dispersed all his strength.

Bruce… His past adoration, his past affection – his true feelings - returned like waterfall to warm him from inside. Bruce was so strong; so adamantly moral: a real star that he wasn’t worthy of looking at.

His mother was right: Bruce was a power that bettered him…that galvanized the good inside him.

His Ma…He remembered her wrinkled sad face when he took off after he sensed Diana; her agony when he promised her that it wouldn’t be long before he returned.

His Ma knew about Diana; she never liked her but his Ma’s request for him to come to the farm it could be because she learnt the whole truth…: it wasn’t just mother’s instinct. It could be that Bruce asked her to call him to the farm in order to protect him because Bruce suspected that Ivy was going to surrender him to Darkseid?

It could be that Bruce never stopped caring about him and was in the trail of Darkseid and Bagdana? Bruce knew that Bagdana was behind all this and had his eyes on him? Did Bruce know that Superman’s behavior was caused by Diana’s and the demon’s powers?

No, he couldn’t hope. How could Bruce even suspect such conspiracy and especially after his betrayal? No, it was Superman’s fault that Bruce couldn’t be prepared for the danger.

So he couldn’t just wait to be saved…it was his fault: Superman didn’t have the power or the will to resist to Ivy’s charm; he didn’t have even the prudence to listen to Bruce’s warnings and make the tests.

His hatred for himself was such that his fists clenched without even realizing: he should find a way to get out of his cell and go back to Bruce – to warn him about Bagdana’s plans. To warn everyone.

Clark gritted his teeth and clenched more his fists to force some strength to his trembling, suffering body. But the Kryptonite chains felt like burning his skin more and the red radiation became so stronger that he could see the nightmarish color even with closed lids.

Suddenly, his fever became a fire burning his mind and fueling the torturing thirst.

Water…if only he had some water…
What was that? Something refreshingly cool and soft swept his hot forehead. And then some drops of water fell on his parched lips; his mouth opened on its own accord to suck the life giving liquid.

“Bruce…” he knew that Bruce would find him.

But a cruel snigger sank him in his previous despair: no, it wasn’t Bruce. This laughter couldn’t be Bruce’s; it was a woman’s laughter and it was filled with malice.

He knew who she was and had no mood to see her. He closed his mouth stubbornly even though he craved for more water but he wouldn’t accept anything from her.

But then a new excruciating pain towered every other pain and he groaned: it was from his groin. Iron pinches were crushing his genitals. He opened his eyes to face Ivy’s green eyes and her poisonous smirk. Her hand was over his groin and her fingers squeezed his genitals.

“Bruce…Really, Kal El?” she asked slyly. “You have the nerve to expect that the little brat would ever come to you again? He doesn’t give a damn for you after everything you did to him.”

Clark gulped; it was true. But he couldn’t bear listening to her uttering Bruce’s name: she used devious means to make him hurt Bruce.

“Don’t even utter his name!”

His eyes shone with a red hue that Ivy wasn’t sure if it was a reflection of the red radiation or his ire. However she smirked. She wasn’t in Wonder Woman’s blue and red attire; her gorgeous body was in Poison Ivy’s form. Almost naked with thread like stems wrapping longingly her juicy curves ending to green-silver leaves that covered her most private parts. Although Superman all these time couldn’t resist the body of this woman now seeing the same body scantily dressed resulted to more nausea…

“Why? Is he so pure that I’m gonna defile him?” she laughed. “You really didn’t realize that your little whore wasn’t a virgin when you put your big, hot prick inside him?” she pumped painfully his length and Clark stopped breathing and clenched his teeth to not give her the satisfaction of moaning in pain.

“Don’t touch me!” he growled finding a way to steam his pain.

She cocked an eyebrow and her green eyes sparkled.

“Really now…Don’t tell me you don’t like it…all this time you were burning in my arms and begging for more. The brat was entirely obliterated every time I kissed you.”

Clark found the strength to cackle and arched his eyebrows.

“Only due to Bagdana’s tricks…you really don’t fool yourself believing that I’d ever choose you over Bruce…”

Ivy clenched her teeth and her grip on Superman’s genitals became fiercer but his satisfaction for her irritation was such that he forgot the pain.

She grabbed his chin and brought her lips to his despite his resistance pushing her green tongue inside his mouth like the old times.

“I could kiss you with my fatal kiss…” she said sensually licking her lips “in your miserable state it would suffice to end your pathetic useless existence…But I won’t do you the favor…Bagdana will
certainly want to show you what use he has for your bitch – the only use he is worthy of: being a whore. And you will watch before you die knowing that your Bruce will be eternally the demon’s whore!”

Superman knew that this was the plan and he had to do something to influence even barely things.

“Oh! It seems that it’s time for a war council” Ivy said playfully winking at Superman. “Darkseid is calling.”

Ivy touched the sensor on the side of Superman’s coffin-like cell to make the door slither sealing the jail.

“Wait!” he said and she crooked her mouth. “You don’t believe that Darkseid will keep his word and give to you what you want. He destroys planets and he hates humans; he will exterminate every human being. And you, Ivy, are still a human being.”

She rolled her eyes and tilted her head on the side.

“No, you’re wrong, Supes. I was once a human… and it was awful. Humans treated me like rubbish, like they treat my defenseless green friends – like they abuse nature. They made me an outcast because I loved nature and defended her children from humans’ evil; they jeered me, they used me fooling me to assist them in their stupid purposes – one of them almost killed me. But my friends saved me and gave me their power and love. Now I’m not Pam Isley, the pure idealist who believed that she could persuade those fools with reason – now I know better: humans can’t be reasoned; they understand only pure, cruel force like Darkseid’s and mine” she shrugged a shoulder. “They deserve to perish and I will help Darkseid in this…It is time to bring my revenge to its fulfillment: Poison Ivy won’t be anymore the haunted murder but will reveal her true self – the powerful Goddess of Nature.”

Superman shook his head fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

“If you assist Darkseid in this you won’t be the Goddess of Nature: you will be a monster!”

Ivy’s green eyes flashed angrily and her lips crooked in a nasty smirk as she stabbed with her gaze their prisoner.

“You know everything about monsters, huh, Kal? You are the monster and this gets reflected in everyone else…” she saw Superman frowning and she caressed the lock that had stuck in the sweat of his forehead. “I was hard on him, Diana” she said mimicking his voice. “We made love but I was violent.” She cocked an eyebrow. “You raped him, Kal El” she breathed leaning close to his face sucking his guilt. “You forced a disabled, defenseless human…You made him bleed, don’t you, boyscout? Exactly like Falcone was doing to him every day…”

She cackled and Clark really ached from this laughter and the truth of her words.

“Some boyscout really…” she snorted touching the sensor and watching the transparent door closing. “It was nice making him squeal? Convulse like a dying fish under you? Didn’t you hear his heart beating in panic? I did when I played with him back in Dolcetto. Didn’t you sense his despair?” she smirked and nodded. “No, you didn’t care about what you were causing; you didn’t give a shit about his suffering…and after these, you have the nerve to call others monsters? Where is your conscience, big hero? It’s not as super as the rest of your parts, huh?”

She laughed and spat at the floor in front of his casket-like cell. Superman’s eyes followed her as she crossed the corridor away to Darkseid’s war council…but he wasn’t seeing anywhere…inside him
the void washed off everything leaving only disgust…for himself.

Gordon gazed at the night sky; the view from the MCU rooftop was always the same patch of the gloomy Gotham sky but still Jim found it pleasant every time; it always helped him to relax even in the midst of difficult times.

Not that now they were facing difficult times: the city’s mob was still hiding in their holes after the last year’s cleansing when the League killed the three crime lords; Joker with Harley Quinzel, his new lackey, was out of the streets again.

Yet Jim couldn’t rest because there was all the time that nudging feeling inside that kept him vigilant; maybe it was this city, his experiences over the years, as his wife was saying ‘the Gotham effect’. For Jim however it wasn’t just an abstract thing – it always took a shape sooner or later; this time it was the case of the Wayne video.

The despicable deed of broadcasting the boy’s torture, clearly to cause pain and distress to the young man now that he finally was free from his abusers. The sadist bastard who broadcast the video wanted to remind Wayne his past and plunge him again into nightmares – perhaps even to destabilize him mentally…

Jim looked at the full moon. The person who did that was hidden behind the dead hacker, happy that they wouldn’t discover him/her. Yet Jim wouldn’t give up until the responsible was brought to justice. Because the one who hated Wayne so much would hit again especially since he didn’t manage to break the young man. They had to make it even if the case was difficult and the research led them to dead end.

He huffed and his breath didn’t form smoke: spring was in her midst and the weather was mild. There was even a discreet spring smell in the air under the heavy smells of the big city.

Jim hadn’t lit the Bat signal though he intended to ask help from Batman in the case of the video: he didn’t want to rely on the vigilante for police work and he knew that the man had many things to do. Yet he learnt to never deny any help that could lead to solutions.

Tonight he didn’t have to light the signal for his ally to come because his ally contacted him and asked to meet at the rooftop. Perhaps Jim’s odd feeling of uneasiness had to do with Batman because Jim had the suspicion that something was off with his ally: Batman might have arrested Joker and helped Thor and Dr. Strange yet Jim wasn’t convinced that everything was fine with the vigilante.

“Nice night…” a low growl broke the silence.

Jim closed his eyes swallowing his startle and turned behind.

“Yeah…spring reaches even Gotham” he shrugged. “Joker, Crane and Dr. Quinzel are back in Arkham: we have enhanced the building’s security. Dr. Hugo Strange is appointed as the new Head” he arched his eyebrows and huffed “let’s hope that he’d have a better luck than his predecessors…”

Batman gave a sharp nod.

“I’m not here for Joker.”

Jim frowned.

“Then?”
“Something big is coming and you need to keep the city guarded.”

Now Jim’s gut feeling was proved right. He licked his lips.

“A new gang?”

“Worse. It isn’t Gotham centered. Someone powerful is going to launch a world scale attack but he might have a special interest in Gotham so we have to be ready for his attack.”

Jim’s eyebrows twitched but other than that he kept his nonchalant, stoic expression.

“I must speak with the mayor and the state governor…”

“You won’t speak to anyone yet.”

Jim frowned.

“Falcone-like situation?”

Batman shook his head.

“No, but the enemy can penetrate the minds of leaders and control them – we don’t want him to know that we are aware of his existence and plans.”

Jim raised his arms.

“We can’t do much without the assistance of the central government. We can’t fight if the world leaders aren’t informed to contribute.”

“They will be informed as soon as our preventive measures are on so that the enemy is blocked from their minds.”

Jim pursed his lips and shook his head.

“You said ‘we’?”

“Every benign power of this world is informed and our actions are already in motion but there are things that must be done in every city because it’s certain that during the fight thugs will try to take advantage; and our enemy will manipulate them to create chaos behind our backs endangering the lives of innocent. We can’t risk that so police must be ready.”

Gordon nodded.

“I’ll increase patrols and officers in the streets gradually till you inform the authorities above me and it is escalated to red alarm; I’ll increase security to the Blackgate and Arkham – they will probably attempt to let loose the maniacs to force the heroes split their powers in order to help the cities. You can count on Gotham’s police.”

Batman pressed his lips.

“If I didn’t I wouldn’t have come to you. We’ll be in contact.”

Gordon hesitated to say what he intended since the situation sounded so crucial that Batman’s attention needed to be there.

“Say it” Batman said understanding.
“It’s about the case of that video…you know, with Wayne.”

Batman nodded.

“We are sure that there was someone else behind Isaac” the Commissionaire continued. “We search Isaac’s connections to reach the one who sent him the CD but we face a dead end.”

Batman knew what Jim wanted to say and there was no need for him to utter the words.

“I’m working on it…” he said sharply and dived to the void.

Gordon shook his head and raised his eyebrows.

“Of course you do.”

He sensed the ancient ritual; the irresistible smell of human greed. It was ages since the last time someone did that…after that last time it seems that they had given up…A smirk carved his face and followed the summoning: he didn’t hope anymore after hundreds of failed attempts but still butchering those who were stupid and arrogant enough to dare play with him was always fun: a small revenge for what humans took from him.

He emerged and solidified in a basement: a cold, empty, dark basement smelling of the ancient perfume of summoning – the ancient brass vessel in the corner emanated the smoke of the burning ingredients.

Only a human presence – his sacrifice: he sensed that this time it was a child – he smirked. Human corruption had reached new highs…Offering a child to a demon. Till now every time was a woman or a man…but a child? They really believed that a child would satisfy Bagdana? This was outrageous! And entertaining.

He cast his eyes on the presence curious to see the child that they chose.

It was a boy tied on the floor; his arms stretched over his head with his wrists tied together, the rope leading to an iron ring from the wall; his legs bent in the knees waiting for him. They had blindfolded him knowing that he shouldn’t see the demon…His skinny body was covered with black silk. The boy was trembling in cold and fear…he was really skinny.

He snorted: Ra’s Al Ghul wanted to make fun of him…it wasn’t enough that his ancestor killed Lilith? Now he mocked him offering him this pathetic lamp. At least, this time the human who would taste his wrath after the failed copulation would be Al Ghul…Oh! He couldn’t wait to rip him to pieces.

He approached the boy and took the fabric off of him revealing his entirely naked body…the poor kid convulsed more from terror clearly sensing what was ahead. His body was immature but nice looking showing signs of blooming beauty: too bad the boy was to die tonight…

Time to get what they offered to him…He grabbed the boy’s thighs opening them more for his enormous length – he cackled thinking of what it’d take for that tiny entrance to accept him…

The boy screamed and sobbed. But he although should snigger at him he felt an odd need…

Bagdana took off the blindfold off the boy’s eyes…and stared: he hadn’t seen more beautiful, more special eyes than these. He was reminded of star sapphires only the star was from clear emerald as
the boy’s irises formed a shape like star...

Suddenly, he realized that the boy’s eyes were in his, locked, persistent. The boy was afraid and yet his gaze was unyielding even when regarding the yellow cat-like eyes of a demon.

“Humans shouldn’t look demons in the eyes” the boy took away his gaze but it was too late – the demon was intrigued.

It was the first time after ages that he really cared to be inside the body of a human. And he did that pushing to get deeper; the boy was in pain but it wasn’t the first time that the boy was used...Al Ghul didn’t even offered him a pure child...a virgin child.

Yet although that body was already heavily used it was beautiful being inside it...The boy was suffering...was tearing apart yet he felt beautiful...he felt like being revived...like new power, new life slithered inside him lifting him again to the forbidden sky. He ordered new arms to spring from his body in order to get every sense he could from that body: groping his bony buttocks, fondling his scratched from whips back, touching cruelly his breasts; his head multiplied because he needed to taste everything...his tongues licking the boy’s breasts, his abdomens, his genitals...sucking his unripe length.

He knew that boy, he suddenly realized; he had seen him again...an odd sight that was...a small boy wandering in his rugs, on his trembling, skinny, bleeding legs...in the maze of Gotham’s caves with bats keeping him company. They had met before...

Yet what he was feeling now as he thrashed inside the boy had nothing to do with caves and earth; he was flying again, he was in Lilith’s hot body breathing freedom, tasting happiness, joy, elevation...It was fulfillment again after millions of years. He moved faster and pushed deeper as every time with Lilith; he could hear the moans, the hot breaths of Lilith urging him for more; he could smell her intoxicating perfume...no, this intoxicating perfume was different but still it had Lilith inside...

The boy was grunting, was screaming; sometimes crying and sometimes just sobbing silently suffering as he was used but Bagdana could hear Lilith’s clear giggle: a melody mesmerizing...

He could sense liquid wetting him; human blood as his teeth sank into the boy’s flesh to feed his hunger for more Lilith. But the blood was too much and the boy’s screams and grunts had silenced; his breaths and heart beat weakly but he couldn’t care for anything else than the glory he was experiencing after an eternity...

His insides roared with satisfaction as his fluids rushed inside the beloved body; the body he missed so much...It was true...He saw a small, cute leaf on the place where the boy’s left big toe should have been: the boy had there the mark. The mark of Lilith!

It was true: that skinny, tortured boy was his Lilith reborn...

“Bagdana is daydreaming about the moment his human whore will be writhing between his legs...” Darkseid’s rough, sarcastic voice cracked and dispersed the basement.

Granny sniggered casting him a hostile glance and Ivy snorted. Bagdana looked at the New God who sniffed at him from his tall granite throne.

Darkseid smirked and before them emerged an image: Bruce entirely naked on the stony floor of this same hall; he was on his stomach and Bagdana held his breath seeing his muscle bound back and his gorgeous, round shaped buttocks... But then Bruce raised his head to look at him and his face was
sweaty with black locks framing untidy his sharp cheekbones. Two sapphire-blue eyes glimmered in the light the fires in the vessels cast; there was terror and despair in them and it was breathtaking beautiful yet Bagdana begged for the defiance he was used to…

“I was expecting more from a demon” Darkseid sneered and the image was gone. “For starts being concentrated in what I say: I have a powerful demon in my army and I count on him.”

“For what reason?” the demon cocked one of his thick eyebrows. “I thought you were powerful enough to clear this mess on your own…”

“Why doing the worthless chores myself?” the God retorted and Granny nodded. After all you proved that you are a precious minion; your cunningness makes you a great asset.”

“Well, thanks for the praise” Bagdana crossed his arms over the chest.

“The machine is almost ready, Master” Granny said. “We can use it soon.”

“No. I will use the machine only when Earth’s heroes are defeated: I want them to see the spectacle: it would be the pinnacle of my victory. My celebration!”

“Then what’s the plan?” Ivy in the form of Wonder Woman asked.

“My favorite demon is the master of earth” he stabbed Bagdana with his eyes “he’ll cause earthquakes in every corner of this filthy planet – as you did to get dear Ivy save humans in order to gain Superman’s affections. I want the earth to crack and swallow humans; I want volcanoes explode burning with their lava everything!”

Bagdana pursed his square lips.

“Well, that’s easy…”

Granny snorted but Darkseid stretched his arm towards the demon.

“It should be in order for you to get your share from the spoils” he said threatening. “You must keep in your wicked mind that everything belongs to Darkseid and so does Bruce Wayne: I will give him to you but you have to earn him.”

Bagdana snorted angrily and fume emitted from his non-existing nostrils.

“I thought I earned that by rendering Superman useless and bringing him to you.”

Darkseid smiled and leaned to the back of his throne.

“You showed admirable skills and cleverness, Bagdana; yet I wouldn’t like to lose your abilities before the end.”

Granny cast a nasty look at the demon and turned to Darkseid.

“What do you want me to do, Master?”

“Lead Parademons to hit simultaneously nuclear reactions, dims, energy plants, oil rings and every plane that will be in the air… I want terror and despair everywhere.”

The space before Darkseid’s throne was filled with images from nuclear reactors in flames; dims breaking and water flooding cities; airplanes exploding in the air above big cities and crushing on streets…People running everywhere distraught, screaming for help, crying as parademons were
launching at them adding to the terror the fire and the cracked streets had already created.

“I want those fools who call themselves heroes running around without knowing what to do… Alistair and Stitches will lead Intergang in Metropolis killing everyone in their path; at the same time Gotham will be overrun by thugs” Bagdana frowned to Darkseid’s satisfaction. “People will be screaming and begging for help and then their newest heroine, Wonder Woman will appear igniting their hopes. Only to sink them in more despair as she will begin killing people instead either herself or…”

“My friends will have the chance after all these years to get their revenge” Ivy said. “I’ll give them the power to throttle people ensnaring them from their pots; slash them with their thorns from their jails in human parks; trees will smash them under their roots!” her eyes flashed gleefully and Darkseid nodded.

“And only then Darkseid will appear destroying the capital first sending the message of this world’s end; showing to the humans how useless their heroes are. When their terror, their despair, their anger against their failed heroes will reach the zenith the machine will suck their dark energy..!”

“Why Gotham?” Bagdana asked the only thing he cared about.

Darkseid closed his eyes annoyed for the interruption.

“You want Wayne: the thugs will bring him to us. You don’t expect me to waste precious warriors for him.”

Bagdana remembered Superman’s warning; he never trusted Darkseid with Bruce.

“Keep your scum away from Bruce!” he growled stabbing the god with his blazing eyes.

Darkseid arched his eyebrows in irony while Granny gritted her teeth.

“He can’t speak to you like that!” she spat and Bagdana turned his head to her sending her with a sharp gaze to hit the wall.

Granny roared outraged and stood immediately ready to surge at the demon. But Darkseid raised his palm and she stopped at her heels.

“Leave Bruce to me” the demon hissed to Darkseid.

“Your place is at the battlefield” he retorted.

“You’ll have me; but keep the scum away from Bruce” Bagdana said with his eyes locked in a staring battle with Darkseid.

Darkseid smiled.

“Very well. But don’t forget: nothing is yours if I don’t grant it to you…”

Oliver Queen regarded Wayne Manor in front of him. The imposing beautiful building was surrounded from mist as the day had hardly dawned but he didn’t have the patience to wait for the hours to pass. Thankfully, the butler let him cross the gates and he didn’t have to sneak inside raising suspicions.

He didn’t trust Darkseid with Bruce…The New God had vicious intentions that he might have
already realized. He had to see Bruce. All these days the butler was always telling him that he was out of town but was that the truth? What if Darkseid had already captured him and held him so he had leverage on Darkseid?

Or…He frowned with a thought crossing his mind as he stepped out of his red Lexus. What if Bruce suspected the truth and was acting to prevent their plans? Bruce was more than clever…

Alfred opened.

“Good morning, Mr. Queen. How may I help you?”

Queen rushed inside as soon as the Englishman showed him in. His eyes scanned the vast, pristine premises.

“Good morning, Alfred. I must see Mr. Wayne.”

Alfred’s slight frown didn’t escape his attention and Bagdana felt that his thought might be right.

“Sir, it is quite early and I am afraid that Mr. Wayne is still asleep.”

“You mean that he is here?” he asked in disbelief.

“You mean that he is here?” he asked in disbelief.

“Exactly, sir. But it is too early for visits.”

Bagdana didn’t believe him; Alfred was lying to him: Bruce wasn’t here. Something had happened to him or he was out in some kind of mission to search the truth – there was only one way to find out. He began running reaching the main marble stair and climbing the steps two at a time; the old butler was impossible to caught up with him.

As soon as he reached the door to the master bedroom – Bruce’s bedroom - he halted abruptly. He closed his eyes and breathed: he was going to find out the truth. If Bruce wasn’t inside then either Darkseid had taken him or the human had suspected that something was wrong and was trying to ruin their plans. So either he would have to confront Darkseid or warn the New God to act sooner.

He grabbed the knob ready to burst in.

“That’s utterly inappropriate for a gentleman!” Alfred said to him outraged breathing quite calm for a man of his age.

“Sorry, Alfred, but I’m not a gentleman” Queen spat without looking at him.

He knocked the door once in a feeble mimicry of discretion and without waiting for an answer because he was sure he wasn’t going to get one, opened the door.
Chapter 84

The vast bedroom was in darkness since the heavy, mahogany curtains were down blocking the pale light of the morning; only the dancing low flames of the stone fireplace opposite the bed cast some light – the spring had come yet the nights were still quite cold in Gotham and for someone in recovery more warmth was necessary.

Queen’s breath stopped and the human heart he was carrying gave a loud jolt: his sensitive hearing had caught the sweet sound first before his eyes met with the sight. It was perfect! In the midst of the darkness, the pale light caressed the human form on the bed...

Bagdana wished Alfred wasn’t there so he could sprout more pairs of eyes to devour… As the weak, red-gold light caressed Bruce’s porcelain skin his features’ beauty was revealed in its entirety since Bruce was fast asleep thus unable to try and conceal his beauty.

His head lay gently on the white silk pillow letting his cheek on, framed by some naughty locks that were fondling the cheekbone as the forehead. His eyelids were covering his eyeballs so softly and silken eyelashes touched feathery the skin. Two rosy lips moved slightly in the calm respiration’s rhythm and Bagdana had to order his legs to not move as they were ready to bring him there to capture those lips in an eternal kiss...

In the tranquility, the relaxation and the blessing of oblivion the deep sleep offered there was no shadow of past and present suffering and torture trying to cover the shine of this beauty...

Bruce was meticulously muffled in velvet blankets however Bagdana could discern the lines of his body. It was so hard to be patient waiting the moment that this body would be again naked in his arms that his whole existence trembled.

A wild, hostile hiss drove him out of his reverie and he acknowledged the white and black fur ball that had rose from his nest on Bruce’s chest; the same kitten that hissed him out of the bedroom when he invaded Bruce’s dreams months ago was stabbing him now with his glowing narrowed eyes that sent the newcomer the message of his animosity exactly like the rest of his aggressive posture.

Alfred cleared his throat as low as he could.

“Sir, I think it is time we left the room before we disturb Master Bruce’s rest” he whispered however the demand was clear.

Queen licked his lips uncomfortable and looked at Alfred with regret. He was ready to follow the butler back yet a quiet changing of breath audible in the silence of the room stopped him.

“Alfred?” a low, hesitant voice asked clearly still muffled in sleep’s effect.

Batman landed smoothly on an alley not too far from the MCU building where he had left Commissionaire Gordon only a few minutes ago. He had parked the Tumbler there: he intended to patrol the city; he had missed Gotham. And then he could return to the Manor and get some sleep.

He felt immediately the presence upon entering the alley however he didn’t take a defensive stance.

“You left me behind…”
He raised his lenses eyeing Catwoman that sat on the Tumbler’s roof with crossed legs. Batman tilted slightly his head on the side.

“You can’t come with me everywhere…”

She jumped down with her eyes flashing dead serious.

“Yes, I can! You left me behind twice last year and that was…” she spat her breath coming out pressed but then calmed down. “You can’t be alone at this point; you’re…”

Batman raised his palm and Catwoman stopped realizing that he didn’t want something like this to be uttered in a public area.

“I’m fine.”

Catwoman came closer and her eyes met his lenses.

“I do hope so; I was sick with worry exactly like the others.”

“I left a note.”

Catwoman cocked her eyebrows and shook her head clenching her waist with both hands.

“Yeah…quite the reassurance! What about Tony” she purposely didn’t use his surname “how you were sure that he wouldn’t notice that you’re gone.”

Batman walked to the Tumbler.

“First, he is too occupied right now and second I was in constant contact with him.”

Catwoman pursed her lips.

“I see…calling him first so he wouldn’t call and figure your run away” she shook her head. “Oh! You’re so wicked!”

He grinned.

“Well, time to go back now” his friend added determined.

Bruce wanted to growl yet the pain he was feeling in his back and the exhaustion made him nod.

“I’ll patrol a bit and I’ll go back.”

“No! We’ll go now! Do you realize that you’re away for two days?! Two days that you definitely didn’t get enough food or rest…No delays, buster! We’re leaving now!”

“Yes, Master Bruce. I most apologize for the disturbance” Alfred answered and walked to his master’s bed.

Queen watched as Bruce used his elbow as support and raised a bit his torso to look puzzled at the second presence in his bedroom. The kitten rubbed to his master’s hand and Bruce caressed him with his other hand; the demon felt jealous of the small animal.

“Mr. Queen?” Bruce asked confused bringing hastily the blanket to cover the little of his chest that
Bagdana sighed inside: that wasn’t really needed since the black silk pajama shirt he wore let only a scarce patch of his collarbone chest part out. But just that and the human’s neck were enough for the demon to feel fascinated and aroused.

“Bruce, I’m sorry for my inappropriateness…” he mumbled defeating the wish to immerge in Bruce’s beauty and stay forever there.

Alfred leaned over his young master.

“Mr. Queen insisted on seeing you but I think that now he realized that there is nothing wrong with your health he wouldn’t refuse to honor us with his presence later so to allow you to continue your rest.”

Queen nodded.

“Of course!”

But Bruce brought himself in sitting position and ruffled his messy hair; Hero settled in his lap.

“No, it’s okay; I woke up now” he looked at Alfred who pressed his lips disapprovingly. “Just give me a few minutes to dress and I’ll be with you.”

“Thank you, Bruce” Queen replied without leaving from his sight the human.

Yet Alfred walked to him and made an inviting gesture towards the open door.

“Follow me if you please, sir” he said politely though he really wanted to kick him out of the Manor.

Bruce met Queen’s eyes and the older man hastened to take away his gaze and turned to follow Alfred who closed the heavy door.

Bruce looked at Hero inhaling calmly.

“You sensed the truth about him from the beginning, right Hero?” he asked remembering how the kitten had hissed at Queen that evening in the café.

So Bagdana wanted to check on him…this either was from sheer concern over his health or the cunning demon suspected something from his long absence. Alfred had told Bruce that Queen called several times during his absence yet Bruce chose not to call him back because it’d be too suspicious if he spoke to him so soon after their last not so pleasant exchange.

He had to be careful because Bagdana was really clever – he was an ancient demon after all. However the way Queen burst into his bedroom showed that the demon lost a bit his self restrain…

He took Hero from his lap and left him on the mattress in order to slip his body into the wheelchair to get ready acknowledging the various pain spots throughout his back; the pain was milder after the revitalizing sleep yet it was still there.

Queen took the white-blue china that Alfred offered him and sipped the black coffee. The Englishman had led him down to the great salon where the businessman settled to a high backed armchair and waited.
He rubbed his chin uncomfortable.

“I’d like to apologize for my previous behavior, Alfred.”

The Englishman cocked his eyebrows.

“I do not think that it is necessary to apologize to a butler, sir,” he said casting him a cold glance. “Pardon me, I must prepare Master Bruce’s breakfast.”

Queen waved that off.

“I understand.”

The demon actually rejoiced with Alfred’s leaving since he would be free to delve into the memory of seeing Bruce sleeping.

He hid his face with both hands and breathed: he wouldn’t let anyone to ruin that, not Darkseid, nor god or mortal.

The low sound of the elevator made him jump on his feet his eyes towards the long, wide corridor listening to the discreet sound of Bruce’s wheelchair approaching.

He was dressed in jeans and a black long sleeved sweater with a quilt blanket covering his paraplegic legs. The kitten was curled on his lap and Bruce let the animal down as soon as he entered the salon.

Queen hurried to meet him and gave him his hand to shake which Bruce did immediately and then showed him the armchair to sit.

“Well, to what do I owe your visit?”

Queen pursed his lips, his embarrassment radiating.

“First of all, I apologize for the way I burst into your bedroom. I didn’t want to ruin your morning sleep. I’m unforgivable.”

Bruce tilted his head meeting the man’s green eyes.

“Then why you did that?”

He sighed and looked him in the eyes.

“Because I was really worried, Bruce” the younger man frowned. “After Joker’s kidnapping you disappeared: no public appearance and every time I called Alfred was telling me that you were out of town. At first, I thought that you simply didn’t want to speak to me after our last meeting but then I began to worry. I went to the Wayne Tower but I couldn’t find you there either.”

“Is something going on with our deal?”

Queen smiled and waved that off.

“Not at all. I just wanted to make sure that you were alright because I thought that your people were hiding the truth of a possible relapse of your health” well, that’s a good explanation Bagdana thought – and not a lie either.

Bruce nodded: *If only this was the only reason…*
“I did have some business obligations out of town that I couldn’t postpone; unfortunately, my latest contact with Joker really had its toll to me and once I finished with my obligations Dr. Thompkins recommended to stay in the Manor and rest.”

Queen grinned.

“I see. I hope now you are better.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows.

“I am but my doctor insists that I should stay away from anything potentially tiresome and focus on my health now that my operation is near.”

The older man seemed startled. Bagdana had forgotten about that; he licked his lips. He didn’t like the idea of such a risky procedure inflicted on Bruce.

“I’m not a doctor but it must be a very dangerous operation.”

Bruce shrugged.

“Even the most common surgeries can be dangerous” he replied. “And this surgery will probably enable me to walk again so the risk is more than worthy.”

Bagdana didn’t agree; actually his insides were clenched. They would put Bruce on a table and butcher him trying to make his spine work normally again. But Bruce had been through a lot and Bagdana couldn’t be sure that he could handle this…He couldn’t afford losing Bruce now that he was so close…

“Maybe you shouldn’t risk so much…I mean I know how much you want to walk again but this is your life and your life is so precious to gamble like this.”

Bruce averted his eyes annoyed and Queen pressed his lips. Of course, Bruce thought, Bagdana doesn’t want to lose his reward.

“I know it’s not my business” Queen said leaning to him and Bruce turned a sharp glance at him.

“No, it isn’t” he spat because that was what he wanted and also would reassure Bagdana that nothing had changed in Bruce’s stance towards Queen – so his possible suspicious were unfounded.

“But I’m your friend and I care about you.”

Bruce nodded.

“I remember our last discussion” he said and Queen shook his head. “Alfred informed me about your calls but I didn’t feel like calling back. I mean that if it was something about the companies you’d have discussed it with Lucius…so your calls were…personal and I didn’t want another personal discussion: after my adventure with Joker I did want some tranquility.”

Bagdana understood that; Bruce had suffered too much all these years and lately. He wanted to avoid emotional turmoil especially with people courting him.

“I see…the truth is that I…I know that I become too persistent sometimes but, believe me, it is honest concern, Bruce.”

Bruce looked the one who was responsible for all his suffering of the last months; the one who turned his dream of living with Clark into a nightmare; the one who was willing to cause the demise
of the humankind just to have him; the one who right now was holding Clark and probably torturing him.

He wanted to attack and stab him again with the Knife of Justice forcing him to reveal where Clark was yet he had to be patient: attacking him would reveal his knowledge and Darkseid would make his move before they were ready.

“Mr. Queen, I had said it to you countless times: I don’t want you to hope vainly. I just can’t face that kind of feelings…”

But Queen stopped him.

“Bruce, I’m your friend, okay? You made it clear that there can’t be anything else between us and I accept that but… I can be your friend, right?”

Bruce found his eyes: how good Bagdana was in pretending! He grinned and nodded.

Queen smiled and touched with his fingers Bruce’s hand that was on his wheelchair’s arm. Bruce felt the same paralyzing feeling of that night he fell asleep in the restaurant.

“As your friend I want you to be sure that I’ll always do my best for your wellbeing.”

“Bruce, is everything alright?”

Bruce shook his head as if he had just woken up and turned his head at the salon’s arch shaped entrance. Dick was standing there frowned, with narrowed eyes regarding Queen’s hand on Bruce’s. He was dressed for school.

“Just fine, Dick. Mr. Queen here came to find out about my health” Queen smiled to the boy however he didn’t let go of Bruce’s hands which made the boy squint more in hostility.

“Alfred had served breakfast” the boy said and Bruce took his hand from Queen’s grasp.

Dick leaned and took Hero who had run leaving his corner right in front of the fireplace.

“You have to eat too, Bruce – actually, I came to tell you that granny and Alfred are waiting for you.”

Bruce grinned understanding the boy’s intention to give him a reason to get rid of Queen.

Indeed, Queen stood.

“I must leave now” he said.

“I’ll take you to the door” Bruce said and slithered his chair at Queen’s side to the main entrance.

Upon arriving at the heavy front door, Queen stopped and looked at Bruce.

“The boy is very fond of you” the older man commented eyeing behind Bruce’s back the boy who was following them at a distance holding Hero.

Bruce pressed his lips following Queen’s stare there.

“I guess I’m too lucky” he smiled fondly and Bagdana wished his human mate could grant such a smile for him too.
Queen nodded.

"You are" he agreed and passed the opened door. "Can you promise me that we'll meet again soon?"

Bruce smiled but inside he smirked.

"You can count on that…” Bagdana.

Queen reflected his smile satisfied as the demon relished in the certainty that Bruce wasn’t suspecting anything.

"Then I’m the lucky one…”

It was gradually more difficult to remain conscious; his body was collapsing, his strength had already evaporated and the constant pain didn’t let him any chance to struggle. Not that he would be able to do something with the Kryptonite and that damn red radiation that felt like baking him slowly, dehydrating him from any life – a real torture along with the stabbing hunger, the thirst and that nausea.

But nothing was more torturous than the revelation of his own deeds the past months. Revelation… not exactly. He knew what he was doing yet now without Ivy’s influence he could see clearly and judge without that selfish prism which justified everything.

Bruce hadn’t said anything to anybody…nothing about…no, he erased the thought of those deeds before even form. He hadn’t said anything to his Ma otherwise Ms. Kent would have rebuked him or worse…Bruce protected him. But Bruce couldn’t protect Clark from his own blaming self that blew him mercilessly…

So it was really a blessing that most of the time he was unconscious, without his own thoughts pricking him. Although he knew that he deserved that, still that state of almost non-existence was irresistible…some mercy…

"Have you seen anything more beautiful?"

He heard suddenly Lois’ voice and he turned his eyes where she was staring.

His casket-like cell wasn’t there anymore and the low humming of the red radiation was replaced by music played by an orchestra. Clark Kent with Lois at his side was in the enormous salon of Wayne Manor that was filled with people who had stopped their chattering to look at the newcomers who descended the great marble stair.

Falcone was addressing the people but Clark like everyone in the space was gaping at another direction.

A young man was following herded by Chill.

Clark estimated him around 26 years old, but his face looked younger. He was approximately 6’ 1’’ tall with a body so harmonically sculpted, every muscle in such perfect size and form that Clark thought of the ancient Greek statues. However, once his gaze fell upon the boy’s face, he forgot the body – it was a perfect blend of masculinity and softness, the cheekbones’ sharpness underlining the warm almond shaped eyes that were shining like the multicoloured gems of the room, but with such sweetness that magnetized the eyes more than their inanimate antagonists in the room.
The young man was pressing his lips out of uneasiness but he couldn’t hide their cute shape and light pink colour; Clark was certain he wanted to run his hands through his soft dark locks that surrounded perfectly groomed his gorgeous face – it was easy for Clark’s super hearing to catch the boy’s crazy heartbeat.

However, his engagement with the frantic heartbeat brought his eye sight zooming to the broad chest. With a rush of hot blood, he gazed at the soft skin that was dressing the well defined chest and then the fine muscles that adorned his belly. His tailored clothes cried to be ripped off so this magnificent body could be exposed to everyone’s greedy eyes, thought Clark and angry with himself averted – not effortlessly – his gaze before it went lower.

“He doesn’t look like a whore, does he?” he asked Lois hesitantly.

All the blinding lights and the music were gone leaving behind darkness, silence and a bare space with only some boxes on the floor mounting the wall.

A surprised huff left Batman’s lips as Superman snatched his upper arms; he stretched them swiftly upwards pinning him to the wall. Batman thrashed trying frantically to resist, struggled to find an opening to free himself but the alien was unrelenting; the alien’s beautiful strangely blue eyes smiling with glee.

Superman was feeling the powerful body pressed on his own go rigid and writhing like a giant serpent but this time the Man of Steel wouldn’t retreat; he wouldn’t let the annoying man to escape him no matter how bruising his hold needed to be.

“Why you didn’t tell me your plan? You don’t trust me, do you?” he demanded.

“I trust you” Batman was completely calm and unfazed by the fact he was trapped “I didn’t tell you because I knew that you wouldn’t approve, you being so moral and law abiding and that you would want to do it your way which would have been disastrous.”

Superman motioned his head in negation, his eyes dead serious.

“No, you don’t trust me; you don’t trust anyone and you believe that you know the best way for everything; that you are better than all of us, you arrogant bastard!”

The artificial white eyes were focused on his and Clark could feel the true eyes underneath being sad; the beautiful shaped lips half opened in confusion.

Suddenly, a strange urge took the better of Clark and he rushed his lips on those proud lips, devouring, wrestling the defiance, the resistance, his tongue defeating the Bat’s tongue that wanted to shove him out of his mouth. Finally, relishing the incredibly soft lips and the hot mouth; the powerful muscles under his steel grip relaxed, the entire body pliant... trembling from fear? His heart jolted as he felt those rosy lips shyly massaging the invincible mouth that was conquering them.

Clark’s hands of steel searched desperately for an opening in the man’s suit, his need to feel that body was mysteriously unbeatable; he wanted to smell him, to taste him... to see his face. His hands touched the cowl and pulled but there was no give.

He withdrew his lips to let the man breathe, his eyes still closed.

“I need to see your face...” Clark’s heart beat crazily and he opened his eyes to be met with the bricks of the unpainted wall; the Bat had slipped.
He turned afraid that the man had gone but he saw the black caped statue a few feet away from him, his back on Clark; his shoulders hunched.

“You should teach me how you do that...” Clark attempted to relax the tense air between them but he stopped abruptly seeing the gloved hands touching the base of the cowl a green light glowing for an instance – Clark was sure that it was a system of fingerprints’ recognition that allowed only the Bat to remove the cowl. The Bat slowly, hesitantly was pulling the cowl off of his head, revealing a thick sea of short black hair drenched in sweat.

The Bat clutching the cowl turned his face to Superman and the man of steel was goggling, being aware of his own stupid expression. His head moving slowly in utter disbelief.

“No... It can’t be...” his crystal clear strong voice was hoarse and faint.

“You wanted to see my face but you weren’t ready to see the truth?” his voice was sarcastic but had a little sadness in it.

The voice was smooth as always, not gruff and strict. His magnificent eyes looking at him filled with pride and strength, their endless sorrow just a shadow in their sparkling. His Star manifesting his entire shine.

“Who are you?” Clark had to ask because he felt the entire world slipping under his feet: Falcone’s toy, his broken Star standing in front of him dignified, imposing, emanating power and self-confidence, but beautiful and alluring as ever.

“It is easier to say who I was” his voice was solemn and steady but Clark was able to feel the bitterness.

A black sleek car slithered graciously on the illuminated by strong floodlights down town street; it halted in front of the Intercontinental Hotel where people were swarming fast as soon as the car appeared, intrigued to have a better view of the car.

But once the driver’s door opened smoothly and Bruce Wayne graciously stepped out nobody cared anymore for the car; The young man gazed for an instant at the clear night sky as if he’d sensed something and was searching for it and then returned his eyes to the approaching valet who was breathless.

The driver was a perfect match to the impressive car; his immaculate tailored suit highlighting his body’s carefully chiseled muscles. His locks shone to the abundant lighting of the hotel’s entrance.

Superman was watching from a rooftop opposite the hotel, unnoticed as he thought but hurrying to hide behind the wall when Bruce raised his gaze as if he had sensed his presence.

When Bruce emerged all grace and charm from the car, the light blue glow from the interior lighting of the car still caressing his features, he just gaped as the men and women inside and outside the hotel did.

It was as if the floodlights of the entrance had lost their light in the glow that the young man emanated. He manifested confidence and an air of easiness which was only one part of what he was feeling, because Superman could detect his nervousness and how tense he was; truly, Bruce and Batman. His face was brighter than the moon when he smiled warmly to the awed – only from the car Superman hoped – valet, Bruce’s beautiful eyes sparkling.
And those clothes… Perfectly tailored as if the cottons and the silkworms from the start had the intention to dress that body; the smooth fabric shining discreetly but charmingly in every tiny movement he made, stressing the strong and artistic painted muscles and that black blazer had exactly the length to cover and not cover the enticing buttocks under the fitting smooth fabric, just to arouse the watcher for more… Superman sighed and felt his face turning hot.

And then he felt a lava of envy for the tailor who surely measured that body from too close and was so impressed by his Star’s body to create THAT suit that was a cry to assault. If he had the power, he’d forbid Bruce to employ the same tailor again, or, since forbidding Bruce to do something was perhaps impossible, Clark would ask with his Superman charm the tailor to not work for Bruce Wayne again: who was he kidding? Which tailor wouldn’t want to work with a man like him?

As the young man made some steps to the entrance that was already packed with people, some of them journalists who were here for the Mayor candidates, was evident that those clothes were wicked, enchanted; they looked like obsessed lovers never leaving the beloved body but staying glued on him…

The bright scene of the Hotel’s entrance darkened and the people vanished…

Clark dried his hair with a towel and wrapped another around his waist heading to his dingy bedroom for a lonely night flooded with dreams.

He yawned more from boredom than sleepiness but his mouth stayed agape seeing Batman standing before the small balcony door. Impossible; he had heard the Tumbler heading to the Palisades…He rolled his eyes – auto-pilot, of course!

Batman had his lenses deactivated and Clark had the rare gift to see those unique eyes sparkling through the dark cowl.

“How? I didn’t hear you…” Clark asked – foolishly – because that ninja could evade even his super senses.

Batman placed his thumbs on the cowl’s fingertip receptors which answered with a hiss before Bruce took the cowl off, revealing his face and his sweaty, stuck on his head and forehead locks.

“Do you care about ‘how’ or ‘why’?” Bruce cocked an eyebrow and gave a crooked smile.

Clark didn’t need another prompt; he used his super speed to reach his Star – which was ridiculous since the room was really small – and closed him in his naked, humid torso. He cupped the younger man’s face and kissed passionately his lips, Bruce responding avidly while two gloved hands wrapped around Clark. Bruce had come for him!

“You wouldn’t have come, huh?” Bruce asked him piercing Clark with his sparkling eyes. “Is this how much your love lasts?” he asked mocked hurt with a smug expression.

But immediately he chuckled as in a blur Clark had placed him on his small bed starting unclasping his armor’s various parts using his X-Ray vision to find the hidden joints. Clark’s yearning was such that he had just removed a big armor plate from Bruce’s chest and his mouth glued on the younger man’s breast sucking the hot, sweaty flesh while his hands continued their frantic job pulling off that annoying armor and throwing the towel off his own body.

“You could have chosen a latex suit…” Clark sobbed as his hard penis was met with Kevlar instead of soft, sweet flesh.

Bruce snorted.
“You know, bullets can pierce my body…” he huffed as Clark rooting around managed finally to extract the hip part of the armor, his hard penis rubbing Bruce’s dressed with underwear groin. “And I don’t like latex on meeeeee…” a long moan escaped his lolled backwards neck as Clark suddenly lowered his underwear and began kissing his genitals.

“You know…” Clark mumbled between aroused flesh “I hate latex too…on you…” he grunted “because everyone…would picture…what I see…”

Bruce grabbed Clark’s hair and yanked softly his head to lock their eyes; Superman’s crystal blue eyes were feverish, almost crazy in desire.

“I thought you were mad at me” Bruce said seriously.

Clark’s eyes widened.

“Mad? At you?”

“I’m not the easiest person…”

But Clark stopped everything else by capturing his lips and massaging gently and then stronger following the movement of Bruce’s lips, swimming in the sparkling seas of his Star’s eyes, the emerald stars blinding him with their dance.

Bruce moaned on Clark’s full, rich lips enjoying their strength and salty taste, his hands which suddenly were ungloved – courtesy of Clark - ruffling a bit shyly the wet locks of the Man of Steel.

“The only reason…” Clark couldn’t pull his lips from that sweet mouth “I wouldn’t have come… mmmm!…is to let…you” his tongue was brushing Bruce’s mouth and his Star’s tongue played along “rest…”

Bruce tightened his grip on Clark’s strong back and slithered his lips feathery light on his neck causing Clark’s surprised groan that became a sob when Bruce’s mouth brushed his ear letting hot air stimulate the hyper sensitive organ. Bruce could hear the powerful heart kicking in Superman’s made-of-steel ribs as Clark’s hands became once again greedy in their exploration.

Clark didn’t want to penetrate the tired body in his arms although Bruce urged him to.

“Bruce, stop…” he whispered between rasps because his need was so demanding that made him shake uncontrollably and Bruce’s wet mouth on his aching nipple wasn’t helping. “I know you’re doing it…because…” he whimpered as the younger man’s tight thighs wrapped around his and closed with his ankles crossed.

“Because I want it!” Bruce’s fierce eyes shone like lightings in the dark room that was illuminated by the flashing of boards and cars passing outside.

What restraining power Clark had, evaporated when Bruce’s hips touched his slithering up and down and in tantalizing, huge circles that numbed his mind and made the throb of his length agonizingly crazy, his big vein swollen with boiling blood. His penis on his own accord slipped towards the beloved flesh and Clark barely made it – thanks to super speed - to take the lube from the drawer and apply it.

As he was thrusting tenderly in Bruce he was sure that his Star offered that to him to relieve him; Clark despite his drive to quench his yen feared that Bruce didn’t really wanted to be touched but then thankfully felt the younger man’s penis also erected. Having memorized Bruce’s bodily reactions from their first time he knew that his Star was a bit slower in getting aroused; which was
perfectly reasonable given the struggle inside him every time…

“You’re the most gorgeous and bravest being in the world…” he mumbled mouthing greedily. Bruce’s stretched neck to end up savoring his lips and tightened his embrace as his thrusts became faster brushing Bruce’s prostate.

Bruce held desperately Clark’s taut shoulder blades as his body convulsed uncontrollably, electric currents flooding his spine and his mind; he was moaning and grunting but Clark was sucking every sound kissing deeply his mouth. And then suddenly Clark’s embrace became one handed, his other hand caressing tenderly Bruce’s throbbing penis till with a violent jolt he came exactly the moment a hot flood filled his insides.

“You know that you healed me?” Clark whispered in his ear still holding him glued on his body. Bruce’s calves caressing his shivering buttocks.

Bruce locked his still dilated eyes on Clark’s.

“Actually, you did that. Remember?”

Clark brushed Bruce’s wet locks that stack in his forehead and cheekbones framing his sweaty face.

“Despite the huge improvement from the medicine, my powers didn’t felt as before but after last night…” he sighed “I feel stronger than ever.”

Bruce chuckled.

“It’s only your psychology.”

……………………………………………………………………

“In the cave, I felt the urge to grab you and take you away from everything…” Clark said honestly and locked his eyes with Bruce.

“Ten or fifteen years ago I’d have wanted you to do that; I’d have pleaded with you for that… But now things are different, Clark.”

Clark nodded. Ten years ago…Ten, fifteen years ago he had begun his action – even before. In fact, he had saved kids from abusive families, from pedophiles…but he didn’t save Bruce…If he did, his Star’s body and soul wouldn’t ache so much from bleeding scars; his Star could be able to sleep without nightmares…

Bruce’s quite respiration on his shoulder brought him out of his thoughts; he was sleeping like a baby inside Superman’s arms breathing softly hot air causing goose bumps on his flesh.

He carefully pulled himself from Bruce’s body and the younger man protested in his sleep. He placed him tenderly on the mattress and cleaned him gently with his tongue as if licking the most delicious ice cream. Then lay beside him, cuddled him to have his soft breath brushing his chest and Bruce unconsciously nestled in his broad torso seeking the human warmth, the human affection. Clark smiled; he wasn’t a human yet Bruce made him forget that. Actually, he felt very small, weak and coward in comparison to that human…

“How can you be so brave and fearless with all the horrors you experienced?”

Bruce hid his face in Clark’s pectoral and unconsciously nuzzled Superman’s chest making him moan.
“Tomorrow night we’ll sleep at the greenhouse…” his Star whispered without opening his eyes and Clark knew that he was talking in his sleep. “It won’t rain tomorrow and Clark will be able to see all stars…”

Superman leaned and kissed softly Bruce’s forehead.

“I need only the star in my arms…But will go there, Star; I promise.”

Clark’s heavy eyes jittered happy and a careless smile carved his sweaty, hot in fever face. Bruce…

But suddenly the cheap hotel bedroom blended with a cave; deep in the mountains until the furniture was gone and only rocks, stalactites and stalagmites were left; humidity and dim light. Clark’s elevated heart sank as he saw a golden bumble with Bruce inside and the granite demon holding him tight.

**Bagdana nuzzled Bruce’s face, his burning lips sucking the human’s bent neck.**

“But you are: her blood runs in your veins, her flesh, her perfume…”

Bruce yanked his head.

“Don’t touch me!”

**Bagdana jerked his hand and struck Bruce’s cheek; Bruce’s head lolled to the side and Bruce wondered how it wasn’t detached from his body, his cheek in pain as if it had burned.**

The demon closed his eyes and breathed calmly; he brought his mouth above the burnt human flesh and blew gently restoring the damage. He caressed tenderly the healed cheek and cupped again Bruce’s face bringing the youth’s eyes to lock with his.

“You’re going to remember! And feel!” he roared and his mouth captured Bruce’s mouth his thick, rubber-like tongue thrusting inside, reaching his throat.

Bagdana was confidently grinning. Bruce was hovering held by the demon and suddenly his clothes tore in shreds falling from his body leaving him completely naked. His legs were grabbed and brought around Bagdana’s hips; the demon’s monstrous length was fully erect and dripping, a third pair of hands stretching him for the demon to penetrate him.

“Stop this…”

**But Bagdana’s hard as stone length was already pressing to enter.**

“Our third union will be in front of them to show them you’re mine! Let’s show Superman to whom you belong!”

“No!” Superman cried with such volume that he couldn’t believe he had strength for.

His heart beat fast. If Darkseid won this time nothing would stop Bagdana from taking Bruce forever. He couldn’t let this happen; he couldn’t just stay there surrendered to his confinement, defeated by Kryptonite and red light watching while they plotted to destroy the planet and enslave Bruce.

He had to overcome the Kryptonite’s effect; he should defeat his weakness, the pain. He clenched his jaw and gritted his teeth forcing his fingers to form fists: he could get out of his prison – he could save Bruce.
He growled to pump energy from his anger to his limbs. He roared clenching his fists and pulling at his chains forgetting the burning of the Kryptonite in his wrists; ignoring the screaming of billions of cells all over his aching body.

He was Earth’s defender, the protector of humans: he couldn’t let Darkseid slaughter them. He was Bruce’s love…he couldn’t let that demon capture him. Bruce’s love would give him the strength he needed…

When Bruce closed the door behind Queen and turned, Alfred was there and Dick had gone to the kitchen.

“I hope you rebuked that rude man, Master Bruce.”

Bruce smiled.

“It wouldn’t be of any use, Alfred; this rude man is actually Bagdana.”

Alfred’s eyes widened.

“Good Lord!”

Bruce chuckled and nodded.

“Exactly” he arched his eyebrows. “He is ‘wearing’ Oliver Queen’s body in order to help Darkseid with his plans and…approach me. I didn’t scold him – I think he regretted his rush act.”

He moved his wheelchair heading to the salon.

“I don’t understand, sir” Alfred said following. “The Black Butterfly is supposed to keep him away from you?”

Bruce stopped the chair and looked at him.

“I think that this is another reason he possessed a human body: the human flesh protects him from the gem’s energy.”

Alfred nodded.

“At least you are privy to their plans” Bruce nodded and Alfred set his jaw. “Enough with Mr. Bagdana-Queen, your breakfast is getting cold.”

“I must see Leslie…”

“Speaking of the devil…” a third voice entered the space.

The fierce doctor walked to them from the kitchen’s direction.

“I think we had enough of the devil for today…” Bruce tilted his head amused.

Alfred grinned.

“I forgot to mention that Leslie was in the kitchen, sir.”

“It’s okay, Alfred.”
Leslie stopped in front of Bruce and leaned to him.

“Nothing is okay, young man. Where were you all these days?”

Bruce pressed his lips and inhaled.

“I think it’s not the right place to discuss this, Leslie” he said showing with his gaze towards the kitchen at the far end of the corridor; it was a considerable distance yet there were Ms. Turner And Dick who might come at any moment. “Let’s have our breakfast and then we’ll continue.”

Leslie grinned.

“Right. You have days to eat properly and then there’s your medication you need to take. We’ll talk later.”

Bruce exchanged a glance with Alfred. Her words certainly had a threatening note…

Once they finished breakfast and Ms. Turner left with Dick in order to drive him to school, Leslie and Bruce went to the study of the upper level alone since Alfred had some chores to do.

“Bruce, you haven’t realized how crucial is the situation” Leslie said. “It is supposed that you want to be operated and walk again but instead of following your doctors’ orders you wander around exhausting yourself and weakening your organism. How are you supposed to cope with that surgery, Bruce?”

Bruce shook his head.

“I think that it is you who don’t realize the criticality of things. A powerful alien is on the verge of attacking earth and there’s little time to prepare our defense. So” he inhaled “I don’t have the luxury of sitting and watching.”

Leslie held the arms of Bruce’s chair, ‘trapping’ his body between her arms and his eyes in her strict gaze.

“You did your duty, young man. You unveiled them, you warned the Avengers and gave them your ideas; you even found the real Diana and brought her here. Now you can leave things to them: they are super powered, Bruce, and most of all, not recovering from multi injures. I understand that you want to offer them as much assistance as possible yet if you collapse, if…” she didn’t want even to utter it. “What will be the gain?”

Bruce clutched his forehead.

“Leslie, the battle that is coming will need every power the Earth has – we can’t hold back anything. I can’t stay behind” he met her eyes. “I just can’t; there are things I must do. If Darkseid wins, what’s the point if I’m safe and healthy hiding somewhere? He’ll find me” he didn’t want to elaborate on that.

Leslie stood sighing.

“If only you were not so stubborn!”

Bruce pressed his lips feeling for her but also having the conviction of his beliefs.

“I need your help, Leslie.”

She shook her head and chuckled.
"You have that without asking but you’re turning your back on my help and instead you’re running around ready to take part in a battle that can kill you" she shuddered once the word left her mouth but Bruce’s face was calm.

"I have to be there, Leslie…But I need you to give me fortifiers: drugs that will sustain my body till the end: I must last till the end."

Leslie pressed her lips and closed her eyes.

"You must be really exhausted to ask that: you would have never asked something like this knowing that I’d figure your extreme fatigue. My precious boy, I…How can I offer you the means to commit suicide?"

Bruce took her hands in his and locked eyes with her.

"I am really tired, Leslie but I have no choice but to continue; it won’t be suicide if you give me the drugs that will fortify my endurance” he smiled “you’ll give me the means to survive. And then, after Darkseid is defeated I’ll be able to rest and enjoy your care.”

Leslie smirked fuming and shook her head.

"I hate it that you have your father’s diplomacy and your mother’s sweetness. I’ll do everything in my power to help you.”

She squatted before him and caressed his locks and Bruce held her hand and kissed the palm.

“Where’s your conscience, boy scout?” a sarcastic female voice hissed to Clark’s ears filling his veins with green poison.

He saw again Bruce stepping out of his car, beautiful, shadowing the lights of the luxurious hotel. He saw him raising his head and focusing his eyes on the spot were Superman was sneakily stalking him. His breath was cut again from the shine, the beauty of those almond shaped eyes: star sapphires indeed.

Red…Red slithered over Bruce…it wasn’t the red radiation of his cell…it was blood that soaked Bruce’s tailored suit, his perfectly groomed hair, his porcelain face…his eyes.

"For the last time, Clark: Thor came here only because Loki pestered me.”

“I didn’t see Loki but even if that it is true then I see” he smirked “that Bane and Talia taught you the pleasures of threesome so what better than two gods fucking you?” Bruce’s eyes bulged and his heart stopped beating. “Maybe if I told you that Diana and I would both fuck you, there wouldn’t be a problem…But since I didn’t, you took the first opportunity you found: Thor and Loki: Who got your ass and who your mouth? Or they changed positions? You’re doing the same with Rogers and Selina in the Tower? I imagine you prefer to fuck your friend than…”

Bruce raised his hand and brought it with all his speed and force at Clark’s face…But this time Superman was ready for that: he grabbed Bruce’s hand stopping and pinning it on the mattress above Bruce’s head clenching bone crashing the wrist. Simultaneously, with all his speed, he raised his hand and bitch slapped the human who dared to raise hand on him.

Bruce’s head rolled on the side and blood sprung from his nostril and torn lip slithering slowly to his cheek. A deafening thunder worsened the buzz in Bruce’s ear but he looked through his narrowed
eyes at Clark who was smirking smugly.

Superman tightened his grip on Bruce’s wrist, feeling the familiar arousal from the struggle of the body trapped under him. The human had his jaw clenched though it must hurt much from his slap; he knew to control his power to not permanently damage or kill him but also to pass the message across. His mocking eyes lowered a second to see Bruce’s heaving chest: the human never liked being defeated.

He brought his face over Bruce’s enjoying the smell of his blood, of his defeat…His groin twitching from the defiance underneath him.

“I owed you that, Bruce, remember?” Bruce’s blazing eyes stared him unfazed; certainly he remembered the day he slapped Clark because he accused him of having an affair with Matt. “My memory is eidetic…” he breathed licking Bruce’s blood though the younger man turned on the other side his head to avoid him. “I know your every movement…”

But he frowned instantly, his shock great when something sharp burned his jugular; the flesh protested as a drop of blood dripped slowly. Clark saw with the corner of his eye the Knife of Justice firmly grasped in Bruce’s free fist; its diamond blade flashed in the dim secret light of the headboard – a cracking bolt enhancing the impression of the blade’s sharpness.

Their eyes collided in a battle of determination.

“You know just the 1/100 of my movements, Clark” Bruce said calm and decisive but still with affection. “The Blade has defeated a mighty ancient demon: it can harm you” it was an advice.

Clark snorted and felt the Blade’s menacing presence on his neck.

“Two demons” he corrected cocking his eyebrow. “Two demons who fell for your body…Well, Bruce? What are you going to do with that? Kill me?”

Bruce clenched his jaw; Clark’s grip on his wrist had loosened under the surprise of the Knife in his now vulnerable neck. Bruce’s hurt cheek throbbed.

“I just want to stop you before you do something you’ll be sorry for all your life! Think, Clark!”

Clark’s face was sweaty: the sense of sharp metal grazing his skin was unusual for him.

“Think what?! For once I uttered the truth and you are ready to kill me! All the time I’m giving to you and you don’t give anything and the one time I spoke to you about the satisfaction you deny from me, you show your real face!” he snarled “What about my satisfaction, Bruce?! What did you offer me?!”

“Then take your satisfaction but stop shouting! There’s a distressed boy in the Manor and nothing of these is his fault!” he lowered the Knife keeping his eyes locked with Clark’s.

Now Superman understood: using the Knife against him would manage only to galvanize his beliefs of Bruce’s hostility and hatred but the human believed that if he surrendered his body to him, then maybe he would realize that he was true in his love and prove Vivian wrong.

Bruce placed reverently the Knife on the nightstand and Superman found his chance: he grabbed Bruce’s free hand and pinned now both his hands on the mattress over his head, stretching his body so beautifully that Superman felt his groin demanding satisfaction. Bruce was always looking him in the eyes calm, dignified and affectionate.
“You know that I didn’t give my body to anyone else” he said steady and jerked his head upwards capturing Clark’s lips in a tender kiss, filled with love and agony to help him see the truth.

Clark deepened the kiss, loosening the bruising grip on Bruce’s wrists.

“I can give you everything the others gave you and even better…” he whispered sucking his lips passionately and then nuzzling his stretched neck and the small part of chest that the three open buttons left uncovered. “You’re mine, Bruce…”

Clark was still holding his hands on the mattress in a rather painful way yet Bruce looked him proudly.

“I love you with all my existence but I’m not your possession…”

Superman closed his eyes frustrated and bit the cotton pajama shirt softly at first but then in a burst of accumulated anger he tore with his teeth Bruce’s clothes not minding that he was scratching also the tender skin; his hands clutching the trapped wrists to not permit any other surprise and to keep that body flexed.

Clark rose a bit and watched appreciatively the nude body under him and now after months he realized that Bruce that night for the first time after the greenhouse felt uncomfortable being naked in front of him.

Superman brought Bruce’s arms down without releasing them and turned him on his stomach; Bruce must have felt his healing arms almost ripped from their sockets as Superman twisted them behind his back.

“I can give you everything the others gave you…” he leaned over Bruce’s hair and the force of his breath burnt his neck.

And then in a swift, violent motion Clark settled one wrist upon another and ordered the energy casts that enable Bruce’s body to operate bound hard his wrists.

Superman realized the pain that Bruce had felt.

But that night he didn’t care for the human’s suffering; Superman turned him around and smirked smugly to his face.

“The energy casts are Fortress’ property – that is to say mine; they obey my wishes…You like that, Bruce, don’t you?” he travelled the younger man’s chest with his palm to end at the ripped abdominals. “Losing control, being helpless…”

Bruce controlled his heart that cringed remembering every time he had been tied up.

“Clark, you know what I like…”

Clark shook his hand bringing his fingers lower, to Bruce’s groin.

“I thought I knew, Bruce, but I was wrong; but finally my eyes are opened. I won’t let you give your body to anyone else ever again… I won’t permit you to disgrace yourself and me by getting screwed in parks or participating in threesomes.”

Bruce closed his eyes and yanked his head backwards.

“I never did that! You know it: you’d have caught their smells on me.”
Clark brought his head over Bruce’s groin and began sniffing, the younger man fighting a devastating wave of nausea.

There was no foreign smell.

“You’re sly, Bruce” Superman raised his head to look at him. “You warned them to cover their smell.”

Bruce gritted his teeth and raised his torso to bring his head close to Clark’s.

“Even you don’t believe that! Till the incident at the Tower you didn’t give a damn about who was talking to me or for Joker being free to get me. But then when I asked you to stop seeing that woman she poisoned your mind with the idea of my supposed infidelity and you found the best way to justify your attitude.”

“Enough!”

He grabbed Bruce’s shoulders and threw him on the mattress, settling his body on him; he captured violently Bruce’s mouth with his and began sucking and devouring, his teeth chewing cruelly the lips. He licked the drops of blood and opened his eyes to stare at Bruce’s sparkling ones.

“So beautiful...so rot...a real powerful seductress, indeed” he whispered caressing with both hands Bruce’s face to finally grab both cheeks and resume his cruel kiss, this time thrusting his tongue deep in Bruce’s throat choking him.

His body that was rubbing demandingly felt sticky under the uniform and he raised his body a second keeping Bruce’s body clenched between his knees, permitting the human to take some air. Superman roared satisfied when his body stayed bare without the burden of his clothes.

For the first time, Bruce’s eyes stared coldly at Superman’s naked body; the man’s half erection making his guts clench.

Superman’s body demanded to feel the warm human flesh and he obliged, rubbing his torso to Bruce’s so hard that it pained...like Superman’s unbearably hot mouth that trailed Bruce’s neck kissing, biting and licking the little blood his teeth evoked.

The more he conquered Bruce’s unresponsive body the more the fire in him rose...An insatiable fire. He fist Bruce’s hair and pulled his head down forcing his neck to arch for his mouth to gain better access. He licked and sucked, his other hand groping the younger man’s ribs.

“Moan for me, Bruce…” he growled. “As you did for Thor!”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“Nothing happened with him; Clark…”

“Shut up!” he cut him tightening more his clench on Bruce’s hair and brought his face over Bruce’s devouring the fire of his eyes. “You cheated me, Bruce! But I’ll keep you...” he kissed his cheekbones moaning. “I’ll give to you what you crave for and you’ll drop your bullshit about Diana...”

“She is poisoning you, Clark...You need to take your distance from her and run the tests Jor El told you…”

Superman’s gleeful eyes were Bruce’s entire world as he raised slightly his head.
“You have no right to pose demands! You should be begging me to forgive you and not trying to defame a great woman like Diana!”

Bruce’s eyes widened and for a second he stopped breathing…

“I did nothing wrong to ask your forgiveness and I’m not defaming her I’m just stating the facts! Think, Clark!

But Clark indifferent grabbed his thighs and opened them. Bruce couldn’t feel the pain but saw and heard the violence of Clark’s ministrations even though the wind’s blowing was wilder than ever; the man he loved was rock hard and Bruce wished he could be happy for their coming unification; staring at Clark’s gleeful eyes that looked down at him triumphantly, Bruce wished that making love to him could lead Clark to the truth…

Clark now in his own state of pain could read Bruce’s every emotion; every distress and pain…It was a nightmare…it was Hell…it was himself causing all that…

The Man of Steel thrust his entire, huge length in Bruce with one single swift movement, without any preparation, without any softness or caution just choking by force the resistance Bruce’s unprepared insides posed after five months of inertia.

Bruce gasped…It hurt like Hell and his heartbeat peaked…No, that was impossible: his body didn’t feel below the waist.

Clark cocked a sarcastic eyebrow regarding Bruce’s dumbstruck expression.

“You’re a helluva actor, babe! Pretending surprise…We both know that it is Thor’s thunderous prick we have to thank for reviving your dead asshole…”

Bruce gritted his teeth: he couldn’t continue listening Clark speaking like a creep…like all those who used him.

“Stop talking like that, Clark; this isn’t you…We both know that some neurons survived the injury – it seems that some of them are in my rectum” he tried to reason with him “but we never tried before…”

Superman smirked and settled his hands on Bruce’s hips beginning thrusting in him, establishing immediately a fast and hard way that made Bruce’s sensitive body cry in protest but he pressed his lips and swallowed the pain.

The thrusts became faster rocking Bruce’s body but Superman’s thirst wasn’t satisfied; he leaned over the sweaty but simultaneously cold torso under him and swallowed one nipple, sucking so fiercely that Bruce writhed uncomfortable since this along with the pounding of his anus was overwhelming.

But Superman didn’t care; he knew that Bruce enjoyed that – he needed it like this to be satisfied… and also Superman relished that too – inside him burnt an irresistible fire, a desire to make Bruce pain; make him suffer. He bit the tender nipple and sucked the liquid but more he sucked the violent heartbeat under the human skin; Superman knew that Bruce stubbornly choked his moans and grunts but he was stubborn as well.

He bit the other nipple and at the same time sent a low intensity heat beam to hit the nipple he tortured before and stood erect from his ministrations. Bruce’s torso jerked but Superman cackling moved his hips inwards smashing the momentary resistance with a stampede of thrusts.Oh, how much he enjoyed Bruce’s torture! He finally could understand Falcone’s need to make that beautiful
being writhe in pain and agony.

“You like that to your nipples, huh?” he said smugly to Bruce’s narrowed eyes and inhaled the delicious smell of a trapped wild animal underneath him.

Bruce bit his bottom lip that was already torn in many places from Clark’s bites: no, he didn’t like having his nipples tortured – Falcone did that when he was really young…Clark knew it but that didn’t stop him casting heat to his other nipple too. Bruce jerked his torso upwards using Superman’s length inside him as support but the Man of Steel hugged vertically Bruce’s shoulders to glue their bodies together, impaling him mercilessly, faster, deeper…Cracking the soft insides, causing friction burnings, pain...

Superman was pressing the younger man chokingly on him knowing that the human breathed difficult but Bruce clenched his teeth to hide his suffering and that pissed him: his lover denied giving to him what he gave to others. He sank his teeth to Bruce’s shoulder, blood springing along with a sharp intake of air from the human. Superman cupped with both hands his head and stared at those defiant, fervent eyes.

“Don’t hide your pain from me…I know it gives you pleasure and I can give you more pleasure than anyone…” he breathed and captured the maimed lips kissing passionately, his body pushing enthusiastic inside Bruce.

His clenching in Bruce’s shoulder became bone crushing and the Man of Steel roared in his mouth as boiling liquid from the alien’s ejaculation burned Bruce’s wounded insides. He didn’t moan or grunt though a new wave of pain travelled his spine to stab his head but his weak body convulsed like in the past when he was a child and adults used him.

Bruce appreciated the softness of the mattress when Superman lowered him tenderly yet his lover’s length was still inside him, stretching his anus to its limits and throbbing demanding more. He looked at Clark’s face that watched him like a hungry vulture; Superman’s locks were wet from sweat and framed his beautiful features.

He smirked to the human and placed his body over him kissing his breasts and digging streaks with his nails on his back.

Superman’s eyes stopped to the Black Butterfly that dangled on Bruce’s chest: he knew from a long time ago that this rare, precious diamond was like Bruce. He touched his lips on the sparkling stone…and jerked away because it burned his lips.

He saw Bruce staring at him as Superman touched his lips shocked: he felt that the human was mocking him, his gem demonstrating that he could escape him…No…He grabbed again Bruce’s thighs and began thrusting stronger than before making the human writhe and sweat from pain and effort to control his restrained breath – to not moan...

When Superman turned him to his stomach, he had already cum in him three times and his hot liquid was filling his anus and the inside of his thighs; he knew that it slithered lower. He was also aware that except from semen something else streaked Bruce’s body – his own blood…But Clark didn’t give a shit. Bruce deserved that – he liked that.

The sheet was drenched under his pelvis and the stain expanded fast as Clark started for the fourth time his in-out movements; each time faster, deeper and stronger than the last. Bruce bit the pillow to stop a scream: Superman’s stone testicles whipped his stretched anus with every wet sound of flesh invading flesh. His eyes were covered from thin but annoying mist.
Clark now could feel everything Bruce was feeling with an empathy that had left him when Clark needed it the most; he felt wetness in his own eyes.

“I have more endurance than any of your lovers, Bruce” Superman said haughtily setting Bruce’s knees on the mattress for him to get a new, better ankle; clenching his thighs to crush the human body on him so to get deeper. The sound of flesh slapping flesh a mesmerizing melody to his ears.

He released Bruce’s thighs and brushed his trembling back, relishing the fine, strongly bound muscles.

“I should whip you, Bruce” he whispered massaging the covered in cold sweat human flesh. “I know how much you enjoy that...But I couldn’t stand it…”

Bruce shook his head as much as he could.

“You can’t do that, Clark, because you’re not that kind of person and you know that I don’t like it…Falcone used to whip me as a child and it was awful…” his voice almost cracked.

A thunder howled near...

And Clark remembered the sight of Bruce’s brutally spanked buttocks after their first meeting in Falcone’s party.

Clark’s hands massaged his trembling back softly now; even his thrusts became slower and Bruce hoped that finally he had found himself. But suddenly a powerful hand clenched his hair and forced his body upwards, his neck bent so much that Bruce was almost choked, his back brushing Clark’s torso. Superman touched his hot mouth on his stretched neck sucking.

“Beg me like you did with Bane…” he whispered sensually.

Bruce blinked to chase away the mist from his eyes. Clark had no problem thrusting in him for hours but his body felt like broken – no, his body was already broken since the factory incident but now it hurt all over.

“I begged him only once...when the lives of my loved ones depended on showing my obedience to Ra’s – and he had asked me to have Bane use me for him to watch...” he tried to catch his breath but Clark’s grip and his continuous pounding wasn’t helping. “I never again begged him...”

Clark’s fingers tightened more uprooting his locks and arching his neck.

“He says to everyone that you begged him for more at the mountain...” he mouthed Bruce’s earlobe.

Bruce found the strength to snort.

“Of course he does...You believe him?” he sensed Clark’s hesitation. “I won’t beg you, Clark, because at my parents’ grave...some months ago...you told me that I wouldn’t have to plead anyone again in my life...” he closed his eyes exhausted “and I still believe in you...though you don’t believe in me...”

Superman stretched more his neck, biting the soft skin where jawbone met the ear.

“Who’s the best of your lovers?” his wet, hissing breath attacked Bruce’s ear.

He closed his eyes to recruit some air from his stretched neck.
“You’re the only lover I ever had, Clark” he said in such a steady voice that it was a surprise for him too.

That pissed Superman: he threw Bruce’s head to the mattress keeping his clench on his hair and pressed his face down.

“You like powerful beings” he hissed through gritted teeth. “I’m Kal El, the mighty Lord of Krypton, and you’re a cheap human…”

Bruce closed his eyes; his breath laboriously maintained through his pressed nose and mouth yet he managed to take in some air to speak.

“This isn’t you, Clark; you know that I’m not enjoying this…”

But Superman buried more his face to the mattress and clenching his bare teeth increased the already frantic pace of his thrusts, drilling the stubborn human’s insides, enjoying the loud sound of his flesh slapping Bruce’s so similar to the sound of rain whipping the earth.

No… Superman whispered: he couldn’t have done that…he couldn’t have tortured Bruce like this… it was a lie! He gulped the bile that had gathered in his mouth but didn’t want to pop out to give him some relief from nausea. His fingers unclenched from the fists they had formed…

It wasn’t a lie: he did these things…He had raped Bruce.

It was the second meeting of the Avengers in the interim of ten days. Everyone around the table was dead serious looking at Tony in the head of the meeting table: the Black Widow, Captain America, Dr. Banner, Dr. Strange, Nick Fury and Pepper. Only Thor hadn’t arrived yet. Outside the whole wall windows New York was cast in the darkness of the night.

Despite Thor’s absence Tony had began presenting along with Dr. Banner the adjustments to their weapons and outfits for protection against Parademons.

“These adjustments were also made to the army weaponry” Tony said.

Natasha frowned.

“But you said we had to keep it secret.”

Tony nodded.

“Dr. Strange” he showed the man in the burgundy cape at the right of the table “and his team managed to establish a kind of protection against Darkseid’s mind control. So I spoke with the President informing him about the danger; UN and NATO are alarmed too and have informed the global governments; protective measures are already being taken for the protection of civilian population and of the greater energy facilities. In discretion of course.”

Fury rubbed his chin glancing at the door.

“Thor is here.”

But as soon as Thor entered the room the rest of the Avengers stood surprised, their faces filled with confusion and aggressiveness. Tony rushed to the door clenching his jaw and Steve followed him.

“What is he doing here?!” Tony roared and Thor raised his palm in a calming gesture as the rest of
the people in the room gathered there.

Loki shook his head smirking.

“I’m so touched from this cordial welcome, Tony old pal!”

Tony surged at him grabbing him from the lapels.

“You said that Asgardians had imprisoned him” he roared to Thor without letting Loki out of his sight. “You can’t trust gods!”

Loki nodded snorting.

“I can concur on that…mmm…Tony, can you not sputter on me?”

“Shut up, you motherfucker!” Tony’s hand moved fast to hammer Loki’s sniggering face but Steve grabbed it in midair.

Tony looked at him more angry than surprised.

“I’m angry as much as you, Tony but Thor was enraged as well so something must have happened to change his attitude.”

Thor sighed inside: exactly…

“The voice of reason” Loki pursed his lips.

Only to get slapped by a female hand; he looked surprised at Pepper.

“Shut it!”

Loki shook his head and cocked his eyebrows to Tony.

“I love bossy women…lucky Stark!”

Tony bit his lip to not hit him.

“Why did you bring him here?” Steve asked Thor. “It’s top secret, remember?”

“Loki has a place in this meeting” Thor replied.

Tony jerked.

“Says who?!”

“I.”
Chapter 85

Batman entered the meeting room with Catwoman and Flash at his sides; his imposing, serious figure in vast contrast with Catwoman’s swaying and Flash’s eased demeanor crossed confidently the shining floor to the spot where the Avengers glared at Loki.

“Wow!” Flash looked around awed. “Nice Tower!”

Tony cast him a sideways glance without letting Loki out of his sight.

“Yeah, last time we didn’t have the time to offer you a tour” Tony said and acknowledging his teammates’ puzzled looks. “Batman knows everything.”

Steve was looking at Catwoman who smiled to him slyly locking her eyes with his.

“No kidding…” Fury mumbled grinning and his eyebrow arched almost at his head.

“We must be united in this” Batman spat in his raspy voice. “And the time is short so…” he showed the table for them to move there.

“Thanks for making us feel at home…” Natasha snidely remarked tilting her head.

“You don’t expect us to fight along with Loki” Captain America said to Batman. “Because of him several people were killed during his attack in New York and he helped Joker kidnap Bruce Wayne…”

Loki stretched his posture to lean to his brother’s ear.

“It would be of help if I said them that Batman used Bruce Wayne to approach me?”

“How can you trust him?” Dr. Banner intervened and Tony crossed his arms over his chest and looked smirking at Batman.

“How?” the billionaire added.

Batman walked to the table as if the Tower was indeed his.

“I need him” he said keeping his back turned to them. “We all need him. He is precious for the battle.”

Loki pouted and nodded arching his eyebrows.

“I am precious…”

Batman turned sharply his head and cast him a deadly glare with his flashing lenses.

“You’ll be also gagged if you say another word without being asked” he growled and Loki pouted.

“You’re the boss…” he said lolling his head. “Too many nerves…” he shook his head.

Catwoman and Flash moved to the table and the Avengers did the same without pausing to cast sinister glances at Loki. The later along with Thor were the last to take their seats around the table.
“What about the Arrow?” Captain America said. “He can be valuable in the battle and he is with the good guys.”

Bruce huffed inside.

“You can’t count on the Arrow.”

Natasha frowned.

“Is he with the enemy?” her eyes flashed.

“I never liked the archer…” Loki said and Thor silenced him with a glare.

“He is affiliated with Darkseid.”

Dr. Strange nodded.

“Nice… And he must have some special qualities if he managed to find Loki’s enchanted palace. Also, he has an interest in Bruce Wayne; we should take that into serious consideration.”

Batman raised his palm.

“Stark will take care of his friend’s safety but what is the important thing right now is that Darkseid’s machine is ready” Batman began.

“Exactly” Tony affirmed “I have the machine under monitoring and Luthor said it to his boss.”

He touched the screen of his wrist watch and a hologram appeared in the air beside him. Luthor was standing beside a sphere like black machine which vibrated emanating golden light that made clear the engraved symbols all over the machine. They could hear three people talking but only Luthor was visible.

“Who are the other two?” Steve asked.

“Darkeid and one of his lieutenants” Tony answered.

“Granny Goodness, according to Jor El’ Batman added and Tony showed them the images from Jor El’s archive.

“Why we can’t see them?” Fury asked.

“Because of their unique structure which intervenes with the monitoring devices and ruins the signal they transmit” Dr. Banner explained.

“And these are his troops” the footage changed to show the green creatures which attacked Bruce.

Winged, bonny creatures 7 feet tall with arms ending up to guns and blades; their heads were long and narrow and their mouth was filled with hundreds of long, thin teeth. Their eyes were white and completely blank. Their entire body was sleek.

“They attacked Bruce months ago” Tony remarked. “They wanted to introduce the fake Amazon Princess by saving Bruce.”

“We adjusted our weapons and armory to their power” Banner said.

Steve who was sitting opposite Catwoman managed to get his eyes off her and gaze at Tony.
“If his troops are here and the machine is ready then his attack is imminent.”

“Actually, we won’t wait for him to make the first move” Tony said dead serious.


Tony arched his eyebrows.

“Someone with one eye who sits at my right” his eye showed Fury “told me that I’m not a detective or a strategist so I ‘hired’ professional help” he gestured to Batman cocking his eyebrows “it’s Earth we’re talking about after all.”

Batman cast him a glare at the ‘hired’ but didn’t comment.

“We can’t afford letting Darkseid act first: his powers might hit simultaneously energy facilities, schools, hospitals and commercial flights globally which will be catastrophic causing chaos and millions of casualties” he added.

Steve looked at him.

“How can we prevent that?”

Batman met his eyes.

“By dictating the time of the attack.”

Fury grinned fascinated.

“You mean provoking the attack” the Colonel remarked.

Batman nodded.

“And how that will protect the targets you mentioned? We can’t stop the entire world’s life…it will be suspicious and Darkseid will sniff something and hit before we manage to protect all the targets.”

Batman gazed at Black Widow who had just spoken.

“The Training Day for the Great electromagnetic storm…” Batman rasped and the people around the table goggled while Tony smiled. “It’s all over the news the last 24 hours.”

Tony took it from there.

“Every time an electromagnetic storm hits the earth every system faces major problems so the governments supposedly have decided to train for the possibility of a major storm imitating the conditions and taking the proper measures: so the fields that face the most problems, e.g. commercial flights will be cancelled and the energy plants will be shut in order to avoid disaster from the storm’s energy but in reality from Darkseid hitting there.”

Batman looked around the table.

“Nuclear reactors, electricity plants if hit will cause damage of nightmarish dimensions. Thousands of people will also die when Darkseid’s Parademons hit the commercial flights.”

“Yes, but there are also countless of hospitals, orphanages, schools etc all around the world; what about them?” Catwoman asked.
Tony looked at her.

“The governments have taken measures; S.H.I.E.L.D.’s personnel will assist. Meanwhile” Tony continued “armed forces will be all over the planet supposedly following the emergency scenario for an electromagnetic storm but truly being ready to fight Darkseid’s troops.”

“Stark has made the arrangements with the leaders who thanks to Dr. Strange are not in danger of being manipulated by our enemy. Darkseid won’t suspect that this Training Day has anything to do with him” Batman said.

“And how we are going to provoke him to make his move?” Natasha asked meeting Batman’s lenses.

“By threatening what he cherishes most: his Anti-Life machine. When everything is secured, Colonel Fury along with Agents Carter and Hill will present Brunno Mannheim with summon to inquiry and a search warrant for his facilities in the desert: where he keeps his machine. At the same time Metropolis Police would launch raids at the hideouts of Intergang. Faced with such threats Darkseid will attempt to manipulate authorities into slip away but then he’ll realize that he can’t do that any longer so he’ll attack: first, because he wouldn’t want to risk losing his machine again and second because his arrogance wouldn’t bear such treatment from humans.”

“Wicked!” Flash said.

Batman cast him a dead serious stare and Flash arched his eyebrows uncomfortable.

Fury rubbed his chin.

“Inquiry and search warrant based on what?”

Batman met his gaze.

“His involvement in the stealing of Wayne Enterprises’ property” and acknowledging the stares of everyone on him. “Some months ago some items were stolen from Wayne Enterprises.”

Tony grinned.

“The items that created that machine. Mannheim had visited Bruce and threatened him to give him the items that were found in LexLabs. Bruce refused and a bit later the items were stolen. Of course, Mannheim’s urgency made me suspect something and set monitoring devices in the items in order to see what was going on.”

“Well done, Stark!” Natasha said but Fury looked pointedly at Batman clearly not believing that this was Tony’s idea.

“Thank you, my dear” the billionaire answered tilting his head.

Yet Batman moved on abruptly.

“Darkseid is really powerful; according to Jor El’s info he is very fast” he looked at Flash “Superman’s speed; he is very strong and he can kill with his eyes even gods.”

Tony projected footage from Darkseid in battles on other planets courtesy of Jor El.

“Oh! It gets funnier…” Loki chuckled. “We’ll have a blue and a green giant in the field.”

Dr. Banner looked thoughtful: Darkseid indeed was at Hulk’s size.
Batman glared at Loki.

“Loki has a gas that weakens super powers” the others shook their heads remembering the incident at this very Tower months ago. “Ironman will launch it to the air yet we can’t be sure that it will have the same effect on the New God. Your powers won’t be affected because you’ll get the antidote/inoculation Tony manufactured.”

“That’s why you said that Loki would be useful in the battle?” Thor asked.

Batman met his gaze with his jaw set.

“Not just that. But the rest is my business.”

Fury grinned.

“We are going to a suicide mission then” he said “me and my agents. Once he realizes the threat and won’t want to hide anymore he will kill the first humans that pester him: me and my agents.”

Batman met his one-eyed gaze.

“You and your agents will be far: you will call his secretary to inform her that her boss is obliged to come for an inquiry or he’ll be forced to come – at the same time, you will be to his premises in the desert. They certainly won’t let you search the place so you will leave with the ‘threat’ to return with reinforcements.”

Fury nodded and Batman turned to the others.

“His intention is to strike hard at Washington believing that if he destroys the US capital the rest will follow; we have indications that he had gathered the parademons in the area.” Tony said.

Dr. Strange pursed.

“That means casualties because he is so powerful that even with all of us battling him and with all the protection we can afford, he still would definitely blow skyscrapers and public buildings.”

Batman nodded.

“That’s why we drag him away by staging an attack in his premises at the desert. The machine is his priority. Knowing that a search is due to take place there he’ll turn his focus there; the heart of the battle will be in the desert instead of the cities.”

“He’ll risk damaging his machine with a battle there?” Natasha asked.

“Of course not. But it still will take place in the desert because our forces will be there heading to his machine.”

“However, Metropolis will still be at his target. Metropolis is Superman’s city and he has Intergang there; after police tries to apprehend his gang, he’ll try to wreck chaos and panic with his thugs so that the supposed Wonder Woman will come to help humans only to assist in killing them increasing the overall despair. Darkseid wants humans’ despair in order to become stronger. Gotham will be his target too; police and national guard is informed” he turned to Tony. “Have you taken Bruce Wayne to a safe place?”

“Bruce Wayne?” Steve and Dr. Strange asked simultaneously and the former looked at Catwoman.

“We gather that they might have a special interest for him” she said.
Tony nodded.

“Bruce is safe.”

Fury grinned and cocked an eyebrow.

“Of course he is.”

Natasha tapped her fingers.

“Police and National Guard will take care of thugs but what about Wonder Woman? She might be an impostor but one with super powers – police officers and soldiers won’t do anything.”

The dome that covered the meeting room cracked in the center and slowly opened to permit entrance to a small tornado. Everyone stared startled there except from Batman and Tony.

The tornado slowly stopped spinning to reveal a stunningly beautiful woman at 1.83. She was dressed in a shining ancient warrior’s armor made from brown leather. At her right thigh hanged a straight sword and at her left a glowing curled lasso. Her long, black hair was free at her back and two plaids created a wreath over her forehead; a golden tiara was stuck in her hair ending to a red, 16 rays star in the triangle of the tiara. Her forearms were covered with golden bracelets and her long calves with golden greaves which had the head of Medusa engraved on the top.

“That’s more like it” Natasha said “she is an Amazon, unlike that overpowered cheerleader!”

Catwoman looked at her and gave her the thumbs up.

“I’ll take care of her” Diana said.

Steve Rogers stood and came to her; he stretched his hand for a shake and she took it.

“It’s our honor, Princess” he said inclining his head.

“The Amazons will be at your side in this battle” she said and Thor got up to approach.

“Asgard’s powers will be with Earth too.”

“Darkshit wouldn’t know what hit him!” Flash said.

Batman turned his lenses at him.

“He has a powerful ancient demon with him” he spat and Flash pursed his lips. “We can be sure that he will use his powers when the time comes.”

“Which are?” Dr. Strange asked.

“Earthquakes, volcanoes, even tsunamis” the people around the table gulped.

“Civilian casualties” Dr. Banner mumbled what everyone was thinking.

Dr. Strange stood.

“My team will do everything to stop that force. We have people in every corner of the planet.”

Batman nodded.

“Good.” Tony said.
“What about Superman?” Fury asked.

Tony didn’t care to answer that but Captain America took the initiative.

“We defeat Darkseid and free Superman.”

Batman got up.

“Superman is my responsibility” and without another word he turned his back and moved to the exit.

Fury watched as the Dark Knight left the room and suddenly was met with Tony’s sarcastic stare.

“You can doubt my detective and strategic skills but not my superiority in human resources…”

The road back to Gotham was smooth: Tumbler ran in auto drive and thanks to Leslie’s fortifiers his feeling of fatigue was almost eliminated which made his work easier.

He had asked from Lucius to wait him in the cave and he knew that the loyal scientist was already there. In the meantime, the road there was a nice chance to look into the video case.

Selina was returning to Gotham on her bike because they didn’t want anyone to think that Batman’s and Catwoman’s relationship was something more than alliance – especially, Steve who already knew that Selina was the Catwoman.

He opened the archives of the late Matthew’s – Pielser’s lawyer - he had set the cave’s processor to accumulate; they were about his financial activities: there were some transactions repeated every month. It was a centre of care for severe disabilities. Bruce looked through the names of the patients and he stopped to the name of the lawyer’s wife.

The archives of the centre showed that the lawyer visited his wife often. But as he perused through the patients’ names what struck Bruce was another name: P. Elliot…Thomas Elliot’s mother. So Thomas Elliot could have some connection with the lawyer. Maybe they met there?

He hacked the lawyer’s accounts and found that the date that probably the video was bought there were some transactions; he crossed those transactions with Elliot’s accounts but of course nothing matched. Then he searched the source of the amount of money; it came from an off shore company…

He hacked the off shore’s logs and archives and everything led to Thomas Elliot. Bruce always suspected him but still he couldn’t blame him before.

Elliot was a professor at Gotham’s University so he could have known about Isaac’s skills and it wasn’t difficult for him to send him the disc.

Batman leaned back to his seat: he’d gather some more details and send everything to Gordon. He couldn’t believe that Elliot would reach that bottom…for a childish rivalry…

Flashes from the video’s content ran before his eyes and suddenly exhaustion washed his bones.

It was few yards before entering the cave; he ordered vocally the Tumbler to stop. He opened one of the compartments of his belts and took the small syringe.

He glanced at it feeling like a junky yet he had to take the fortifiers Leslie gave him if he wanted to make it through the end and be in top condition. Okay, he could drag his legs even without the drugs
yet this battle needed his outmost.

He took off the forearm plate of his armor and opened the sterilized covering of the syringe. Without a second thought he stabbed the needle to his vein and closed his eyes: it wasn’t doping just his usual strengthening drugs but in bigger dosage.

Lucius was sitting on a stool before the computer bench and watched focused the central screen. Upon hearing Tumbler he stood and walked towards the vehicle.

Batman got out and nodded his greeting to Lucius.

“Good evening” Lucius said “is everything alright?”

Batman walked towards the bench taking off his cowl and Lucius eyed the paleness of his boss’ face.

“Fine, Lucius; thank you for coming here so late” it was almost midnight.

“Not mention it, Mr. Wayne.”

Bruce sat on a stool and was happy to realize that the feeling of fatigue had subsided.

“Did you search what we talked about?”

Lucius sat at the stool next to him and put on his glasses which were on the chest pocket of his blazer. He pushed some keys on the keyboard and an animated map filled the central screen.

“Your hunch was right, Mr. Wayne; there are indications of Kryptonite in Mannheim’s Mansion” he smiled. “How did you know that he wouldn’t keep Superman with the machine?”

“I didn’t know that’s why I asked you to look there too for Kryptonite but I assumed that someone like Darkseid wouldn’t want to hold his ‘treasures’ in the same place. And to hold Superman they need Kryptonite to weaken him.”

“Exactly and they don’t imagine that we suspect them to cover the mineral’s radiation.”

Bruce nodded satisfied and Lucius showed with his pen the area.

“The Mansion is situated in the center of a really vast estate and the indications of Kryptonite are coming from the building’s interior.”

Bruce nodded.

“I bet it is heavily guarded.”

“Right” he took out of his blazer’s inner pocket a tablet with the characteristics of a chip.

Bruce’s eyes fixed on this and Lucius gave it to him.

“The other thing you asked me and instructions about it’s installation” he gave Bruce a USB stick.

“Thank you, Lucius.”

Lucius arched his eyebrows.

“There is no need for that, Mr. Wayne: I know what you are doing…I’m the one who should thank...
you.”

Bruce grinned.

“We have much road to travel till then…” he said. “The data Jor El sent us?”

“I utilized them as you told me” he opened his briefcase that was laid on the rock surface supported on the computer bench.

Bruce looked intrigued at the small vial Lucius placed on the bench.

“You deleted every trace of the data after?”

Lucius smiled reassuringly.

“That goes without saying, Mr. Wayne; I don’t want even to imagine what would happen if they were found in the wrong hands.”

Bruce shook his head.

“Jor El trusted me with these and I wouldn’t want him to feel betrayed.”

Lucius’ eyes became dead serious.

“He won’t.”

Bruce nodded, his appreciation visible in his eyes. Lucius seemed a bit hesitant to say what was on the tip of his tongue but eventually opened his mouth.

“If I’m permitted to say something, Mr. Wayne…”

“I think there is no doubt that you are permitted to say anything” he grinned.

Lucius licked his lips.

“Maybe after everything you have done already you should stay away…”

Bruce pursed his lips and ruffled his sweaty hair; not that he hadn’t expected this.

“Listen, Lucius: I understand and believe me I appreciate your concern; I know that I’m far from being in my best condition yet I can’t just sit and watch. There are things that must be done. And no: I can’t expect from the others to do them; they have other missions as important as mine. After all, if the outcome is negative everyone is doomed so what’s the difference if I’m safely stashed somewhere?”

Lucius lowered a bit his eyes and Bruce patted his upper arms till the scientist met his eyes.

“Everything will go as we want, Lucius.”

The older man smiled.

“It is supposed that elderly people should encourage youths not vice versa.”

Bruce frowned.

“I never thought that you considered yourself ‘elderly people’…”
Lucius laughed.

“Exactly. Lucius is younger than many youths I know!”

A third voice entered the cave after the ripping of the waterfall and the whoosh sound. Ironman landed on the rocky surface and Tony deactivated his face plate as he approached them.

“We need to talk, Bruce” he said without further undo staring solemnly at his friend. “Back in the Tower you said that Superman is your responsibility; I disagree: You did too much; it’s time to let us do what we must. I know that you have located Superman’s holding place: give me the coordinates and we’ll save him.”

“No. This is something I must do: we need him in the battle.”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“I doubt he will be in shape to fight.”

A shadow of sadness and deep worry passed over Bruce’s eyes and Tony despite his dislike for Superman felt bad.

“This is my problem” Bruce snapped. “And it is a crucial part of the plan.”

Tony closed his eyes and huffed glancing at Lucius for help to receive a pressing of the lips as if to say that there was nothing he could do.

“You must think yourself a bit, for fuck’s sake!” Tony shouted and instantly lowered his tone; he inhaled deeply. “I didn’t want to yell at you…”

Bruce shook his head.

“You didn’t.”

Tony dissolved his armor and squatted in front of Bruce to hold his upper arms.

“You already have overexerted yourself, little guy…What end you think this will have?”

Bruce met his friend’s distraught eyes and his tranquility had a calming effect to Tony.

“I’m hearing that all the time” he chuckled. “Leslie gave me medication, Tony and I feel fine. I want this to end in this best possible way, that’s why I want the plan to be executed perfectly: billions of lives are depended on this so I can’t just stay behind.”

Tony huffed and licked his lips.

“What’s the point if the world is saved and I lose you?” he said in a raspy voice from emotion.

Bruce caressed his friend’s hands on his upper arms.

“What’s the point if we lose the battle and I’m alive?” he cocked an eyebrow. “You know what that will mean.”

Tony yanked his head and gritted his teeth. He knew that Bagdana’s reward if Earth fell was Bruce.

“I won’t let that happen.”
Bruce nodded.

“Exactly. I’ll do my job and you yours.” He grinned. “I assure you that the plan doesn’t include my
death.”

“I do hope so, sir.” Alfred had just arrived with the lift and as always he brought treats for them on
the silver engraved tray. “Pardon me for overhearing.”

Tony stood and Bruce grinned to his butler.

“I know that a gentleman like you would never eavesdrop” he teased him.

Alfred placed the tray on the bench and cocked an eyebrow.

“Indeed…Though having to do with someone as strong-headed as you, sir, I’m afraid that even I
would eventually drop so low.”

The butler looked at them.

“Please help yourselves: I’m sure you need it – oh, I am preparing a nice dinner for everyone though
a bit late: I do hope you will honor me staying for dinner.”

Lucius smiled.

“You can be sure of this, Alfred; I miss your cooking.”

“Count me in too, Al” Tony said chewing one of the delicious looking ham muffins.

Alfred looked at his young master.

“As for you, sir, I think that you need a nice shower before dinner and then a good night’s sleep. Can
I hope to that?”

Bruce nodded.

“I’ll do that, Alfred, but before sleeping there’s something I need to do. Something I owe.”

“I never expected you to be allied to anyone” Steve said holding Selina’s shoulders and nibbling her
neck.

He had come to Gotham from New York to spend the night with her and now they were cuddling in
Selina’s bed.

She crooked her mouth.

“You mean Batman…Don’t tell me you’re jealous…”

Steve kissed more passionately.

“Am I wrong to be? Mysterious men always attract women.”

She chuckled and sucked his lips.

“The only thing that connects me with Batman is that his actions helped Bruce many times. It’s nice
to have the proper connections, right?”
Steve nodded and let Selina to push him on his back on the mattress. She straddled him.

“Don’t you like the pre-battle sex?” she said in her slicest and sexiest voice.

Steve stared appreciatively Selina taking off her black lace bra and grabbing his T-shirt to push it hastily over his head.

“We don’t know if there will be tomorrow, right?” he said and huffed. “Like the old days…before the great battles… If it is to die then better having the greatest memory with you…”

Selina rolled her eyes, cocked an eyebrow and lowered his jeans freeing his aroused groin.

“From my point, I’m sure that there will be tomorrow and so I chose the best doping before the big game, huh?”

Steve laughed.

“I prefer your standpoint, Sel…”

He raised his torso to close her in his arms kissing fervently her lips.

Thomas looked through the railed window door the infamous criminal: he was very different now without his makeup.

Suddenly, two acid green eyes met his but Thomas didn’t jump startled.

“Thought I was in isolation…” Joker tilted his head on the side. “And it isn’t a bit late for visits?”

“I have strong friends” Thomas replied.

“And stroooong nerves; anyone else would have run away by now.”

Thomas snorted and then smirked.

“Yeah, sure…”

Joker frowned and pouted.

“Aaaand what soomone with strong friends wants here?”

Thomas grinned.

“To offer you the chance to be out of here and get Brucie.”

Joker giggled.

“Doooon’t tell me…another fan of Brucie? And what you will get?”

“The satisfaction of seeing Brucie getting what deserves. Well?”

“Youuuu’ll get me out now?” he licked his lips nervously clearly impatient to get out.

Thomas smirked.

“No…when I consider it right.”
Joker pouted.

“Yoooo’re the boss…” he shrugged and Thomas cocked his eyebrows; he wasn’t that stupid to believe that.

The street was empty apart from some stray cat that crossed it every now and then; the stores were closed for hours now and the only light in the area came from the street lamps or a car that hastily ran to its destination.

This neighborhood was in the Narrows and after Wayne’s return from the dead had been under development exactly like the entire Narrows. Yet as it was mainly a small stores neighborhood during the night there was hardly any movement.

Jason and Dick were in the alley opposite the largest of the stores in the area.

“You’re not serious!” Dick exclaimed to his friend.

Jason hushed him hastily.

“There’s some security – careful, man! An’ ya’re not the best to speak ‘bout seriousness…”

“You made me leave my bed to show me the store you plan to stole?”

Jason rolled his eyes.

“I didna ‘make’ ya…Ya wanted to come along…”

Dick licked his lips and shook his head.

“You will seriously do that to Bruce? After everything?” Jason crooked his mouth. “If you do this then there’s no chance he’ll train us.”

“Ya heard him; he won’t train us anyway…”

“So you want revenge?”

Jason tilted his head on the side and regarded his friend exasperated.

“No wonder Zucco fooled ya, man! Ya’re talkin’ bullshit! I love Bru…” he noticed Dick’s arching eyebrows and immediately changed. “I like the dude whether he trains us or not; an’ I won’t rob the store: I’ll took one or two things – ya know for the kicks.”

“There are better things than stealing to get some adrenalin.”

Both boys jumped startled as the raspy voice came right behind them. They turned and goggled at Batman.

“Batman, I…” Dick started.

But Jason frowned and took a nonchalant expression.
“What are ya doin’ here?”

Batman yanked his head.

“I was looking for you to give you what I owe you” he crooked his mouth. “But I’m changing my mind now…”

“Eavesdroppin’ is baaaad, dude” Jason said pouting and Batman cast him a glare and made to turn his back.

He touched an indicator in his forearm and the alley was lit from the headlights of the Tumbler. Jason goggled. Batman had come to give him the ride he had asked.

“No, no! Dude, don’t go! I…I was jokin’!”

Dick rolled his eyes.

“He isn’t stupid, Jay!”

“Okay, okay! Gimme a second chance, man…I didna do the offence; ya can’t punish me just for thinkin’?”

Batman tilted slightly his head and looked the innocent expression over Jason’s eyes: if he wasn’t Batman Bruce would have laughed with the cunning of the boy. Jason was looking at him pouting, his agony increasing with each second.

A hissing sound echoed through the dirty alley and the Tumbler’s doors opened upwards. Batman made a node with his head urging the boys to jump in.

“Thanks, man!” Jason said and rushed there.

Dick looked at Batman.

“I’m sorry for leaving the Manor…it must seem like betraying your trust but it was Jay. Thank you for not being mad at him.”

“How can I?” he replied and gesture towards the car.

Jason was looking and touching everywhere in the car like a little child taking a new toy – actually, Jason was just eleven years old so he wasn’t that far from little child; Bruce was smiling inside. He closed the doors and started the engine seeing how thrilled the two boys were.

“How ya managed to brin’ the car in the alley? We didna hear anythin’. Ya must have slipped right under our noses, beside us an’ we didna notice. It has some shrinkin’ mode that makes the car smaller?”

Batman looked at him.

“No. The alley has a back entrance.”

Dick burst out in laughter and Jason crooked his mouth.

“I knew that…” he said defensively to Dick.

But he forgot all when Bruce pressed the button for acceleration and made the boys jerk backwards – of course he had them tie their seatbelts as soon as they entered the car. The Tumbler crossed the
road fast and smooth but Bruce lowered the speed once the car entered the central highway where many cars passed.

“They don’t see us?” Dick asked.

“No. Tumbler is in stealth mode” Bruce replied.

“Mmm. That’d be handy” Jason said and Batman cast him a sideways glance.

“You said that you wanted to fight crime” he remarked.

The younger boy smirked and his eyes shone wickedly.

“Yup! But ya didna hire me…so…”

“There are equally if not more important things than fighting crime with your fists.”

Dick shook his head.

“Sure but sometimes fists are the best option.”

Batman met the boy’s eyes.

“Not for boys with potential like both of you – actually, every kid should stay out of this.”

Both boys huffed frustrated and the Tumbler developed speed again as they crossed the Lincoln Bridge and then the country road in the Palisades. At some point the vehicle jumped over a hill and landed several feet away causing a thrilled shriek from the boys.

“Do it again, dude!” Jason yelled and Bruce just couldn’t deny him.

The Tumbler jumped over a small hill to land in front of the forest. The boys looked at him disappointed.

“No more?” Dick asked.

“I want to talk to you” Bruce said dead serious and the boys nodded. “Soon a major battle is going to start: a powerful alien with his allies is going to strike us.”

The boys initially goggled but then exchange determined glances.

“We’re not afraid” Dick said.

“We can help kick out that UFO motherfucker” Jason added.

Batman grinned on the ‘UFO’ because he remembered Tony using the same word.

“I know that you are brave. So I want you to stay at the Manor and you, Jason, will bring your mother there” the boys nodded. “The Manor is the safest place in Gotham.”

“Yeah, I can bring mom to the Manor but I can do things” Jason protested.

“Me too” Dick added.

Batman met the boys’ stares.

“Your help is precious and that’s why I’m talking to you right now. I trust you that you will protect
and support Alfred and the others; they will need your courage.”

The boys looked each other and pressed their lips nodding making their talking with the eyes.

“And you?” Dick asked. “You will be in the battle?”

Batman nodded.

“And that’s why I need you in the Manor.”

Jason was thinking something and liced his lips uncomfortable. Dick noticed.

“What?” he asked his friend.

“Is just that…” he looked at Batman. “Is this why you took me for a ride? Ya’re taking care of yar checklist in case ya…?” the boy’s voice was almost angry because he didn’t want to sound sad.

Dick frowned.

“No” he said. “You can’t be in battle…You could…” he shook his head. “You’re strong and brave and all that but you’re injured and vulnerable.”

Jason nodded.

“Dick can’t afford to lose another parent…” he said “even a foster.”

Dick looked at his friend.

“Neither Jason; he is been through enough shit…”

Batman was touched from the boys’ love yet he set his jaw.

“There is no reason for this discussion; I took you for a ride because I wanted to talk to you confidentially…and I had delayed too much Jason’s ride which is not right: he earned that. And that’s all! I didn’t have you for drama fans.”

The boys stayed silent: Bruce was right; they shouldn’t be talking like that. Jason pursed his lips.

“Ya said I earned it… Even though I was thinking to burst into that store?”

Batman grinned.

“I know you are a good boy, Jason, and down there you know right from wrong. Actually, you two are great friends to each other: the one helping, completing and supporting the other: don’t you ever lose that.”

Jason gulped and pressed his lips.

“Ya’re doing it again, man!” he protested. “Talkin’ as if ya’re gonna…”

“Don’t say that, Jay!” Dick snapped.

“I’m saying what I’m thinking and that has nothing to do with the situation, understood? Do you doubt my abilities?” Batman growled and his frown under the cowl was audible; he wanted to make the boys forget their fears.

“’Course not, dude!” Jason said and Dick shook his head. “Ya’re gonna kick their asses an’ we’ll do
the same if anyone tries to hurt Alfie an’ the women!”

Batman nodded.

“That’s what I want to hear. Now we’re getting you, Jason, at home and then return to the Manor.”

The vehicle roared reaching turbo speed in a few seconds and the boys exclaimed thrilled.

He was dying. Clark knew he was… the few drops of stamina had evaporated yet he didn’t care if that was the end; not because the pain, the hunger, the thirst, the torture would end but because he didn’t deserve to live any longer after what he did.

At least he wouldn’t see what was going to happen; the Earth’s destruction; the slaughter of humanity; Bagdana taking Bruce…No, that…that wouldn’t happen: even if he was to die Bagdana wouldn’t enslave Bruce. No, no, no! They would be stopped even if he died forgotten here…

He just wished he wasn’t this weak and unable to escape. He wished he could stop Darkseid and his gang and save Earth and Bruce. And then he wouldn’t care if he died because Bruce would be safe…If only he could ask forgiveness from his Star; the forgiveness he didn’t deserve but at least Bruce would know that he realized his crimes and regretted them and he will be eternally tormented for what he did.

He wouldn’t have the chance to kneel before Bruce and apologize…He was doomed but at least let the world be saved by some miracle.

Suddenly, he felt a slight change; something like being moved. But he didn’t have the strength or the mood to raise his heavy, throbbing head from his chest and open his eyes to see; probably they had come to taunt him again. It was as if his body was feeling better the burning red light subsiding and the Kryptonite effect lessened but he didn’t believe it; tricks his mind played to him to torture him more with hope.

“Moon River wider than a mile
I’m crossing you in style
Some day…”

His eidetic memory was his cruelest torturer and it was right to do so tormenting him with the song he was singing to Bruce every night while he was in coma back in the Fortress. Even the remembrance of that song stabbed him brutally in the chest.

Bruce waking up from the coma.

Moon river, wider than a mile
I'm crossin' you in style some day
Old dream maker, you heartbreaker
Wherever you're goin', I'm goin' your way

“You know you should have been sleeping…”

Clark’s voice was stern but in his eyes it must have been obvious that he was happy Bruce hadn’t slept.
“You spoiled me; I need you to cuddle me to fall asleep – so basically is your fault.”

Superman crouched and lifted him from the chair easily as a baby.

“I’m so happy I finally spoiled you!” he exclaimed heaving him in bridal style and flying again through the open balcony door of his bedroom in Tony’s villa at Thasos.

“Where are you taking me?” Bruce chuckled and Clark leaned his head over his, locking their eyes.

“To spoil you more…”

They floated over the black sea; the full moon was sending silver to sleep over the black slithering silk of the sea. And then in the peaceful thrashing of the small, lazy waves, Bruce heard some very familiar words that made his heart beat faster.

“Moon river, wider than a mile…”

He stared at Clark who blushed and stopped singing.

“I know this song” Bruce said.

“No kidding…”

“I must have heard it in Tony’s house: Sinatra is his favorite singer…but this song feels more important” Clark was looking up, pursing his lips. “What?” he asked grinning.

Clark gulped and looked him in the eyes completely solemn.

“I used to sing to you that song…every night…at Fortress…when you were…” he inhaled deeply “far away from me…when I wanted to persuade you to come back so to see the world together…to not let me see such a vast world alone…”

Bruce felt his eyes watering and Clark smiled.

“It seems they’re right about people hearing us even when…” he caressed Bruce’s cheek “they’re far…Don’t cry, Star…we’ll cross that river together” he captured his lips.

“Sing it again…”

Clark began singing as before mimicking perfectly Sinatra’s voice but Bruce touched his fingers to his lips and he stopped.

“In the Fortress…don’t tell me you sang using Sinatra’s voice?”

Clark blushed.

“No…”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I want to hear it with your real voice…”

Clark coughed embarrassed and began singing with his own voice and it was the loveliest voice Bruce had ever heard; he murmured appreciatively without opening his eyes and felt Clark change his position hugging his waist and holding him upright glued to his body. Moving slowly to the rhythm of the song…Bruce nestled his head to Clark’s heart keeping his eyes closed to suck the
verses, Clark’s voice and his heartbeat.

“Old dream maker, you heartbreaker
Wherever you're goin', I'm goin' your way…”
“Two drifters, off to see the world
There’s such a lot of world to see
We’re after the same rainbow’s end, waitin’ ‘round the bend
My huckleberry friend, Moon River, and me”

Something unbelievably soft and cool caressed Clark’s hot forehead: the truth was that he was feeling much better; the fever must have had fallen considerably and although nausea was still there in his empty stomach it was just an echo of the hurricane of the previous…hm…days? Months? Also, the pain was decreased to almost bearable levels yet he was too weak, unable to move.

But he could feel the soft and taut at the same time surface he was leaned on: that was leather definitely. He wasn’t laid flat on his back but more in a sitting position. Also, he could still open his eyes yet he knew that the red radiation and the green glowing of his chains were gone; now around him was tender, warm golden light much like sun’s radiation…

He was feeling better as if the song itself had some healing powers which thought was stupid: songs could heal but a beloved song like this could definitely fill you with courage.

He moaned as the cool fabric brushed his sweaty neck. And then his dry, torn lips felt something touching them; his mouth opened on its own accord and some drops of water dripped inside comforting his thirst but also making the demand for more violent; however Clark knew that at this point he shouldn’t drink much water at once because it would hurt him.

Which the stranger didn’t want as well because he withdrew the water.

Clark was happy that he felt better yet he was afraid that it was Ivy again having fun by torturing him with the temporary stopping of his torture. On the other hand…Ivy didn’t know that song and its significance.

His heart drummed and despite the weakness and the pain that insisted on piercing his every cell he opened his eyes; he wanted to open them at once but they couldn’t do that.

So Clark gradually, in the speed his weak eyes allowed him, managed to see behind a wet veil that he was in a small space; in front of him was a hard surface with bluish indication and a small screen; he could see the source of the golden light above him on the low ceiling: a small generator of light that imitated the sun. Which was necessary because from the window in front of him he could see in the covered with forest horizon that the day hadn’t dawned yet despite the fact the dark blue of the night had cracked to allow lighter color.

But what struck him was the presence of a steering wheel. He was in a car.

But his surroundings were the least he wanted to see; his heart was pounding his tormented insides pressing his panting breath to a stampede. He wanted to see his singing savior because now he was sure that this wasn’t a game of his captors to torture him even more.

The wet veil covering his eyes stubbornly didn’t want to clear as much as he blinked; however he managed to see the outline of a face…and frankly he didn’t need to see more to recognize yet he needed to see because he couldn’t bear anymore not seeing…

“Batman…” he whispered because his remaining power permitted him only that; his lips cracked in a joyful smile even though he didn’t want because he was afraid that Bruce might consider it a
mocking gesture. His mind was a twirling celebrating blur but at least he had the wisdom to call him Batman not sure if there was someone else around.

Two gloved hands held tenderly his head.

“Calm down – you’re safe now.”

The veil that till now was covering his eyes rose and he saw Batman’s strict cowled face over him. The lenses were looking at him and Clark was sad he wasn’t seeing Bruce’s beautiful eyes. As if he sensed it Batman held his cowl touching the fingertip receptors and Clark’s heart jolted joyfully hearing the familiar and so exhilarating sound of unlocking.

Of course his heart stopped for a few seconds not because of pain or weakness but because he was gazing at Bruce’s beautiful face again after months revealed fast but for him tormenting slow – arousingly slow. Bruce’s eyes weren’t filled with hostile determination as in their last meeting in the Metropolis’ hotel; sure, they still glowed with the man’s characteristic determination but at the same time Clark could see concern and affection if not…love. Love he didn’t deserve.

Bruce saw Clark trying to raise himself and he hugged his back to settle him back on the seat; he wished he could have transferred him somewhere more comfortable yet this wasn’t an option right now. After all this time he felt his heart convulsing for the man before him; there wasn’t even a trace of the man that insulted, yelled and treated him bad…As if that Superman was just a nightmare; only Bruce knew that he wasn’t a nightmare and just pushed his heart to stop behaving so stupid.

He put his forearm under Clark’s head so that it was more comfortably for him.

Yet Clark tried to rise again; his agony written in his eyes.

“You shouldn’t have come, Bruce…” his breathing became a rasp and Bruce wiped with the cloth the sweat from his forehead. “It’s too dangerous, Bruce…Bagdana…Bagdana is…”

But Bruce locked his eyes with Clark’s and just nodded.

“I know” he said calmly.

But this didn’t comfort Clark who wanted to at least warn him about every detail of the sinister plot that was weaved in the shadows. He shook his head.

“Diana is not the real…” he inhaled. “You were right” he said hastily. “She isn’t the Amazon Princess; she is a fake; she is a murderer called Poison Ivy” Bruce was completely tranquil worried only for Clar’s out of breath rant yet Clark in his despair didn’t notice and continued pushing his weak lugs. “She works for an alien that wants to conquer Earth…Darkseid…that’s his name… he set Bagdana free and Bagdana planned everything…he and Ivy manipulated me into…” his strength evaporated before uttering all the wrong he had done to Bruce all these months.

But Bruce didn’t want to hear either; he was seeing Clark’s agony and that wasn’t helping.

“Hush, Clark…”

Clark frowned and then smiled relieved.

“Of course…you know everything…otherwise you wouldn’t have found me. But still, Bruce” he made to support himself to rise but Bruce didn’t let him. “Bagdana made everything to get you! He might be somewhere close…you have to leave and warn the others.”
Bruce grinned.

“I have done that already...They know about Darkseid.”

Clark let his head rest on Bruce’s forearm and his glimmering from fever eyes regarded the human with awe; which stabbed him in the heart because he instantly remembered the insults he had launched against that rare human being.

“You are injured, Bruce…” he said weakened “and vulnerable; we can’t afford the risk of you getting hit…” he coughed. “Someone else should have come…” no, even that was too much for a scum like him. “Or better you should have let me rot here…” he bit his lips “it would be too soft punishment for what I did.”

Bruce wanted Clark to stop thinking what he did and focus on what he should do now. He used the cloth to wipe the new drops of sweat from his face.

“You’d have preferred to see someone else?” he smiled and cocked an eyebrow with his eyes glimmering mockingly.

Clark closed his eyes and Bruce pressed his lips because he had missed him so much.

“No…but…” he moaned: a delicious smell tantalized his nose.

He knew what that was and for confirmation he felt the familiar sense on his lips. He opened his eyes: Bruce had brought a donut to his mouth – the Prince’s Donut. Clark felt his tired eyes watering.

“Bruce…you…”

Bruce nodded.

“You must eat” he said composed.

“My stomach...Nausea…” but the truth was that being away from the red light and the Kryptonites had made the nausea subside more as the time passed and now smelling the delicious dessert actually he felt a pang of hunger.

“You need the sugar” Bruce replied determined reading the change on Clark’s eyes.

He supported his head and Clark ate a small testing chunk. He moaned from appreciation after the starving of all these days. But his worry didn’t let him enjoy the delicacy: in his mind, Bagdana’s threat was always looming.

“Bruce, they will notice my absence...they’ll know and chase us...You! They can’t catch you...they shouldn’t.”

Bruce regarded him a bit strictly; Clark shouldn’t torture more himself with that.

“Don’t worry about that...just eat” he spat.

And Clark obeyed.

“Don’t tell me that Batman bought them from Ms. Rose’s bakery?” he asked copying the similar question Bruce had asked him the morning after their night in the greenhouse.

“Don’t tell me that Superman is Ms. Rose’s client?”
Bruce felt a punch in his guts hearing that question which remembered so well.

Clark noticed and his guilt became salt in his wounds…the conscience wounds because his body didn’t have any surface wound; the tortures they inflicted to him were internal. Yet his conscience’s torture was worse than everything else and didn’t subside even if Kryptonite and red radiation was away.

“No…Lois helped” Bruce decided to soothe him by answering his question.

Clark’s eyes shone in the reference of that name but then he stopped eating and lowered his eyes remembering how he treated his best friend.

“How is she?” he asked.

Bruce found his eyes.

“She is fine; I told her everything about the mind control you were under” he crooked his mouth

“Tony of course had informed Bruce Wayne because Bruce couldn’t have found this. She is always your friend – now. Eat!”

Lois was pressing the keys on her desk computer huffing and puffing; today the all too familiar roaring of her colleagues’ typing was annoying. Martha Kent had called Perry to tell him that Clark was ill so he’d have to stay in bed for some days. But Lois wasn’t stupid: she remembered the phone call Ma Kent made her and her question about Clark’s whereabouts.

If Clark was with her all this time then why she called her to ask about him? Of course he could have returned to his Ma after the phone call but still…Clark definitely couldn’t be sick so this was just an excuse to cover up his absence from work. And Lois wondered: only from work?

She was writing in auto pilot while thinking hard; Martha’s sudden call to her son to come visit her after Superman saved those people in the restaurant attack. And now this… Lois frowned without even realizing. Maybe what Superman did that day in the restaurant put him in some kind of danger and that was the reason Martha called him to the farm? To protect him? But then Ma Kent called looking for her son…so Clark left the farm; and now Martha calls to say that he is ill…and Superman has disappeared…

The ring of her Smartphone startled her.

“Bruce? What a pleasant surprise! Yeah! Everything you want: do you want me to come to Gotham?”

She smiled.

“You’re here?! Wait…I’m coming.”

Bruce saw her coming no more than five minutes later; he was at the park opposite the Planet’s building, sat in his wheelchair, dressed in jeans, a white crew neck sweater, a black leather jacket and a cap covering his head. His legs were covered with a quilt blanket and he wore a pair of black sunglasses.

He was waiting under a tree near the park’s center where there wasn’t any person who could hear. Bruce saw Lois scanning the park with a frown.

“I forgot to ask him where he’d be…” she said frustrated.
Bruce chose the spot he was waiting exactly because allowed him to watch the park’s entrance. So he saw her looking around to locate him and to help her touched the screen of his Cosmo calling her.

As soon as she heard Bruce’s voice in her phone she spotted him. A young man in a wheelchair… she shook her head: she should have located him instantly – she felt really dump failing to do so till now who saw him with the Cosmos to his ear.

She ran there and Bruce smiled giving her his hand for a handshake.

“I forgot to mention where I was…” he said.

Lois narrowed slightly his eyes noticing how easily the young billionaire could pass unnoticed wearing casual clothes and a pair of sunglasses. She felt Bruce’s gaze behind his glasses and smiled.

“You didn’t have to make the road here, Bruce; you could have called me and I’d have come.”

Bruce took off his sunglasses and looked at her.

“I want a favor so it would have been rude to ask you to make the road; after all, I needed a small trip” well, that wasn’t actually true: Leslie’s medicine may have given him strength and stamina yet he could sense that every new journey had its toll on him.

Lois sat at the wooden bench beside Bruce.

“You can ask whatever you want. It will be my pleasure.”

Bruce smiled.

“You’re too kind, Lois” she waved that off. “Some donuts…”

Lois’ goggled.

“What?”

Bruce shrugged.

“I would like you to buy some donuts for me.”

Lois laughed and then stared at Bruce perplexed.

“Sorry for asking…but all this road for some…donuts?”

“Specific donuts” Bruce arched his eyebrows and now Lois seemed to understand. “I need Clark’s favorite donuts from Ms. Rose’s bakery. And you as his best friend must know what are his favorite.”

Lois shook her head.

“Are you sure you don’t know? I mean you two were together for several months…” he said and immediately bit her lip realizing that it’d pain him to be reminded of that.

Yet Bruce didn’t show anything.

“He always ate the donuts that were my favorite…”
Lois nodded.

“*The Prince’s Donuts*” she smiled tenderly seeing Bruce blushing.

She got up.

“Wait here and I’ll bring them.”

It didn’t take her more than ten minutes to return with a paper bag filled with the delicacies; she gave the bag to him. Bruce recognized instantly the smell. It wrapped some of his most beautiful memories.

“But they are the Prince’s Donuts.”

Lois grinned smartly.

“Right. This is his favorite taste…”

Bruce’s eyes became blank and Lois was touched and sad for the young man’s pain.

“Do you know where he is?” she asked to change the subject as she sat again at the bench.

“It’s confidential but I know you won’t say anything to anyone.”

“That goes without saying, Bruce.”

“Tony told me that he was under some influence all this time and that Diana was actually an impostor” Lois nodded – she would have bet her salary on that. “She works with a powerful alien who plans to attack the planet. Actually, Tony believes that Superman is their captive right now and they prepare to attack the planet.”

Lois frowned. She used to snort hearing about aliens but after she learnt the truth about Clark she changed her attitude.

“That makes sense – Superman surely is one of the greatest protectors of Earth. They know his human identity?”

“Tony told me that they ignore that.”

Lois huffed and crossed her arms over the chest.

“Will they manage to save him? Save the planet?” she asked determined but with some agony in her voice.

Bruce nodded and then Lois touched her hands on his shoulders. Bruce raised his eyes to meet her gaze.

“And with you two? Is there a hope for you and him?” she asked tenderly.

Bruce met her eyes.

“No.”

Lois closed her eyes sad but nodded understanding.
Thor stood in front of the arched shaped window in the throne hall of Odin’s palace; he was in his full battle attire along with his horned Viking helmet. His blue eyes were focused in front of him on the green and blue planet that twirled slowly placed in the vastness of the universe. His brow was furrowed as thoughts flooded his mind.

He clenched Mjolnir without realizing and twitched feeling a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re so deep in thought that you didn’t hear me crossing the hall.”

Thor turned to see his father dressed for battle as his son; he nodded.

“Are you worried about the battle’s outcome?” Odin asked.

His son shook his head.

“I’m sure we’ll win, father…Bruce’s plan is excellent.”

Odin arched an eyebrow.

“Bruce’s…” he commented arching his eyebrows but without saying more. “Then why are you so worried?”

Thor looked at his father’s rugged face.

“Every battle has its dead…”

Odin crooked his mouth. Of course.

“We know that but it applies only to the mortals.”

Thor smiled.

“Not in this battle, you know that, father: Darkseid can kill gods.”

“Howeover your worries are for your mortal friends…”

The younger god nodded and pressed his lips.

“Yes, Tony.”

Odin let a bitter short laugh.

“And Mr. Wayne.”

Thor stretched his body and yanked his head.

“He insists on being in the battle while he is paraplegic and tired from his activity all this time.”

Odin pursed his lips.

“It is his life even if it’s a mortal life: he decides what he’ll do with the years he has. He is an unyielding, proud being” he chuckled “I’d have been surprised if he chose to stay away.”

Thor looked at Earth.

“He insisted on Loki fighting with us.”
"Your vote was in favor of Loki’s release."

Thor shook his head.

"Yours too!"

"It seems that I was under Batman’s charm, as well…" Odin laughed yet Thor gulped uncomfortable.

"I hoped to have my eye constantly on Loki but Bruce kept secret how he is going to use him."

Odin nodded.

"You must trust your clever friend" Thor shook his head.

"I trust Bruce but I don’t trust Loki… And even without the Loki factor still it is dangerous."

Odin patted his upper arms.

"We have an army of Valkyries and Asgardians ready to confront Darkseid" in front of them Odin projected what he had just seen: in the marble surfaced vast yard of the palace an army on chariots shone under Asgard’s sun.

Female warriors – the Valkyries - with wings and long curved swords and men of Asgard in their glimmering silver armors. Thor felt very proud of his people.

"Your friends will have all the help Asgard can give" Thor nodded and Odin’s one eyed gaze became strict. "But you must not let your heart bond with him more…You should never go beyond the limit of the friendship. For your own good, son."

Thor nodded.

"Bruce will never let me go…” he chuckled “…astray and bloom such feelings;” he crooked his mouth. “But I’m not sure if it is ‘for my own good’…” he snorted and Odin pressed more his son’s upper arms locking their eyes.

"He wants to protect you, Thor."

He smiled.

"Of that I’m sure."

"How’s Ma?" Clark asked and Bruce came out of his thoughts.

"She is alright but very worried… I reassured her that you’d return to her."

Clark was eating slowly from Bruce’s hand realizing that the donuts were more delicious when eaten from Bruce’s lips mingled with his perfume and the taste of his flesh. Yet he knew that he couldn’t ask for that any longer.

“It was you that advised her to call me at the farm, right? To keep me protected…”

Bruce wiped with his fingertip some cream that had stuck in Clark’s lips.
“I did. I knew that after you stopped the attack in the restaurant Ivy and Darkseid would want to neutralize you so that you won’t become popular again…”

Clark pressed his lips.

“But I left…not listening to her despair…indifferent to her feelings” he sighed and closed his eyes. “I’m an ungrateful son…I hurt her…”

Bruce caressed his sweaty hair.

“You’re not” he said and their eyes locked like the old times Clark realized with a pang.

“I owe her an apology…and to you…”

Bruce tensed; he didn’t want to hear anything.

“The things I’ve done…” Clark insisted.

Bruce touched his gloved fingers to his mouth; his eyes flashed.

“Don’t say anything…we have a battle of life or death before us.”

But at this moment Clark cared only for the man he had before him; for the pain and suffering he inflicted on his Star; his Star who despite his behavior never stopped caring and protecting him.

“Right now” he was feeling better yet his strength was still quivering and so was his voice “the only thing that matters is asking your forgiveness.”

Bruce licked his lips.

“There’s nothing to forgive. Now what matters is the battle: we have only a few hours before it starts and we need you, Superman” he said abruptly.

Clark bit the inner of his mouth.

“I want to fight and beat them for what they did…but I’m too weak” he frowned. “I’m still in pain” he huffed “I don’t care about the pain but I have no strength; I can’t even move my arms and legs – my powers are nonexistent. Even with abundance of sun light plus the artificial solar light of the Tumbler I’ll need days to recover and still I won’t be in my top condition…”

He stabbed his eyes to Bruce’s.

“But I’ll fight and I’ll be happy to die to stop them.”

Bruce yanked his head.

“We don’t want you dead” Clark’s heart leapt happy. “Darkseid has his machine in the frozen desert” Clark nodded because he knew the place. “The vast circular basin the mountains form throughout the state’s borders. He has facilities there where he keeps the Anti Life Machine. We will bring the battle there to prevent Darkseid from hitting the cities. We can’t wait him to make the first move.”

“Exactly: he intends to destroy Earth and exterminate humans. How you will make him fight there?”

“Fury will go to his premises in the frozen desert with a search warrant; they will refuse and Fury will leave with the threat that he’ll come with reinforcement to force the search; Darkseid will try to
mind control the officials to cancel the order. When he’ll realize that he can’t stop that he will do everything to protect his machine – especially, when he finds out that his Intergang will be under Police’s attack too.”

“You corner the beast…” Clark mumbled awed. “But can you manage all that? Darkseid’s mind powers are tremendous and Ivy has super powers that if used…”

“The real Diana is with us. And we have more allies at our side: Jor El will cast the Fortress protection.”

Clark’s eyes widened impressed.

“And we need your entire strength and your skills as well” Bruce cocked his eyebrows. “Now. The plan will be set in motion in about one hour and thirty minutes.”

Clark was really enthused with the plan yet his weak, aching body was a big letdown that choked his exhilaration.

“How?” he asked perplexed almost in despair.

He began trembling from cold; his fever had dropped but now his temperature declined abruptly due to the days he spent under Kryptonite’s effect. His teeth rattled.

Bruce’s insides clenched seeing him like this and he raised him from the seat to hug him so to give him his warmth – the Tumbler’s heated seats weren’t enough; even though he wore the armor still this was warmer than Clark’s body right now. He felt Clark’s heart beating crazily with the proximity.

Clark closed his eyes: Bruce was holding him. Bruce still loved him so much that he hugged him to warm him. He managed to persuade his arms to touch Bruce’s back though the armor kept away that soft, taut skin he loved. His eyes met with Bruce’s.

Bruce knew that it would come to this; he had come here determined to do it; for that reason he didn’t let anyone else come. He had to give Superman his strength back. And Clark was freezing, the warmth inside the Tumbler insufficient; the thick forest near Mannheim’s Mansion was a perfect cover yet it blocked much of the real sun’s warmth.

It was difficult; his embarrassment was tormenting yet he had to do it; he clenched his jaw and swallowed his shyness. He began taking off the various parts of his armor rather hasty.

Clark hadn’t overcome his dizziness yet he looked in disbelief Bruce taking off his armor revealing part by part his dressed in underwear body. He couldn’t understand what was happening: maybe it was a dream? His desire for forgiveness and his thirst for Bruce was taking the form of a beautiful illusion?

Illusion or not he couldn’t let Bruce do this. He touched carefully his hand and Bruce cast him a perplexed glance; Clark could see some sweat drops on his face.

“I’m not worthy of this, Star…”

This is what Bruce needed: delays in what he had to do especially when that was so difficult.

“Can you simply shut your mouth?” he snapped and Clark grinned.

Bruce let Clark lay on the seat’s back to have his hands free to take off his undershirt. Clark’s misty
eyes widened awed seeing Bruce’s naked torso stretched as he pulled off his undershirt; he swallowed the saliva that filled his mouth: he wanted so much to touch, to kiss but he didn’t have the strength and more important: he didn’t have the right after what he had done.

Yet Bruce slithered in the same seat with him and straddled him making Clark’s heart beat strong with excitement; Clark wondered how Bruce managed to feel so light on his weakened body.

But his wonder took an abrupt end when Bruce did the most unexpected thing: he found the spots where Superman’s weathered uniform clasped and pushed the fabric off his torso.

Bruce stopped hastily his eyes from doing what they loved: admiring Clark’s perfect shaped body. He wrapped his arms around Clark’s back and raised him to touch his torso.

“You’re cold…” he whispered to Clark who was too dazzled at the moment to reply.

He was numb feeling Bruce’s velvety, warm flesh on his again after every monstrosity he had done; beyond every odd…This was a dream: the most beautiful dream; his Star holding him glued to him wanting to warm him. He blinked to control his numbness and his quick breath: Bruce was so pleasantly warm like returning to your home after walking hours in the freezing cold and finding the fireplace lit…

“You’re so warm…you’re my sun…” he mumbled letting his head touch Bruce’s shoulder on the crook between neck and shoulder using his weakness as excuse to feel more skin and suck more of Bruce’s bodily perfume.

Bruce felt his insides melt from affection but a cruel bite was always there reminding him that things could never be the same again. He didn’t have any feeling from his legs but he was sure that if his legs were healthy now would have paralyzed by Clark’s breaths on his neck. He caressed Superman’s cold hair. He had set on a system of sun light emission from the Tumbler’s ceiling but the healing effect was too slow and Clark was so much cold and weak.

Their time was limited: he inhaled deeply because now was the time he dreaded.

He took off the armor’s part that covered his pelvis back and front; then with one arm holding Clark tight on him he lowered with the other his boxer and did the same with Clark’s bottom half of the uniform.

Clark was startled feeling something so hot and soft on his icy groin; his eidetic memory that all this time was tormenting him now blessed him with the affirmation that this was indeed Bruce’s groin. He raised his eyes and met Bruce’s; it was obvious from the sweat drops on Bruce’s forehead that he was shy and embarrassed.

Bruce licked his lips.

“You need the warmth” he snapped and moved his hand to touch Clark’s length.

Clark appreciated the sensation; he was grateful but he was ashamed as the memories from what he did surged his mind. He managed to persuade his hands to overcome their weakness and cup Bruce’s face. The younger man locked his eyes with Clark’s without stopping his ministrations on Clark’s length that suddenly began twitching.

“Bruce, no…You don’t have to do this…I’m a scum: I don’t deserve your forgiveness.”

Bruce didn’t reply anything; he captured slowly Clark’s lips and began a passionate kiss that gradually became strong as Clark followed sucking the younger man’s taste as if his life was
depended on this.

Clark moaned glued to Bruce’s lips as the human fondled his back with tender movements while his other hand pumped his length; his blood began warming again and when Bruce detached and lowered his head to touch his lips to Clark’s awakened length his body was agitated from pleasant expectance.

Clark didn’t manage to speak before Bruce started…but he didn’t have the strength to stop something so pleasant, so life giving. Bruce’s mouth ministrations on his length coupled with those dexterous hands on his back pushed Clark to a blissful oblivion; he rested his head on the back of the seat because he still didn’t have the power to support it under such flooding sensations. He was grunting and his dead till now body convulsed as his blood began boiling…

Bruce felt Clark’s length hardening and despite his relief that Clark’s body was recovering he felt a cold current running the healthy part of his spine. However he closed his eyes and choked his hesitation.

When Clark’s erection was rock hard Bruce detached his mouth to Clark’s moan of sadness.

The Man of Steel took gently Bruce’s chin and brought their eyes to meet. He was aware that the younger man was now applying lube to Clark’s length.

“Bruce…”

But Bruce determined grabbed his own paralyzed thighs and made them open; then he took Clark’s rock hard length.

“Bruce…I…” Clark mumbled astonished but before saying anything else he felt his length brought to Bruce’s opening.

Clark could feel Bruce’s heart beating fast and he could tell that it wasn’t only from joy as his own; he touched Bruce’s shoulder: he was ready to tell him to stop because he knew that Bruce wasn’t ready – and he wouldn’t be ready for long after what he had done.

Bruce sensed Clark’s hesitation: damn! He had failed to cover his own apprehension. With a determined move he pushed Clark’s length inside him. He was surprised to realize that his anus protested painfully still echoing the experience of their last night.

But he ignored the pain and looked into Clark’s glimmering eyes; Bruce could tell that Clark was enjoying their unification but also in his beautiful eyes sadness and confusion were clear.

“Bruce…why?” he mumbled but even as he uttered the words his hips began convulsing in thrusting movements, pushing his flesh more into Bruce as if attracted by a powerful magnet; like the thirsty runs to the water…

Bruce’s eyes were blank; he felt Clark’s arms hugging his back to settle him on his lap more comfortable.

_The cave was empty from bats as they had gone for hunt; he had returned from the meeting in the Avengers’ Tower almost at midnight. But even that late Lucius didn’t deny him the favor and was waiting there to give him everything he had asked; yet Bruce wanted something more: affirmation once again for his assumption._

_“Lucius, do you happen to remember…”_
The scientist looked at him interested.

“What, Mr. Wayne?”

“When you inoculated Superman from the effect Ra’s Al Ghul had caused him through my body, how his organism responded?”

Lucius frowned thinking for a bit.

“At first the recovery of his powers was slow but then all of a sudden, one morning his powers had reached their previous level of strength; I remember that it was after that big downpour; I remember that night because Mr. Stark was looking for you.”

Bruce nodded. It was the night of their first time in the greenhouse. Clark had mentioned briefly when the next night Bruce had gone to his hotel room.

“You know that you healed me?” Clark whispered in his ear still holding him glued on his body, Bruce’s calves caressing his shivering buttocks.

Bruce locked his still dilated eyes on Clark’s.

“Actually, you did that. Remember?”

Clark brushed Bruce’s wet locks that stack on his forehead and cheekbones framing his sweaty face.

“Despite the huge improvement from the medicine, my powers didn’t feel as before but after last night…” he sighed “I feel stronger than ever.”

Bruce chuckled.

“It’s your psychology.”

Clark tapped Bruce’s nose and then caressed his swollen lips, Bruce kissing his fingertips.

“Lucius’ exams confirmed it…”

Clark was thrusting in him in a stable pace, strong but also gently; Clark’s body was rejoicing their coupling after all these months yet he wasn’t stupid; he knew that Bruce wasn’t perfectly into this but he was doing it for his sake, to heal him. And yes, his body was beginning to feel a lot better as if he was inside the very sun.

His thrusts became faster and Clark hugged Bruce tighter seeing in the human’s eyes the realization. The Man of Steel kissed tenderly Bruce’s sweaty jaw line caressing his cheeks; their eyes locked as Clark’s body thrust one last time feeling Bruce’s insides.

Clark caressed Bruce’s back affectionately kissing his wet hair and Bruce finally let his head rest on Clark’s shoulder. Clark’s body was hot now and his naked muscles vibrated energy and life: Bruce closed his eyes – it worked.

Clark cupped Bruce’s face and brought his eyes to meet his own; he caressed his cheek.

“There is no hope for the world, right?” he asked determined, no fear for the ending that was near.

Mannheim was sat in the big leather armchair of his desk; his office at the top floor of Mannheim
Industries’ building was drenched in pure darkness – the big rectangular window behind his back settled as to not let even the pale light of the dawn come in.

His eyes was staring blank at the wall projecting there the plans he worked in his mind. Fire, explosions, dust and debris everywhere in the great human’s city; the White House demolished. Human corpses all over the streets mummified as his machine had sucked everything they had inside them.

“It is almost time…” he dragged his words. “It’ll begin in Washington and the rest of the world will sink in the panic and terror witnessing Darkseid’s enormous power and greatness…”

Bruce smiled and for Clark that smile was hope; the sun he had be bereft of all this time.

“There was never hope for this word but that never stopped us from working to create hope.”

Clark smiled and brushed Bruce’s hair ending up caressing the back of his neck; their eyes were locked like their bodies that breathed and beat in the same pace like few months ago.

“You saved me; you gave me warmth, strength, energy; you gifted me with your body: you gave me life…”

Superman felt his old strength vibrating inside his muscles, energy fuelling his body; his senses reaching their full capacity which enabled him to absorb every detail from Bruce’s body. He nuzzled the human’s cheek’s rejoicing the velvety flesh even with his nose; he could sense that Bruce didn’t loath the touch but neither relaxed into it like in the past.

“I’m sorry, Star…I’m sorry for all the insults, the pain, the suffering I…”

But Bruce touched his fingertips to his lips and Clark kissed them feathery.

“Thank you, Star.”

Tony stood in front of the whole wall control panel in the operation room of the Tower watching avidly all over the global map the orange round lights of medium vigilance slowly turning to red indicating the time of action.

Around him in the room agents on their desks or standing buzzed like bees giving or receiving information.

Fury, Carter and Hill were on their way to the Mannheim facilities in the frozen basin; the call summoning Mannheim to interrogation was also a matter of time to be made and Tony pictured the one eyed veteran readying his old fashioned cell phone; his eye shining in determination and his full lips curled in a smirk.

Tony was agitated and he looked forward for the moment – it wasn’t long – when he would activate Ironman’s armor and fly to the battle. He preferred the battle to end all this waiting. He wished he had Bruce’s patience.

He felt two soft hands on his shoulders and his nostrils caught Pepper’s intoxicating perfume; in the chaos of the ‘war room’ he hadn’t heard her heels. He turned his eyes on her with a big smile over his face.
“That perfume…” he said.

Pepper crooked her mouth.

“Are you alright?”

Tony cocked his eyebrows.

“Yup! But I’d gulp an entire bottle of scotch if it wasn’t battle time” he frowned. “Or maybe I should do that? In the past scotch had enhanced my performance…”

Pepper crossed her arms over the chest.

“Not even think about it!” she spat strictly and Tony grinned.

He set his arm around her waist and led them out of the room. The operation room was dark with artificial light and being out in the corridor that was made of whole wall windows enlightened Tony’s spirit: the dawn was all over New York’s skyline and the first golden rays of the morning sun exhilarated him in new hope.

“They are unaware of that day’s importance…” he said “peacefully ignorant of the battle that it is to begin. They are even happy for the day off they have…”

Pepper looked him in the eyes and caressed his hair.

“You are afraid about the outcome of the battle?” she asked in a whisper so that nobody hears.

Tony shook his head.

“No, I’m sure we will prevail. We have the weapons, we have the knowledge, we have the preparation, we have Batman’s plan. Everyone is in place as Batman wanted: Diana and Selina in Metropolis to help the police with Intergang and the fake Diana – afterwards they will join the battle; Dr. Strange’s team protecting each continent – Stephen is ready to reach the battlefield; Fury, Carter and Hill heading to the basin; Captain America and Hulk ready to begin towards the facilities and I will do the same in a few minutes; Thor is in Asgard standby to lead his army here; Flash will assist National Guard and the army in Washington in case Darkseid orders his troops to attack; Batman believes that Darkseid will concentrate his forces in the desert to not let us approach the machine yet he wants to be sure; battleships are ready to launch fighters to stop Darkseid’s troops if they attack all over the globe.”

“Then?” Pepper asked.

“It will be a difficult battle…” he pressed his lips “I have inoculated our friends and I’m going to launch Loki’s weakening toxin in the battlefield to weaken Darkseid but still he’ll be mighty. People might get killed…”

Pepper nodded.

“Every war has its casualties in both camps. You are worried about Bruce?” she guessed.

Tony inhaled.

“I would prefer it if he was safely settled in Superman’s Fortress; Jor El will unleash the Fortress’ protective energy to prevent them from destroying the planet with earthquakes, hurricanes and volcanoes. Certainly the Fortress would be unassailable whatever the outcome. Bruce is still
paralyzed; already exhausted and that battle…”

She blinked.

“He is brave and smart; he knows how to protect himself – and you two will be in the battle together” she shook her index finger warningly. “You better be careful and not your usual playful self; these creatures are not for games.”

Tony closed his eyes and fumed.

“Believe me I have no mood for games with these motherfuckers.”

She leaned and kissed him in the ear lobe something that always made him feel goose bumps.

“My hero…” she chuckled.

“You’re anything than a lady in distress, Peps.”

“Thanks for noticing” she cocked an eyebrow.

“I feel confident with you here overlooking and handling information; coordinating along with Lucius from the Wayne Tower.”

She smirked.

“You have a knack in human resources, right?”

He patted her upper arm and kissed her lips slowly giving a passionate pace.

“When this shit ends…” he started but Pepper rolled her eyes.

“Men’s promises while kissing are like the pre election promises of the politicians” she said and Tony cackled.

But then his wrist watch beeped and he met Pepper’s eyes determined.

“What?!” Mannheim roared to his shaking secretary.

“Agent Fury from the S.H.I.E.L.D. called and demanded that you present at Metropolis’ attorney general for inquisition. If you refuse to attend the hearing – he said – you will be arrested.”

Mannheim knitted his thick eyebrows.

“For what?” he rattled his teeth.

“For the robbery in Wayne Enterprises’ facilities, sir.”

Mannheim clenched his fist and punched his antique grandiose heavy desk.

“That bastard again! Leave!” he roared to the woman and she hastened to do so.

Mannheim rubbed his jaw: there was no way he’d go there obeying to stupid humans! If they tried to arrest him, well, they were due for a nasty surprise. However he didn’t like that they suspected him for the robbery not that it was difficult to connect him: he had threatened Wayne before the robbery.
The sun disk was now clearly visible on the horizon from the Tumbler’s winds-creen. Yet Clark didn’t care about that: the only sun, the only life he needed was right there inside the car; in his arms, settled on his body; Clark was inside the sun itself and it felt so amazing…

Yet Bruce was aware of the time and the importance. He detached from Clark which made the Man of Steel narrow his eyes in weak protest and slipped into the driver’s seat. He began putting on his underclothes and then his armor.

Clark having finally regained much of his lost strength began putting on his uniform too not without regret.

“It’s necessary such haste?” he asked hesitantly because after the gift Bruce gave him it felt ungrateful to ask for more – he didn’t even deserved that.

Bruce holding his cowl ready to put it looked at him and Clark’s insides clenched because soon he wouldn’t be able to see his magnificent eyes.

“We don’t have much time; the operation starts…”

Clark nodded and he was ready to say something when an alarming sound was heard from the Tumbler. Bruce let the cowl aside and touched the screen zooming on the approaching figures – they were ten Parademons. He pressed his lips and put on the cowl. They shouldn’t see that Superman had escaped.

“We can beat them” Clark said seeing the creatures which he recognized from Bruce’s description of his attackers and from the visions Darkseid had planted in his mind.

Batman cast him a sharp glance.

“They must not know that you’ve escaped” the door hissed opening upwards and he was ready to jump off.

But Clark grabbed his forearm.

“You can’t face them alone: we will leave this place, drive you somewhere safe and I’ll fly to the frozen basin to fight with the others. Bruce, you’ve made already far too much and you are injured; you’re tired I felt that.”

But Batman jumped outside shaking off his hand.

“The Tumbler is set on auto pilot to drive you to the location.”

“No!” Clark yelled.

“Don’t try to overcome the system, you can’t” the door closed and Clark searched for something to open it. “You can’t open the door with force, Clark. Just go there and fight like all of us…We’ll meet at the battlefield.”

The Tumbler began moving accelerating fast; Batman watched the vehicle expressionless and that brought his eyes to meet with Clark’s who still looked at him; the impenetrable windows of the Tumbler weren’t an issue for him since his sight had much recovered.

Batman activated his glances and turned his back to meet the Parademons giving Clark the time to
Catwoman was covered by the shadows of the alley two warehouses away from the one that housed the central Intergang hideout. She was at Metropolis’ docks and the sun had already risen on the horizon. Catwoman would prefer the operation to happen during the night yet he understood Bruce’s intention: who would suspect an attack in daylight?

True: there weren’t additional security measures around the warehouse –clearly to not raise suspicions that they prepared something big. The thugs had been gathered to several hideouts of the gang clearly being ready for Darkseid’s orders for action. Police would surge simultaneously at each of them in a few minutes. And Catwoman and Diana who would stay hidden till Ivy appeared were ready the first to help the Police and the second to confront Ivy who surely would appear once her boss realized the danger to his plans.

Selina frowned suddenly; behind her was a presence that till now she hadn’t sensed coming. Bruce had warned her about Darkseid’s minions.

“I don’t like stalkers” a squeaking, malign female voice addressed her back.

Catwoman turned cocking an eyebrow to see among the shadows the elderly female creature that was Darkseid’s lieutenant: Granny Goodness. She smirked.

“Hadn’t anyone told you that you shouldn’t mess with cats? They have nails!”

She said and launched her whip hitting her in the face. She wasn’t concerned of betraying the plan because certainly Granny didn’t know her alliances.

Granny growled pissed and stormed at her.

Batman saw in his forearms indicators that the Parademons were close. He pulled his grapple gun and wrapped the cable around a thick branch launching himself up: he needed to buy Superman time.

As soon as the green creatures were underneath he jumped at them.

They were startled and Batman used the element of surprise to knock out instantly two of them upon landing kicking them hard in their vulnerable guts.

Some of the others stormed at him keeping him occupied while the others fired at him with the weapons they had attached to their arms.

He was hitting the Parademons who attacked him dodging the fire that was launched at him which killed some of the Parademons that fought with him. He grabbed the hand of one that was ready to stab him with the blade he had in his other hand and twitched his arm upwards breaking it; at the same time he launched a cable from his wrist wrapping the firing arm of the Parademon that aimed at him turning the weapon to shoot another Parademon who was ready to fire.

Batman clenched his jaw and sent the Parademon whose arm had broken to crush on his comrades. Instantly he turned around jumping at the remaining Parademons who set their weapons against him.

Suddenly he felt a change in the air behind his back.
“Stop!” he heard and the Parademons halted.

Batman turned to see the one he already knew. Bagdana: in his demon 9’ granite form dressed in black leather leggings and a black leather vest that let much of his broad chest visible.

“You?” Batman feigned surprise and the demon smiled.

“You believed me rotting in Tartarus, right? I know you would come for him even after everything he did to you – after all, it’s not difficult to find Kryptonite’s radiation when you want to find where Superman is kept: his disappearance certainly made you suspect that Diana lured him to a trap – you never believed in her” he laughed. “But I caught up with you before saving him. And now you’ll come with me.”

Batman set his jaw.

“I won’t come with you and you won’t come near me” he showed the Black Butterfly to the demon.

Bagdana smirked and without doing a move Bruce saw in the air before him Catwoman fighting with Granny Goodness; his friend was dodging the fire Granny was sending at her and attacked back kicking Darkseid’s minion hard in the face causing an enraged shriek from her.

“She is great but she has no chance against Granny…” Bagdana said cocking an eyebrow.

Bruce frowned inside and saw Granny deflecting Selina’s bullets and sending fire at her; Selina began somersaulting avoiding the lethal fire and took cover behind a trash bin. His friend fired at Granny who laughed maniac when she deflected every bullet.

“It’s a matter of time” Bagdana said slyly watching avidly Batman’s reactions.

“It’s fake” Batman growled clenching his fists.

Bagdana shrugged.

“It could be but you know deep inside that I didn’t create that:” he shook his head amused. “I always keep watching that foul creature called Granny Goodness for backstabbing me and look whom she is ready to kill: you brought your friend with you and left her in Metropolis as a backup for your operation to save Superman;” Bruce’s heart began beating again: at least the demon didn’t suspect the real purpose of Selina being in Metropolis. “She was to help you with taking him away, huh?. Granny hates humans…” he said almost sighing. “She is going to kill her…”

Bruce’s heart was pounding seeing Selina jumping away as Granny blew the trash bin with a beam she sent with her hand. He had sent Selina to her death! And Diana couldn’t help because she was away, instructed to show up in the precise time…

“Give me the diamond and the Knife of Justice and I’ll save your friend.”

Bruce knew what that meant: surrender himself to the demon. Selina jolted her whip and grabbed Granny’s firing hand deflecting the fire and crushing her to the wall. Yet as she was falling Granny dragged the whip crushing Catwoman to the cement of the alley; instantly Darkseid’s lieutenant stood and turned smirking ready to fire at Selina who was down.

“Save her!” Batman demanded throwing at the demon’s feet the diamond and the Knife he had took out of his belt.

Bagdana stretched his index figure to the image and Granny with a puff vanished leaving Selina
frowning looking surprised around her; at the same time Bruce felt his legs weakening and realized that the demon had deactivated the his armor’s system that enabled his legs to stand and move. He collapsed to the forest bed like a chopped tree and simultaneously felt his arms paralyzed.

Bagdana looked at him and huffed satisfied.

“I like it when I ruin Granny’s fun…”

Granny found herself in Mannheim’s office; she was fuming realizing that someone messed with her business but seeing her boss she was shocked. However her anger was such that she didn’t notice her boss’ mood.

“Bagdana did it!” she shrieked between her flying gray hair.

“What?” Darkseid spat.

“I was ready to fry a stalker who probably wanted to break in the central hideout and he just took me from there and brought me here! Why are you keeping that lousy creature with you?”

Darkseid met her gaze calm.

“It’s almost time for our attack: humans dared to summon me for inquisition. They threatened to arrest me if I don’t present myself in two days” he cackled. “When they come to arrest me I’ll launch my attack – I want the world being in a normal day – unlike today – so that they watch planes and civil buildings filled with people being exploded. After we finish I’ll get rid of that useful – he gave us Superman in a plate after all - but annoying demon.”

Granny smirked satisfied, her wrath having subsided.

“And his human pet?”

Mannheim raised an eyebrow and pouted.

“I need a pet too…”

Suddenly, his personal phone rang and he frowned seeing the number of Stitches, the thug he had named leader of the Intergang: the filthy rat was instructed to never call him.

“Police surrounded our hideouts…”

“Don’t worry” he said confident “they will leave.”

Granny looked him perplexed and Darkseid smirked smugly.

“It happened before; I’ll manipulate the authorities to call them back.”

He sat in his armchair behind the desk – he was sure of his success yet he frowned realizing that he couldn’t access the minds of the police heads.

“What?” Granny asked in agony.

“Nothing” he said and concentrated harder.

Yet his concentration was ruined. His personal phone rang again; he clenched his jaw seeing the
number: the premises in the Frozen Basin.

His eyes widened on listening the leader of his security.

“You didn’t let them inside!”

“They were S.H.I.E.L.D. agents – I repelled them but they had a warrant and they said that they’ll come back to search the facilities with force. They’ll bring the Avengers!”

The Machine! They must not find the Machine.

“They think!” he spat and while his employer was trying to ask instructions he launched his phone to the opposite wall smashing it to pieces.

He’d stop them; their superiors would do it. There wasn’t any difficulty for Darkseid to mind control those stupid men and women whom humans had the idiocy to call leaders. They would stop the S.H.I.E.L.D.

But to his shock he was unable to reach their minds as if a wall was built around. He tried again and again… Some sweat drops appeared over his brow. And something he hadn’t experienced ever again crawled in his insides: agony? Fear? That were for humans not him! But he couldn’t afford losing his Machine again now that it was ready.

“Master what’s wrong?” Granny leaned on him touching the grandiose desk.

His breath came out as a panting smoke.

“Nothing…”

The stable phone on his desk rang since his cell was broken in pieces. Stitches.

“They didn’t draw back! What to do?”

His punch this time broke the table. Someone understood that the minds of the authorities were controlled and found a way to block him. Intergang was under attack and they were ready to search the facilities with his machine: was there any connection or just a coincidence? He had to protect his machine.

“Boss, what we’ll do? They have surrounded us and are in!”

Mannheim changed his form to Darkseid’s gigantic form. The God yanked his head back.

“Fight back! Kill them! I send you backup!” he roared and Granny looked at him eager almost drooling.

Darkseid punched the phone smashing it instead of just ending the call.

“Very well” he smirked. “If they want it that way…they don’t know what beast they try to corner… the pests chose to die earlier.”

“Take him back to the Mansion” Bagdana ordered the Parademons who hurried to get Batman up.

The demon conjured an ancient looking box and threw it to the others.
“Put inside the gem and the dagger.”

Batman knew that the demon didn’t dare touch the artifacts himself; not without his human form that protected him from their power.

Bagdana met Batman’s glare.

“I know you would have easily escaped them so I had to take my measures…immobilizing you.”

The human set his jaw and yanked his head defiantly and the demon grinned satisfied.

“I’ll see you in a while. First, I have to make sure that you didn’t manage to take your pathetic lover out of his cell” he shook his head. “I’m sure I caught up with you before entering the Mansion but…” he smiled “a demon must be sure, huh?”

Batman met his stare keeping his cool and the Parademons that held him manhandled him towards the Mansion that lay magnificent and terrifying underneath the forest covered hill.
Chapter 87

Granny stared mesmerized at her master’s tense in determination and wrath face; Darkseid’s ever frown became even deeper as his nostrils emitted fumes and sparkles.

“Ivy will lead Intergang into massacring Metropolis while the Gotham filth will do the same; the authorities are in deep sleep so it’d be ridiculously easy to flood the streets with blood, panic and chaos – no mercy! I’ll take care of the police those foolish agents are bringing to search my facilities. Parademons will make their first appearance there and then as the world will be in wonder I will strike myself with all force to the US capital showing to everyone that they are doomed…One hundred thousand Parademons are there hungry for human flesh.”

Granny grinned broadly but then rubbed her chin.

“What about the Avengers?”

“They won’t know anything till the squad going to my facilities is slaughtered; they won’t know where to go – they’ll rush to Metropolis and Gotham to save the cities from the criminals and I will be uninterrupted as I’ll smash Washington with Parademons. Imagine their confusion and panic? They won’t know what to do…Eventually, they are going to come to stop me only to meet their humiliating defeat: but before I finish them off I want them to see the three big cities drowned in blood knowing that the entire world will have the same fate after; and then I’ll turn on my machine and the so-called protectors of this planet will watch humans being drained alive, their energy accumulated giving me the ultimate power to extinct the universe.”

She yanked her head thoughtful.

“Thor?”

Darkside shook his head.

“My sources say that he left the planet; until the news of my attack reach Asgard and he comes here there would be nothing for him to do…except to die himself” he said with blank eyes that visualized what he uttered.

Granny nodded.

“What about that scum demon? You won’t call him to fight?”

Darkseid tilted slightly his head; his eyes shone with confidence.

“I don’t need him now; I’ll slaughter the squad myself. He will be called when the attack on Washington will start: not because I need him to win but because I want him to devastate the world with earthquakes and volcanoes” he cocked his eyebrows “not that I can’t do it myself however let him do something…”

His minion bowed her head with respect.

“Everything for your glory, master” her eyes flashed maliciously.

Batman watched nonchalant the Parademons poking at him with their blade-arms cutting his armor.
but unable to reach his skin.

They soon realized that their blades couldn’t harm him so they began just hitting him all over the body; the armor still absorbed most of the force but Bruce felt the blows above the waist and acknowledge those below the waist. The fact that he didn’t even cringe from their blows enraged his captors.

The Parademons had brought him to a big room at the back side of the L shaped Mansion; it was empty, dark and dungeon-like with walls and floor covered with cheap cement.

Even though Bagdana had rendered his legs and arms paralyzed the Parademons chose to tie him erect to a stone rectangular pillar in the middle of the room. His wrists were bound together behind his back with a chain- like thing that glowed red; his ankles were bound side by side with a chain exactly like the one that tied his arms.

Bruce’s mind was focused on other things: Bagdana had gone to Superman’s cell to make sure that he indeed had caught him before freeing the Man of Steel. Things were on a sharp razor’s edge… The plan could so easily get ruined.

But Batman wasn’t showing anything just gazing at the aliens that surrounded him like hungry wolves having fun by punching him unaware that his armor spared him from the biggest of the impact.

The taller and broader from them who seemed and acted like their leader raised his blade arm and slapped him in the face. Batman took the blow without a grunt and immediately raised his head regarding the alien creature with his cold lenses. Weren’t for the cowl his entire cheek would be bleeding but now only his jaw was slashed.

“The end of your useless race has come, human; you and your kindred soon will die” he said in a hissing voice.

“So you are not mindless pawns…you know foreign languages” Batman growled.

The green creature showed his thousands of needle thin, shining teeth.

“It’s nothing to us to learn your primitive stupid language.”

“English is not the most difficult or perplexed language in the world” Batman commented sarcastic “so it wasn’t a big deal…”

The creature tilted his head on the side; his elliptic, plain black eyes puzzled.

“You’re not scared?”

Batman yanked his head scowling.

“Of you? You know the word ‘fear’ but you are a zero to my scale of fear” Batman spat.

The creature rattled his teeth.

“I’ll show you that I’m what you should fear most!”

Batman snorted unimpressed and the creature raised his blade arm and began downing it swiftly to Batman’s neck, the human not even flinching but watching him with the same tranquility.

A breath before the blade grazed Batman’s neck the creature made an awkward, squeaking sound
and then it was turned into ashes that formed a small pile in front of Batman’s feet.

The rest of the Parademons jumped backwards startled and shaken and turned their heads to see what Batman was seeing: Bagdana materializing in the middle of the room among green-blue smoke. The demon didn’t need to bother with the automatic door.

Bagdana straightened his gigantic posture and walked arrogantly towards Batman; a grin was plastered to his face and his yellow cat-like irises were fixed on Batman’s lenses.

He stopped in front of the pole where Batman was tied and without breaking eye contact with him made a sharp movement with his head and the Parademons clearly scared from their leader’s fate scattered outside the room.

Bagdana shrank his posture to be slightly taller than Batman and regarded dead serious his captive. He raised his hand and touched with his fingertip the blood trail on Batman’s jaw the Parademon’s hit had left. Batman snapped his head away but the wound had already vanished leaving the skin unscathed.

“I promised that I won’t let anyone to hurt you.”

“To whom?”

“To Lilith – I would never let her last child being hurt: you’ve been already too much hurt” he paused. “And to myself.”

Batman didn’t reply just yanked his head backwards and Bagdana smirked.

“You’re pissed” he said cocking his thick eyebrows. “I ruined your plan” he huffed. “I caught you before freeing the Kryptonian: he is still safely housed to his cell.”

The visible part of Batman’s face remained expressionless and Bagdana nodded.

“You see I knew you were looking for him even though he betrayed you. His disappearance and your suspicions about Diana’s malicious nature made you search for him. Even though you are paraplegic you were leaving Gotham to find him.”

Batman’s frown though covered from the cowl was clear.

“How do you know I was gone from Gotham? How do you know about me suspecting Diana? What are you doing here? How do you manage to escape…” he had to play the ignorant so that the cunning demon wouldn’t suspect that he knew everything.

Bagdana’s gleeful smile was filled with satisfaction for Batman’s confusion.

“So many questions from a great detective like you…You are clueless, aren’t you?” his irony subsided. “Of course…you were injured, disabled, your heart broken by Superman. You were facing far too many things to figure out everything.”

Bruce always liked to play the ignorant.

“What are you talking about?” he spat.

Bagdana grinned and circled slowly the pole where Bruce was tied.

“You asked from Thor to check on me yet I predicted that and I fooled the little Asgardian…you can’t imagine how funny it was…” he chuckled and stopped right in front of Bruce. “It wasn’t
difficult: putting a reflection of me in Tartarus baring my characteristics…You suspected that
something was off with the Amazon yet you didn’t have any proof so your suspicions were
attributed to jealousy, right?” Bruce didn’t reply and Bagdana nodded. “Since Thor assured you that
I was safely jailed in Tartarus you couldn’t imagine that Diana was planted by me to seduce
Superman and render him useless.”

“That’s impossible” Batman said.

Bagdana snorted.

“I’d prefer ‘ingenious’ or even better ‘diabolic’ – I’m a demon after all” he twitched his eyebrows
smugly. “I took a common” he tilted his head on the side and pursed his lips “well, not that common
criminal from Gotham” he nodded grinning at Batman’s silence “yes, from your city, Batman; I took
her and turned her into the powerful, charming Amazon Princess. Poison Ivy – the villain I…’hired’
– had her own special powers, one of them changing her form, using pheromones to allure and
enslave people to her will and I gave her the powers and skills of the legendary Diana of
Themyscira.”

Bruce would like to rub in his face that the fact he chose to introduce Ivy with the popular version of
the legend instead of the reality was his mistake. However he pressed his lips feigning tranquility that
struggles to conceal surprise.

“Escaping from your jail in Tartarus requires great power and you were deprived of your strength;
how can you give power to someone when you don’t have for yourself? How you got out?”

Bagdana leaned to him bringing his face close to Batman’s relishing the human’s breath that was
slightly faster from frustration for his failure.

“Only a god could free me from Tartarus and a god did it giving me back my strength.”

Batman shook his head.

“Yes, Bruce…A mighty alien god who wants to conquer and destroy the earth; he was clever
enough discerning my usefulness for his plans so he freed me sealing our alliance.”

Batman set his jaw.

“You mean servitude” he growled.

Bagdana smiled and his fingers crossed tenderly Bruce’s exposed chin causing his captive’s jerk to
avoid the caress.

“Everyone has a different word for the same thing” he pursed his lips. “Alliance, servitude…ally,
master, servant: I don’t give a shit how you or Darkseid calls it – Darkseid is the god that freed me.
The only thing that matters is getting what I want.”

“Which is?”

Bagdana’s face became serious.

“You” his eyes were completely still.

Batman snorted.

“I’m your share from the spoils?” he asked sarcastic.
The demon shook his head.

“I do deserve the best thing this planet has” Batman glowered at him. “I gave Darkseid Superman tied in a green Kryptonite weed bow and a heroine - protector of the humans that will slaughter them when the time comes: imagine the despair when humans look at Wonder Woman for salvation and she answers with killing them? Darkseid needs humans’ despair; he is going to make the perfect use of the darkest emotions of humankind: he’ll become even stronger. It’s the first material for his Machine.”

“Machine?” Batman feigned puzzlement.

“The items you found in Luthors’ Labs; those that were stolen…”

Bruce pretended to halt his breath.

“Mannheim works for Darkseid?”

Bagdana laughed.

“So your mind began working… Yes, he came to your office to threat you to give him the items – foolishly, that was a risky thing to do but the idiot god didn’t ask me; and you of course refused” Bagdana frowned remembering how Bruce’s attitude caused Darkseid’s interest. “But, no, Mannheim doesn’t work for Darkseid: Mannheim is Darkseid” he said amused with Batman’s stunned silence. “When I captured you, your friend, the Cat, without knowing was faced with Granny Goodness, one of Darkseid’s lieutenants – so you were right to ask me to save her.”

The demon waved his hand in the air.

“Mannheim was Darkseid’s human form for years while he was here watching and learning about humans. And of course this explains why you located Superman in his Mansion. I bet you thought that Mannheim was a new Luthor.”

Batman cocked an eyebrow inside: right…However he licked his lips pretending that he was trying to overcome his surprise for what he heard.

“How did you know that I was suspecting Diana? And how did you know I was away from Gotham?”

Bagdana rubbed his square chin.

“Oh, yes; we come to this…”

In front of Bruce’s eyes Bagdana was replaced by Oliver Queen in his smuggest expression. Batman slightly gaped.

“Queen?”

“Exactly, Bruce” he answered in Queen’s low baritone. “You suspected Diana but you thought that she just brainwashed poor Oliver Queen and that he just fell to the same trap as everyone else. It was so obvious when you were trying to get from me information for the island and the Princess; trying to make me affirm your suspicions. Of course, since Thor had seen me in Tartarus, you couldn’t suspect that Queen wasn’t Queen” he tilted his head. “Well, almost…” he commented.

“And the real Oliver Queen?” Bruce asked something that really wanted to learn.
“I found him in a deserted island that even the maps don’t have; he was almost dead and then I conceived my plan: how to introduce a charming, stunning legendary Amazon to seduce Superman and a tycoon to watch over you and try to…”

“What?”

Queen shook his head.

“Try to gain your love…As a human to a human: a new start between you and me…” he snorted. “But you are too stubborn to look away from that Kryptonian…I tried; I tried hard: I took you where Superman was fucking Diana expecting that you would loath and forget him once and for all…”

“You took me? But it was…”

Queen gave his place to Arrow, the demon taking his other human disguise.

“The mysterious Arrow…” he said thoughtful. “I like the name you gave me, Bruce” he chuckled. “I even became a hero to approach you…” he shook his head disappointed, sad. “But your heart is an unconquerable fortress…”

“And the real Queen?”

“I saved his life by possessing his body: it was a matter of minutes for his death” Arrow’s flashing green eyes locked with Batman’s lenses. “I could have let him die yet a human body was very useful to me.”

“Why? You could find another way to bring Ivy close to Superman.”

Arrow’s grin was visible among the shadow his hood shed over his face.

“With his body I could be near you: the human flesh would not let the diamond affect me and hold me back. And as a human with common experiences with you I might manage to approach you” he lowered his eyes. “I wanted to live a human romance with you…” he whispered and Batman pressed his lips.

“What would Queen become?”

“I can do whatever I want. He is just a shirt for me: now he is of no use to me.”

“When you leave his body he will die?”

Arrow tilted his head on the side.

“Don’t tell me you came to care for him after all?” his voice was filled with irony yet his eyes were sparkling happily. “It’s my choice whether he lives or dies when I’ll leave his body.”

“Then let him live” he almost ordered.

Arrow laughed amused.

“I managed to enter your heart with his form? I should be grateful to that shirt – but demons can’t feel gratitude” he seemed thoughtful. “However I will let him live; actually it doesn’t matter. In two days Darkseid will unleash his attack and every human will die.”

“You cooperate in this, in something that will exterminate the world only to get me?!” he growled angrily.
Arrow disappeared leaving Bagdana in his place; the demon grabbed his chin and leaned to him.

“Why I should care about this horrible world?”

“You live millions of years here!” Batman gritted his teeth.

The demon cocked his eyebrows.

“So what? This world and humans caused me only suffering; they separated me from my love; they took her away and killed her! I’ll be happy when humans get massacred and you should be as well. All your life they humiliated, tortured, raped you! This world it’s only pain for you, Bruce! And for me… We can make a new start in a new world: a world only for us…” he whispered and brought his lips to touch tenderly Bruce’s lips.

But he averted his face leaving the demon’s lips to kiss the air.

“Never!” he growled clenching his jaw.

Bagdana jerked upwards with his eyes blazing red from ire; he slashed the air with his hand and immediately Batman’s armor peeled off of his body and his underwear vanished leaving him completely naked; the cowl had followed the other pieces of the armor so Bruce was facing the demon without anything between them. Yet his eyes were wilder and fiercer than the lenses.

Bagdana brought his face close to Bruce’s and closed his eyes.

“I claimed your unripe, child body and it was the most beautiful thing in ages…now seeing your mature body makes it impossible to be patient any longer…”

Bruce stabbed him with his sparkling eyes; his jaw was set in determination.

“Forget that, Bagdana!”

Bruce felt his shackles vanishing. His legs bent dragging him down but Bagdana caught him in the air holding him tight. Bruce growled and convulsed in the powerful being’s arms using his body since arms and legs were paralyzed yet Bagdana made his gripping stronger. The demon didn’t want to hurt the struggling human in his arms so he let him drag him a bit.

However this had to stop so he forced Bruce to face the grim wall setting an invisible soft barrier so that the human wouldn’t be crushed on the concrete. Bruce twitched trying to resist yet the demon was like granite exactly like the color and the texture of his body and crushed him on the wall; he was prepared for the pain of the impact with the concrete but instead he felt the soft layer the demon had conjured. On that he snarled and fought more: he hated that pretention of affection and care when the demon had only one purpose.

The demon’s cocooning body became like pinchers stilling his writhing body.

“I should have punished you” Bagdana whispered in Bruce’s ear panting from frustration and his effort to contain the man without hurting him. “You backstabbed me and sent me to the Tartarus to rot!”

Bruce clenched his jaw and jerked his head to avoid the close contact yet the demon was unyielding.

“Then do it!” he spat defiantly. “You definitely won’t be the first one and it won’t be your first time doing it!” his breath came like grunts as he tried again to shake the demon off him.
Bagdana tightened his grip on the human’s upper arms pressing him more to the wall to persuade him to stop fighting. However the close contact with Bruce was a torment and the human’s perfume mesmerized him to the core. He sighed.

“Calm down, Bruce: you’re going to hurt yourself trying to fight me.”

But Bruce growled and jerked again his torso holding his breath to gain more strength.

“I don’t care!” he spat through his teeth.

“But I do!” the demon was panting; however this fighting spirit, this defiance made his body scream in desire.

When he finally managed to confine and immobilize Bruce, Bagdana touched his head on the human’s naked shoulder closing his eyes in pleasure both from the sense of the velvet flesh on his thousand years old skin and the rare perfume. Bruce was trying to catch his breath and calm his heart that didn’t accept defeat.

“Please, Bruce” the demon said gently “remember…Remember our life together…you like fighting as you always did…remember the clangs of iron and copper in the battlefield when we disguised ourselves to mingle with humans in order to participate to their stupid wars?” he caressed Bruce’s arms listening to the human’s quick breath; he felt like trying to hold a wild animal. “Remember when we wear their ancient armors and carried their spears…the sense of the primitive iron swords as we hit and killed people…Remember the screams; the war cries of the warlords; the skin raising shriek of the horns; the smell of blood; the smell of terror; the smell of the death that we were the only ones who wouldn’t taste…Remember the fires…”

Bruce’s eyes were focused on the stone wall, blank seeing the images Bagdana was speaking about: a vast battlefield on a valley with a small river at the right.

The angry and terrified neighs of the horses were painful to the ears; a cloud of dust covered the valley but everything was visible because he was standing in the middle of the valley people with ancient armors and weapons surrounding him. Around them people were dueling; spears were ripping the air hissing to splash into human flesh causing creepy cries of pain. The smell of blood stung in his nostril but he loved the sensation.

He was waving his heavy, straight sword twirling, severing arms, legs and heads in his motion; covering his body with his shield. He could see beside him Bagdana no different than a sturdy, tall man slaughtering those who made the mistake to attack him; he used his sword yet some times he did it with his bare hand. He felt his fleeting gaze on him and the demon turned and smiled and Bruce felt his heart elevated and his body aroused. Someone downed his axe on his helmeted head shattering the iron –oh! It was priceless seeing the human’s shocked expression when realized that his victim was alive and had stabbed his dagger in his guts: the owe of being aware that he had encountered a god glimmered in his terrified eyes till life abandoned him.

Bagdana ran to him laughing; his sword blade as his dagger dripping hot blood. Indifferent to what was happening around, the demon wrapped his arm around his waist and kissed him passionately. And he liked the feeling: for an hour he was fighting enjoying himself but now his body was excited for the demon that had glued his body on him. Bruce elevated himself in the sky taking Bagdana along – the excitement of the battle made his body feel so alive, so lively! He took off the fabric that kept his hair tamed; a flood of raven-blue silken hair fell like wave all over his back.

Bruce’s heartbeat had calmed and he felt the demon’s lips trailing the back of his neck.
“Humans were our favorite game and their wars our perfect foreplay…Remember our coupling after the heat, the arousal of the battle; the passion…Your fire burning the demon of the fire…” he breathed. “I love you, Bruce.”

Hearing that, Bruce overcame his momentary numbness of feeling the sensations of another body. He jerked managing to push a bit the demon taking advantage of his surprise; yet he was immobilized again.

“You don’t know what love is!” Bruce growled in frustration for the forced intimacy he didn’t manage to shake off.

On that Bagdana felt his aroused body fueled from anger: he grabbed both Bruce’s wrists and turned him to touch his back to the wall, stretching his arms on the wall over his head. Bruce’s breath flamed his face hot from frustration because he was unable to escape.

“Is that so? Who can stay loyal to his dead love for ages? Who can continue searching for his love through thousands of years?”

He felt Bruce’s chest heaving from his panting and touching his; their eyes were locked in a staring contest. Bagdana clenched his jaw and pressed Bruce more on the wall rejoicing the contact.

“Certainly not your unworthy Kryptonian! He fell for the first person who hit on him. He cheated and broke your heart!”

Bruce’s torso twitched again even though he knew that he couldn’t escape the demon’s grip – his arms were still paralyzed even though Bagdana clenched his wrists; yet his wrath was such that he didn’t care.

“You just admitted that you and that impostor put him under your spells!” he snarled showing his teeth unfazed by the fact that a powerful demon held him defenseless.

It was Bagdana’s turn to grunt in frustration; he shook Bruce.

“Wake up, Bruce! If his love was real no spell, no power in the world would have made him fell for another person and cheat on you! His love didn’t last because it was fake.”

“Bullshit!”

The demon’s eyes flashed red from anger and his nostrils emitted fume; his body lost its granite texture and become red gold fire kept inside by a transparent skin that reminded glass.

Bruce felt the demon’s grasp on his wrists tightening and his body falling.

Clark had stayed in the driver’s seat from the moment the Tumbler began speeding away from Bruce – not that he could drive; the route was preprogrammed and he couldn’t override it. He tried to open the doors or even break the car’s wall even though he knew that it was in vein; then he tried to steer the wheel or change the course with the control panel failing each time. So he stayed seated surrendered to the notion that he was going to be ‘released’ only when the car reached the destination.

He watched the road from the windshield and absentminded ate the rest of the donuts in the paper bag and absorbed the solar artificial light from the Tumbler’s ceiling along with the natural sun light that the solar panel gathered sending it to him.
His initial thought on realizing that he wouldn’t be able to come out of the car unless he reached destination was that when the door opened he would immediately take off back to the Mansion to make sure that Bruce was alright. Because despite Bruce’s reassurance that they would meet in the battle Clark was afraid: he didn’t trust that cunning demon.

But then he realized that if he did that then he would disappoint Bruce once again. Betray his faith in him. Bruce wanted him to fight for the planet, for humans because the battle against Darkseid would be harsh. If he turned his back again to humans’ need then Bruce’s sacrifice would be wasted; jeered…

Because Clark knew that what had happened in this same car just minutes ago was a sacrifice. Bruce made that not only for ensuring that humans would have all of their protectors in good shape for the battle but also to give Superman the necessary strength to survive and win that battle.

He looked outside the window on his side. Deserted country road surrounded in both edges by nothing else than low weed with their surfaces burnt from the cold. He was approaching the Frozen Basin and he was seeing the proud mountains shedding their frozen shadow to the land.

Bruce had chosen the deserted road for Superman’s journey. Of course the Tumbler didn’t have a problem overcoming the obstacles a deserted country road presented every now and then.

Bruce…His Star. Clark cringed only on the recollection of himself saying that to Bruce now, after everything…Certainly Bruce had felt disgust hearing the same word that Superman had used publicly for Diana. That special word that Superman had chosen to name the youth that stole his heart…

“She is my Star!”

Clark bit his lips. Disgust…Bruce knew how to gulp his disgust, his urge to flee in order to achieve a kind purpose. And now this purpose was saving the Earth. Bruce was a master of disguising his true feelings or body reactions. Yet Clark thanks to his recovering senses had felt the younger man’s inner struggle in his arms.

Each second Bruce was struggling as in the greenhouse during their first time. Struggling with howling demons that still tortured his body, soul and mind… Only this time the demon was he… The same man that had promised Bruce happiness, love…

Clark gulped as the images of what he had done that night before cheating Bruce with Diana came back. He was worse than Falcone; worse than Ra’s Al Ghul or Chill or Bane. He hid his face in his hands: he was Bruce’s worse demon. Bruce trusted him; gave him his body waging a tremendous war with his demons for his sake; he opened him his heart only for Superman to rip that vulnerable tender heart in pieces and walk over…

Clark during their intercourse was sucking the softness, the warmth; yet under that external heat he had sensed what he had caused: the ice. A thick layer of ice that was unbreakable like granite.

The realization made Clark’s chest clenched: he had turned Bruce’s beautiful heart into ice… He wanted to scream from despair as his eyes watered. Bruce once again sacrificed himself to heal him yet Clark would never be able to heal Bruce again: on the contrary, he had killed the man’s heart.

Clark closed his eyes feeling like abandoning everything and just going back to Bruce whenever he found the chance. Yet he clenched his fists and jaw.

“I won’t do that: I’ll do what you want me to do, the right thing. I promise that this time I won’t
Lois with Jimmy was watching avidly what was happening. They had taken their cover in the shadows the alley between two warehouses provided. Police had made everything under first seen secrecy and that was the reason no other reporter was around. Yet Lois had a very sensitive nose for these things and Bruce’s visit and their talking about Superman made her turn on her journalistic antennas in full capacity.

She was frowned: the police had breached that warehouse but from there came sounds of real battle: clearly the thugs wouldn’t surrender so easily. Her information had taken her many times near this same warehouse yet everything stopped there: no more hint whether that place was indeed the hideout of a gang.

But now watching all this: the unprecedented police power and the huge resistance it dawned to Lois; this was about Intergang. The warehouse was Intergang’s lair and the police was trying to capture the beast. The building was surrounded by two lines of patrol cars that had their sirens on making the docks anything but their usual buzzing yet peaceful landscape. Behind the patrol cars ambulances were positioned ready to take the injured: some officers were already taken there by their comrades.

What made Lois an impression was that the broader area of the docks was deserted, like a ghost town; clearly police had evacuated the entire area afraid of heavy casualties. So Intergang was much more than just another gang…

“Jimmy, keep shooting” she said to her sidekick who now was using a digital camera shooting video instead of taking photos.

The bangs from the shootings inside the building became a cloud that rapidly covered the entire area and the two reporters watched intrigued as more police and SWAT members rushed inside.

An explosion towered the ruckus of the shooting and they saw the wall of the warehouse collapsing creating a huge whole from where the thugs bursted out taking cover behind the debris and shooting at the police officers and SWAT members who chased them; people both from the mobsters and the law enforcers lay on the terrain hit by the wave of the explosion.

Lois wished that they weren’t dead.

“Keep shooting” she said urgently to Jimmy and pulled of her own phone to shoot pictures as she saw something that surprised her.

A woman dressed in skin tight black leather stormed at the thugs jumping on them from the top of a cargo container; on landing, she spread her legs wide smacking hard two thugs stopping the rainfall of bullets against the law enforcers. She twirled standing in one leg and used her other leg as a hammer, her stiletto heel shone in the morning sun as she slashed her opponents.

Lois could discern the cat ears on her head. She narrowed her eyes.

“Catwoman in Metropolis? Fighting along the police? Then this is larger than a local operation against a gang…”

“Then what is it, Miss Lane?” Jimmy asked intrigued.

Senila grinned satisfied as the thugs grunted taking her heel’s hit on the face or neck; her twist kick
sent five of them flying and Selina somersaulted towards the next clog of thugs. The law enforcers finding a clean path since Selina stopped those who fired at them surged the debris as well.

But then more thugs flooded the area shooting with firearms.

“They were hidden in the basement!” a SWAT member shouted.

A second team of SWAT members had gone to the basement but some of the thugs managed to slip them and now attacked from behind.

“Wonder Woman” a police officer said looking upwards.

“Miss Lane, Wonder Woman!” Jimmy said and zoomed his camera to the heroine.

Lois pursed her lips remembering what Bruce told her.

“That can’t be good…” she mumbled.

“She is…strange, Miss Lane” Jimmy said puzzled and Lois took the camera looking at what he was. Wonder Woman’s eyes shone gleefully glaring at the law enforcers below; a nasty smirk grazed her beautiful face as she hit her bracelets together, crossing her forearms; a blast wave erupted targeting the people of the law.

“No…” Lois whispered scared for the people Diana was aiming at.

Darkseid stood on the flat rooftop of the ten acres, shaped like a horizontal Π Mannheim facilities in the Frozen Basin; he had his real gigantic form and he gazed at the horizon with a satisfied smirk over his square face. He was watching the developments at Intergang’s headquarters in Metropolis’ docks and his smirk became broader seeing Ivy arriving there causing the excited stares of the police officers below.

He cocked his eyebrows; he could sniff those stupid humans’ exhilaration seeing their heroine arriving to help them; he could taste their puzzlement seeing her crushing their lethal bracelets together aiming at them. He readied himself to suck their despair and their pain when the blast from the bracelets burnt them alive. And then the rest of humankind was next.

His oversensitive hearing caught the sound of a van; he turned his eyes there and saw the SWAT letters on it entering the east borders of the basin following the country road to his premises.

“Foolish people!” he shouted and turned his vision to the hills surrounding the road.

Parademons were waiting there ready with their eyes watching eagerly; their teeth visible, shining hungry for human flesh and blood. Granny was there standing on a flat gray rock overlooking the road and the black shape of the van. She was waiting for his order to attack, her manic eyes filled with gleeful anticipation and her gray curly hair dancing around her face with the icy breeze.

Darkseid yanked his head backwards. He was going to start from there so to have the pleasure of watching Ivy and Intergangs’ thugs spreading terror in Metropolis.

He wasn’t going to kill the SWAT team heading towards his facilities. He preferred to watch his Parademons feasting on them. He would have his time when he attacked Washington after
eliminating them. So he focused his eyes on the van and the vehicle was toppled ending up to the
edge of the road.

He gave Granny the mental order to attack and turned his eyes on Metropolis ready to devour the
massacre.

Selina raised her head hearing the sound of the bracelets crashing and then the blast; her eyes
widened: the wave was going to burn the officers and the SWATs underneath. She couldn’t do
anything as she was far from Ivy’s target; yet she dove because the heat could hurt her kicking and –
punching on her way two thugs that were shooting indiscriminately.

Ivy began laughing as the blast wave was near the humans. But suddenly she frowned.

Something shining ripped the air and stood in front of the fire wave sucking the entire wave. Ivy let
out a frustrated scream and followed the shining thing’s route as it ripped again the air returning to
where it had come.

Police officers and SWAT members looked as well, confusion edged on their features; but thugs
were as perplexed as their opponents just goggling at the sky.

A dazzled red and blue dressed Diana stared in front of her a woman catching the round gold shield
that had absorbed her blast and now returned to its mistress. The big head of the Medusa on the
center of the shield glared at Ivy as if it was alive; the gold perimeter of the shield flashed on the
morning’s sun blinding the fake Diana.

The humans underneath regarded with awe the newcomer: an imposing 8’ 1’’ woman of stunning
beauty glaring at the scantily dressed woman that claimed her name. Her brown leather armor
covered her sturdy but curvy torso; the pieces of leather falling down to the middle of her thighs’
length. Her long calves were dressed in gold cleaves. Her raven hair danced in the morning sea
breeze.

“Impossible…” Ivy mumbled shaken.

“Impossible!” Darkseid roared clenching his fist in the air.

Diana whipped her golden lasso in the sky and in a motion that no eye could catch she caught Ivy’s
wrist and twitched her in the air throwing her down to the rooftop of the warehouse at her right.

“Who is she?” Stitches asked flabbergasted Alistair Bendel who was at his side.

Selina came from behind and smacked their heads together letting them fall down unconscious. She
rolled her eyes.

“She is the real Amazon Princess, you morons!”

The law enforcers cheered and stormed at the thugs shooting at will.

“The real Princess?” Jimmy gapped at Lois who had a crooked smile on her face.

“I knew it!” she said.

“And who’s the other?”
“Keep shooting!”

Darkseid began rasping; his wrath choking his breath. The real Amazon Princess? She existed? And how she learnt and came?

His scream of frustration echoed throughout the vast Frozen Basin.

“Be it” he reassured himself “I’ll watch my troops slaughtering those who want to threat the machine and then I shall destroy her too!”

He focused his vision on the road miles away where the van was laying upturned on the edge covered from a cloud of dust.

He smirked as his troops with Granny at the head swarmed the hills like ants ready to finish off the SWAT members. There were two thousand Parademons and there was no doubt about the outcome so Darkseid snorted satisfied forgetting for now Metropolis. He yanked his head upwards to enjoy better the spectacle.

Jim was reading the papers he had on his lap. The patrol car Montoya drove sped through Gotham’s roads. The Police Commissionaire didn’t want to stay away when his officers faced Gotham’s thugs who as expected obeyed to Darkseid’s mental orders.

Though what was unexpected for Darkseid was that police and SWAT were waiting them and the assaults on Arkham and Blackgate was thwarted. Law enforcers at the moment were counterattacking aiming to arrest them which wasn’t easy since thugs were brainwashed to die killing as many as they could.

“We’re almost at Arkham, Commissionaire” she said. “The police in Metropolis fights Intergang.”

Jim nodded tapping his finger on his pressed lips.

“What’s so important, Commissionaire?” Montoya asked glancing at the papers: Jim Gordon always preferred reading on paper than screens. “I thought this was the top priority?”

He raised his head and looked at her.

“This is as important. Batman found the biggest suspect for the Wayne video. And our research confirms his findings.”

Montoya frowned.

“Who is it?”

“Dr. Thomas Elliot.”

Her eyes bulged.

“The famous neurosurgeon? The University’s Professor?”

Gordon shrugged one shoulder unimpressed.

“He seems to hold an old grudge to Mr. Wayne?”
Montoya laughed confused.

“But Wayne was just eight years when he ‘died’.”

Jim tilted his head keeping his stoic expression.

“Elliot is clearly disturbed.”

“Sure thing! When all this ends we bust the bastard, right?”

Jim shook his head.

“I’ve already ordered his arrest: the DA gave us the warrant. We can’t risk: someone with such hatred would want to take advantage of the situation to escalate the damage he already made.”

Montoya pressed her lips outraged.

“Killing Wayne.”

Jim nodded calmly.

“Exactly. I sent Bullock to arrest him.”

The Parademons surrounded the van at an inch’s distance and Granny raised her arm ready to give them the signal of attack.

But her arm had hardly reached the air that when a loud clap startled her.

The wall of the van that was upwards was crumbled like paper and an enormous mass jumped out with a creepy roar.

Darkseid’s eyes popped out from their sockets seeing a green giant with ragged pants falling on his troops smashing them with his enormous hands before even landing. Hulk! What the Hell?

The green giant began plummeting the green creatures throwing them right and left knocked out.

“Shoot him!” Granny shrieked her hair becoming dancing antennas from her rage.

The Parademons obeyed but before shooting something shiny reaped them like wheat plants in the field. Captain America jumped out of the same van storming at the Parademons punching them with fists and elbows and taking his returning shield before falling on the frozen soil.

“What?!” Granny spat.

“You don’t like our company, dear?”

Granny turned around but before seeing who had addressed her, a hard kick on the face made her lose her balance; Natasha Romanov stood before her with spread legs her hands clenching her waist.

“Ironman is here too, alien freaks!” a shining red and gold android came out of the van soaring the sky.

Tony saw his friends destroying Parademons with their bodies; the rest of the aliens fired at them but the Avengers’ attires were reinforced to withstand their firepower.
“Time to do your show, boy!” he said to himself grinning at Pepper’s snort inside his helmet since she was monitoring the operations. “I love you, babe!” he laughed and launched missiles, bullets and beams adjusted to destroy Parademons. “Wooooooo! Let’s kick some Parademon asses!”

“So much for the seriousness…” Pepper remarked hardly containing her amusement.

Indeed, the Parademons who took Tony’s fire power were blown to pieces; of course he hit those at a distance from his comrades to not hit Avengers too. Tony laughed seeing Hulk stretching his enormous body and kitting his chest with a roar that alone pushed two of his enemies back staggering.

Darkseid would have paled if he wasn’t blue; his eyes were bulged and for a moment he stayed dumbstruck, shocked by that development.

“Avengers? Here?! They know about the machine and they’re coming to get it!” he growled. “And they can destroy Parademons: they came prepared! It was a plan from the beginning!”

His teeth rattled and his entire gigantic body shook from wrath. He sensed the planet: no plane in the sky; no energy plant working; no people on oil rings; the Electromagnetic Storm Training Day: a trick so that he had no chance to harm civilians. So that nothing would stop them from attacking his machine.

“No!” he roared. “Still you don’t know who Darkseid is…” he mentally contacted his thousands of Parademons at the outskirts of Washington: he had no trouble changing his plan – Avengers would die first and then the rest of the bastard kin. “Thor is far” he smirked “you don’t have a chance!”

Bruce prepared himself for crushing to the floor yet Bagdana’s arms were wrapped around his torso; the demon’s upset was such that Bruce realized that his arms had regained their mobility free from the demon’s spells.

As the floor came near Bruce felt something soft welcoming his body and with the corner of his eye he saw a black round cloud that resembled a mattress. He clenched his jaw and jerked his arms to escape the demon’s grip: the awareness of what Bagdana had in mind filled his guts with disgust. Not again…

But the demon grabbed his wrists and on landing on the mattress stretched Bruce’s arms above his head, touching his body on the human’s. He took care to weigh enough to trap Bruce but not harm him.

Bruce writhed like a cornered snake and tried to free his hands yet Bagdana put more strength in his grip and met Bruce’s angry, blazing stare. The human was gritting his teeth.

“Stop fighting, Bruce” Bagdana said almost sad. “You’re a brilliant human, an extraordinary warrior but you have no chance against a demon without your weapon” the demon’s eyes showed the box at the far end of the room where Bruce’s diamond and the dagger lay.

Bruce growled and yanked his head upwards smashing it to the demon’s forehead: he wouldn’t let happen the same thing. With all the training of Ra’s Bruce’s eyes darkened and he felt his head crack; a warm liquid slithering his forehead. But he wasn’t going to stop resisting.

Bagdana sprout a new pair of arms and clenched Bruce’s hair at the back of his head firmly but gently lowering his head on the mattress drowning his resistance. He saw the crack on Bruce’s forehead and leaned over the skin blowing gently and healing the wound.
He met Bruce’s defiant stare acknowledging the human’s clenched jaw.

“I love you, Bruce, and I won’t let anyone hurt you, even yourself. The only reason this filthy world survived till now is for me to meet you; I’m your destiny, Bruce; you were born for me…”

“There is no destiny!” Bruce growled and tried to free his head to hit again the demon even if that meant breaking his head.

But Bagdana wasn’t going to allow him that.

“The leaf on your left big toe is the biggest proof of exactly that, Bruce…”

An oval ottoman from black velvet appeared with a tiny toe on it; the skin that seemed taken care to regain its rosy color and perfect shape after all these years bared a cute leaf shaped birth mark.

Bruce felt his blood running cold; his guts twisted in a knot and his head began spinning. The cries and the pleadings of a boy no more than eight years old echoed in his mind’s deepest caves. A cold, gleeful smirk shone in the shadows exactly like the huge cleaver did and then pain…horrendous, unbearable pain that Bruce felt right now again on his empty toe. And then yells and cries and sobs from the little boy who pleaded for his mommy…

Bagdana felt Bruce’s body shivering not from cold but from the memories; he bit his lip and touched feathery Bruce’s cheek.

“I’ll stop that pain, Bruce…” he said affectionately “I’ll erase all your memories…You won’t suffer again from the nightmares of your past.”

Bruce set his jaw determined to not let his tears leave his eyes.

“It’s none of your business! My memories is my problem.”

Bagdana shook his head.

“You will be able to be happy again…” he insisted patiently.

But Bruce jerked his torso upwards.

“My memories are filled with the people I love and who love me! The people you’re now helping to get killed!”

Bagdana’s eyes sparkled.

“I can save everyone you love; I care about you, Bruce; and I’ll do everything for you to be happy.”

Bruce made to shake his head but Bagdana’s grip on his hair didn’t let him. So instead he fixed his blazing eyes on Bagdana’s and the demon felt shivers of excitement.

“Can you save 7 billion humans?” Bruce spat.

Bagdana sighed and closed his eyes.

“Why do you care, Bruce? People always caused you pain; nobody cared about your suffering; nobody helped you; they sniffed at you.”

Bruce tried to move his arms with no avail.
“There are good people; people in need like I was; people who know how to love unlike you! Get off me!”

Bagdana brought his face over Bruce’s.

“You know I love you more than anything else…”

Bruce snorted.

“You don’t love me: you love Lilith’s remnants in me. If you knew that by slashing me in pieces you would take Lilith back you’d have done it without a second thought!” he growled keeping his still stare in the demon’s eyes.

Bagdana became icy cold hearing that…taking his Lilith back by…Bruce watched him knowing the storm inside the demon. Bagdana licked his lips and producing a hand out of nowhere brushed Bruce’s cheek.

“You never feared to look the demon in the eye…”

Whatever power of restraint the demon had evaporated under these eyes’ charm; Bruce was completely naked under him and that injured body emanated vigor, defiance and beauty. His head immersed in Bruce’s neck almost on its own volition; his full lips sucked the vibrating from anger vein throughout the human’s neck.

Bruce closed his eyes frustrated; he knew what the demon wanted; from the start he knew where this would end up. He pressed his tired body to resist even trapped under the mighty demon, who still held his wrists and head immobile. He couldn’t feel below the waist yet he could hear the sound of Bagdana’s erection rubbing on his bare skin and that made his heart drum.

The demon absorbed in the mesmerizing numbness that Bruce’s flesh caused him and intoxicated from his body’s perfume downed his neckline with his lips continuing with Bruce’s pectorals that bulged from his heart’s frantic beat. He ordered his clothes disappear to let his thirsty body to suck every feeling.

Bruce fought to master his mind into calming and ordered his legs to move to kick the demon – anything to stop those lips from kissing his body.

Yet the demon in his excitement sprouted another pair of arms and took gently Bruce’s kicking legs massaging sensually upwards to the thighs. He spread the human’s thighs.

Bruce heard the sound and an electric current of dread went through the healthy part of his spine.

“No!” he shouted and the demon raised reluctantly his fevered eyes to meet the human’s angry eyes that stabbed him.

“I know, Bruce, I caused you horrific pain in the past. You were a child and I forgot that thinking I was with Lilith again…I was hard on you, careless; I made you bleed; I ripped your body in two; I almost killed you…” he gulped. “I’m sorry: you are right to detest our contact but I can be gentle; I won’t hurt you again, you see…”

Bruce’s eyes twitched as he felt a soft liquid applied inside his anus meticulously, carefully relaxing the tight muscle… His face began sweating and his breath became quicker; the demon had brought his head over his abdominals kissing reverently his flesh while Bagdana’s hands fondled his torso. He was trapped; held still by the demon’s numerous pairs of arms but he couldn’t let that happen…
“Stop!” he snarled with such strength that Bagdana stopped and brought his head over Bruce’s.

“You didn’t tell the Kryptonian to stop” he complained locking his eyes with Bruce’s.

Bruce set his jaw.

“He never did anything I didn’t want.”

Bagdana grinned smugly.

“That’s a lie…That night I felt your despair, Bruce; your suffering, your loathing; your pain…The Kryptonian surpassed even my bolder expectations raping you that way.”

Bruce’s hair stood on edge.

“He never…You…you were watching?”

Bagdana’s smugness vanished and his stare became affectionate; compassionate.

“I wasn’t watching but we are connected, Bruce; I sensed everything and it wasn’t difficult to realize what he was doing to you; I wanted to run to your bedroom and burn him alive!” he shouted taking out the wrath of that night. “You never told him to stop because you knew that he wouldn’t and you dreaded that he would become another one of your rapists!” he spat listening to Bruce’s breath becoming faster. “But deep inside you know – your body knows that he is one of your defilers!” Bruce’s entire body writhed trying to escape him. “However here you are…you still searched for him and came to his rescue. Can’t you see that he doesn’t deserve your love? He doesn’t love you, Bruce.”

Bruce controlled his ragged breath allowing his exhausted body to relax; only to tense again feeling the demon’s erection on his belly.

“But you say that you love me” Bagdana’s eyes became interested. “If you really love me then don’t do this…” his eyes nailed the demon’s yellow ones.

Bagdana couldn’t take that powerful stare; his insides were in a fierce battle after Bruce’s last words. He bit his lips and sighed letting his head fall on Bruce’s chest defeated; the human’s heart beat fast, faster feeling the demon’s hot breath caressing his flesh. Bagdana’s body shook from the battle inside him: doing what Bruce asked or doing what he wanted.

Diana stood before Ivy who was rooted on the middle of the rooftop; the golden lasso had wrapped around her torso several times. Ivy gritted her teeth frustrated feeling the heat of the lasso.

The Amazon Princess felt the puzzled human stares. It was the time of the truth.

“Speak the truth!” she ordered. “Who are you?”

Ivy spat on Diana’s feet glaring at her; Darkseid didn’t want the truth about her to be revealed before humans became desperate. She should insist on being the real Diana.

“I am…” yet the lie couldn’t slip from her tongue; her mind felt controlled by the vibrating energy coming from the lasso’s layers. Her mind was filled only with the truth. “I’m Poison Ivy” she said.

Selina who were watching like everyone else arched her eyebrows.

“I told you…” she said slyly to the two knocked out thugs on her feet.
Suddenly hundred of footsteps echoed like thunders and the space quickly filled with more thugs who escaped from the police’s raids to the other Intergang warehouses and came to help.

The law enforcers took cover behind their cars and shot at their assailants. Diana let Ivy restraint by the lasso and stormed at the thugs throwing her sword to stab the jacket of a thug who ran in front of the others. The force of the sword was such that the man crushed on the warehouse’s wall taking with him five others who were following him.

“Nice catch!” Selina yelled at her jerking her whip to take the firearm from the hand of a thug.

“Thanks” Diana nodded and punched a 7 feet thug who had the size of a rugby player.

The shrieking sound made the Amazon look up: the dispensable part of the crane was detached from several bullets hitting its hinges. And now it was falling to crush both lawmen and thugs.

Diana called mentally her lasso and flew to catch it; she whipped it and the lasso wrapped the edge of the heavy part. Diana clenched her teeth and kept the object in the air for a second before she led it above the harbor. With her other hand she pulled her tiara off her hair and threw it like a boomerang to the metal mass blowing it off into pieces.

Both police officers and thugs cheered united for a second.

But then Diana felt something like rope wrapping her waist; she frowned seeing a kind of chain thick green stem squeezing her. It was stronger than iron.

She turned her eyes where sniggers came. A woman with rich red hair flooding her naked back stood midair. Her gorgeous, curvy body was completely naked apart from leaves covering her private parts. Two sparkling green eyes regarded the Amazon who felt dizziness as the plant around her waist emanated some blue smoke.

“Poison Ivy has her own lasso, girl!”

Granny twisted around and sent a fire beam at Natasha who ducked it taking cover behind a rock. But the alien roared and sent consecutive blasts blowing the rock into thousands of pieces and Natasha hardly made it to avoid the stones.

The Russian fisted her hands and stormed at Granny tackling her down yet Darkseid’s lieutenant pushed the human off of her throwing her to crush on the ground.

Natasha was dazzled for a second and Granny found the chance to aim at her; the light blue fire from Granny’s hand was on its way to hit Natasha when a silver shield came and stand before her; the fire bounced off the shield and would have hit Granny if she hadn’t dodged it.

Granny frowned enraged and raised her head to see a man in a burgundy cape landing graciously before her. Her face distorted in anger and she raised her palms ready to launch her lethal fire.

However Dr. Strange made a gentle move with his hand and a crystal red light struck her instantly square in the chest throwing her to the other end of the battlefield.

“Thank you” Natasha said to him having approached. “Let’s find the bitch and kill her” she grounded her teeth.

Yet Dr. Strange’s attention was opposite them where their comrades were fighting the green
creatures that after the first startle were fighting hard. With Ironman’s coverage from the sky Steve and Hulk had no problem to neutralize their opponents.

Stephen cocked an eyebrow.

“I think we better turn our attention elsewhere” he said in his deep baritone.

“Mr. Stark.”

“Yes, Lucius” Tony said keeping firing at the aliens in the spots where they weren’t extinguished by Steve and Hulk.

“Flash informed me that Darkseid’s forces have left their hideouts around Washington.”

“So more company then…”

He hardly had finished his phrase when Jarvis collected voice addressed him.

“Sir, you have company.”

His helmet’s indicators showed him what Dr. Strange had sensed already.

Steve threw his shield like a discus to scatter the Parademons that had surrounded him and narrowed his eyes hearing the sound; even Hulk stopped the hammering to sniff the air.

The surrounding area lost its gray color of steppe and became green as what gave the impression of big green ants swarmed the place downing rapidly to choke them. And then the sound of thousands footsteps was towered from the flapping of thousand wings; the light of sun was shadowed as the sky filled with uncountable flying Parademons that fired at them before landing.

Steve took cover under his shield and Hulk slapped the fire coming at him like annoying mosquitoes. Natasha rushed were the Parademons began landing and Dr. Strange like Tony flew to confront those that was still flying.

“You are outnumbered, you fools!” a horrible thunderous voice cracked the sound of thousands of feet and thousands of wings coming against them.

Darkseid landed with a loud sound on the hill overlooking the battlefield. He didn’t want to finish it quickly; he wanted those annoyed pests to suffer; and he knew that the sound of his voice was another way to plant despair.

“This is your end, filths!”

“I’m sorry, Bruce…” Bagdana said after a minute and raised his head to see Bruce’s face. “I love you but I can’t stop” he continued sad. “It’s been 12 years since I last claimed your body… I can’t take it any longer, Bruce…I am a demon: I’m not made to oppress my whims. I wish I could…”

Bruce’s eyes flashed angrily but the demon captured his lips gently as his length slowly slipped inside the human’s opening. Bruce growled in the kiss to cover his despair and bit hard on the demon’s sucking lips hoping to enrage him into hit rather than use him.

His mouth filled with a bitter liquid that burnt like acid and a thunder shuddered Bruce’s body; his eyes darkened and his head began spinning leading him to nothingness.
Bagdana panicked; he stopped kissing and looked at Bruce’s almost closed eyes: the human was fading. He touched his mouth to Bruce’s and sucked what was in the human’s icy cold, black mouth. He sucked and sucked until Bruce’s mouth found its normal temperature and color; Bruce began breathing again.

“My flesh and blood is still poison for you, Bruce” he whispered and nuzzled his neck to prevent this happening again; his greedy hands resumed fondling the body that convulsed under him.

He was inside the body of his beloved after 12 years of hungry waiting…It was again like then…His body was fueled with energy, joy, pleasure beyond expectations. His hips began pushing, thrusting his length to get deeper; gain more warmth, more connection…

Bruce clenched his jaw to push his arms to escape from the demon’s grip; put strength to move his head yet Bagdana’s many arms were unyielding as the demon’s thrusts became quicker and deeper. Bruce felt the nausea that was lurking inside him after the encounter with Clark feeling his entire body making his head spinning; Bagdana’s lips were sucking his abdomen and a second tongue was licking his genitals much like then in Ra’s’ basement. He felt choking and it was almost impossible to stop his breath from becoming asthmatic.

His teeth rattled trying to withstand the feelings.

“Relax, Bruce” the demon mumbled swimming in the ocean of his pleasure. “Let yourself free to enjoy the senses…”

“Bastard!” Bruce growled.

But the demon was too much aroused to answer as his thrusts continued.

It seemed eternity for Bruce: a tormenting, unbearable, dragging eternity drenched in his own icy sweat that mingled with the demon’s sweat and saliva. Suddenly he felt the demon’s body on him tensing and then the hot liquid of the demon’s seed filled his insides that much to Bruce’s disgust sucked it.

At least it ended Bruce thought and tried to jail his feelings of dread to the same dark dungeon of his mind as he was doing all his life. Yet he felt his body being gently turned on his stomach and the demon’s rough tongue licking his cold back; Bruce’s breath stopped when a second mouth sucked his ear as Bagdana’s length still inside him began thrusting again. His hands were held on the mattress as his head; his body was crashed under the demon’s body even though the weight he felt was minimal compared to what he expected.

The exhaustion of all this time corroded his every cell; the demon’s hot breath fast as his thrusts caressed his ear and his wet tongue licked the flesh.

Bruce clenched his jaw and determined engrossed his mind in what was happening outside this room… Forcing only one thought in his mind to shatter everything else: Bagdana was unaware of the raging battle.

“Third time of coupling is a bonding charm, Bruce” the demon said affectionately to his ear, caressing tenderly the human’s wet hair in front of him. He had just ejaculated inside him for the second time and the demon’s body was feeling as if he was born again.
Dr. Strange pursed his lips and turned his head where the voice came. “Hm… I won’t be so sure!” he said cocking his eyebrows smugly.

Darkseid was ready to fry him with his beams when sounds of thousands new presences made him frown. They weren’t his. He turned his head to see where the Avengers cast fleeting glances while they were fighting their enemies.

Valkyries ripped the sky moving their wings furiously to reach the battlefield faster; Asgardians in their shining silver armors were descending on flying chariots. In front of them Thor was already waving his Mjolnir throwing thunders against the Parademons that was firing at Ironman in the air while Odin threw his sword ripping at once ten Parademons that brandished their blades at Natasha who were absorbed in beating three Parademons at once.

Granny Goodness had returned to the battle using her gun to kill Hulk only to be tackled by a Valkyrie.

“Where’s that lousy demon?” she communicated mentally with her master clenching her jaw.

Thor landed between a cluster of Parademons and used his hammer to plummet them hitting without stopping; his eyes, his entire face was tightened in fierce determination.

He didn’t notice a Parademon reaching him from behind – they had realized that their firearms didn’t do anything to the Avengers so they went for the blades instead. The Parademon raised his blade arm to cut the God’s head lowering it fast.

A shriek in his ear startled Thor who turned to see the Parademon with a shocked expression, still with his blade arm millimeters from Thor’s neck; the creature collapsed on the ground with a big, round burning of laser on his chest.

Darkseid’s eyes bulged and his teeth rattled.

“Impossible!” Granny uttered having managed to roll away from the Valkyrie.

Thor looked to the point where the laser must have come and his eyes widened seeing Superman floating with his red cape waving behind him.

“I owe you an apology, Thor” he said landing in front of the god.

“Your apology must be to someone else but now we have a battle” Thor answered and Superman nodded bringing his fist on his heart and bowing his head with respect.

“Where’s that demon?!” Darkseid hissed; he could storm the battlefield and finish the job but he was so startled and flabbergast that his wrath overwhelmed him so that confronting Bagdana became his priority: he would return after to end that farse.

Bruce had calmed his breath and heartbeat, galvanizing himself into ignoring his own body’s cries.

“Only when it is lovemaking” he replied dryly and felt Bagdana’s head frowning immersed in his hair. “You claim that you know about real love” he cocked an eyebrow “I’d expect that you would know the difference between lovemaking and rape.”

Bagdana smiled and nibbled Bruce’s shoulders that were covered with cold sweat.
“You’re pissed, Bruce; I understand... But we’ll have an eternity of love making when you will enjoy it as much as I.”

“That will never happen” Bruce retorted with conviction.

Bagdana sniffed deeply Bruce’s perfume mingled with his sweat.

“It will happen... Darkseid has the knowledge... Life mocked me giving me back my lost love sharing the same body with my worst enemy but not anymore... Darkseid will give me the power: I’ll erase the priest’s DNA from you and then nothing will block you from remember and feel what you should.”

“Then you admit it” Bruce sniggered fixing his eyes on the wall “you don’t love me.”

There was a rush in the air and Bagdana turned surprised to see Darkseid materializing facing the side of the cloud that made their bed.

The New God’s face was distorted in anger and shock; his breath fast and burning even more taking in the scene before him. However the demon noticed the change in Darkseid’s eyes that regarded Bruce’s naked body.
“After a long – for Gotham’s standards – time of peace it seems that the mob decided to show again its teeth. Our sources speak about riots in the Narrows and an outbreak of violence all over the Midtown. But, as you see, from the footage our reporters send GCPD has already taken measures…”

Alfred was sweeping with a cloth the plates from the breakfast he had just washed. His face as his entire demeanor was composed as ever. He didn’t have a TV in the kitchen yet he still could hear from the set the boys had opened in the living room. Ms. Turner and Todd were upstairs. Bruce wanted them here because it was known that they were connected with him so someone who would want to get to him might have gone against them.

His concern won Alfred’s butler manners and threw the cloth on the black granite countertop walking towards the living room.

“Police officers and SWAT forces facing the thugs all over the Narrows and, as you see, there are considerable forces guarding Arkham Asylum, Blackgate Prison, MCU and the City Hall. It seems that police was already informed about the outburst of the city’s mob…”

“‘Course, ya moron!” Jason spat from his spot on the living room’s velvet white sofa. “Batman had warned the lot.”

Suddenly, the newscaster nodded listening to the control panel; simultaneously, to the three different images from Gotham’s riots was added a forth showing docks; the subheading read ‘Metropolis’ Docks – now’. The footage showed a similar image with Gotham depicting law enforcers fighting with thugs who fired at them barricaded behind debris that obviously came from the ravaged warehouse; the difference was that over the riot scene, on the Metropolis’ sky, floated a presence.

“The Daily Planet reports that a big police operation takes place in Metropolis’ Docks with Wonder Woman’s involvement… Wait…” the newscaster’s voice filled with disbelief and surprise “Wonder Woman attacks the people of the law?”

The explosion from Wonder Woman’s bracelets had almost hit the police officers when something barely seen stopped the wave; the camera moved fast where the shield that saved the police officers headed: a woman in ancient warrior attire grabbed the heavy shield with one hand.

“Who’s that woman?!”

“The real Diana, ya dork!” Jason spat from his spot on the sofa and shook his head exasperated. “Where they find those people?”

His words were confirmed when Wonder Woman wrapped in the real Lasso of Truth admitted that she was Poison Ivy.

Jason cackled.

“Like watchin’ movies! Only this is real!”

But Dick wasn’t sharing his thrill; his face was sullen and his brow frowned in thought.

“Where is Batman? There is no news…” he said to Jason worried and the younger boy lost his mood.
“I’m sure he is alright, young masters.”

Both boys jerked startled turning to the opening from the kitchen’s side. Alfred was standing there, his eyes watching the footage on the screen. His face was calm and composed yet the boys knew better. They exchanged a glance and nodded.

“‘Course he is!” Jason said with conviction.

“Definitely!” Dick agreed; both of them wanting to reassure and comfort Alfred.

Alfred smiled seeing through their attempt.

“There’s no news from the Frozen Bazin because Master Bruce and Master Anthony considered it best to close the satellites – using the Electromagnetic Training Day as excuse – because they didn’t want any panic to be spread. Not to mention the reporters who would swarm there: imagine having to protect them and fight at the same time. They took care of everything” he shook his head “not only for the world but also for Gotham: The Haven and the free clinic are heavily guarded.”

Both boys nodded smiling.

“I’m sure everything will go smoothly, young masters” he was trying to comfort himself as well the boys who – Alfred knew – now loved and cared about Bruce.

Dr. Strange shook Elliot’s hand. He was in his office in Arkham when the information desk of the institution notified him about the man’s coming. Training Day or not he had patients to attend to and riots outburst found him in the Asylum.

“That’s a surprise, Dr. Elliot” He said showing him the armchair in front of his desk.

Thomas crossed his legs elegantly and cocked an eyebrow.

“I’ve told you about my interest to study Joker’s case and you – very kindly – agreed to assist my efforts.”

Dr. Strange sat in his high backed antique leather armchair and answered with a grin.

“Of course but the Asylum is right now at an emergency” he frowned “you know about the riots, right? As a matter of fact I don’t understand how they did allow you to get inside.”

Thomas smiled and put his hand in the inner pocket of his expensive, tailored blue blazer. Dr. Hugo Strange watched and his lamp-like eyes widened.

Thomas pulled out a small, square black handgun and pointed it at him.

“I can be very persuasive, dear Hugo, as you see…” he shook his head. “I don’t want to kill you but this…emergency…this fuss all over the city is the best conditions for me to conduct my study.”

“Dr. Elliot…” Hugo Strange said calmly trying to reason with him.

Elliot cocked his eyebrows.

“I’ve already killed an officer: he fell on duty from the bullets of some thug. Now I want the object of my study.”
Dr. Strange intertwined his fingers on the desk.

“‘The security system of Arkham doesn’t allow to anyone to open the cells – especially during an emergency.’”

Elliot leaned back on his armchair laughing.

“It may be so but you are Joker’s therapist so I’m sure you have access…And the same goes for Dr. Quinzel’s cell too: she is also your patient…”

Hugo Strange brought his hands on his face.

“This is about Bruce Wayne, right? You’re ready to do something foolish…”

But Thomas cut him abruptly jerking from his seat and pointing the gun aggressively at his face. He grinned.

“The whole mess in Gotham right now gives me the best opportunity and your patients will be the best assistants.”

Strange shook his head in disapproval.

“Thomas, think it better. You’re an accomplished neurosurgeon; a respectable member of the society; a brilliant and ingenious man: this is beyond you. You understand that you can’t destroy everything you accomplished for an old grudge. Put the gun away and I won’t tell anything to anyone” he met Elliot’s feverish eyes “I give you my word.”

Elliot rolled his eyes frustrated.

“Nice offer, Doc, but I’m not here for psychoanalysis…I asked you to become my ally but you refused so I have to adjust to what I can” he smirked “and I won’t lose anything: a rich bastard was killed during a riot while Joker with his accomplice were lose – everyone knows Joker’s insane interest for Wayne…well, the whacko finally cracked and killed the brat. You see? Everything taken care!”

He stood and gestured with the gun for the psychiatrist to do the same. Hugo Strange got up; his face cold and expressionless. It was obvious that the experienced psychiatrist was completely unruffled; unfazed from the barrel’s sight.

“You can’t trust those two, Thomas.”

Elliot moved towards him and poked him on the back with the gun to walk.

“This is my problem. Now: I’ll have the gun in my pocket – we don’t want to panic the staff, right? It could lead to most unpleasant situations. You’ll accompany me to Joker’s cell and like a good doctor you’ll free him as you will do with Dr. Quinzel.”

Strange nodded with an icy cold stare.

“As you wish…”

They walked through the bright corridors of the Asylum – since Bruce Wayne had donated a large amount of money for the institution’s renovation he asked for the sun light to be abundant inside the building: Bruce had been deprived of the sun light for eighteen years and learnt how precious it was for people. Thus he believed that if the building’s premises used the natural sun light then this would
be beneficial for the inmates’ wellbeing and even their recovery.

Hugo Strange had smiled hearing what the young billionaire had asked and his reasoning; when the doctor came for the first time to the Asylum he inquired about the choice of natural light instead of artificial. The staff’s answer about the young Wayne’s wish made the psychiatrist appreciate more the youth.

Both Joker’s and Quinzel’s cell were at the maximum security ward but in different sectors; in isolation at least for the first time after their arrest.

Joker having heard the footsteps jumped from his bed and rushed to the small window of his door intrigued and ready to have his fun with the staff. Seeing Hugo Strange he cackled.

“Whaaaaaat’s up, doc?” he asked mimicking Bugs Bunny’s voice and then he scratched his non-dyed, brown hair. “Isn’t it a bit early for our…mmm…session?”

He cocked his eyebrows and his eyes focused on the wall clock opposite his cell. It wasn’t even afternoon.

“It’s still morning…” he frowned. “Aaaaand I heard a second pair of shoes – not the light footsteps of that sweet, littl’ nurse that tinkles me with thooose needles…Sooooooo, what surprise do you have for me, egg eye?”

Strange didn’t answer and Elliot stepped forward to be seen from the door’s window.

“It’s time to play” he said dryly and Joker’s eyes shone seeing the gun Elliot pulled out of his blazer’s pocket.

The jester shook his head.

“Uuuuuuu! I looove people who keep their promises…” he said hoarsely but then he became serious regarding the gun and the pricy blazer. “You shouldna put the gun inside that cloth – you might damage it.”

Elliot rolled his eyes and nudged Dr. Strange to open for Joker who was licking his lips thrilled.

Hugo Strange gave his personal code to the secret panel under the wall and then he pressed his thumb in the fingerprint recognition socket that emerged. The door opened with a hiss and Joker slithered outside with his knees on the floor like a rock star.

“Soomebody stoooop mee!” he jerked his head upwards.

“Are you finished?” Elliot asked bored.

Joker frowned and pouted tapping his index finger on his bottom lip.

“Chaos in broad daylight?” he asked thoughtful and crooked his mouth.

Elliot gestured to him to stand.

“When someone gives you lemon you make lemonade…” he said. “Gotham’s scum decided to rebel during daylight and police is occupied with them. So we can do our work undisturbed.”

Joker looked at the icy calm Dr. Strange and winked showing with his thumb at Elliot.

“He’s cleeeeeever, huh, doc?”
Strange looked at Elliot, cocking an eyebrow.

“No; actually he is an idiot!”

Thomas ground his teeth and pointed the gun at the doctor; his finger tensing around the trigger.

“I could kill you right now – but I need you to open Quinzel’s cell.”

Joker’s eyes widened thrilled and he clapped.

“Ooooooooh! My Harleeeequin! I missed her…” he rushed at Elliot and gave him a noisy kiss on the cheek but then his excitement ebbed. “Well, nooooot that much…I miss Brucey more…”

Elliot lolled his head at him and glared.

“Can you shut up?!”

Joker saluted him military style.

“Yes, siiiiiiir! Ooooh! I like this guy! Huh, doc?” he wrapped his arm around Strange’s shoulders and pushed him forward.

Hugo Strange was forced to repeat the same procedure to open Quinzel’s cell; she walked outside clearly enraged. Joker regarded her scratching his head.

“Ooooorange isn’t your color, Harlequin!”

“Shut the fuck up!” she said and slapped him in the face. “I’m imprisoned here because of you. And orange isn’t your color too!”

Joker batted his eyelashes cute.

“You were the first thing I asked from this fine gentleman when he freed me, you see…You are aaaaaalways in my miiiiind…” he sang out of tone.

Harleen looked him smoothened.

“Really?”

“Of course not, my dear” Strange said. “He is trying to manipulate you.”

Harleen gritted her teeth and punched the psychiatrist in the nose sending him to the wall and then on the floor.

“Don’t you dare slander, Mista J!”

Joker patted her in the back and took her hand kissing the knuckles.

“Haaaaarley, you’re myyyyyy girl… Can I call you Harley, huh?”

“Enough with this shit!” Elliot barked impatient. “We have things to do!”

“Rrrrrright!” Joker said but winked to Harley. “What are we going to do with the egg eyed here?”

Elliot turned the gun on Strange and simply pressed the trigger; the sound was almost inaudible. The psychiatrist’s body jerked once, bumped on the wall and dropped again on the floor in an odd angle.
“I like laaaaaconic people!” Joker laughed. “It’s shooooow time, babe! But first” he said serious
“Harley, is right: oooorange is not my color” he looked disgusted at his inmate’s attire “aaaaand a
great show needs the fitting suits. We need to change.”

Elliot gritted his teeth frustrated but Joker nonchalant patted his back.

“You’re new in the business…you’ll understand with time…”

Thomas crooked his mouth disgusted and waved the gun to indicate them to move.

“C’mon, I have many things to do. We’ll take Strange’s car so that we won’t be stopped at the gate.”

The wolf whistle made Lois turn her gaze from the sky and look at Jimmy.

“Nice outfit that Ivy!” he exclaimed thrilled goggling at Ivy’s almost naked body, forgetting his usual
shyness.

Lois rolled her eyes and gave him a small smack in the back of his neck.

“Sweep your drooling and keep shooting…”

“Fascist…” the youth mumbled but smiled when Lois smiled at his comment.

Selina frowned seeing Diana’s waist wrapped in a green-silver stem which sprouted from Ivy’s
naval; it was thick like a high voltage cable and seemed so tough that even the Amazon couldn’t
shake it off her. Actually, Selina could discern that the Princess was dazzled, disoriented so she
wasn’t trying to free herself much to Ivy’s snigger.

That encouraged the thugs to resume their attack to the law enforcers either with bullets or fists.
Selina ducked her head to avoid the stray bullets and ran to the edge of the docks under the patch of
sky where the two women hovered.

They had discussed with Bruce the possibility of Ivy using her pheromones on her opponents and he
had given her the antidote Jor El had manufactured based on the analyses he had done to Superman
during Ivy’s influence. They both knew that it might come handy.

She wrapped her whip around the crane’s tower and climbed to the top with the ease of a cat. Then
she straightened her posture, gathered her whip in a roll and walked lightly on the horizontal jib
section, the corner of her eye seeing the docks from 50m height.

“What is it, dear?” Ivy asked sarcastic seeing Diana’s eyes confused. “You’re too ancient for the new
tricks? You shouldn’t have underestimated me, Amazon!” she smirked with a gleeful shine in her
green eyes

Ivy pulled the stem that was wrapped around Diana’s waist bringing the Amazon to her; as soon as
Diana was close to her, Ivy raised her hand to punch. Ivy’s punch strong enough to injure Diana
since Ivy had the powers Bagdana gave her was inches from the Amazon’s face. Diana’s eyes were
under mist but still she could see the aggressive movement without however the motivation or the
mood to defend herself or blow her opponent: she was lightheaded and his brain acknowledged Ivy
as a being it shouldn’t be harmed even if she killed her.
Lois narrowed her eyes.

“C’mon, girl! Wake up! Don’t let that bimbo defeat you!”

Ivy screamed as something slashed and wrapped the wrist of her fisted hand; drops of blood splashed in the air.

“Remember the feeling of my whip, bitch?” Selina asked slyly from the crane’s top, her flashing eyes regarding Ivy.

Ivy fumed as her eyes glared at Selina.

“Oh, yeah! I owe you…” she said and raised her tied wrist pulling the whip.

Her strength enhanced by the demon’s spells was more than enough to throw Catwoman off the crane yet Selina smiled and ruined her effort by simply letting go of the whip causing Ivy to lose her balance and as a result lose her grip on Diana.

“You didn’t really expect to catch so easily an alley cat, huh?” Selina mocked her and jolted heading to land on the dock.

Ivy roared and rushed behind her which was what Selina wanted. Taking advantage of Ivy’s turned back to Diana Catwoman did something Batman-like: she threw a tiny needle aiming to Diana’s neck. Diana jerked feeling the small stab.

As soon as Catwoman put her feet on the cement Ivy stopped right in front of her.

“Time to pull off the cat’s nails!” Ivy sneered glaring.

Selina cocked an eyebrow.

“Really?” she retorted and regarded curiously her opponent’s body “What’s out, sister! You’re going to stumble on your attire…” she remarked snidely and began somersaulting.

Ivy boiling in her wrath caught her up with her speed.

A stem jumped from Ivy’s waist and twisted around Catwoman’s ankle. Her momentum stopped abruptly and she fell flat on her back. Ivy minced to her.

“And now, Kitty…” Selina glared at her registering the gold, big leaf she held that shone in the sun indicating that it was actually a sharp blade.

“Not so fast!” it was the angry roaring of a lioness more than the voice of a woman.

Ivy made to turn to see what it was that rush of air behind her but the wave fell on her and tackled her crushing her on a container slapping the blade-leaf from her hand.

Ivy saw Diana’s face contorted in anger over hers; the real Amazon was holding her from the neck and was stabbing her with her blazing eyes.

“I heard that you were given super powers” the Amazon said and grinned. “So I have no hesitation to do that…”

She grimaced and slapped Poison Ivy with all her might.

“That for impersonating me…”
Ivy jerked her leg kicking Diana hard on the groin but the Amazon not even flinched. Instead she raised her hand again giving her another slap.

“That for disgracing the name of the Amazons…”

Ivy punched the Amazon on the stomach yet Diana gritted her teeth and this time gave her a blow on the mouth.

“That for debunking me with that ridiculous outfit…” she yanked her head. “And that…” she head butted Ivy in the forehead knocking her out “for the damage you made using my name.”

Selina who was watching having approached smiled bitterly. *For the pain you caused to Bruce*…she thought and walked to Diana who was binding Ivy with her lasso.

She pulled out another tiny needle from the case that was built in her suit at the right thigh. Diana looked at her puzzled.

“Batman gave it to me: it will deprive her of her super powers; it’s a compound dose so it must be enough until Darkseid is defeated.”

Diana nodded and Selina stabbed the needle in Ivy’s upper arm.

“Thank you” the Amazon said “she did something to me and I was confused, numb…”

Catwoman nodded.

“She was doing something like this to Superman…thankfully today, I had the antidote. You helped me too so we’re even” she cocked her eyebrows and lolled her head gesturing towards the battling thugs and law enforcers “we can’t let them have all the fun, huh?”

Diana smiled.

“Definitely not.”

Jim Gordon was giving orders to his officers coordinating them. He was outside the Blackgate Prison where hundreds of thugs tried to breech the building; fortunately, police expected them so their attempt was thwarted and now police and SWAT exchanged fires with them to force them to surrender.

They had the control yet these thugs acted like brainwashed and weren’t willing to negotiate or stop fighting determined even to die as long as they killed officers along.

Jim’s face was contorted; he was watching behind barricade listening to the SWAT head – Montoya at his right. It seemed so absurd to him that this was happening in daylight: mob and thugs always preferred the coverage of the darkness which showed that they were indeed manipulated to act like this exactly as Batman told him.

Suddenly, his cell rang. It was Bullock.

“Search for him everywhere” he ordered Bullock and ended the dial.

“What is it, Commissionaire?” Montoya asked.

“Bullock didn’t find Elliot; they search his apartment and found a disk with the video.
Ironman was soaring above the battlefield wiping with his adjusted laser the hoards of Parademons that seemed endless. After the initial shock, the green creatures began using shields that sprout from their blade arms replacing the weapon with protection. It was a good thing that Ironman’s weaponry could pass the shield though more persistence was necessary.

His fellow Avengers underneath battled the alien army supported by the Asgardians. Tony was grateful to that arrival because till the Valkyries arrived he had to fight alone the flying Parademons. Even now the flying motherfuckers were more than the Earth’s defenders and Tony had to dodge and maneuver to avoid their fires: his armor was adjusted to withstand yet Tony didn’t want to risk.

Simultaneous to fighting, Tony had his systems scanning constantly the battlefield which had spread to almost a mile range so he couldn’t rely just to his vision. He wanted to have the control so to act whenever his comrades needed help.

Hulk was having fun catapulting with his enormous fists Parademons right and left as if they were annoying pests; his hide was too harsh for the alien weapons to harm him.

Captain America and Natasha was fighting with hands and legs but the former every now and then stopped using his shield for protection and launched to neutralize his enemies. Dr. Strange was fighting with elegant hand motions as if he was in his operating room; his gentle gestures conjured either shields to protect himself from the aliens or light beams that blew the creatures. Odin and Thor in the middle of the battle were causing major disaster to the aliens.

However what troubled Tony and made him restless was that Darkseid didn’t make his appearance yet. They had heard him but since then there was no sign of him. He didn’t have any doubt that the battle had just started and the big boss’ absence wasn’t good. The alien was up to something.

“Sir, Superman is here.”

Tony licked his lips: part of his restlessness had to do with Bruce. He didn’t know anything about his friend’s whereabouts or condition and he was afraid. Bruce should have stayed somewhere safe and not running around to save Superman.

He launched his laser and blew up two Parademons that were fighting with a Valkyrie and then made a swirl to head where Superman was.

“Sonovabitch!” he exclaimed because he almost bumped on Superman who hovered in front of him.

The freaking Kryptonian looked very good for someone being imprisoned by Darkseid for so long. And the fact he was flying and…he just used his laser vision to blow up ten Parademons in a row showed that Bruce had made it: he managed – who knows how – to restore Superman to his powers.

Superman stood in front of Ironman: his relationship with Tony Stark was always bad yet Clark now was ashamed even to look the man in the eyes – the lenses.

“Mr. Stark” he said “I owe you…”

Tony just didn’t have time for that.

“Oh, shut up! You owe me and Bruce too many things but now it’s not the time” Superman bit his lips and nodded. “Where’s Batman?” he asked not using Bruce’s name in case someone overheard them.
Superman’s eyes became more shadowed from guilt.

“He locked me in the Tumbler and sent me here…but he stayed there.”

Tony bit his bottom lip and he was happy that Ironman’s helmet hid it from Superman. Yet it wasn’t so difficult for Clark to understand.

“He told me that we’ll meet here.”

Ironman shook his head.

“But obviously he’s not here!” he spat and span around clearing the area from Parademons which found the chance to approach.

Superman followed his lead using his laser vision and his punches.

“They seem like sprouting like weeds…” he mumbled. “We are lucky that Thor brought the Asgardian army.”

Ironman turned slightly his head.

“Batman’s work” he spat and flew away heading where Granny were fighting the Asgardians killing several of them.

Superman gulped but instantly set his jaw determined: his hatred for Bagdana and Darkseid but most for himself won his guilt: there would be time for guilt, now it was time for action. He flew using his entire force to tear apart the flying Parademons in his way while his laser vision was blasting more of them that were far.

He knew that it was better for him to fight the flying creatures to stop them from hitting his comrades from the air yet his agony was that those in the land were outnumbered and would be easily swallowed by the thousands of enemies.

For the first time, his grim face lit from relief: a red blur ran the road towards the battlefield ‘uprooting’ the green river of aliens. Flash. Bruce really took care assembling every force that loved this planet.

Montoya’s walkie talkie buzzed and Gordon frowned. The young lieutenant looked at Jim while listening.

“Dr. Hugo Strange was found in the Arkham Asylum shot in the chest – he is alive – but he opened Joker’s and Quinzel’s cells. Elliot had gone to visit the doctor.”

Jim ran to his patrol car before Montoya finished and she followed him jumping at the driver’s seat.

“Wayne Manor” he said to her.

The demon and the human were both completely naked on a black cloud that was their mattress. Bagdana was lying on his side behind the human massaging with both hands, no, better fondling, the human’s broad muscle bound back; his lips were planting soft kisses on the shoulders’ skin that looked velvety smooth. The demon’s cat-like eyes were filled with affection so abnormal for a demon – Bagdana had even adjusted his body’s size to match the human’s in order to not hurt him.
The human was on his belly with his arms loosely placed over his head; his eyes were blank but determined gazing at the cement wall in front of him.

It was obvious what had taken place. Darkseid wanted his rage to prevail and to avert his eyes disgusted yet he realized that he couldn’t or…he didn’t want to.

His eyes were fixed on the body before him unwilling to let go. From the day he met him in his office, Darkseid had found Wayne rather attractive – even if he didn’t want to admit it. Yet seeing him like this made the impression stronger.

With the expensive clothes on and sat in the wheelchair, Darkseid couldn’t imagine that this body was chiseled in such perfection; with porcelain, glowing skin and strong, artistic sculpted muscles. The way he had his arms over his head made the deltoids bulge pointing every single jointing fiber. Bagdana was nibbling the human’s shoulder blades and Darkseid couldn’t blame him…

Only a small part of Wayne’s front was visible yet it was delicious enough letting him see a portion of a pink nipple and harmonic layers of abdominals. However Darkseid wasn’t sorry he couldn’t see the man’s chest and those juicy pectorals which could see partially because a cute curve from the waist led to enticing, protruding round buttocks that the New God could tell that had just given tremendous pleasure to the demon; they were taut but at the same time seemed soft and velvety urging his hands to touch to feel…

The perfume this mortal body emanated stunned and intoxicated him blended with the smell of sex hued sweat.

Humans shouldn’t be so beautiful…So alluring; so charming…More charming when Wayne’s glimmering beautiful eyes narrowed like a wildcat’s as soon as he saw Darkseid. Raven silken locks wet framed his hot face and made his eye’s effect stronger. So intense, beautiful eyes…

The New God thought that the human didn’t know who had before him but still having a blue giant staring at his naked body after Bagdana having screw him should have been terrorizing; yet the human didn’t look scared.

Bagdana took in the way Darkseid was goggling at Bruce’s body and fast like air he stood on the floor, his clothes reappearing to dress his own gigantic body. The demon placed his body in a way that Darkseid couldn’t see Bruce anymore.

Darkseid smirked: a demon protecting his mate from strange eyes.

“How scurvy you are, demon!”

Bruce’s thought was that Bagdana was a demon so from definition he was scurvy thus the New God wasn’t saying anything new.

“Being here fucking your human whore!” he roared to the demon wanting to show that Wayne’s stunning nudity left him indifferent.

Bagdana smiled.

“Isn’t that bad that I took my share before the battle…” he slurred.

Suddenly, Darkseid with the corner of his eyes saw something that struck him like a thunder: in the middle of the room, on the floor around the central stone pole, black things were scattered; black things with one of them standing out: a cowl with pointy ears.
The New God’s eyes widened for the umpteenth time the last hours: when he met the human in his office, he experienced his defiance, the strength of his character, his immunity to mind control but he couldn’t imagine... His eyes stabbed Bagdana’s body struggling to see the man who lay on the mattress.

“He is the Batman!” he roared. “That’s why you asked from me to not kill both Bruce Wayne and Batman: they are the same person and you couldn’t risk one of them getting killed! That’s why Batman’s appearances were scarce: he is disabled!”

Bruce behind the demon’s mass clenched his fists: he didn’t want Darkseid knowing his secret. He supported himself to his elbow and rose a bit. It wasn’t a disaster.

Bagdana smiled.

“You figured out, I see…” he cocked an eyebrow.

Darkseid’s lips flared and his fists clenched: the demon was mocking him.

“You didn’t tell me the truth about Wayne!”

Bagdana crossed his column like arms over his enormous chest and shrugged a shoulder.

“I’m a demon” he said “you didn’t really expect honesty from a demon?” he asked amused.

On that sarcasm Darkseid let his rage explode: he clenched his jaw making his teeth emanate sparkles. His hands became fists.

“You shall be punished for your cheating! I’ll have the human first subjected to my treatment!” his nostrils spat fire.

Bruce rolled his eyes: it was ridiculous.

“You won’t touch him!” Bagdana hissed calmly and his yellow cat like eyes became flaming red scowling at the bigger god.

Darkseid yanked his head backwards cackling and made a motion forwards to overcome Bagdana’s obstacle but he was pushed back from a hot wave: the demon’s body lost its granite texture and became a mountainous body of fire and lava that reached the ceiling towering Darkseid; the flames coming from the mass danced frantically around and two coal like eyes stabbed the New God.

Bruce felt something soft covering his body and his eyes just before Bagdana’s transformation: he saw Bagdana taking the form of his kingdom’s deepest depths but he didn’t feel the heat that certainly would have burnt him alive. Bagdana took care to cover him with that protective layer.

Darkseid’s eyes were still and his breath echoed like roaring: it wasn’t the time to spend his powers and those of the despicable demon. He needed him to defeat the humans and then he’d teach him a lesson. For the time being however he loosened his stance and looked him in the black-gold coals that were his eyes.

He nodded.

“If you want to keep your pet then use your strength against humans.”

The mountain of lave and fire began freezing giving its place to granite that was chiseled in real time to produce in a second Bagdana’s casual form. The demon’s thick brows were knitted.
“What are you saying? Your attack is going to be launched in two days. You changed the attack’s time without telling me?”

Darkseid now was rasping: his wrath for Bagdana’s treachery to hide the truth about Wayne had made him forget what happened in the Frozen Bazin.

“THEY ATTACKED US, you deplorable serpent!”

Bagdana’s bewilderment was depicted in his yellow cat like eyes.

“That’s…no way…” he said.

Darkseid sniggered but his rage was such that the snigger became a roar.

“The Avengers are at the Frozen Basin; they wanted to search Mannheim’s facilities…to get my machine.”

Bagdana grimaced.

“You stopped them?”

Darkseid snorted and fisted his hands.

“What do you think?! Right now they fight with the Parademons I brought from Washington.”

Bagdana shook his head almost indifferent.

“Fine then…They chose to end their lives sooner.”

Darkseid growled.

“Idiot! They have weapons that can pass the Parademon’s skin and their attires are durable to Parademon’s weaponry! And…” he stabbed the demon with his eyes “Thor and Odin came with an army of Asgardians and Valkyries.”

If Bagdana had human skin and not his granite hide then he would have been pale; his plumb lips that just now were sank in Bruce’s sweetness stayed agape.

Darkseid’s ire subsided a bit for amusement’s shake over the demon’s shock. He wanted to make the demon suffer for what he did.

“Police and SWAT attacked Intergang in Metropolis.”

Bagdana blinked.

“Ivy can easily smash them.”

Darkseid smirked.

“Not when the real Diana of Themyscirra protects them!”

Bagdana opened his mouth unable to utter ‘impossible’. Darkseid crooked his mouth in disgust.

“And Superman is free!” he roared leaning to him and moved his hand in the air.

Bagdana saw in the humid air of the room the battle in Frozen Bazin but no Superman: Darkseid must have been raving.
“It must be a trick…what you say you saw: some hologram or something stupid. Superman is in his cell…I just saw him” he said confident.

“Then how you explain this?!”

The demon’s eyes almost popped out from their sockets: Superman was flying, strong and vivid as if he wasn’t under Kryptonite’s and red sun’s radiation for days. The Man of Steel was using his laser vision and his extraordinary powers without a problem exterminating Parademons. The demon shook his head.

“But I did saw him in his cell weak, half dead; I sensed his DNA.”

Granny Goodness’ face was deformed in a grimace of rage and hatred. Her plump body vibrated from boiling anger as she crossed the battlefield in her way shooting at the Asgardians with the guns she held in both hands. She was determined to kill everyone in her path winning this battle even herself.

She shrieked satisfied as several Asgardians collapsed on the soil; they might have had armors that Parademons couldn’t breech yet her weapons could.

Granny smirked and jumped in the air to arrive faster to the spot where Asgardians were slaughtering Parademons with their long swords. She turned her weapons on them and pushed the triggers simultaneously ready to savor the massacre.

But then something stood between her fire and the Asgardians absorbing the beams. Granny’s eyes bulged and she cried from frustration.

It was Captain America’s shield that after stopping the beams turned downwards to end up in her master’s hands. Steve’s determined eyes crossed with Granny’s as she landed before him.

“You don’t know that it’s cowardice to hit someone in the back?” he asked.

Granny cackled.

“I’m face to face with you, pest!” she let a spooky shriek and rushed against him firing both her guns.

Steve used his shield to protect himself but Granny reached him and threw away the firearms replacing them with long, broad blades that shone in the sun; she downed the blades to Steve’s throat and he dodged bringing his shield to block them.

Granny roared frustrated and pushed more the blades almost bending Steve’s hand. Captain America clenching his teeth jerked his legs kicking his enemy’s calves shoving her away from him. He hardly had straightened his body when Parademons swarmed at him shooting and moving their blades. Steve was moving his shield both to block hits and attack himself.

Suddenly, three of his enemies were launched to the air and then hit by bullets.

Steve narrowed his eyes trying to discern through the dust the one who was helping him. A human body jerked in the air kicking two Parademons and landed in front of him.

“Two are better than one, right?” Natasha said in her thick accent and Steve nodded smiling.
They took positions back to back in order to cover more space but they failed to see Granny turning her firearms at them; her eyes shining maniac.

They heard her shrieking laughter and the sound from her beams; it was too close for avoiding and Steve had thrown his shield to smash attacking Parademons. They both fell on the ground aware that the range of her beams was enough to hit them even down.

But then the beams were deflected by something transparent that made the air wave and Granny had to jump several feet away to escape her own beams.

Steve gave his hand to Natasha and both stood looking in the air: a laughing Superman was there blowing over his index fingers which stood like gun barrels.

“Hard times for heroes, huh?” Superman said.

“Are you alright?”

They turned around to the other familiar voice only to see a second Superman regarding them serious as ever.

“Two Supermen?!” Darkseid grunted goggling at the footage from the battlefield.

Bagdana surprised as his ally narrowed his eyes.

Clark squinted at… himself; but he let his surprise last only two seconds and immediately he readied to attack the impostor: after what happened with Poison Ivy and Darkseid he wasn’t willing to take any risk…especially, when he was in front of none other than himself!

But a second before he surged at the impostor the second Superman changed leaving none other than Loki in his place.

Clark had the same startled expression as Natasha and Steve.

“Ugh!” the mischievous god exclaimed. “Muscles and all are overhyped; I prefer my unique, peculiar beauty…What?” he asked taking in the expressions of the others; he shook his head and crooked his mouth. “Someone of us has to work, huh?” he rushed to the other end of the battle sending waves of energy against the aliens.

Thomas Elliot heard only the sound of his expensive leather shoes on the linoleum floor and the determined beats of his heart. With the corner of his eyes he acknowledged nurses and doctors dressed in white passing right and left greeting him and frowning when they didn’t receive any reciprocation.

As he had expected police and Wayne Enterprises’ security had surrounded the free clinic to prevent any attack from the rioters. However he worked in the clinic and his ID gave him easy pass.

Leslie was in the middle of the foyer room. Dressed in her white robe, agitated, looking at her colleagues with her determined deep stare behind her rectangular glasses she gave instructions. Like every day the foyer was filled with people: elderly, women and children of the Narrows benefited
from the free clinic.

He smirked inside and walked to her.

“Tommy, it’s not your shift” she greeted him.

Elliot growled inside: suspicious as always, he thought.

“Well, no classes at the University due to the Training Day and I thought to come here to help” he looked around “aren’t you glad to see me?”

Leslie sensed something odd – odder than usual behind Elliot’s cocked eyebrows – yet she had too many things on her mind to deal with it now. She walked with the intention to head at the emergency rooms, her staff already walking towards the patients’ wards.

“Of course I am, Tommy – it’s a busy day.”

Thomas nodded.

“More than usual…”

“It’s the riots…” Leslie said her eyes on the emergency ward as she walked hastily, Thomas at her heels.

“Police seems to have the control” he remarked slyly.

Leslie pushed the door’s knob to enter the first room.

“Yes, but people in the Narrows have seen a lot so it is natural to be panicked and to want to stay in a safe place. Aren’t you going to wear your robe?”

She asked frowned registering his blank eyes.

“No, Leslie” he answered turning abruptly his suddenly glimmering eyes to her. “We’ll go to visit our Brucie.”

Leslie let the knob and narrowed her eyes.

“What? That’s not the time for this.”

Elliot smirked.

“Oh, yes…I think it is” he pulled out of his pants’ pocket a square handgun.

Leslie pressed her lips and shook her head staying calm: it wasn’t the first time someone threatened her with a gun.

“Thomas, put that away…you don’t want to do this.”

“Oh, yes, I do. And don’t patronize me, you foolish woman! That brat humiliated me and now it’s the time he pays!”

Leslie closed her eyes: all this time, Bruce was right about Elliot; on the other hand she had been too naïve and lenient to him, which gave Thomas the chance to do this.

He was in a hurry; he grabbed Leslie’s upper arm and holding the gun with the other he dragged her
to the foyer causing shrieks from the citizens and the nurses who saw the gun.

Leslie gestured to everyone to calm down.

“Thomas, people have nothing to do with your grudge. Why threatening them?”

Elliot clenched her more.

“They’ll help me persuade you to take me to the Manor” he smiled. “I know that the Manor has the
toughest security there is and now with the riots even more so the only way to get in is with you.”

Leslie set her jaw.

“There’s no way I’ll get you there to harm Bruce!”

Thomas cursed furious and brandished his gun as if he was ready to hit her, movement that made
bystanders, patients and staff, huff scared.

“We’ll see about that!” he said controlling his temper and Leslie frowned. “Come!”

Everyone looked where Elliot’s head was turned. A blond girl with two ponytails on her head,
dressed in a tiny skirt and white strapped leggings walked to the foyer swaying her hips accompanied
by a nurse who had her back on the people. The girl whom Leslie recognized as Dr. Quinzel held a
machine gun.

Suddenly, the nurse turned and Leslie couldn’t hold her laughter because amusement overcame for a
second her wariness. The nurse was dressed in the casual white robe; ‘she’ was tall with short, bushy
red hair that was a wig; her face was painted white and her lips were painted ruby red highlighting
the scars that reached her cheeks.

“Hellooooo, people! Nurse Joky is with youuuuuuu to relieve you from your pain…” he made his
voice hoarse. “Permanently!”

He drew out of his skirt a machine gun and aimed it at the people. He pouted.

“Now…I dooooon’t like disobedient patients. Soooooo be good kids and your beautiful nurse will
take care of you.”

Leslie stared at him cocking an eyebrow.

“You found your true inclination?” she asked eyeing his skirt “Those leg hair though…” she arched
her eyebrows. “Dr. Elliot can suggest a good surgeon to operate you…”

People around gulped afraid that Joker would be mad but the nurse looked at himself and laughed.

“I like her, Tommy” he said looking at him. “He has a sense of humor.”

Quinzel was crossing the room grinning broadly turning her machine gun to people who flinched
and yelled causing her laughter.

“You’re right, Mr. J. It is exciting!”

Joker stared at her and shrugged.

“Youuuuu should listen to paaaaaapa Joker, Harlequin!”
Elliot rolled his eyes.

“Enough with your nonsense!” he stabbed Leslie with his eyes. “Either you’ll get me to the Manor or this day will stay in the history as the free clinic massacre!”

Both Joker and Harley grinned pointing their guns at the people who shrieked.

Leslie bit her lip; she hated that.

Kelly heard the fuss returning from the patient rooms and came curious to see what had happened; it wasn’t something unusual for the clinic after all. But upon entering the foyer and seeing Joker with his minion threatening people she paled. But then she took in Tommy holding Dr. Leslie with a gun clenched in his hand and she couldn’t stop herself: Thomas couldn’t do this…

She ran to Elliot.

“Tommy, what are you doing?” she asked searching for his eyes.

Thomas huffed exasperated and looked at her.

“I’m so tired of you” he spat and in front of everyone’s goggling eyes he shot the girl in the chest.

Kelly’s eyes stayed widened in confusion as her lean body fall on the floor with a bleeding hole in the chest.

Leslie jerked in Elliot’s grip to run to her nurse but he held her back.

“Now, Leslie: do you want me to continue?” he roared.

The kids began crying hiding in their parents’ chests; Leslie bit her lip realizing those people’s panic and despair: they had come here, to the doctor who for years protected them, only to be surrendered in a nightmare. Thomas had definitely gone mental: he just shot Kelly, he wouldn’t hesitate to do it again.

She shook her head.

“No, I’ll take you there.”

Elliot smirked.

“Wise choice…Ah! Harley will stay here ready to execute your precious patients in case you try something in the road.”

He pushed her ahead of him and Joker followed.

“We’ll take your car” Elliot said when they entered the underground parking. “I suppose the Ground’s Gates open automatically for you.”

Montoya sped the car crossing fast the bridge to the Palisades casting glances to her chief who regarded the road impatient.

“Soon we’ll be there, Commissionaire; Palisades don’t have any traffic.”

Jim had already sent signal to the patrol cars that were in the city’s exits to the Palisades. They would
stop Elliot: he hoped that they would arrest him before getting near the Wayne Estate.

So when his cell phone rang he almost jumped.

Montoya looked at him with the same hope.

“Tell me…” Jim said. “I’m coming!”

“What?” Montoya asked.

“Turn around!”

Montoya obeyed immediately performing a skillful U-turn taking advantage of the almost empty bridge.

“The officers who guard the free clinic reported gun shots from inside” Montoya looked at him. “They allowed Elliot to enter: he worked there and had an ID so they let him.”

“Shit!”

As soon as Bagdana saw the second Superman turning into Loki everything dawned to him. He actually closed his eyes and smiled amused causing Darkseid’s irritated puzzlement.

Bagdana turned to look at Bruce who was watching the two giants with still, determined eyes; the layer the demon had put on him to protect him from the heat covered also his nudity so Bruce felt at ease. But all of a sudden, the demon stormed at him, forcing him on his back; Bagdana straddled him and grabbed his wrists stretching his arms over his head.

“You did that!” he said but his voice vibrated more from admiration than wrath. “I thought that I caught you before managing to free Superman but you not only had already released him but also you had taken care to cover your trails in case something went wrong.”

_The forest covered hill cast its grim shadow over the grotesque gothic building that stood at his foothills. The dawn was almost there yet the sky was still dark with clouds hiding the stars and the moon._

_Two shadows slipped inside the Mansion from the back door of the kitchen. The room was at the back side of the enormous rectangular building._

_“It’s like Dracula’s castle with these sharp turrets…and so dark with its gothic shape glaring at you. You’re sure it’s not haunted as well?”_

_The one shadow immediately headed for the door on the other end of the vast room but the second, leaner silhouette looked around curious._

_“You know your thing, huh, Batman? How did you know that the kitchen would be empty?”_

_True, the room was equipped with the usual kitchen ware yet it was obvious from the spider webs and the dust that it wasn’t ever used._

_Batman turned to his companion._
“The owner of the Mansion has no interest for food” he growled and the other nodded. “On the other hand…” he touched the down part of his wrist and the sketch of the building appeared into the room its lines illuminated in green neon light.

The face of Batman’s companion was cast under the green light and Loki’s sneaky eyes sparkled.

“Wow! James Bond style…”

Bruce rolled his eyes behind the lenses. Loki leaned to him.

“Not that I don’t goggle at the high tech thingies but…you sure don’t want me to transfer us there…” he winked and lolled his head “you know with magic?”

Batman scowled at him giving him the silent treatment and Loki arched his eyebrows.

“You’re the boss…” he shrugged.

The corridor leading from the kitchen to the Mansion’s interior was dark and deserted but Bruce knew that this was just for that part of the building since his blueprint showed where the guards were patrolling.

The fact that Darkseid didn’t even suspect that someone could have figured him and attempt an invasion to his lair was a major asset. Yet Batman never let down his guard. Lucius’ tracking system showed Kryptonite radiation at the left wing of the building where most of the guards were situated.

Loki was staring around as if he was visiting a museum.

“All these grim portraits on the walls don’t seem like old aliens…” he mumbled.

“The Mansion belonged to the true Mannheim family for centuries till Darkseid possessed the body of Brunno Mannheim.”

The only way to pass the patrols unnoticed was through the old study room that the building’s old blueprints showed that it had a secret door leading to the wing where Superman’s cell was. Batman could knock out the Parademon guards but if someone saw them in that state would immediately realize the intrusion.

That door opened exactly at the corridor with the cell; the odd thing was that contrary to the rest of the left wing the corridor with Superman’s cell was unguarded – they didn’t expect intruders and even if some breaking happened it was expected to be stopped before that corridor.

The corridor was narrow, dimly lit and the floor was covered with a material similar to tile.

“Tell me something” Loki mumbled. “Does Stark know that you used Bruce to get in touch with me?”

Batman looked at him.

“Stark doesn’t need to know everything.”

“Right” Loki nodded pursing his lips.

They followed the corridor for several feet when they saw green and red light in front of them. Bruce’s heart began drumming in his ribs but he controlled it. They hurried their steps till they reached their destination.
Bruce’s heart lost some beats seeing Clark in that awful state.

However he regained his recollection before Loki suspected. Then he pressed a button on his forearm blocking the alarm system connected with the cell’s door.

The mischievous god was staring Superman tilting his head.

“Not so super, huh? Poor Supes!” he mumbled.

Batman cast him a glare and the god touched the door which opened with a hiss. Then Loki did the same stopping the red radiation and Batman opened the Kryptonite chains supporting Clark who immediately collapse not having the chains holding him up. Loki hurried to help.

Batman looked at him and his lenses met Loki’s eyes.

“You know what to do.”

It was time for the implementation of the plan: Batman told Loki that he knew his ability to take whatever form he wanted – of course Bruce remembered vividly that time Loki was on his bed in Thasos having Superman’s exact appearance but he couldn’t tell him that because then Loki would connect the dots since that incident was something that Bruce wouldn’t have told to anyone.

In front of his eyes Loki became an exact replica of the Superman he had on his hands: weary, thin, pale, weak with disheveled hair and sweaty face. Superman winked.

“Good enough?”

“Fine” Batman growled and Loki rolled his eyes.

“You won’t harm yourself if you say something more encouraging than ‘fine’!”

Batman let carefully Superman on the floor and pulled out of one of his belt’s compartments a vial. He opened it and threw the content all over Loki who frowned.

“Superman’s DNA” Batman answered. “If anyone comes to check, his DNA and your appearance will do the work.”

Loki stepped inside looking with pouted lips the casket like cell.

“Nice cell…” he said and reactivated the red radiation. “Good think I don’t have claustrophobia!”

Batman closed the shackles to Loki’s ankles and wrists.

“When I should leave this place?” Loki asked.

Batman lifted Clark from the floor.

“You will know…”

Loki smirked and Batman shut the door of the cell; the god winked sending Batman and Superman back to the Tumbler.

Bagdana saw in the battlefield the second Superman becoming Loki.
“You used Loki’s shape shifting skills to outsmart me!”

Bruce arched his eyebrows and shrugged as much as Bagdana’s grip allowed him.

“You’re not the only one who knows the game of deception…”

Darkseid’s eyes flashed impressed overcoming his arousal from seeing the demon handling like this the mortal’s nude body. Bagdana pressed his lips remembering how he had fooled Thor months ago with a reflection of himself.

“You used my trick against me…” he said. “I caught you not on your way to free Superman but you came to win time for Superman to leave; you didn’t want the Parademons reach him because then your plan would have been doomed… you wanted Superman to go to the Frozen Basin” he shook his head and smiled. “You planned everything so that the attack at Mannheim’s facilities would take place in daylight because you wanted the sun light to charge Superman’s powers. And the real Diana…” his eyes were filled with admiration. “You figured out everything…”

Bruce met his stare.

“You chose the popular version for your Princess to persuade people that she was real; yet for someone who was raised by a person obsessed with the ancients this didn’t work…”

Bagdana shook his head.

“Ra’s Al Ghul taught you everything…” he sighed. “So you searched and discovered Themyscira and the real Princess…this was the reason you were absent from Gotham…you weren’t looking for Superman: you were weaving your perfect plan” he laughed. “You knew I was Queen?”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“First I figured that Queen was the Arrow…However Queen couldn’t be a skilled archer: his friend from university had said that he was lousy at archery and the Arrow as well as the Queen I met was left handed even though he tried to show the opposite because the real Queen was right handed. And then the Arrow was the first to find Loki’s palace and threatened to kill him with a golden arrow… No mere human could discover the magic palace of Loki and the golden arrow reminded me an ancient drawing I found during my research about you: Bagdana, the left handed archer who killed gods with his golden arrows.”

Bagdana closed his eyes amused.

“And I thought that I fooled you…”

Darkseid decided to overcome his surprise; till now he was listening silent and in awe for the human being that lay defenseless in two gods’ presence but in fact as strong as them. He fixed his angry eyes on Bruce.

“You made the attack at my premises to drive me away from the cities to stop me from retaliating; the Electromagnetic Storm Training Day was your idea to rob me from targets with many casualties” Bruce’s gaze turned to the New God unflinching. “You knew that I wouldn’t risk my facilities being breeched…You know about the Machine…”

Bruce tilted his head on the side.

“Mannheim’s interest for the strange items found in LexLabs was intriguing…You attacked me to intimidate me into giving you the items” Bruce pressed his lips. “Since you wanted them so much I
let you take them – of course persuading you that you stole them from me.”

Darkseid’s eyes gazed at the human impressed.

“You had tracking devices on them…”

Bruce met his gaze.

“Tony Stark is an inventive genius: it was easy for him.”

The New God nodded.

“And you knew where the items were and that Luthor assembled them to build a machine.”

“You got it.”

Bagdana laughed and Darkseid cast him a sideways glare.

“A giant chessboard” the demon said unfazed by his ally’s irritation “where deities thought that they could use Bruce Wayne as a pawn” Bruce turned his sparkling gaze to him and Bagdana smiled.

“But you turned the deities into your pawns!”

Darkseid’s wrath surpassed his admiration; he rushed on Bruce shoving Bagdana off of him and grabbed him from the throat without managing to make the human’s stare bend. Bagdana returned in a flash and clutched Darkseid’s forearm to stop him from choking Bruce.

“Stop!”

Darkseid however was engaged in the staring battle with Bruce.

“You won’t defeat Darkseid, Mr. Wayne: you’re ingenious; a rare specimen and I’ll experiment with you when I finish with your friends.”

He let go of Bruce’s neck and turned to Bagdana.

“We have a battle to finish!”

Bagdana glared at him.

“You won’t harm Bruce!”

Darkseid smirked.

“I would be a fool to harm such a specimen… Now, follow me!” he roared and vanished.

Bruce and Bagdana were again alone in the enormous room their eyes connected.

A loud bang broke the silence and the demon without breaking eye contact smiled. He showed with the corner of his eye the place where the parts of Batman’s armor lay…now it was stamps of smoking ashes.

“You can’t get out of here since the doors work with DNA recognition but a demon must be cautious especially after the way you humiliated me… Your armor is destructed so you are robbed from the device that enables you to stand and move so do not spend your strength in futile attempts.”

Bruce scowled at him without replying anything and the demon took gently his chin despite Bruce’s
attempt to jerk away.

“I sensed your exhaustion…you’ve been exerting yourself to prepare this. Too bad all these were in vein…There’s no use or meaning in struggling anymore, Bruce. Rest. You did everything you could but soon it would be over and we’ll be free to revive our love.”

“There’s no love in you” Bruce hissed and the demon caressed the human’s cold cheek with his thumb. “Darkseid will dispose of you as soon as he achieves his goal.”

Bagdana let go of Bruce’s chin and stretched his posture.

“So you realize that despite your valiant and ingenious efforts your friends will be extinguished… Don’t worry though: I won’t let Darkseid lay his hands on you.”

With that the demon vanished and Bruce looked at the wall opposite him from where the Parademons had left. The door was there. With the corner of his eye he registered the ancient box where Bagdana had stashed the Black Butterfly and the Knife of Justice: the demon believed that he couldn’t do anything even with them.
Lois watched the police officers handcuffing the thugs who were scattered all over the warehouse’s perimeter. Most of the Intergang members were knocked out; the rest were either beaten up or wounded so their groaning offered a white sound to the sirens that howled.

Law enforcers were also wounded so the paramedics had their hands fool with treating or carrying injured from both sides. Thankfully, the casualties seemed to be very few.

She glanced at Jimmy who was shooting everything broadcasting to the *Planet’s* site.

Catwoman was there all the time helping in the fight but Diana had left when it was obvious that the outlaws were defeated. Lois supposed that she flew to help the forces of the law in the other warehouses where Intergang’s smaller lairs where situated.

Lois saw the head of the police officers walking to Catwoman and shaking hands.

But then the reporter turned her eyes to the sky watching the Amazon returning. But she detoured to bring to the police the unconscious Ivy: she unwrapped her glimmering Lasso leaving the law enforcers to handcuff her opponent. She rolled her Lasso and put it in its place at her left thigh as she headed to Catwoman. The lieutenant stretched his hand to the Princess as soon as she approached.

Catwoman chuckled.

“She prefers this” she said slyly bringing her fist to hit the place of her heart. “I know, it hurts but it’s the cultural shock…”

Diana looked at her amused and shook the hand the lieutenant offered her.

“Thank you: we are grateful. Without the help of both of you things would have been very difficult.”

Catwoman who carried some bruises and scratches to the visible part of her face nodded.

“Maybe the paramedics should look this?” the officer asked her concerned.

“No, it’s nothing” she waved that off. “Cats have nine lives, you know.”

Diana smiled.

“The people of the law have finished with the other hideouts” the Princess said.

“Yes” the officer replied “we are in touch with them and they informed us that your contribution was valuable” he bowed his head with respect.

“They were almost done when I arrived” Diana retorted modestly but firmly.

“We have to leave now” Catwoman whispered to Diana’s ear and the Amazon nodded.

“The city is in your hands now, lieutenant” the Princess said. “You won’t have a problem with Ivy; she is unconscious and deprived of her powers” and she followed Catwoman without another word.

Lois watched the two women frowned.

“Where are they going?” Jimmy asked.
“Something is going on…” Lois said and gestured to her sidekick to follow her as she carefully tailed the two women.

“You’re worried” Diana said to Catwoman.

“Yes…” she answered absent minded thinking about what happened to that alley with that odd woman and her sudden disappearance that saved her life – something was off and a nasty gut feeling clenched her insides. “We better go to the field. I’ll take my bike.”

“Flying with me is way faster” Diana remarked serious.

Catwoman lolled her head thoughtful but then she nodded thinking that there wasn’t any time to waste.

“Fine” she let her arms down and grabbed Diana’s upper arm. The Amazon took off.

“We are following them!” Lois said thankful that her car wasn’t far.

But Jimmy running behind her wondered how on Earth someone could follow flying people.

Dr. Strange was blocking Granny’s consequent beams of yellow light with green balls of energy he conjured moving elegantly his hands.

Around them Asgardians were slaughtering Parademons while all over the sky Valkyries did the same with the flying aliens backed by Ironman and Thor who covered flying the battlefield aiding their comrades underneath. A red blur was launching Parademons in the air and Superman finished them off.

Hulk’s roars as the green giant catapulted enemies all over towered the consequent bangs of bullets, rockets and beams, the cries and the shouts; Natasha and Steve at their part of the field were working as a team to neutralize their opponents: Natasha with two guns and Steve with his shield.

“Things are good for us” Tony said “they are countless but we beat them easily.”

Thor moved his hammer sending thunders to a clot of flying Parademons that surrounded two Valkyries.

“But still we have casualties: the plan of the attack here was wise otherwise we’d have hundreds of dead civilians right now” Ironman nodded his lenses launching laser to burn a Parademon in the ground. “Also” Thor grunted hammering with Mjolnir two Parademons at once “Darkseid hasn’t shown up yet and I’m sure he’ll have surprises for us…”

“We are prepared for him…” Tony said and cheered when Dr. Strange managed to hit Granny who screamed outraged taking cover behind a rock to avoid a new blow. “Stephen, look out!” Tony yelled seeing a waterfall of blue flames coming at him.

But before even hearing Tony’s warning, Dr. Strange sensed his cape lifting him and throwing him away from the lethal danger.

Everyone looked to the spot where the flames had come along with a bang as from a thousand thunders. A blue giant stood in the middle of the battlefield smirking at them: standing on two column-like legs, towering at 10 feet, his enormous arms bound with bulging stone muscles were still glowing from the energy he just sent to kill. His eyes were two red slits that glared at his...
Ironman standing in mid air lolled his head towards Thor who clenched his hammer gritting his teeth.

“Well…you got what you wanted – next time, do ask for something more delicious, will you?”

Thor didn’t have time to reply anything because he sensed something extremely hot approaching him; he turned only to see a fireball coming at him. He brought Mjolnir to deflect it but something pushed the fireball away from him.

With the corner of his eye he saw Odin grabbing his axe that was returning to him after pushing away the fireball. They both nodded and saw before them emerging through a burning cloud Bagdana with a fireball ready in his hand.

He was shorter and leaner than Darkseid but still he was a giant of 9 feet; his body was a flaming golden red mixed with black, naked but for metal briefs covering his groin, showing off his perfect long, bulging muscles in arms and legs. His eyes were the usual cat like slits, shining like rubies on fire and from his head protruded two long, straight horns that glimmered gold and emitted waves of flames. In his right hand he was clenching a big, wide sword that his blade was made from dancing flames.

“Tony” Pepper’s dodged voice filled his helmet “something is happening at Mannheim’s facilities.”

But Superman had already heard the bangs and turned his long distance vision to that direction biting his lips.

Bruce stood completely naked right next to the mattress: his legs were a bit shaky despite the mental concentration he focused on them; it was the fatigue and the pain in his pelvis. He had to hold the mattress for support and concentrate for a few moments before walking carefully. He couldn’t afford letting the panic of his body’s exhaustion and the loss of his armor’s artificial mobility stop him. He had made it again though certainly now was more difficult.

He simply disregarded that and his nudity walking staggering a bit to the corner of the room where the box containing his weapons was placed. The box was small, square with silver engravings on its metallic surface. Odd enough its dome shaped lid opened as soon as Bruce touched it. He frowned: it was doubtful that Bagdana would want this to happen.

Bruce wore the pouch with the Black Butterfly around his neck feeling dressed even though he was entirely naked. Then he grabbed his dagger. Suddenly, a thought flashed in his mind: the box opened because it sensed Bagdana’s DNA. Bruce closed his eyes: his body had absorbed the demon’s genetic fluids.

He looked at the door: It worked with DNA recognition…so…

Bruce crooked his mouth and made another step closer. An almost inaudible hiss and a rectangular part of the wall vanished showing him the way outwards.

From there he knew the way out of the Mansion and he was more than capable to pass unnoticed from the Parademons guarding.

He had to hurry so he sped which made his body protest however he couldn’t afford paying attention to that. He crossed the corridors leading to the kitchen and came out to the day light appreciating the sun that warmed his nude body.
His face became pink in the thought of someone seeing him like this…he fastened his steps to the spot where the Tumbler was set to wait for him after taking Superman to the Frozen Basin.

Bruce thanked himself for having the wisdom to program the Tumbler to wait for him at the base of the hill and not on the top – its stealth mode was protecting the vehicle from detection. Ascending the hill was an adversity that would have been detrimental right now.

The driver’s door rose to welcome him in and Bruce slipped in the seat; instantly, the car’s engine turned on and the vehicle sped ahead towards the Basin.

Bruce brushed the control panel initiating a hissing sound in the back of the car. He turned to see a layer that had emerged from the trunk with the panels of his spare armor: Alfred taught him when he was child that spare attire is always useful. He began putting his armor on feeling relief flooding his abused body; the disgust from what had happened in the Mansion was pushed deeper in his mind’s depths though its stinging remained as an abstract nuisance.

Alfred glanced at the people in the ground floor living room. Master Richard and Jason sat cross legged on the thick velvet carper with Hero rolling between them, Ms. Turner and Todd sat on the sofa and watched worried the developments in Gotham as GCN broadcasted footage from the areas with the riots.

He was sure that the two ladies were relieved that their children were in the safety of the Manor but still their hearts were to the people in danger. Of course GCN’s reporter assured that Gotham’s police had the control and his words were proved by the footage of SWAT members handcuffing thugs.

Alfred laid the tray he was carrying on the table and the boys followed Hero’s hasty jump to approach the delicious smelling delicacies.

“I suggest caution, young masters: the biscuits are really hot.”

He had brought also tea for the ladies and hot chocolate for the boys wanting to ease their agony. Since he couldn’t do the same with his own agony…His heart beat fast wondering where his young master was and in what state.

“Alfred, you should have told me to help you” Ms. Turner said.

Ms. Todd looked at him.

“Yes.”

Alfred smiled.

“You are so kind, my ladies yet it is my pleasure to take care of all of you.”

The door’s bell wasn’t a surprise for Alfred because when he was ready to bring the tray in the living room he had seen in the rectangular control panel on the kitchen’s wall that Leslie had just passed the gates. Of course the fact that she came here this time of the day was a surprise itself.

He walked calm to the door with a faint grin for the boys’ efforts to keep Hero away from the cinnamon biscuits. The kitten was restless all day from his human’s absence and he didn’t touch the treats the boys were giving him but now the cinnamon biscuits reminded him of Bruce so surged to them.
Leslie’s face as he opened the door was grim and Alfred frowned but before he asked what happened Thomas Elliot came to the fore pointing his gun at Alfred.

“I’m sorry, Alfred…” Leslie said. “They hold my patients hostage…”

“I do understand, Leslie” Alfred replied calm.

“Move inside, Alfred” Elliot said calm but firm, his finger tensing on the trigger.

Alfred nodded and moved backwards. Bruce was right to be cautious of Dr. Elliot; his young master had given the police evidence that Elliot was the one who gave the video to the hacker but it was obvious that he managed to evade arrest due to the riots. Alfred wasn’t afraid for his life but for the people inside.

Elliot didn’t close the door and Alfred narrowed his eyes exchanging a quick glance with Leslie who bit her lip. He had his answer when a bizarre nurse jumped in.

“Nurse Joker at youuuuuur seeeeervice” the gruesome nurse said with a Cheshire smile.

Now Elliot closed the door and along with Joker moved their weapons to urge them inside.

The people in the living room turned to see the visitor Alfred brought but gaped at the spectacle of the armed men. The boys made to move but Elliot aimed at them.

“Easy, brats!”

Hero hissed with his fur standing on edge and Dick hastened to hug him to stop the kitten before enraging their captors. Joker laughed.

“My faaaaaavorite kitten! Where’s your master, kitty?”

Thomas nodded and stared at Alfred.

“That’s the question of the day, Alfred. Where’s Brucie? It’s time I finish my matters with him.”

Alfred stared at him nonchalant.

“I don’t regret to inform you, sir, that Master Bruce isn’t here” he answered in his strict butler way with a dose of sarcasm added.

Elliot gritted his teeth annoyed from the news and Alfred’s attitude.

“Liar!” he said and touched his gun’s barrel to Alfred’s chest. “You say that to save him! All the time protecting him! But not today! If you don’t tell me where he is I’ll kill you!”

Joker scratched the red hair of the wing.

“Oooooooouuuuu! The new one is gooood!” he said and threw his wing away revealing his still non-dyed hair. “Baaaaaad quality” he looked at the ladies. “Dooooon’t buy thiiiiis: Tooooooo itcyyyy” he mumbled as if sharing a secret.

“Leave him alone, ya dork!” Jason hissed to Elliot with clenched teeth and jerked on his feet; his mother doing the same afraid for her boy.

“Atatatata…” Joker said waving his firearm warningly at them.
“Alfred says the truth” Dick rose too, holding Hero in his arms. “Bruce isn’t here.”

Alfred regarded the frustrated, sweaty Elliot perfectly unruffled.

“Master Anthony took Master Bruce to a rehabilitation clinic in California to have him prepared for the operation.”

Leslie crossed her arms over the chest: she knew already that Bruce was away but Elliot wouldn’t have believed her even if she had told him.

“Thomas, you see that there’s no meaning to all this” she said calmly. “Make it stop before more people get hurt.”

Elliot was fuming; his breaths coming out like rasps. His plan was screwed and that made his hatred more heated.

“No problem then…I might not have the chance to kill the bastard but I’ll send him to where he belongs.”

Joker looked at him intrigued.

“He haaaaas potential…” he said arching his eyebrows.

Elliot smirked.

“I might not have the chance to kill him but I’ll kill all of you.”

Superman saw the half mile long walls of the Mannheim’s facilities’ horizontal Π collapsing creating an enormous cloud of dust and an huge pile of debris. Despite the dust Superman’s vision enabled him to see what was surging out of the building.

His eyes narrowed: more than half a million Parademons, half of them flying and half of them on foot. But the worst was what was coming behind them: at least one hundred gigantic statues made from metal that shone in the sun. They were fast and their hands were actually canons. Their bodies were sculptured in detail with sharp edges protruding from everywhere; their heads were skeleton-like but their jaws were covered from metallic long, curvy horns that Superman could detect that were small canons.

This huge army ran towards the battlefield to swallow Earth’s defenders.

He felt Ironman by his side; he was seeing what Superman did.

“I need take care of Darkseid” Tony said.

Superman nodded.

“I’ll stall them.”

However as soon as he ended his phrase something hot hit him square in the chest throwing him back; Superman clenched his fists to fight the pain and saw Bagdana glaring at him brandishing his sword a second before storming at him.

Ironman stopped in midair to help Superman sending his liquid ultra nitrogen to freeze the flaming demon who roared outraged. The center of Bagdana’s body lost its red-black color becoming an icy
“Someone is paling…” Tony sneered and Superman found the chance to regain his breath.

Bagdana narrowed his cat-like eyes at Tony and jerked his body growling; Tony watched with widened eyes the progression of the ice stopping and then rapidly the fire ousting the ice; the demon’s body reinstated in its previous conditions.

“Ow!” Tony said making a fast manoeuvre to evade the fire wave Bagdana sent at him and set his systems to prepare everything Ironman had in nitrogen to hit again.

“Tony, leave!” Superman yelled because Tony had mentioned that he had to do something concerning Darkseid.

The Man of Steel blew with all his might icy air to hit the demon in the back the moment he was ready to slash Ironman with his enormous fire sword.

Bagdana jerked and turned to Superman indifferent to Ironman’s departure. His hatred for Superman made his flaming body glow more from heat. He smirked and two rows of pearly white teeth spit sparkles.

Clark stood before him glaring at him through narrowed eyes; his suit was burned in the chest but he didn’t care: that being made him hurt Bruce! He ruined everything! He blew again, the ice hitting Bagdana’s head, and surged at him, his eyes turning red.

Bagdana shook his head to shake off the ice and cackled roughly bending his head to bring his horns to stab the attacking Superman.

Yet Clark managed to grab the horns grunting from the burnings; if he was a human his hands would have been ashes now but still the pain was considerable. He put the pain aside and shook the horns trying to uproot them from the demon’s head.

Bagdana moved his sword to slash Superman’s belly; Clark took in the movement and raised his leg to kick the sword away still feeling the fire slicing him a second before the blade shattered.

Both opponents stood catching their breath. Superman’s belly ached but at least he broke the demon’s sword. As if Bagdana had read his mind a new sword emerged in his hand; the demon grinned.

“You will die today, Kryptonian. You and every other on this planet! And Bruce will be mine eternally.”

Superman shook his head.

“That won’t happen” he spat.

Bagdana chuckled and Superman saw in front of him Bruce and Bagdana on the black cloud-mattress. The demon held Bruce’s wrists over his head, choking his every attempt to resist with hands sprouting from his body. The demon was savouring Bruce’s writhing body kissing, licking and fondling every bit while thrusting deep in him.

Superman’s eyes widened in terror and pain and Bagdana laughed.

“He surrendered to me to buy you time to flee…but I don’t give a damn about this because what you just saw was our third unification. And the third time is a binding spell: Bruce is eternally bound to
“No!” Superman shouted and with his greatest speed he head butted the demon in the chest unbalancing him.

He began hammering him with his fists careless of the burnings on his skin.

Darkseid minced in the battlefield sending beams with his illuminated hands to kill Asgardians, his square face carved from a gleeful smirk.

Tony flew towards the blue giant shooting Parademons in his way; he wanted to reach close enough to have target but also be at a distance so that the alien wouldn’t kill him.

Suddenly, Loki was in front of him.

Darkseid found himself in front of Thor and Odin who blew at him simultaneously with their weapons; however the New God deflected their fire with his forearm and launched white beams from his eyes at them. The Asgardian gods managed to jump out of harm’s way and Darkseid spat furious. He called Bagdana with his mind.

The demon had shoved Superman off of him and downed his blade on his head but the Man of Steel caught it with both his hands putting all his strength to stop it before severing his head.

Bagdana heard Darkseid’s call in his head and growled frustrated kicking Superman in the guts before disappearing to reappear to his ally’s side.

“Devastate the planet with earthquakes and volcanoes” Darkseid said. “Add some tsunamis for the effect.”

Bagdana cocked an eyebrow.

“Gladly.”

“I ordered Parademons to attack the cities: Mr. Wayne might have evacuated major facilities but the cities are filled with apartment buildings.”

Darkseid smirked and shot his beams to Captain America growling frustrating when the human rolled on the ground avoiding the lethal force.

Superman stumbled on the air from Bagdana’s blows but fist his hands and stopped his falling; he controlled his breath: there were giant robots heading there.

He flew fast there and began blowing icy air to the first two robots he met making their legs freeze and break bringing down the enormous things. Yet he noticed that half of the flying aliens stopped and turned around heading away from the Frozen Basin.

“Now” Darkseid said to his demon sending laser with his hands to blow Asgardians “bring earthquakes and lava to humans: let’s give your pet something to remember and regret that he dared to provoke Darkseid’s wrath!”

Bagdana hesitated for some seconds but then determined ordered the elements of earth to bring destruction to the major cities.

“Odd earthquake activity is reported throughout the globe – it’s remarkable that the earth is shaking
even in areas with no history of earthquakes; but what is stranger is the simultaneous eruptions of major and minor volcanoes…” the calm voice of CNN’s newscaster said.

Bruce brushed the turbo speed option on the Tumbler’s control panel casting glances at the screen with image from CNN. So Bagdana set in action his powers.

“Scientists, however, reassure that the phenomenon is rather smooth with earthquakes of small size and volcano eruptions that cause no worries. The authorities are talking about minor damages in buildings and a few citizens with superficial injuries”

Jor El’s hologram face appeared on the screen.

“Bagdana unleashed the elements – Fortress smoothed the effect.”

Bruce grinned satisfied.

“Thank you, Jor El.”

Bagdana knitted his eyebrows and Darkseid clenched his jaw.

“What?!” he barked.

“Something blocks my powers…something protects the earth…”

Darkseid roared.

“Your human did something, you useless demon!”

Bagdana pursed his lips and in his frustration launched more flames against the Valkyries crossing the battlefield like a golden stream of air.

“Still I can smash them single handed!” Darkseid roared. “They can’t diminish my strength!”

He clenched his fists.

“My power will eradicate New York even from here – nobody can stop me!”

He turned his eyes to the horizon towards New York.

Loki winked to Ironman.

“Now?”

Ironman armed both canons under his wrists and Loki stretched his arms towards Darkseid.

“Now!” Ironman said launching the gas that eliminated divine powers.

Loki did the same their combined quantities of compound gas hit the New God who grunted feeling that his strength wasn’t enough to hit a distant target.

“No!” he yelled and grounding his teeth turned to eradicate those who caused that to him.

“Time to ruuuuuun…” Loki said cocking an eyebrow and grabbed Ironman’s forearm vanishing both of them a second before Darkseid’s omega beams hit them.
Some bushes were turned into ashes instead and the New God frustrated from his enemies’ escape roared his anger causing landslides to the surrounding mountains.

“You will pay for these! Your petty tricks may have stopped me from wiping out the cities but my powers are enough to kill all of you and then clearing the human filth!”

“I love the arousal of escaping from the monster’s jaws!” Tony said when Loki made them reappear in the other edge of the battlefield.

Loki arched his eyebrows.

“Easy, kinky boy…don’t fuck us!”

Tony laughed and rushed where Superman was fighting the robots.

It was the first time in his life that Superman felt overwhelmed. His eyes were red sending continuously laser to the giant robots: he had figured that they were sensitive in the spot where their necks met the right shoulder and targeted there. Truly, once the laser hit there the giants collapsed and then Superman finished them off with his frozen blow that shattered the strange alloy they were made of.

Yet new robots kept coming from the premises and the flying Parademons shot at him taking advantage of his absorption with extinguishing the robots. The sun was doing a perfect work for him so the fire from Parademons didn’t harm him yet it was painful along with the wounds Bagdana made him.

But more painful was the realization that the legions of Parademons were heading towards his comrades to swallow them. Even some robots managed to pass him and the horrendous sound of their 5 tons’ mass implemented a creepy hue to the scenery.

Suddenly, as he was bombarding a robot with his fists, he heard the sound of metal crushing to the ground. He looked down curious.

Flash met his gaze and gave him the thumbs up grinning broadly. The speedster was so incredibly fast that made thousands spins around the robot’s feet in a second hitting the metal that melt causing the robot to collapse. At the same time Flash knocked out dozens of Parademons.

Superman smiled and launched his lasers against a flying Parademon that surged at Flash who was already feet away uprooting every Parademon in his path. An explosion to his right made Superman turn.

Ironman had brought down a robot. Both his shoulder canons still emitted smoke as he turned them to shoot at another robot.

The good thing was that as the robots fell down they crushed dozens of Parademons stabbing them to death with their spikes.

“Good job!” Superman yelled at Ironman punching two Parademons at once.

“We were prepared for the robots from Jor El’s logs” Tony said. “But they are too many…”

Superman saw the battlefield from above: Stark was right. In the wide battlefield, the powers of Earth were winning yet the aliens kept coming with Granny having taken the head leading them to charge. Also, Darkseid although weakened and unable to hit targets miles away, still was lethal in the battlefield.
“When he returns and finds all his loved ones slaughtered then his already cripple mind will collapse…I made already the beginning with that video: I bet Brucie had a major mental breakdown watching again Falcone giving him what he deserves…” Thomas Elliot laughed seeing the disgusted expressions of Ms. Turner and Todd. “And being haunted by the knowledge that everyone watched too…”

Hero hissed and jumped from Dick’s hands to stab his nails in Elliot’s face; he cursed and writhed to escape from the hissing kitten.

Joker armed his gun warning Alfred and Leslie who were ready to attack Thomas.

Finally, Elliot managed to throw the animal off of him.

“I’ll start with his stupid kitten then” he said and shot while Hero was still on air.

Dick jumped upwards, somersaulted in the air and caught the kitten dragging him away from the bullet.

Elliot’s eyes were now flashing with manic hatred shooting at the ‘flying’ boy but unable to find target. Dick landed outside the room protected from the wall but Elliot had already turned his attention elsewhere; he aimed at Alfred.

“You then…”

He made to press the trigger but a horrific pain in his wrist made him lose any control and the gun dropped down. Everyone saw a blade piercing Elliot’s wrist and the doctor’s eyes bulged more from shock than pain.

“Nooooot soooofast, buddy” Joker said with an ominous frown having thrown his firearm for two of his beloved blades. “That video was yours?” he asked losing his stuttering in his icy cold wrath.

“How are we supposed to follow something we don’t see, Miss Lane?”

Jimmy uttered the question that had been bothering him from the beginning. He was at the passenger seat troubled by the crazy speed Lois was driving her car.

Her eyes were fixed determined forwards.

“They flew towards the west borders of the state but there is no report of an emergency to the cities near the area: so what happens must be at the borders of the state.”

Jimmy crooked his mouth in disbelief and Lois cast him a glare.

“I’m an instinct reporter, kid!” she spat. “And you heard on the radio about the simultaneous earthquakes and volcano eruptions – something major is going on… Shit!”

She saw a black van that was positioned horizontally in the center of the street blocking her way. Three people were in front of the van staring at the approaching car. Lois lowered speed and finally stopped as the people came to them.

They were two men and a woman. Lois knew very well the one with the eye patch.
“Miss Lane” the Afro-American said.

“Agent Fury” S.H.I.E.L.D.’s presence here confirmed her hunch.

“I have to ask you to turn back.”

The reporter tapped her fingers on the steer wheel.

“Something big is happening” Lois said straight out. “The world must know.”

Fury shook his head.

“Now it’s not the time for exclusives and Pulitzers, Miss Lane. It’s better if the world doesn’t find out yet.”

Lois rolled her eyes and locked her gaze with Fury’s one eye.

“What if I promise that I won’t broadcast anything till it’s over?”

Fury laughed and Agent Carter stepped forward.

“You don’t expect us to trust a reporter…”

Lois smirked and stepped on the accelerator.

“I don’t need you too!” she said and steered the wheel to avoid the van’s mass and continued her way.

“Damn!” Fury cursed and ran to the van’s driver seat Maria Hill and Agent Carter following.

“She is Superman’s reporter” Hill said jumping inside “maybe we can trust her.”

Fury started the engine and instantly stepped on it.

“Lately we couldn’t trust even Superman himself…On the other side, even if we trust her, we must protect her.”

General Morrison was watching the frigate’s instruments avidly. The entire fleet was in red alert monitoring the entire planet being ready to act. Every airplane carrier had F-22s, Eurofighters, Rafales and Suckhoi’s with their engines ignited waiting for the order to act.

“General Morrison, targets are heading to New York, Washington, London, Moscow, Beijing and Tokyo” Pepper’s calm voice reached him from the control panel.

“We are ready for them, Miss Potts” he answered and his staff in front of the control panel and around the room began transmitting the news to the forces around the world. “All forces on them” he ordered as soon as the screen of the radar showed hostile dots approaching New York who was near them. “Intercept and destroy before they reach inhabited areas.”

Pepper informed the other military forces and the same order was given simultaneously from the commanders of the alliance’s warships all around the globe.
“Slaughter them all!” Granny shrieked leading the charging Parademons against the Earth’s protectors.

Dr. Strange conjured an enormous green shield blocking Bagdana’s wave of fire from hitting Hulk who was plummeting Parademons roaring and showing his teeth.

Bagdana pressed his lips frustrated and turned his fires on the wizard instead; Stephen moved his hands clock wise and immediately the shield that protected Hulk became blue waves that met the fire and quenched it. Then the wizard raised his hands leading the waves to attack the demon who set his sword’s blade to block the waves that were absorbed.

Dr. Strange didn’t have time to realize what happened when Bagdana jerked up his sword launching the wizard in the air to crush on the rocks. The demon send a fireball to finish the wizard as soon as he would hit the rocks and sure for his success walked away; he didn’t see Stephen’s cape stretching and drawing Dr. Strange far from the rocks. However the fireball was made to find and hit him so he saw the fire inches from his chest…

The Eye of Agamoto twitched and Stephen saw awed the medallion sucking the fireball.

Dr. Strange landed smoothly on his feet catching his breath for a second before using his hands to conjure green waves to blast Parademons.

Captain America sent his shield to shatter five Parademons at once while Natasha was firing at the rest. Suddenly, Steve felt heat and with the corner of his eye saw Darkseid launching his beams at him; Captain America fell on the ground to avoid the lethal beams yet Darkseid laughed as his beams adjusted to Captain’s new position.

Steve clenched his jaw ready to take the lethal blow but then the beams were deflected to hit elsewhere just burning his shoulder. The pain was horrible yet Steve was thankful he was alive; he saw a huge, pole like axe in the place where the beams were stopped.

The axe that seemed ancient changed course midair returning to its owner.

“Fight with someone at your size, Darkseid!” an imposing voice addressed the New God who glared at Odin.

The father of the Asgardians stood proud with his crystal gold armor shining blindingly and the horns of his helmet spitting sparkles like the axe he was holding.

Darkseid laughed.

“Odin! The old Viking God!” he pursed his lips and regarded Odin “You’re not of my size by the way” he laughed. “You must be ashamed for letting that human lure you and your people to your deaths. Did you fuck the human or he is only your son’s whore?” his rough voice was vibrating with scorn.

Odin’s face distorted in a grimace of rage.

“It’ll be my honor to terminate a deplorable being like you!”

Darkseid yanked his head back.

“Have it your way! Today you’ll lose more than your eye!”

The New God stormed against Odin with such speed that only a blur was visible yet the Asgardian
was ready for him and as soon as he reached him his axe hammered Darkseid throwing him away.
Odin charged at him downing his weapon at his head yet Darkseid blocked the sparkling blade with
his crossed forearms and kicked Odin in the stomach sending him away.

“First I’ll have fun with you and then I’ll finish you!” Darkseid cackled and surged against Odin who
brought his axe at the New God’s upper arm. “It tinkles” he cackled though a black liquid slithered
on his skin.

Odin punched him with the iron crowbar he pulled from his belt and Darkseid grunted from the pain:
he didn’t like to feel pain. He roared and jerked his forearm to hammer Odin’s head. The Asgardian
dodged but Darkseid blew sending him away wrapped in glowing white chains.

“Time to end this farce” he said and focused his eyes on the tied Asgardian launching his omega
beams.

“Not my father, you bastard!” something deflected slightly the beams to miss Odin.

Odin turned to the voice and his eyes widened seeing Loki dressed in his green golden attire; his face
had lost every humor in fierce determination that was highlighted by the golden horned helmet.

“Only I have the right to play with him, you giant, deformed Smurf” Loki spat and waved the golden
spear he held sending silver rays at Darkseid.

The New God looked at him irritated and caught the rays casually with his hand.

“The god-clown! Nice! You’ll die together.”

He turned his deadly eyes to Loki but immediately jerked upwards feeling pain.

“You won’t kill anyone!” Thor roared and his Mjolnir spat blue thunders like his glaring eyes. “Loki,
take father away.”

Darkseid smirked and without a word moved his palm upwards sending a red wave at Thor who
blocked it with Mjolnir though he felt his hammer heating and vibrating. He grunted from the power
he had to sustain but in the end he managed to raise Mjolnir to send the wave Darkseid sent, back to
him.

Darkseid laughed and absorbed the wave with his hand.

“You, Asgardians, are so weak…” he cackled. “So weak and worthless that I won’t waste more time
playing…” his red eyes became flames and the white omega beams surged at Thor who dodged
them firing thunders with Mjolnir.

Darkseid took the s on his forearm and sent them back at Thor who stumbled which gave Darkseid
the chance to launch the omega beams again sure this time that the god wouldn’t manage to escape
them.

Something flashed gold in the air and the beams were scattered at the same time that a loud bang
made the battlefield shake and Darkseid to be shove ten feet away staggering. He frowned seeing a
woman dressed in ancient armor pulling her sword out of the holster on her right thigh and charging
at him with her eyes flashing.

The force of the bracelets explosion had let Darkseid breathless and now Thor joined Diana coming
at him. The New God narrowed his eyes shaken for the first time; he was weakened and their
weapons could disable him.
Diana’s sword descended rapidly at Darkseid’s neck as Mjolnir moved to smash his head. Darkseid goggled ready for the pain.

But then their weapons found only air.

Darkseid looked around him puzzled. Bagdana smirked at him letting go of the god’s upper arms.

“Diabolus ex machina” he said sarcastic. “Just to see that I’m useful” he added and raised his sword to stab it in the ground making the entire area to shake with a nightmarish sound.

Elliot grunted.

“Of course, you idiot! It cost me a small fortune to buy it from that pedophile but it deserved every cent: I spent many nights devouring little Bruce’s cries and screams; his sobs; his begging for mercy…and then I realized that this treasure shouldn’t be held secret: everyone should share that qualifying spectacle and of course, dear Brucie who suddenly forgot who he truly was and was posing as a prince. I found out that Isaac was a hacker when he hacked the logs of Metropolis General Hospital exposing the plastic surgery of a celebrity. I sent him the DVD saying that it would shake Gotham’s upper class and I bet he didn’t even watch it before broadcasting the content through the hacked GTV’s signal.”

Joker’s face was rapidly changing listening to Elliot and in the end his green eyes had become so grim that they seemed black. His teeth were visible as his mouth had opened like a famished tiger’s looking at his pray.

“Bastard!” he shouted and sent his one of his blades at Elliot’s already wounded arm; however this time the doctor avoided it. “I’ll reap you in pieces, you sick motherfucker!” he growled throwing away readying his other blade.

But Elliot grabbed Alfred and put him in front of him as a shield and walked backwards towards the main exit.

Police sirens filled the Manor immediately as tires’ screeching grazed everyone’s ears.

“Surrender” Gordon’s calm but firm voice echoed through the megaphone. “The Manor and Grounds are surrounded.”

But Joker didn’t care; he had followed Elliot staring at him with the predator’s glee playing his blades between his hands.

“Do you think that the Jeeves will stop me from butchering you?” he tilted his head on the side. “As if I care whether he dies…”

“Leave Al out of this, ya freaks!”

Elliot and Alfred were startled – Joker so absorbed in his rage that not even registered the voice or the words. Something fell with force on Elliot who staggered losing Alfred from his one hand grip. Jason grabbed the butler and dragged him away from them bringing him down behind the big arch that led to the interior.

Joker jumped on Elliot with blood on his eyes.

The front door broke open and officers with stretched guns swarmed the foyer.
“Freeze!” several voices ordered.

Joker stranded in his own world of hatred focused on Elliot’s perfect tanned face; his sarcastic, arrogant eyes made Joker’s head hot picturing that asshole masturbating watching his Brucie being desecrated. His blades danced in the air scratching countless times the man’s face. His hands were moving even with several hands holding them trying to take him off the doctor.

Finally, a hit on the head knocked him out. Elliot was covered in blood yet his eyes were looking the officers being occupied with handcuffing Joker.

He clenched his jaw and grabbed one of Joker’s blades.

“You won’t catch me” he said and jumped through the door doddering.

Gordon and Montoya were at the landing step with their guns pointing at him but Elliot’s mania was such that he pushed both of them and jumped from the side of the stairs.

“Dr. Elliot, let down the blade and raise your hands” Montoya said.

“You need hospital, son” Gordon said trying to reason with him.

Yet Elliot spat at them with his eyes shining crazily.

“Never, you fools!” he got up and rushed at the police cars that swarmed the place.

Several guns fired at him but he rolled on the ground getting only scratched by them. However Montoya’s bullet found his left leg; Elliot with mania fueling his suffering body while still on the ground surged at the legs of the first officer he saw. He stabbed him several times and got in the car, turning the engine on and accelerating.

“Follow him!” Gordon ordered his men who immediately began chasing the car.

“The authorities report minor damages in buildings from the earthquakes, Mister Wayne” Lucius’ voice echoed through the communication system of the Tumbler. “Darksied’s troops fly towards big cities around the globe yet the military sequences transmit that fighters have engaged in air-battle with them and the situation seems to be under control. However from Mannheim facilities more forces are heading towards the battlefield and from the traces there are not only Parademons but entities much bigger.”

Batman nodded.

“Thank you, Lucius; I’m almost there.”

A long pause from the other side.

“Mr. Wayne, are you sure about this? I mean, you have already done too much…”

Batman pressed his lips.

“Lucius, I understand your concern but I can’t stay away.”

Bruce could picture Lucius pursing his lips in defeat.

“Good luck, Mr. Wayne.”
“Thank you, Lucius.”

Even without the Tumbler’s spotting systems he could see from the windshield the dust and the sparkles of weapons over the location of the battle: flying spots indicated creatures engaged in fist fighting or duelling.

“The finest military aircrafts the globe has to offer are fighting with unidentified flying objects throughout the planet; the Pentagon announced that it is included in the scenario of the Training Day. Japan, China, Russia and EU are making similar announcements.”

Lois smirked at her radio.

“Training scenario, my ass!” she spat casting glances at the mirror to the dust behind her that signalled Fury’s coming.

Jimmy out of breath looked at her.

“What is it, Miss Lois?”

“Something big” she answered “and we are heading to its routes.”

Catwoman landed on her feet in the middle of a cluster of Parademons; as soon as her feet touched the ground she jerked her leg in a round kick unbalancing the aliens; they didn’t manage to realize what had happened and Catwoman raked them with the firearms she held in both hands.

Her wild eyes caught few feet to her right Steve fighting along with Natasha against far too many enemies. Natasha’s face was dirty and slashed as her uniformed yet Steve’s right arm was drenched in blood and he hardly moved it using his shield with the left.

Both of them were tired but kept fighting. Catwoman felt her chest aching and set her jaw speeding there shooting with both hands on her way to them.

As soon as the Parademons were down Catwoman regarded the two Avengers.

“Captain, maybe it’s better if you left the field.”

“No way” he said and sent his shield like a discus to decapitate two Parademons at once.

But then the ground shook so much that they staggered fighting to remain up.

Darkseid watched satisfied as the new forces surged the battlefield; they were fewer than he expected because Superman, Flash and Ironman had intercepted them. Yet they were still too many.

“No robots though” Bagdana said thoughtful. “And though they are more in quantity they will manage to eliminate them.”

Darkseid grinned.

“I don’t think so…” he turned his eyes to his facilities.

Superman was hammering a flying Parademon with his fists when he heard the sound: the facilities were vomiting again…His chest clenched as the area shook from thousands feet, some of them way
heavier than the most. Superman closed for a second his eyes discouraged: more robots!

There was a horrific sound of thousand winds scratching the sky as more flying Parademons bigger this time swarmed the sky shadowing the sun.

His eyes met Ironman’s lenses. The latter had heard the same

“It’s far too many…” Stark mumbled.

Elliot knew Palisades like the back of his hand especially the secluded places where he took refuge whenever he wanted to escape his awful parents; he could hear the sirens following him and his heart beat like crazy.

He could escape all these fools. This turn of the road would take him to the rural road: it wasn’t even asphalted covered with branches and bushes and would lead him away from the cops.

Indeed, as he took the turn for a mile nobody followed him. He smirked satisfied and looked at the ocean down of the cliff.

Once they were playing: he, Brucie and other boys – he was no more than 10 and Brucie was 7. He had persuaded Brucie to follow him here – the brat was so naïve and stupid! Young Thomas had planned perfectly: he would have pushed Brucie off the cliff and then would have run back to the adults crying saying that he tried to pull Bruce but he let his hand. He had already scratched his arms and torn his pants to prove that he tried hard. Brucie stood there watching the sharp rocks underneath and the wild waves: the raging wind would make his job easier.

He approached the brat ready to give him just a tiny push: Brucie was short and lean, so fragile…

But then…

“Bruce, where are you, you brat?!”

Brucie turned around grinning excited and ran to the other side.

“Tony, here!”

He gritted his teeth…his breath was labored and his head light. Yet he had to be careful because that road was dangerous and he was dizzy… His stabbed hand gave him hell and he slowly was realizing the wound in his leg...

Suddenly his ears were attacked by sirens! They were again at his tail. The sweat dripped from his forehead to his eyes; no, it wasn’t sweat. His face ached as hell…the steer wheel was slipping from his sweaty hand…He turned to see where the police cars were…They were near…

He stepped on the accelerator and made to maneuver the steer wheel to take the turn…but then he saw his face on the mirror: a horribly disfigured face covered by dozens of slashes that reaped his nose and lips…a monster! The steer wheel slipped from his hand and he tried to move his other hand to catch it…to no avail…

Elliot felt the car leaving the ground…he felt the void…the waves and the rocks coming to him…

Batman had the central screen on the Tumbler’s control panel showing the Mannheim’s facilities. He
saw the remaining building collapsing leaving only a central square room made of thick titanium. Robots and Parademons both on the ground and in the air swarmed the area running to slaughter the heroes. Apokolips vomited its filth to wipe Earth from the universe.

Batman set his jaw.

“Not in my day, Darkside!”

He pressed the red button on the top of a tiny stick he held.

“You see what I do?” Ironman mumbled to Superman and fired with his palm laser at a charging Parademon “we’re talking here, dude!” he exclaimed at the alien encouraged from the spectacle.

His systems enabled him to see what Superman was seeing with his long distance sight. A hundred explosions at once blew up the giant robots sending their burning pieces to hit the Parademons both in the air and the ground.

“How?” Superman asked awed.

“Sir” Jarvis’ happy voice said “Batman is here.”

“Batman” Tony said but Superman had already heard the Tumbler and his heart beat faster with new energy.

Bruce…he thought torn between happiness and fear.

“Attack Hulk!” Granny yelled at her troops that swarm the giant hitting him all together from different ankles.

The giant roared annoyed and began bombarding his attackers but Granny taking advantage of his preoccupation turned her firearms at him. Hulk’s hide might have been durable to Parademon’s bullets yet there were many scratches all over his skin and Granny knew that her fire power was stronger than that of her minions.

She was ready to fire when something kicked both her arms shoving away the firearms. Granny grunted angry and saw the Amazon Princess landing before her stabbing her with her blue eyes.

“You have done enough” Diana said.

“You’re not the one to tell that” Granny shrieked firing at her with both firearms raking the Amazon’s entire body.

Diana rolled over the ground using her shield to protect herself and then jumped upwards holding the shield in front of her and with the other hand brandished her sword at Granny.

Darkseid’s lieutenant dodged the sword and pulled her own twisted dagger to stab the Amazon.

Diana stopped the dagger with her sword; but the Granny was strong pushing Diana’s sword to bend the Amazon’s hand. Their faces were close. Diana yanked her head and butted Granny’s forehead shoving her enemy off her.

Granny staggered realizing that she had lost her dagger. Without losing her confidence she grabbed the shoulder of a Parademon who was fighting behind her and detached his blade arm.
She sniggered at Diana who charged at her lowering her sword to meet the blade. Granny managed to block the hit and freed her blade lifting it to slash the Amazon who made a twirl and stopped again the blade with her sword shattering Granny’s weapon.

Darkseid’s right hand growled and jumped on Diana plunging her teeth on her neck making blood spurt. Yet Diana grabbed her from the shoulders and kicked her away; she jumped on her feet but Granny had blended with the Parademons so Diana decided to focus her efforts elsewhere launching her tiara against the aliens who fought with Asgardians.

Darkseid towered everyone in the center of the battlefield slaughtering Asgardians and Valkyries. Bagdana was doing the same to the other side of the field. The New God knew that his army was enough to swallow the heroes and by eliminating the Asgardian army he would let them alone to face his wrath. He had already injured Odin and Captain America and he was aware that the landslide he and Bagdana’s earthquake caused rocks to fall and disable many Asgardians.

The Earth’s powers were running thin…But then something echoed throughout the Basin and Darkseid frowned.

Diana fighting with her sword smiled hearing that sound: the horns of Themyscira. Ten thousand Amazons had just emerged from the container that was stationed in the roots of the mountain and now raided fast to the battle. In their head was Antiope followed first by the Amazon archers who shot their arrows riding their proud horses and after them the Amazon hoplites who began killing Parademons as soon as they reached the battle.

“I always enjoy seeing ladies coming to rescue me but today even more” Tony said.

Darkseid’s grim stare met Bagdana’s in the other end of the battle. But he disregarded his ally to do what he knew best: manipulating people by controlling their minds. He concentrated: if he managed to control them the battle would end. But he was met with a strong block as a few hours ago…That strange wizard and Loki must have shielded the fighters’ minds.

Bagdana sensed his upset.

”What?”

”Nothing! My robot giants are coming; they will smash them” but to his utter shock only Parademons came from his facilities. “Who did that?” he roared turning his inner sight there to see finding only the parts of his robots scattered.

Bagdana frowned; he could hear the sound of a familiar vehicle.

“No…” he whispered. “Bruce, you shouldn’t have come…”

Batman used the front and back canons of the Tumbler that usually threw gas or smoke bombs to shoot with real bullets the aliens.

Thor smiled hearing the roar of the vehicle and downed Mjolnir on the ground causing the soil to crack swallowing every alien it met.

“I told you that there was something big” Lois said to Jimmy as they watched the spectacle squatted behind a bundle of rocks at a safe distance. “Shoot!”

She cocked her eyebrows regarding the view: flying strange creatures fought with what Lois
recognized from Mythology books as Valkyries; their wings slicing the air and hiding the sun’s light. On the ground, what must be Asgardians were engaged in fight with the creatures. Hulk was doing his usual devastation and though she couldn’t see them Lois knew that the rest of the Avengers and Diana with Catwoman were there too. Amazons on horses and on foot joined the battle howling their war cries.

She gaped seeing two gigantic forms in the two edges of the battle. Lois had seen a lot yet this spectacle made her chest clench. The one was a blue giant who fired death with his hands and eyes. The other was a smaller horned giant with a body of fire brandishing his blazing sword at the defenders of the Earth: definitely, a demon. Lois grim mood was lightened seeing Ironman attacking the demon backed from a man in a burgundy cape who made shields and rays with his hands.

“Superman!” Jimmy exclaimed and Lois looked there finally feeling proud again for her friend: Bruce was right.

Fury and his comrades looked from the van’s windshield the battle in front of them; he turned at his agents and as if reading each other’s minds they drew simultaneously their firearms from the back of the van and jumped out.

“Time to join the party!” the rough veteran said and ran to the battle.

Darkseid squinted at the black tank like vehicle that crossed the battlefield spreading death to his minions.

“I don’t know how you did it but I’m sure it was you!” he hissed and stormed towards the car.

Bagdana saw his ally and made to follow but a clot of Asgardians fighting Parademons thwarted him; he vanished to avoid them but upon re-materializing a Valkyrie shrieking struck him with her spear-like wide blade. The demon might have not being hurt but he acknowledged the pain; he grunted and grounding his teeth sent fireballs with his hand to burn the Valkyrie who managed to dodge the deadly fire that churned the edges of her raven hair.

The demon didn’t have time and didn’t care to finish off the Valkyrie. He didn’t care for the Parademons that were massacred by Amazons and Asgardians; and he was sure that right now even Darkseid didn’t care.

Darkseid focused his eyes on the moving Tumbler and raised his hands jerking them to send blue waves to hit the vehicle.

Bruce saw in the Tumbler’s panel the fire heading against the car and turned the wheel to avoid.

“You can run but you can’t hide, human!” Darkseid said and his fisted hands flashed with white energy, stronger this time, ready to strike again.

But as he was ready to launch his fire, a force tackled him.

“Enough already” Superman said angry and punched Darkseid in the face hitting him simultaneously with his laser vision.

The New God roared annoyed and jerked his arm pushing the Man of Steel off of him, his heated hand burning Superman’s attire in the back.
It ached yet Superman turned around and blew at Darkseid unbalancing him. He surged at him, his red eyes firing laser that – to Darkseid’s utter disbelief – charred his blue chest; and before Darkseid overcame the shock from the burning Clark began hammering his guts with everything he had.

The New God roared furious and grabbed Superman from the neck, his red eyes meeting the Kryptonians.

“Time to finish this” he hissed and his eyes became fires ready to throw out omega beams.

“You’re mad at me not him!” a growl startled Darkseid who frowned and threw Superman away turning around.

Batman was scowling at him completely unfazed by the God’s gigantic form.

Darkseid’s face shadowed by the nasty surprises of the day was carved by a broad grin.

“You destroyed my robots; you weaved an ingenious trap around me but you won’t win. I won’t kill you right now…you will experience the destiny of your race…because you and your friends might have managed to cause some damage to my army but I haven’t used my ultimate weapon yet” he shook his head. “My Female Furies are heading to earth; they would have been here for my attack in two days but you took me by surprise. Well done, human!” he snorted. “Now you’ll see Darkseid’s real power!”

Batman glared at him unfazed. Darkseid’s had set an invisible wall around them keeping everyone out. The New God jerked his head.

“Feel your failure as my machine will suffocate humans!”

A loud bang as if a bomb of hundred megatons had exploded made everyone in the field freeze awestruck. The heroes looked around ready for the worst: everyone knew that Darkseid’s machine had been activated. The super powered heroes looked scared at their human friends…

But to their relief none of the humans was affected in any way. On the contrary, the Parademons both in the ground and in the air began drying as if something sucked their existence, shrinking till only ashes filled their spots.

Darkseid’s eyes bulged as he looked around him his entire army being simultaneously turned to ashes. He could sense that his machine, his pride, was destroyed and most of all he felt weak.

“What have you done, human?!” he roared.

Batman yanked his head.

“Your Anti Life Machine was programmed to suck the energy of the beings whose DNA was in its system.”

Darkseid’s brow furrowed.

“You made Luthor assemble its parts so that the human DNA would be in the Machine’s memory programming it to absorb human energy and qualities. What if I put in the Machine’s control system the DNA of your people? Of your army?”

Batman slipped inside the Mannheim facilities using the ventilation pipes. Thanks to Tony’s tracking
system he knew exactly where the Machine was.

As he crawled through the wide pipes he regarded the premises: he frowned. In the vast space there were at least one hundred giant robots.

Batman slipped out of the pipe and brushed his armor on the wrist giving Tumbler the order to analyze these robots. In his wrist watch he saw the result of the analysis: the robots’ control was in the point where the neck met the right shoulder; also, their legs were sensitive at the knee joint.

He pressed his lips. This was a delay for his schedule: he intended to finish with the Machine and then head to Mannheim’s Mansion to free Superman. But now he couldn’t let this threat like this neither he could destroy them right now because his plan would be revealed.

Thankfully, his belt was always packed with explosives. It took him an hour but he planted the bombs to the robots’ vulnerable spots: now when Darkseid would send them to fight, Batman would have just to press the trigger. He would inform Lucius and give him instructions to blow them up before they reach the battle if Batman wouldn’t be able to do it.

He slipped again into the pipe heading to the compartment where the Machine was. The facilities were heavily guarded outside but inside Darkseid didn’t want his security people getting a glimpse of what he stashed there.

The Machine was in the middle of the space on a short, square pedestal. It was like a huge cube reaching the ceiling. The Machine gave the impression of being alive as it vibrated; its vibrations made the hieroglyphics all over its surface shine gold in contrast with its black color.

Batman stared at it intrigued but then pulled out of his belt’s compartment the tablet Lucius gave him with the Parademons’ genetic code as they had extracted from their remnants after the attack in Thasos. Lucius had explained to him in detail the structure of the Machine so he knew where to slip in the tablet…

Tony’s eyes shone with realization seeing Parademons being exterminated like this after the Machine’s activation. His mind went back to his discussion with Bruce in the cave.

Bruce pressed a key and in the central screen images of Darkseid’s parademons came to the fore.

“They’re called Parademons – thankfully, Jor El has a lot of material for Darkseid. And we have also samples of his soldiers’ DNA” Bruce said. “When they attacked me, Ivy took good care to vanish any trace yet during their assault they had grabbed me so I had some of their DNA on me and also when she blew them up some of their remains were scattered to the clearing. I gathered them and gave them to Lucius.”

A wicked smile carved Tony’s features.

“Then those Parademons would not know what hit them…I can make our weapons able to kill them easily.”

Bruce rubbed his chin and it was clear that an idea had popped in his mind. Tony narrowed his eyes understanding.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’ll tell you but not now…”
Bruce hadn’t told him: it kept his intention as a surprise, a nice one.

Darkseid’s nostrils flared emitting sparkles. Without saying anything he yanked his head and Batman was tossed to the air crashing on the rocks at the other end of the battlefield.

Bruce felt his back crying in pain; his head having bumped to the stone was spinning and his eyes darkened. He made to support himself on his hands but the fatigue and the pain made him abandon the effort.

Bruce saw a blur coming at him and Darkseid appeared in front of him; he glared at Batman.

“I won’t let a human brag that he defeated Darkseid” he hissed and his eyes became fires ready to launch omega beams.

Everyone saw Darkseid hitting Bruce and immediately after relocating them rushed there. Superman, Thor, Odin, Loki, Diana, Ironman and Flash saw the omega beams leaving Darkseid’s eyes targeting Bruce; even if they hit the God the beams were already on their way.

A red waving shield emerged in front of Batman blocking the beams, Dr. Strange’s emerged suddenly; he had his long fingers opened forming the shield.

As if they were connected Superman launched his laser vision, Diana crushed her bracelets together, Thor brandished Mjolnir creating thunders, Odin threw his axe, Loki jerked his hands firing his power and Ironman set in motion every weapon he had gritting his teeth. Flash with his ultimate speed ran around the New God creating energy that unbalanced the fierce being.

Every power they had hit the New God whose face distorted in rage at the ultimate shock of being defeated; he roared fading taking along Granny Goodness.

Dr. Strange’s eyes widened seeing his shield cracking; Darkseid at his final moments put all his remaining power to his omega beams. The doctor’s guts formed a painful knot seeing the beams shattering the shield rushing at Batman.

“No!” Catwoman cried and jerked to run there but Steve hugged her.

Bruce stared at the white, icy cold beams seconds before they hit him.

Something stopped the beams…Hulk rushed at Darkseid’s fading body and punched the God wiping him out at once.

In front of Bruce lay a massive body that had collapsed on the ground. Batman crawled.

A huge burning was all over the being’s chest. Everyone’s eyes were there but Bruce didn’t feel them: he felt as if he was alone – everything had ceased to exist. He slipped his hands under Bagdana’s head and raised it slightly. The demon had taken his granite human-like form; his body’s size wasn’t gigantic anymore.

The demon smiled to him and something dark slithered from his lips.

“It’s ridiculous for a demon to die like this” he laughed. “For love…but I would have done it again… for you…”

Bruce felt the lenses hurting his eyes; he deactivated them and Bagdana’s yellow eyes filled with
gratitude.

“These eyes… I want to take with me…”

“You shouldn’t have done this…” Bruce mumbled.

Bagdana shook his head grunting from pain.

“You’re sorry for me?” he narrowed his eyes. “After everything I have done to you? You’re an angel, indeed; and angels should not be crying for demons…” he frowned. “Tears for a demon?” he raised his hand and touched with his fingertips the tears. “In my millions of life I never found purest diamonds than these…” he grinned “so is there something in your heart even for me?”

Bruce bit his lips.

“You are a demon…yet there is good in you and… love…”

Bagdana gulped trying to breathe.

“No…no, my precious human child…you were right…I don’t know what love is…” he snorted “even now… I acted from selfishness” he laughed but then he was choked by his cough and sobered locking eyes with Bruce. “I couldn’t… spend another eternity reliving the death of my love… grieving… feeling my guts jerking from pain… cursing myself for not saving you… again…” he closed his eyes, inhaling with difficulty; his fingertips touched Batman’s exposed jaw grinning happy. “Maybe in another lifetime, I won’t be a demon and I’ll manage to earn your heart. Goodbye, my love…” he moved his head and touched his lips to Batman’s gloved hand.

In front of everyone’s still eyes the demon evaporated from Batman’s arms.

Bruce’s eyes were blank; his arms paralyzed; his entire existence was frozen. He remained like this for a few moments but then he remembered where he was. He gathered his quivering stamina and stood.

His body ached and last month’s effort rotted his every cell. His head was spinning and his eyes were dim. If only he could reach the Tumbler and leave without his friends realizing his state…

He walked passing the rocks, the others still too shocked to approach; the rock was tall enough to hide him from them. But then he heard a second pair of feet behind him.

“You just saved the world, buddy…” Tony said touched and from his voice Bruce knew that he had deactivated the face plate.

“All of you did that…” he growled without turning to look at him and continued his way to the Tumbler numb from what just happened.

But then he heard another pair of feet running there; he had to hurry. Suddenly, his legs stopped moving; neither his armor’s system nor his mind power could force them. Not that Bruce wanted to make his mind work… he felt drained without any energy or will to try. His head drummed violently and his eyes shut abruptly.

And he was falling…

The last thing he heard was Ironman rushing to him.

Catwoman saw Tony grabbing Batman before hitting the ground and immediately taking off.
Chapter 90

Chapter Notes

It was supposed to be one last chapter but when I finished it was too lengthy; so I decided to split it. I hope you'll like it.

“You must take me to Batman. That demon might have shielded him getting the omega beams saving his life but still Batman was subjected to the beams’ radiation range.”

Dr. Stephen Strange walked vividly the corridor of the clinic facilities that they were situated outside Gotham in a very secluded location and naturally he had never seen before: every now and then he glanced around which said to him that this building was brand new – it didn’t have even a sign with its name; yet it was pristine, built and equipped with the latest medical technology. There were nurses passing by but no patient sign that the clinic wasn’t yet opened to the public.

He was still in his Dr. Strange attire, the burgundy cape, floating behind him; his face still bore the dirt and scratches of the battle.

At his side, Tony Stark walked heavily dressed in jeans and a T-shirt that didn’t look his at all. The billionaire didn’t reply continuing his overall silence that was so unlike him. Ironman had come to the Avengers’ Tower two hours after the battle ended and asked him to follow without further explanation. Stark’s face was grim and his usually bright eyes were shadowed.

Stephen huffed: he couldn’t understand Stark’s bad mood – they had won the battle, Darkseid was no longer a threat for earth and both Peppers and Bruce was safe: the former coordinating the operation from the Tower and the latter in a secure place where Stark had taken him before the battle.

“Tony, we have to find Batman…” he insisted “I know the man treasures his secrets but I think he might be infected by Darkseid’s Anti energy.”

The billionaire stopped in front of a door; Stephen realized that the sector they were crossing till now was empty except than this room, situated at the far end. Tony opened the door.

“…and then Dick made some jumps in the air…”

“Somersaults, Jay.”

“Who cares how the hell they’re named. So he made these ‘springsaults’ and grabbed Hero in the air before the bullet hit ‘im. He was fuckin’ awsome!”

“And Jay…Elliot had dragged Alfred as a shield and Joker was ready to attack both of them. But Jay jumped on Elliot and took Alfred from him and away.”

Stephen’s eyes widened. In front of him, a hospital bed; in the right side two boys were leaning eagerly over the bed. In the right, a young woman sat in a chair and watched pale and silent. A kitten was curled on the chest of the man on the bed licking his chin and purring loudly. Alfred stood over his head; it was clear that the butler was tired and spent while his worried eyes searched avidly his young master’s face.
Bruce’s face had a broad smile on that made his eyes shine looking at the babbling boys. Yet Dr. Strange could discern exhaustion and pain well hidden in the depths of those eyes.

“Both of you are so brave” he said. “Thank you for everything.”

He was more than pale, ashen, with black bags under his eyes. A thin tube was connected to his nose to assist his respiration; his hands were placed on the mattress looking like forgotten or paralyzed with the IV stuck in the right arm. The usual gadgets for monitoring his condition were attached to his body transmitting data to what was definitely a monitor device though he hadn’t seen something like this ever again.

“Bruce is the Batman…” Stephen uttered the thought that fell like a thunder in his mind; he looked at Tony who pressed his lips. “I should have figured out…but…how could he?” he shook his head clenching his forehead, trying to connect the image of the defiant, radiating power and confidence Batman facing the blue giant in the frozen basin with the disabled Bruce Wayne. Of course, Bruce was more than strong in his own way, endowed with willpower Stephen never met before. But…

Tony nodded as if reading his thoughts.

“No, you couldn’t have figured. Lucius and I manufactured for him a new armor with advanced exoskeleton technology that allowed him to walk and fight” there was some regret in his bloodshot eyes.

Bruce’s smiling eyes turned to Dr. Strange and Tony.

“Welcome, Dr. Strange” he said and even though he tried to sound casual the doctor sensed again the man’s fatigue; Stephen cocked an eyebrow: how it could be otherwise? A man stuck in a wheelchair doing all these and saving the world…

Tony gestured to him and they approached. Stephen noticed that the young woman with the long ponytail was holding Bruce’s hand and her eyes were focused on his face, worry etched in her features. Bruce smiled to her reassuringly trying valiantly to seem unscathed.

Stephen studied immediately his patient’s vitals on the screen realizing that everything was too low, hardly at normal levels. Of course, the organism was over-exerted. It was a miracle he hadn’t collapsed entirely. And his temperature was too high. He frowned and touched Bruce’s forehead to reaffirm his suspicion: in contrast with what the indicator said, the man was frozen. But in the screen was something else that made him an impression: Bruce was administered morphine. A lot of morphine.

Bruce sensed his doctor’s worry and turned to the boys.

“Dick, Jason, I think that now you should return to Gotham. Your grandmother and your mother must be waiting eagerly for you.”

It was obvious that he didn’t want the boys to hear what was to follow but the boys were reluctant.

“We can wait outside for you to finish” Dick said looking at the strange doctor understanding that they wanted to speak privately. “Right, Jay? We’ll wait and come whenever your doctor permits us.”

The younger boy nodded.

“'Course, man…” he added hopefully.

Bruce smiled to the boys however his overall weakness shadowed slightly his eyes. Alfred seeing
that cleared his throat.

“I think that you should return to the city, young masters. It was a very eventful day” he added looking pointedly at the boys.

“I’ll drive the boys back to the Manor.”

Stephen turned and saw Lucius Fox who had been standing in a distance to let space for Bruce’s loved ones.

“Thank you, Lucius” Bruce said.

“Not mention it, Mr. Wayne” the loyal man grinned but his face was grim.

The boys were still hesitant.

“I’ll be here the next time you’ll come” he reassured them amused and caressed the kitten on his chest. “You’re a very brave kitten, you know? But you have to go with Dick and Jason now.”

Dick took the kitten but Hero grabbed Bruce’s robe not wanting to part with his human. Selina got up and took the kitten softly but determined.

“C’mon, Hero, don’t be afraid: I’ll be with him all the time” she said bringing the kitten’s nose to her face locking their eyes. “I’ll look after him for you.”

She kissed the kitten’s nose and gave him to Dick. Stephen noticed how tired her voice was.

The boys followed Lucius but every now and then turned to look back at Bruce who smiled. Upon opening the door, they came face to face with Leslie who was holding her medical board.

“You’re leaving? Good…You need some rest too, young men.”

Jason snorted.

“Not me…”

When the boys were out of the room and the door closed Bruce let his eyelids cover his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I asked them to stay in the Manor to be safe and they were almost killed…” he said feeling a sharp pain in his forehead.

Alfred touched his shoulder.

“It wasn’t your fault, Master Bruce. You informed the police but Thomas Elliot was devious and managed to escape.”

Bruce opened his eyes.

“Was?”

Leslie looked at him behind her rectangular glasses.

“He was injured by the Joker and the officers but he didn’t surrender; he drove his car in a frenzy state and at some point the bleeding must have blurred his sight and made him dizzy; he had followed the dangerous rural road over the cliff to escape the police but eventually he lost control of
his car. He fell off the cliff.”

Bruce frowned.

“They didn’t look for him?”

“They pulled out his car but his body wasn’t there. You know how strong the streams are there: his corpse must have been carried away in the ocean.”

She registered frowned her patient’s sad look.

“He asked for it, Bruce.”

“Leslie is right, little guy” Tony said sitting in the chair next to the bed. “Just thinking that I was ready to trust that man with your surgery gets me nausea…” he shook his head exasperated. “I was so naïve and you were so right! Look what the asshole did! He injured Dr. Strange” he raised his eyes to Stephen “not you…. a Gothamite psychiatrist. Killed that cute littl’ nurse: Kelly, I think” Leslie nodded sad. “He killed an officer and stabbed another.”

Bruce licked his dry, busted lips.

“If I was there he might be alive now” he said dryly.

Tony blinked and cupped his face exasperated.

“You just saved seven billion people instead” Dr. Strange said firmly looking at him.

But Bruce met his gaze.

“All of you did that” he said with conviction.

“Stephen is right” Leslie spat strictly “now it’s time you finally think about yourself, young man.”

“Indeed, Master Bruce” Alfred said.

Selina nodded and Tony uncovered his face to stare at his friend. Bruce let his head roll at the side.

“Speaking of which” Stephen said pointing to the vitals’ screen “Bruce’s temperature is high but he actually is cold. As if he is burning inside.”

This made everyone except Bruce stare at the doctor. Leslie shook her head.

“Because he is actually burning” she said casually struggling to bury her despair catching with the corner of her eye Alfred’s distraught eyes.

She walked to Stephen and showed him the board she was holding; Stephen pursed his lips – it was the first time he was seeing something like this but on the other hand, when had someone else been ever before exposed to a New God’s omega beams?

“Are you gonna tell us or what?!?” Selina burst out unable to hold her agony anymore.

Leslie stared at her and nodded. It was admirable that the doctor seemed untouched by her adventure with Elliot.

“The energy casts that hold the parts of Bruce’s bones together are overheated and their temperature is increasing with time. Not to mention that Bruce was also hit directly by Darkseid’s power and
crushed to a rock.”

Selina huffed and gulped while Alfred touched his young master’s shoulder.

Tony jerked up from his chair.

“What must be done?” he asked Leslie and Stephen who had crossed his arms over the chest and was studying the indications on the monitoring screen.

“The only solution is to perform the operation ASAP” Leslie said.

Stephen shook his head and gestured to the screen displaying Bruce’s vitals.

“His organism is utterly exhausted; his vitals aren’t sufficient even for the most common surgery moreover for a surgery as complex and demanding as this.”

Leslie fixed her eyes on her younger colleague.

“If we don’t perform the surgery then the casts will eventually…” she suddenly realized the finality of what was going to happen and she was bereft of energy to continue speaking.

Bruce straightened his head on the pillow and looked at them.

“I’m here, you know; and I’m the one to decide about the surgery” his voice was the non-nonsense, authoritative voice of Batman.

Both nodded and Bruce eyed them determined though he was sensing weakness sneakily overcoming his quivering stamina.

“The surgery will be performed” he said. “I’m the only responsible for my condition; it was my choice to act as I did knowing the consequences and I don’t regret it. So whatever’s the outcome of that operation, the fault is mine and nobody is going to be blamed for that.”

He felt his strength abandon him and the pain that till now was controlled to sufferable levels resurfacing confirming what Leslie had said. He met Selina’s worried stare; she was holding his hand and Bruce realized that she definitely knew how he was feeling.

“You’re frozen…” she said.

Alfred jolted upright.

“I’ll bring more blankets.”

Leslie glanced at Stephen in a stare filled with meaning that Bruce didn’t miss. He didn’t want them to panic; he raised his torso supported in his forearms.

“Alfred, it’s nothing” he tried to stop his butler who had already reached the wooden closet on the left “I’m not…”

But all of a sudden his strength evaporated and his elbows couldn’t support his torso; his heart began beating fast and his breath accelerated which unfortunately was revealed by the beeping of the monitor. Once again he lost any mood or power to struggle and collapsed back to the mattress. His head rolled on the pillow to the side and his body began shivering.

Leslie leaned on him and cupped his face.
“Are you in pain?”

He was but he didn’t want to scare them more; Stephen looked at his vitals on the monitor.

“It’s nothing, Leslie…” Bruce looked at Alfred who muffled him in a thick velvet blanket. “I’m tired and…I just want to sleep…”

Leslie nodded.

“Okay, sweetheart; I’ll sedate you so that your sleep is undisturbed.”

She rose and with Stephen decided how many mls of sedation to administer before Leslie touched the screen choosing the substance, the quantity and sending the drug directly to Bruce’s IV.

On other occasions Bruce would have refused to be sedated but now he felt grateful; this exhaustion was tormenting and his eyes ached but most of all, most bothersome of all, was the feeling of void inside him; the bitterness that covered everything else. He needed to escape.

“I’ll stay with you” Selina said.

“Me too, buddy” Tony added grasping Bruce’s hand.

He smiled.

“Both of you need to rest” he said “all of you actually” his eyes travelled from Alfred to Leslie to Stephen “it was a tough day for everyone…” his grin became broader “not to mention that it is creepy being asleep under someone’s stare…”

Saying that something crawled in his heart, something like a thorn that scratched the tender muscle… He remembered feeling two sparkling green eyes watching him avidly with adoration in the darkness while he was sleeping on the bed of a suite. He closed his eyes and let fatigue’s weakness and the sedative lead him to oblivion.

Alfred fixed better the blanket and finishing caressed his master’s hair letting his affectionate eyes linger on the youth’s face; Leslie touched his shoulder gesturing to follow them outside.

“You are giving him morphine” Stephen said to Leslie as soon as all of them entered the conference room at the other end of the corridor.

The room had comfy armchairs but nobody could sit down.

“Exactly. The highest permitted dosage” she said. “Having a burning fire in your bones is a pain that nobody can endure, moreover in the condition Bruce is.”

Dr. Strange rubbed his chin thoughtful.

“I doubt if even this quantity of morphine is enough; I wonder how he manages to not show any sign of pain.”

Selina shook her head and drank water from the bottle Tony gave her.

“Bruce is used to live in pain since he was a little boy. He learnt to bear his pain without protest, hiding most of it.”

Stephen closed his eyes and nodded: of course. And he was the Batman, a man fixed on a wheelchair who still managed to defeat Darkseid and save the planet.
“We must prepare for the surgery” Leslie said determined though she was scared inside. “The casts’ temperature is continuously increasing and in the end will kill him. We must remove the casts and put the implants performing the operation that we intended to do to restore his legs’ mobility.”

Tony ran his fingers through his disheveled hair.

“This surgery will need twelve hours…”

“Fourteen” Stephen corrected dryly “in the best case scenario.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“Even worse! He is exhausted; he had spent the last drain of his stamina and strength to secure Darkseid’s defeat: how is he going to survive such a testing procedure so soon?”

Stephen licked his lips.

“We are faced with very grim possibilities and I don’t want to be the surgeon who killed Batman…” he snorted “or Bruce Wayne.”

Leslie yanked her head, locking eyes with Dr. Strange.

“You can always quit. I’ll understand… Maybe I would have done the same in your place but I’m not used to quit” she chuckled bitterly and lowered her eyes to finally look up to meet Alfred’s blank in distress eyes “and this is my Bruce so I’ll fight with him till the end.”

Stephen stayed silent.

Selina threw the bottle to the wall and yanked her head. Her bloodshot eyes were burning.

“I know Bruce better than all of you! He could have died any moment in all these years but he didn’t! Because he is stronger than all of us! He never gave up even though everything was against him; even when his odds were less than zero! I can’t hear you talking like this! Bruce will survive this surgery as he survived all the hardship, the despair, the tortures! He will come out of this alive because…” her voice quivered “because he loves us…because he knows how important is to stay with us…with me…”

Alfred walked there and hugged her brushing gently her hair.

Stephen pursed his lips.

“I have never abandoned a patient” he said in his deepest bass voice. “Every time I gave with them the battle till the end” he shook his head and arched his eyebrows. “I’ll do the same once again.”

Tony licked his lips nervously.

“Not to mention that you are a strong wizard now…” he registered Stephen’s mysterious stare and arched his eyebrows “along with being a great neurosurgeon, of course.”

Stephen gave a crooked smile for Tony’s diplomatic addition.

“Darkseid’s contamination must be cleaned from Bruce’s body.”

They turned to the new voice in the room and saw Thor who had just crossed the door having opened the door without anyone noticing in their heated discussion. The god of the Thunders was dressed in his civilian attire and despite the fact he was a god his face still carried the weariness and
hardship of the battle.

“I hope it doesn’t matter that I followed you here” he said approaching Tony.

The billionaire shook his head and waved that off.

“Nah…About this contamination thing…”

Leslie nodded.

“These beams Darkseid sent on him carried his dark energy – and even though Bagdana took the hit Bruce was still subjected to their radiation.”

Stephen pressed his lips.

“Exactly.”

“Can you do this?” Selina asked the wizard.

“I haven’t done anything like this yet” he replied softly “but I’ll try.”

Thor looked at him.

“Eir, the goddess of healing, can assist you.”

Tony yanked his head and met Alfred’s tired, pained eyes which were a stab to his twisted guts.

“Everyone who can help is welcome” he said and clenched Thor’s forearm.

“I will do everything for Bruce” the Asgardian replied.

“Then what about performing the operation to Superman’s headquarters?” Stephen asked but everyone’s grim expressions were more than talkative. “He is free of the mind control now…” he added defensively.

Alfred cleared his throat.

“Master Bruce is the one to decide this but I have the belief that he won’t accept that.”

Tony arched his eyebrows.

“I built these premises with the best specifications to ensure that Bruce will have the perfect conditions for the operation.”

Stephen nodded.

“Very well then” he turned to Thor and knitted his eyebrows realizing what he had heard “Wait… you knew as well that Bruce is the Batman?”

Thor nodded.

“He saved my life…”

Dr. Strange shrugged a shoulder and smirked.

“It seems that our club is crowded. It’s remarkable that so many beings with extra ordinary powers owe their lives to a man without any of these powers.”
“Lois Lane, the reporter of the Daily Planet, has managed to record exclusive footage from the battle that took place earlier at the Frozen Basin in the west borders of New York State.”

Images filled the screen showing the Earth’s heroes fighting Darkseid’s forces assisted by the Asgardian army and the Amazons.

“It reminds a sci-fi movie or a battle taken out of Tolkin’s books, don’t you think, Dave?” the female newscaster asked her colleague.

He nodded.

“In a joint press conference, representatives of the UN, EU, US, Russia, Japan and China along with Pepper Potts for S.H.I.E.L.D. confirmed that an alien invasion was thwarted. A being called Darkseid” zoom on the battle’s footage showed the gigantic form of the New God killing with his very eyes launching white beams “has been planning to conquer the planet. In that end, he had captured Superman assisted by the so called Wonder Woman which as was revealed also today, was a murderer from Gotham – the Poison Ivy. She impersonated the legendary Princess of the Amazons working as a spy for the invaders. The real Diana of Themyscirra helped the Metropolis law enforcers to wipe out Intergang – also, a tool in Darkseid’s plans - and arrest Poison Ivy before she joined the battle in the Frozen Basin contributing to the New God’s extermination” now the wall screen broadcasted how Darkseid disappeared hit by the assembled power of every hero the earth had. “The Electromagnetic Storm Training Day was admitted to be a trick to evacuate possible retaliation targets that the aliens planned to attack to cause thousands casualties…”

Martha watched from her favorite armchair. She sighed seeing her son fighting along with the others. Bruce was right and Martha felt relieved that everything was revealed and now Clark was free back to his old, good self.

She got up feeling her heart beating fast; Clark was here! She ran outside and caught up with him in the wooden patio. She stormed at him and closed him in a tight hug kissing his face: Martha still had in her eyes Clark leaving from the farm in the evening’s sky to fall in their trap. But now everything was alright again. She had him back like Bruce had promised.

The smile on Clark’s face was huge brightening his still dusted face and Martha eyed his torn and burnt attire that let parts of his chest and back uncovered. Clark felt his eyes watering realizing the pain he had caused to his Ma.

“Ma, I’m sorry” he said. “I’m sorry I caused you so much pain…I was a scum, a…”

Martha raised her teary eyes to look at his face and caressed his cheek.

“You’re here now, Clark; and you’re alright, free of her spells…” she kissed his cheeks.

“No, Ma, let me apologize; let me beg for your forgiveness… You tried many times to bring me back to my senses and I only sneered and accused you of siding with my enemies; I was a brute; an ungrateful brat.”

Martha shook her head not getting enough from her healed son.

“Forget everything, Clark: you did nothing to me…however” she inhaled “there’s someone who…”

Clark lowered his eyes.
“Bruce…” he said.

Martha pressed her lips.

“He never stopped believing in you; he was supporting me all the time reassuring me that the good Clark wasn’t lost. I’m sure he persuaded Mr. Stark to help you.”

Clark’s eyebrow twisted: Mr. Stark, right… His mother didn’t know about Bruce and he had no right to tell her.

“He suffered too much, Clark.”

“I know…because of me…I’ll ask for his forgiveness too, Ma…but…I caused him so much pain that I don’t deserve his forgiveness” he said sighing.

Martha cupped his face.

“Nevertheless you must apologize to him, sweetheart.”

He nodded.

“I owe him so much…” he said and his eyes were blank.

Martha looked at him with the old pride she had lost lately.

“I’m sure you will do the right thing…” she pecked his cheek. “Will you eat with me?”

Clark smiled.

“You have to ask when you have fresh baked apple pie waiting on the kitchen table? And roast beef?”

Martha hugged with one arm her son’s waist and walked with him inside.

“It was the least I could do: today is a day of celebration. The bitch that was ruining by boy’s life got revealed, the nasty aliens were defeated and my son was in the battle with the good guys” Clark smiled recollecting the way he had ignored the need for help of the people in New York. “Clark, my boy, is back.”

She gestured to him to seat in the chair on the top of the table and moved to the countertop to prepare the meal.

“I was thinking about that Batman…” she said and Clark tensed relieved that his mother had her back turned. “Is he alright? That blue giant alien – Darkseid, right? – hit him very hard.”

“I wonder the same, Ma” he answered absent minded pressing his lips.

He was trying to listen to Bruce’s vitals constantly after the battle to make sure that he was alright or at least that his life wasn’t in danger. But he couldn’t hear anything and this, as always, made him sick with worry but there was one thought that although frustrating still comforted him a bit: Tony Stark had taken his friend somewhere with lead to stop him from coming there.

At times, Clark’s distress made him regret that he didn’t followed Ironman when he took Batman away. The rock where Darkseid sent Batman to crush was enormous and after Bagdana’s death Batman walked behind the rock so the others didn’t see what happened. Yet Clark used his X-ray vision and saw Batman collapsing unconscious; he was ready to rush there to catch him but Ironman
was there.

His first urge was to tailor Ironman to see where he was going to take Bruce but then he realized that this was wrong…He had no right to inflict his presence to them after everything he had done. Concern clenched his insides but for once he had to think what Bruce would want.

And even now that not knowing was torturing he was aware that his choice after much time was the correct one.

The sedation affected him instantly. He felt a sweet paralysis flooding the healthy part of his body: well, healthy…not exactly. For a few torturing seconds, exhaustion and throbbing pain became so strong that his body shook and he hardly stopped grunts coming out of his mouth: the effort of the last month hammering his body mercilessly.

But then everything ceased…

He was sleeping but his awareness hadn’t abandoned him. His mind was still processing the events of the last hours. Relief that the plan worked. The things he had done the past days crossed his mind like a tornado: Themyscira, Central City, Metropolis; Diana, Hippolyta, Flash, the Avengers, Bagdana…

It was hardly 24 hours since he drove the Tumbler to Mannheim’s facilities in the middle of the Frozen Basin but it seemed so distant as if years had passed…and then the battle; Darkseid’s enraged face when he saw his army being devastated by the machine he planned to use for exterminating the human race.

The white beams cracked Dr. Strange’s shield heading right at him; and then the gigantic body that was till then killing the Earth’s defenders hid the sun and set him under his shadow; becoming the new shield that stopped death from reaching him.

*His mother held his shoulders gently but determined; she was smiling and her smile, her eyes, her perfume, her touch was the perfect medicine.*

*The Frozen Basin had vanished and the moisture darkness of a ponging alley that made his body shiver again more violently than before.*

*Because he was scared, he was crying; his foot hurt like Hell reminding him that that awful man had chopped his big toe a few hours ago. He wanted to go home, to sleep in his soft, warm bed listening to his mother singing his favorite lullaby. He knew that the nightmare was over, now that his parents were there with him.*

*“Kill the brat!” the horrible voice of the man who reminded him of a Gray Wolf cracked the space.*

*The bang echoed in the alley and made his ears ache and he stopped breathing; he was frozen realizing that the nightmare wasn’t over.*

*The gentle hand that was caressing his upper hands pushed him away and he could see only his mother’s back; he saw her jerking with a soft grunt… and then his mom fell down like a cut flower.*

*The demon’s body collapsed in front of him with a round burning mark on his chest…*

*Chill grabbed Hero and hurled the small animal to crash in the wall…the poor kitten collapsed on the dirty ground.*
His mother’s beautiful eyes stayed open, still, crystallized. Beautiful as ever but cold as never before... So familiar and so strange at the same time...

Bagdana’s eyes were so different when they met his eyes one last time before the demon let his eyelashes cover them...

Bruce felt the cold wrapping his body freezing him; the shivers made his teeth rattle. His insides felt like a tight knot. People die because of him.

It was unfair; people dying for his sake. He didn’t want that.

“I’m tranquil, Bruce...”

He turned around and saw Bagdana exactly as he was when he imprisoned him in Mannheim’s Mansion. But now his face was softer emanating what he was saying – the demon was indeed peaceful.

“I thought that making Superman cheat and dump you for another person would satisfy me because I’d have punished you and make you feel the pain I suffered.”

Bruce heard the echo of soft footsteps and watched him coming closer. A faint smile on his lips.

“But then sensing you in so much pain...” he shook his head. “That definitely wasn’t the satisfaction I expected. There were times I regretted... But then... I believed that I could stop the pain having my chance to win your heart as Oliver Queen. It was so beautiful trying to get your affections like a mere human... like starting my life all over again, from scratch... if only your heart wasn’t already given to that Kryptonian...” he looked him in the eyes. “You thwarted me; you were brusque to me trying to discourage my advantages staying loyal to someone that made you bleed... But I still couldn’t get mad at you...”

Bagdana’s eyes were fixed on his.

“And I finally did what I should, Bruce – the best thing in the countless ages I’ve lived. Feeling you alive makes me happy. You were the best gift life offered me and I was so stupid that I hurt you... I abused you; I increased your suffering. I cared only for satisfying my last... my body’s hunger...” he snorted. “I am a demon, what did you expect? I should have taken you from your torturers and raised you like a human child needs to be raised... and then when you would have become the beautiful man you are, maybe you would love me and give me your body with your will... Reviving our past love... Lost opportunities... We would have shared ages together...” he lowered his eyes.

Bruce couldn’t discern anything; they were floating into nothingness; in the oblivion he so much needed right now.

Bagdana looked back at him.

“But now I have finally seen the right thing to do... Saving what is the most precious thing to me... you...”

Bruce made the two steps that separated them; his eyes meet Bagdana’s eyes and Bruce took in the pleasure and relief all over the demon’s face.

“I didn’t want you to die...” he said and raised his hand, his fingertips touching the other’s cheek.

Bagdana closed his eyes.
“I know…but there are many kinds of death and the worst kind was living all these centuries after Lilith’s death…When I found you it was like I was born again; as if the planet had just begun spinning, a new star in the universe. Stopping Darkseid from killing you wasn’t death, even if my life was the forfeit: I was happy that I managed to stop him.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes.

“Do not be sad for me, Bruce…for once let me not being the cause of suffering for you. Feeling you alive will be the biggest happiness for a deplorable demon like me…and maybe someday, in another world we’ll have our chance, to start fresh…”

Bruce closed his eyes sorrow weighing on his body…

“Don’t be sad, Bruce…Life is beautiful, please remember that…” the demon pleaded.

Bruce couldn’t see anything beautiful in this life and this erosion all over his body affirmed that loudly…but then he felt something beautiful wrapping his tired, suffering existence; he opened his eyes.

A new figure he hadn’t seen again approached him: it was a woman; an elderly, short woman dressed in a white, silver long tunic that sent the brightest light around. Her wrinkled face though was brighter than her clothes and her waist length blond hair radiated like pure gold. She smiled affectionately to him and Bruce’s heart was filled with peace…

He opened his eyes reluctantly feeling hands on his body; he was still in a fog but he could say that this wasn’t a hostile touch.

Bruce blinked several times before shaking sleep off of his eyes and managing to make the figure over him recognizable.

It was Dr. Strange dressed in a white medical robe so much unlike his usual burgundy caped- self; however on his chest still hanged his peculiar medallion and Bruce thought fondly of the Black Butterfly on his own chest that his friends didn’t take off.

Dr. Strange was examining him, serious as in the battle. He was absorbed but he turned his eyes to meet Bruce’s stare as soon as he realized that his patient was awake.

“Did you have a nice sleep?”

“I did” Bruce answered “thanks to morphine and sedation” he added bitterly.

“You don’t like drugs, huh?”

Bruce smiled.

“No, but my life spins around them since I got free from Falcone…”

Stephen reflected the smile.

“I know how you’re feeling…for months after my accident I was on heavy medication. But they are necessary for someone with your way of life” Bruce cocked an eyebrow in obvious disagreement and Dr. Strange chuckled with the man’s stubborness. “Your back got badly bruised when Darkseid shoved you to that rock and some ribs cracked; the energy casts saved you from the worst but
eventually with the radiation from the omega beams the casts are deteriorating your organism’s condition.”

“I understand.”

“The surgery is the only solution.”

“I am aware of that and you have my consent; if you want I can sign any paperwork necessary” Stephen waved that out.

“We were thinking the possibility of asking from Superman…”

Bruce didn’t let him finish his phrase.

“No” he shook his head for emphasis “Superman has nothing to do with any of this and I don’t want him involved.”

The doctor inhaled.

“But it would increase the odds of success.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows and locked eyes with him.

“No way, Dr. Strange” he said with conviction. “The operation will be performed here or it won’t be performed at all!” he closed his eyes trying to catch his breath.

Dr. Strange moved his hands to appease him.

“Please, Bruce, calm down. Everything will happen as you want.”

“Thank you.”

“Bruce, I was thinking about the ‘no magic thing’… The operation will be very difficult, not to mention Darkseid’s energy’s residual effect – of course, Eir and I tried to purge you of that but still I would prefer it if there was more time for you to regain your strength and have a good rest. Given that we don’t have that luxury, perhaps it would be better if we had magic at our arsenal…”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, Stephen. No magic even if my life depends on this.”

Dr. Strange huffed exasperated.

“Bruce, I understand that you want the operation to be performed under the same conditions as for every other patient but the nature of your injuries is far from normal. I can’t imagine that we will come across another patient with your history and being directly exposed to Darkseid’s dark energy.”

“No magic, Stephen; we won’t violate the laws of nature.”

Stephen smiled.

“But you agreed to that when you asked my people and Jor El to diminish the earthquakes’ magnitude…” he remarked pointedly.

Bruce tilted his head on the side.
“No; Bagdana and Darkseid violated the natural laws when caused that wave of earthquakes; I asked from you to just restore the harmony."

Stephen chuckled admitting his defeat.

“Nobody can’t catch you in anything, right?” he stopped chuckling. “I don’t want to lose you, Bruce…”

Bruce smiled and shook his head.

“I assure you, Stephen that my agenda is full with things I have to do so dying can’t be squeezed there…”

“Batman has always his contingencies, huh?”

“He definitely tries to…”

Selina was holding his hand so strong that it was on the verge of bruising. Tony stood there pale, clearly upset while Alfred was tidying up the room trying to hide his own distress.

The nurses who prepared him for the operation had just left the room and Dr. Strange’s team had already taken their places in the operation room.

They had managed to procrastinate the surgery for two days trying with every possible way to stop the energy casts from heating more so that Bruce’s organism had the time to restore as much strength and stamina as possible. Yet there was nothing that could stop the casts’ overheating. So the second day they decided that the operation couldn’t be delayed anymore otherwise the casts would kill Bruce anyway.

Bruce stroked Selina’s hair and their eyes met.

“It will help if I promise that I will wake up? We passed so many things together: we can’t be scared of this…” he looked up to Tony and Alfred. “I’ll fight this as I did all my life: you don’t believe in me anymore?”

Alfred ran to him and took his other hand.

“Of course, Master Bruce!”

Bruce smiled.

“And you, Tony?”

The billionaire nodded morose and drained.

“I always do, litt’ guy…” he said in a hoarse voice so much unlike his. “But you have to know that a huge collection of booze is waiting for me…Not to blackmail you or anything…”

Bruce laughed and Tony hugged him.

Clark had returned to the Daily Planet the first day after the battle; his Ma told him that she had asked a sick leave from Perry on his account. So he walked in the common space with his colleagues as if
nothing had happened.

He was touched being back to his routine; it seemed to him as if years had passed from the last time he was there and from his last dispute with Lois. Lois who constantly tried to reason with him.

He looked at her desk and she looked back like in the past before Ivy ruined his life. Clark had grinned broadly breathing easier, feeling some of the burden on his chest gone.

Of course, they didn’t act as they would like to not raise suspicions; they had their chance to speak for everything after the working hours to the café they used to go.

It was the third day after the battle and he still didn’t have any news from Bruce; any sign. Also, Tony Stark was nowhere to be seen…

He was writing on his desktop computer about the world’s reactions after Darkseid’s defeat; the planet was celebrating and Clark was happy to be back in his humble desk that he thought that he would never see again. Yet his joy wasn’t whole as his worry about Bruce bit him hard and chewed his mind.

All of a sudden and without any warning, his breath stopped and his heart lost several beats; it was as if the sun had turned off robbing him from his energy.

“Use your damn magic!” Tony yelled at Stephen, his panicked voice towering the frantic sound of the devices monitoring Bruce’s vitals. “You’re a magician! Do it! He is dying! We’re losing him!”

The line on the screen was flat; and his heartbeats falling to zero. The equipped with the latest medical technology blurred for Tony’s panicked eyes. He was glaring at Strange but the corner of his eye was fixed on Bruce’s opened back.

Dr. Palmer raised her eyes from their patient and looked at Tony.

“Mr. Stark, you don’t help that way!”

But Tony didn’t let Stephen out of his eyes.

“Use your magic, you useless conjurer!”

Leslie stood in front of him.

“Tony, calm down.”

“No, I won’t calm down, Leslie! I’m losing Bruce and he is refusing to do his mumbo jumbo to bring him back while he can! He’s killing him!”

Stephen looked him in the eyes pushing his surgical glasses up.

“He made me promise that I won’t use any magic…whatever might happen…”

Tony frowned feeling his own surgical mask suffocating him.

“Wha…What?! That’s…No!” he shook his head. “I don’t care! You’re his surgeon: it’s your mistake! You’re obligated to save him!”

Dr. Strange gritted his teeth behind the surgical mask.
“You don’t let me!” he hissed and Tony looked at him dumbfounded.

Leslie showed him the door of the operation room.

“Tony, you’re not helping!” he couldn’t see her eyes behind the surgical glasses but he could sense the sparkles. “Let us do our job…Out!”

Tony’s heart was beating in his ears exactly as the monitor with Bruce’s vitals; he felt as if he was in a numbing dream…nightmare. Like walking in jelly…He left the room hearing the echo of Dr. Strange’s calm instructions to his team and the sound of charging.

As soon as he reached the waiting room he tossed away his glasses and his mask cursing.

The people waiting outside rushed at him.

“What’s going on?” Selina asked.

Pepper looked Tony in the eyes.

“What happened, Tony?”

Alfred’s eyes met Tony’s.

“His heart…” Tony answered and had to inhale to continue “stopped. He is been butchered in that fuckin’ room already ten hours! He couldn’t endure it anymore…” his head dropped. “Littl’ guy…”

Pepper gulped and hugged him bringing his trembling head to her chest hushing him.

Alfred felt his legs not supporting him anymore; Lucius helped him sat in a chair.

“At least, the boys are not here…” he mumbled his face getting paler with each second. His insides were crying with pain but he was so shocked, so devastated that he couldn’t even let his pain out. “It just can be…” he whispered; after everything…losing again Master Bruce…

Lucius gulped.

Selina’s eyes stayed still and her breath stopped. She was ready to collapse but there was no way she would let that happen. The world spun around her.

Steve who was there with him hugged her brushing her back.

“He’ll make it, Sel; Bruce is a winner…”

Selina fixed her wild eyes on him.

“Of course he will! He promised me!” she spat.

Clark got up and hurried outside the room without knowing why he was doing that; maybe because he needed air.

He heard hurried steps; Lois had followed him worried.

“Are you alright?”

“No; something happened; Bruce…”
Lois stared at him confused.

“You located him?”

“No, I can’t hear his vitals.”

“Then how do you know that something happened?”

“Because my insides are frozen…because it feels like the planet has stopped moving…the sun’s light darkened.”

Lois pressed her lips.

“Elliot attacked the Manor but they said that Bruce wasn’t even there so he wasn’t hurt.”

Clark gulped. Lois didn’t know the feats Bruce had done; feats that definitely had their toll.

“They must have tried to operate him” he said seeing again Darkseid throwing Bruce in the air sending him to crush on a huge rock. And then the omega beams Bagdana took instead…

All these had forced them to speed the operation.

“Why they didn’t tell me?” he yelled in despair and anger but Lois gestured to him to hush in case someone was close. “I would have given them the Fortress to perform the operation! He would have been safe there! Damn it! Stark, your hatred is killing him!”

Lois met his distraught, crazy eyes.

“Maybe it was Bruce’s choice…” she said softly and Clark closed his eyes.

She was right. He hid his face in his palms.

“It’s my fault…” he whispered.

Leslie watched Stephen’s desperate efforts to revive Bruce. They had turned him on his back; they were too absorbed in their efforts but her eyes were on her boy’s pale face. Something shone trapped in his eyelashes…Leslie closed her eyes realizing it was a teardrop.

She leaned to his ear.

“C’mon, baby…this is not the time to remember the bad things…I know that life has treated you with painful moments but…there are beautiful moments to remember too…we are waiting for you, Bruce: all your loved ones…and…and life is ahead of you promising happiness…you must live, Bruce; you have so many things to live, to enjoy…Please…”

A girl sat in a wheelchair approached him: she was hardly eleven years old with blond short hair and light blue eyes. She looked at Bruce shyly.

“I’m Lucy” she said and Bruce smiled.

“Hi, Lucy; I’m…”

“Bruce Wayne” she cut him. “I saw you on TV – I spend many hours with TV all these months staying on bed.”
Bruce nodded.

“I know how that is, Lucy…”

The girl smiled and nodded, she was hugging a doll from the gifts that Santa had given them.

“My mother says that some people hurt you so much that you almost died; and that the wounds they made you…fixed you to a wheelchair like me” she said shyly, her pale cheeks becoming pink.

Bruce pressed his lips and nodded; the girl stretched her hand to Bruce and he took it.

“What happened to you, Lucy?” he asked quietly.

“I was crossing the street and a car hit me: it didn’t hurt much because everything darkened…Mom told me when I woke up that I was sleeping for a month….”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“You are a very brave girl, Lucy…Your parents must be proud.”

Lucy touched his cheek; her eyes were filled with compassion.

“They tortured you, right? I heard that they were hurting you when you were a kid…for years…and now other bad people hurt you more…you have suffered so much...”

Bruce smiled to the girl.

“They did…but thanks to my friends I’m here now – I was saved.”

The girl looked at him conspiratorial.

“You bought the presents, right?”

Bruce looked up at Alfred and then back at the girl pouting.

“Let’s say that I reminded Santa that there’s a children hospital in Gotham; he has so many things to do that sometimes he needs some reminding. A friend told me that when I was almost at your age.”

“Doctors say that it’d be too difficult to walk again…and” she licked her lips lowering her eyes. “I know that I won’t walk ever again but they just try to encourage me...”

Bruce inhaled carefully to not let the girl know his sadness. But her little eyes that shone like gems as she looked back at him made his heart melt.

“I know that I won’t dance ever again...”

“You dance, Miss Lucy?” Alfred asked warmly.

She smiled to him.

“I was leaving the ballet school to daddy’s car on the other side of the road when the car hit me...” she grinned and hugged tighter her new doll. “I know that I won’t dance but I don’t tell mom and dad because I want them to believe that I believe them.”

“You are a very brave girl, Lucy…” Bruce said in a throaty voice.
She smiled and touched his cheek with the spontaneity of the children.

“Sometimes I get sad but then I think everything I heard about you; how much you suffered but you never gave up and...and I feel that everything will be alright even if I don’t walk again ever because I have my mommy and daddy with me and doctors who love me...and...and I’d never be alone while you...you were just a kid in pain and you were all alone but you never stopped fighting...”

“You’ll walk again, Lucy: I’ll do everything in my power for you to walk again” Bruce told her keeping his eyes closed. “I’m not supposed to walk ever again too but my friends are working hard to find the way to help me walk again...It’d be hard, Lucy, but I’ll do it because you...your bravery would give me strength and courage and inspiration to walk again so that you would be the next. And I promise you that in your first performance I’ll be there in the theatre to applaud and get your autograph...If you remember me till then among your countless fans” he chuckled.

The girl’s cheeks were drenched in tears when she looked at Bruce but a wide, happy smile brightened her round, sweet face.

“I know you’ll make it, Bruce...” she said and leaned to place a kiss to his cheek.

He had to make it for Lucy’s sake; because Lucy believed in him and she deserved to have her life back. If he survived the surgery and walked again then Lucy would walk again; and dance...

“Can you feel this?” Dr. Strange’s deep baritone asked.

He couldn’t see the needle piercing lightly his foot and his doctor’s inquiring eyes but he could feel that tickling: in his legs!

Everyone was looking at him with agony: Selina, Tony, Alfred, Pepper, the boys, even Hero had stilled his eyes on him.

“I do; a needle stabbing my foot” he said casually as if he hadn’t almost died during the surgery and it didn’t take a week for him to wake up; as if that tiny tickle wasn’t what he was dreaming and craving all this time.

His people’s faces brightened but Leslie remained composed.

“Which leg?” she asked firmly locking eyes with him because he wanted to make sure that her patient wasn’t just trying to satisfy them.

Bruce stared at her and felt everyone’s eyes on him; he inhaled.

“The right.”

“Fuck, yeah!” Jason shouted.

Both he and Dick jumped on him but Hero caught up with them on getting on Bruce who smiled and patted the boys.

“Careful, boys” Leslie said sternly “you’re going to suffocate him.”

The two boys pulled away sharing embarrassed looks. But then it was Selina’s and Tony’s turn to hug their friend.
Leslie rolled her eyes and Bruce looked at the boys.

“You see why you were berated? It was a trick!”

Alfred stared touched and happy at his young master and Bruce feeling that affection met his butler’s eyes grinning.

The Englishman nodded without speaking and Bruce understood that it was the man’s emotion that robbed him from his usual eloquence. Alfred walked to Dr. Strange and shook his hand.

“Congratulations, Dr. Strange. I’m grateful to you.”

The man’s face radiated from relief and satisfaction.

“Thank you, Alfred, but it was Bruce’s strength that drove us to the victory – oh! I sound like speaking about the Frozen Basin battle…”

Alfred chuckled and patted Leslie’s upper arms.

“And congratulations to you too, Leslie.”

She shook her head.

“I didn’t do much…” she answered.

Tony ruffled Bruce’s hair.

“You scared us in there, buddy.”

“Us?” Pepper asked with an eyebrow cocked and a crooked smile on her face.

Tony scratched his head.

“Me” he admitted crooking his mouth.

“He pissed his pants!” Selina said dryly and Tony glared at her.

“You owe someone something, Mr. Stark” Pepper said showing with his eyes Dr. Strange.

Tony pouted remembering how he had yelled at him in the operating room; he didn’t speak to the doctor for several days and even till now they exchanged very few words.

He got up and gave his hand to Stephen.

“I’m sorry for yelling at you like this…I could have yelled at you in another way, I suppose…”

Stephen laughed.

“You don’t need to apologize, Tony; I understand – I’d have done the same thing in your place.”

Tony turned his body to address everyone in the room.

“Well, once Bruce is out of here you’re all invited to the biggest party Tony Stark ever gave! Your entire team too, Dr. Strange.”

Bruce smiled to Tony’s cheerful eyes staring at him yet his insides were clenched: he had feeling from his legs but he couldn’t move them. He had tried without anyone noticing.
He comforted himself thinking that perhaps it was the drugs’ effect that thwarted him.
Chapter 91

Well, this chapter was difficult maybe because it was the last for this story. I don't know if the chapter is good enough, I hope it is.

I'd like to thank all of you for reading, leaving kudos or commenting. Thank you for being with me throughout this long journey. I hope you enjoyed it!

It was the first time Selina left the new rehabilitation clinic Tony had built after Bruce’s surgery; the entire week till he woke up she stayed there, unwilling to leave his side. Fortunately, Tony had provided to include a beautiful, comfy hostel for the patients’ companions. She was afraid to be far from her friend.

Steve was coming often but he had also work in the Tower where they were still in vigilance in case the Female Furies that Darkseid mentioned attack the planet even if their leader was defeated. It seemed though that Darkseid’s humiliating defeat took them back to Apokolips as well.

They used Steve’s bike to return to the city and after the fatigue of all these days they chose to stay in Selina’s apartment and eat the pizza they picked on the way.

However the first thing Selina wanted to do upon entering her apartment was a bath: not that the hostel’s room didn’t have a bathroom yet nothing is like home. Especially, when in the bath tub you have the company of a naked Steve Rogers…

She had the chance to appreciate Steve’s pectorals and abs now that she was happy that Bruce regained his leg’s feeling. And Steve was really happy that she was happy since that led to the first lovemaking after long.

But it was definitely worth the waiting…

Selina had already worn her night gown and helped Steve wear his pajama shirt.

“There’s no need for that” he said kissing her lips.

But Selina instead of buttoning the shirt uncovered his injured shoulder that was wrapped in gauze. She kissed the spot.

“With Bruce’s surgery, I neglected you.”

He laughed.

“I couldn’t feel that! How about kissing a little upper?”

He lowered his face so that his lips met hers in a soft kiss that swiftly became passionate, taking away the breath from both of them.

“It was great fighting with Catwoman at my side…” he said playing with a stray lock from her hair.
Selina cocked her eyebrows and pursed her lips.

“You had Ms. Romanov…”

He cocked an eyebrow.

“Fighting with Natasa is just teamwork between comrades and friends. On the other hand, when you punch and kick enemies near me and I know that this gorgeous, lethal body which gives pain to the others, gives pleasure to me…it’s pure arousal…” his voice had become a sexy whispering and he began nibbling her neck that she bent to enjoy more contact.

“Soldier, I never expected to hear that kind of language from you…” she shook her index finger patronizingly. “A good boy like you can’t talk like this to a lady…”

“Mmm…but this good boy likes to tell always the truth…So do you mind?”

“Of course not! Especially since I felt the same way…” she wrapped her arms around his torso and threw off of him the shirt she just helped him wear. “Oh! I love these pectorals – and now with the bruises and scars…” she placed her lips on his chest sucking the strong flesh.

But then abruptly stopped and tilted her head on the side.

“Ummm…nah…you’re injured: I don’t know if you’d bear it…”

Steve frowned and grabbed her from the waist to hug her torso.

“What do you think?”

She laughed.

“Now without jokes” she said seriously. “How’s your wound?”

“It’s just a scratch: Odin diverted the beams with his axe before they reached me and the wound was completely superficial despite the fact it pained and thwarted me to use my arm. However Dr. Strange cleaned it meticulously from any dark energy. Batman though… He was too close to the beams’ radiation even if the demon took the blow. I hope Dr. Strange finds and helps him.”

Selina nodded.

“Me, too but now for me the important thing is that Bruce’s surgery succeeded and he feels again his legs. And my Captain is alright and all aroused from the battle” she said slyly and frowned “at least I hope so…”

“Do you need me to show you?”

Selina pouted thoughtful.

“But we’re hungry and pizza is waiting…” she said teasingly.

Steve hugged her and brought them both on her bed.

“I’m hungrier for you…besides pizza won’t go anywhere.”

Selina chuckled.

“I love boys with rational thinking!” she said and discarded swiftly her white, short night gown.
“I’m sorry for your people who died at the battle” Bruce said really sad.

He was on his bed in reclined position and Thor sat on the chair next to the bed; he was in his civilian attire.

“They were noble warriors, ready to die for the right cause” he answered reverently. “It is a pity Asgard lost them and they are honored and mourned by all of us but Valkyries have transferred them to Valhala.”

Bruce looked at him.

“We wouldn’t have won without Asgard’s help.”

Thor grinned.

“Believe me, Asgard is proud that participated to Darkseid’s defeat” he met Bruce’s eyes. “But we owe everything to you: without you we’ll have lost being attacked by Darkseid without any preparation – Earth would have been doomed.”

Bruce cocked an eyebrow.

“I just saved myself since I’m part of the human race.”

Thor leaned to him.

“How are you, Bruce? Really? Darkseid’s dark energy can contaminate too close to his beams.”

Bruce smiled.

“Is this why you asked Eir to treat me?”

The blond god knitted his eyebrows.

“How do you know?”

“In my sleep, I saw an elderly but beautiful woman who shone like a star: she was saying words in an odd language…and made me feel a lot better.”

Thor nodded.

“She and Dr. Strange fought to remove from your body Darkseid’s contamination.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re alright now – that’s enough for me.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“You’re too kind, Thor; too good and I feel guilty” the blond narrowed his eyes and Bruce chuckled. “I feel that I’m taking advantage of you; taking everything you generously offer without giving anything…”

The god tilted his head and cupped Bruce’s hand on the bed.

“You give me far too much, Bruce, with your friendship. I’m honored and happy that I’m one of
your friends. Besides, you believed in Loki and made him fight for a noble cause. He saved my father’s life from Darkseid: I love Loki and thanks to you I can be proud of him.”

Bruce smiled.

“Loki has good in him but…he is…eccentric. He needed a little push to show what he is really capable of.”

Thor shook his head and his baby blue eyes met Bruce’s.

“I hope that soon you will come again to Asgard for recreational reasons this time.”

Clark Kent stood at the pavement facing the Avengers’ Tower. Two weeks after the battle of Frozen Basin the imposing skyscraper was still surrounded by reporters asking questions to every person they saw entering or leaving the building. Obviously, their aim was to get the chance to catch a big fish, one of the Avengers but they heroes knew how to avoid the press.

However he wasn’t a common reporter; his super senses helped him recognize the vitals of his fellow superheroes even if they were disguised. And today he came to New York looking for one specific Avenger. Not for journalistic purposes but for something more important.

He walked around the area for hours waiting with his heart drumming in agony and impatience. It wasn’t sure that he would find him here even if his reporter sources informed him that he was seen to a rescue in New York.

His body tensed sensing the vitals he waited for hours but he didn’t rush to him. Because his target didn’t know his human identity and Clark didn’t want to reveal it. So he followed him keeping a safe distance since his long distance vision allowed him to see his target from afar and among people.

The Avenger was dressed in jeans and a plain T-shirt which managed to cover a bit his bulky, imposing body – the brown cap on his head and his long blond ponytail definitely didn’t let anyone guess who he was. He was heading to the Batery Park which made Clark’s hair stood on edge as this Park was connected with his biggest crime of all.

It seems that the park was one of the favorite places for the Avenger. Clark felt a familiar pang: of course he met Bruce here…He almost slapped himself to stop these thoughts from poisoning him.

Enough evil he had done manipulated from such stupid thoughts.

The Avenger chose to walk to a really secluded part of the Park where the oak trees were too thick and shed everything under their shadow. That gave Clark the chance to change into Superman to approach him.

“Thor…” he greeted the god who turned frowning.

“Superman; to what do I owe the honor?”

The Asgardian had some idea about what brought Superman to him and as a matter of fact he wasn’t happy about that. Clark wasn’t sure if there was irony in his voice but even if Thor really scorned him, he deserved that.

“I’m sorry if I bother you.”

Thor waved that off. The change in Superman’s manner was evident.
“Not at all…How can I help?”

Superman approached more.

“It’s about Bruce” he saw Thor instantly tensing and raised his palms reassuringly. “I won’t ask you to tell me where he is.”

Though it was a temptation since Clark could see in the god’s eyes that he knew where Bruce was. Actually, that was the reason Clark chose to speak to him: he was sure that Thor was welcome to Bruce’s inner circle – the Asgardian had earned that – and also Thor knew about his past relationship with Bruce so Bruce’s wish to keep it secret wouldn’t be betrayed.

“He doesn’t want me to know so he obviously is somewhere with a lot of lead to stop me from locating him which I perfectly understand after everything I did to him.”

Thor yanked his head.

“Then?”

Clark gulped.

“It’s two weeks since they operated Bruce.”

Thor stayed expressionless without confirming or denying that. He wasn’t sure if he had the right to share that information.

“If you can’t locate him then how can you say that?”

Clark lowered his eyes.

“Because Darkseid hit him badly and then his omega beams emitted radiation that must have contaminated him. Also, the energy casts that held Bruce’s together was of Kryptonian technology, made in my Fortress, so when they removed them I was aware of it. But most important” he locked eyes with the god “at some point, I felt that he…he was dying: his heart bent under the weight of exhaustion, hardship and the operation’s trial” he didn’t want to share every detail of what he experienced.

The Asgardian was impressed by the connection that still existed between Bruce and Superman; even after everything that happened.

“You said that you can’t hear his vitals…”

“I sensed it…It was like the sun lost his light and warmth; like the earth stopped spinning” he shook his head. “Anyway…I know that he finally made it…” he chuckled “Bruce is a mighty fighter.”

Thor gazed the horizon, the harbor cast into the pale pink color of the advanced sunset. He was feeling Superman’s agony and knew that was real; he felt for the man imagining how he would have felt if he was deprived of information about someone he cared about.

“What do you want from me then?” he asked dryly because still he wavered whether he should share his knowledge.

Clark could understand that Thor was skeptical and hesitant to trust him; the Asgardian didn’t want to betray and lose Bruce’s trust: who in his right mind would want that? He didn’t want to press him but without his will his eyes almost pleaded.
“Lack of oxygen can cause damages to humans…is Bruce…?”

Clark didn’t intend to let his agony hue his voice yet it was two weeks since then and all these days his agony was accumulating and now became a wave that broke his barriers.

Thor looked at him with sympathy and nodded.

“Do not worry. He is fine” he didn’t give him details but at least he comforted his agony.

Superman closed his eyes and breathed relieved.

Bruce looked at the steel, horizontal bar in the facilities’ gym; he was there on his wheelchair ready to start walking again…at least, trying. Why that thought even crossed his mind? He should have been thrilled to be there, to finally begin walking again.

Tony, Selina and Dr. Strange with Matt were there too and Bruce could see the eagerness in their eyes.

However, Bruce’s hands were clenched in fists and his breath was laborious even if he hid it. He was afraid of that bar… and that made him even more nervous because this wasn’t logical; this wasn’t like him…

He raised his eyes to see Matt who kneeled to put the exoskeletons to his legs. They would start slowly with the exoskeletons easing his effort and then gradually as walking with the exoskeletons would become natural, they would remove the exoskeletons as well.

Bruce knew what they expected from him and brought his chair close to the bar.

Selina squatted by his chair’s side and cupped his hand on the armrest.

“I know you’d like someone else with you this moment…” she whispered and her eyes were filled with sympathy.

Bruce met his eyes and smiled.

“I have all the people I want…”

“I’d be extremely happy when I’ll smash that awful chair once you’re standing on your feet.”

Even the distant echo of that voice made his body shiver and his mind numb… He saw Clark beaming as he lowered him gently to the astonishingly beautiful wheelchair he had made for him.

A heavy stone crushed his chest and this damned fatigue washed again his body…and his brain. He had no mood to even try to walk though he knew that he should; it felt as if he was completely drained like the remnants of the Parademons the TV stations showed the government agents gathering from the battlefield.

But his friends were waiting worried from his delay.

He grabbed the bar and inhaled deeply to suppress every negative thing he had inside; he shouldn’t let them mess with him especially now.

He clenched his jaw and jerked his body like he was easily doing before the surgery to move his body from the bed to the wheelchair. Only this time he would stay up, on his feet.
Everyone was watching avidly.

Bruce managed to balance his body and stay up with his hands clenching the bar and the exoskeletons helping. Now that he was standing, he had just to move his feet into making a small step; it shouldn’t be so hard: he had done more difficult things with his mind’s power.

“Don’t do what are you thinking, buddy” Tony said warning without revealing the mind power part because Matt didn’t know.

“The movement must be normal, Bruce” Stephen added.

Bruce inhaled and made to move his foot in front of the other – no mental power. It must happen normally…Like a baby’s first step…

But the damn leg didn’t move; he tried to galvanize his will into continuing but he realized that there wasn’t any will to power his determination.

“…the moment you’ll be healed, I swear to Rao that you won’t get out of our greenhouse for two months!”

His legs began trembling and he was falling.

Two strong arms held him from the armpits and supported him. A flash passed his mind: two crystal blue eyes filled with love and a smile filling him with strength and courage… But now there was no strength in him.

His eyes met the carbon eyes of Tony; his friend’s fear written all over.

“I can’t…” Bruce mumbled the only word he never before uttered.

Selina ran to hold him too while Stephen and Matt chose to not intrude.

“I’m sorry” Bruce said to his friends looking at them with guilt “I just…can’t move my legs…”

Tony gulped.

“It’s alright, buddy…don’t…don’t worry.”

Selina nodded and stroked Bruce’s back and Tony brought him to the chair but Bruce shook his head determined.

“I’ll try again…” he couldn’t just give up even though his entire existence was crying to him that he should let go.

Tony looked at Stephen and Matt. They both nodded.

You should make it…Bruce told to himself. You can’t disappoint them…you can’t give up…

He grabbed again the bar but this time his legs slipped immediately after he left his chair. Both Selina and Tony caught him before he was hurt and sat him in the chair.

He was panting; not looking anyone in the eyes. But Selina found his eyes.

“It’s okay, sweetie…It’s only the beginning… don’t be discouraged.”

“It’s far too early” a determined female voice echoed in the enormous gym.
Everyone looked to the entry where Leslie and Alfred had just entered. Alfred hurried his steps to his young master muffling him in the cardigan he held.

“You should give yourself some time, sir” he said softly but Bruce didn’t even look at him.

He didn’t go again to the gym; Bruce didn’t want to fail again so he wasn’t willing to try because he wouldn’t make it. He felt it.

He agreed to go the other part of the gym to do only the exercises that was doing before the operation; at least, he couldn’t fail doing them, could he?

However he bitterly realized that even that it was far more difficult than he remembered and each time left him utterly exhausted to the point of not wanting to go there again.

Matt was grinning encouraging to him all the time but Bruce could see the frown hidden under his physiotherapist’s tranquility. He was realizing too that something was terribly wrong.

At least, in the interior pool a pleasant surprise was waiting for him. Dick and Jayson were already inside playing carefree. Hero ran around the pool following them jerking annoyed whenever the boys sent water to him teasingly; as soon as the kitten sensed Bruce’s arrival rushed to him climbing on his lap. He was wearing his robe so he was spared the potential scratching from Hero’s nails.

Bruce smiled feeling the animal’s paws and caressed him.

“You have grown up, huh, buddy?”

He looked up at Matt and nodded. He let down Hero and slipped from his wheelchair in the water where the boys waited for him eagerly.

It was something very easy; every time swimming was a pleasure and the boys swam away to give him space to swim since they knew how good he was in that. The water felt so wonderful on his legs…he could feel the water’s soft massaging vibrations on his muscles: how he had missed that feeling. His legs overcoming the water’s resist.

But then the same exhaustion, the same emptiness washed his body and he was sinking. He moved his hands but he realized that he couldn’t stay afloat.

“Bruce!” Dick and Jayson yelled together and rushed to hold one arm each supporting him.

Matt dove immediately and held Bruce the way the lifeguards did. He could feel that his patient was surrendered and he could hear his breath fainting. Bruce’s head rolled to his shoulder.

Stephen ran inside; he was passing by and heard the boys and the kitten’s hysterical meows. He helped Matt grasping Bruce from the armpits and pulling him out of the water; the physiotherapist jumped outside and supported Bruce too assisting Stephen to sit Bruce to the chair. The boys got out of the water as well, shock on their faces and Hero licked Bruce’s trembling hands.

Dick squatted next to him.

“Bruce, are you alright?”

“Man, ya’re so pale…” Jason added.

Bruce looked at the boys; his heart was beating frenzied weakening more his body. He wanted to
sleep.

“I’m sorry for worrying you. I’m fine – I don’t know what happened” he said trying to control himself to calm the boys.

Matt brushed Bruce’s frozen shoulder and muffled him in his bath robe.

“It was my fault, Bruce; it is too soon, I rushed things.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No, it wasn’t your fault…Swimming was so easy before the operation” he said dryly.

Stephen looked him in the eyes.

“Yes, but the surgery you underwent was a major feat, Bruce” he said with conviction. “Your body is exhausted and needs time to regain its strength and energy.”

Bruce didn’t answer and looked disheartened at the entrance where Tony was coming. His friend frowned seeing them like this and ran.

“What happened? Bruce?”

Bruce inhaled and rubbed his aching forehead.

“Nothing…I just failed to swim…”

Huge crowds of people had gathered outside the White House where the ceremony for the Frozen Basin’s battle was taking place. Thousands civilians had gathered there along with representatives of every country to pay tribute to the Asgardians and the Amazons.

The UN’s General Secretary spoke first and then several Presidents and Prime Ministers. And then Captain America spoke representing the earth’s heroes who were there. Superman was asked to speak too though he felt that he didn’t deserve that. But since he had the chance, he gazed at the people in the crowd feeling everyone’s eyes separately on him.

“Like everyone who spoke before me has already done, I want also to express my gratitude to our allies: the noble, brave warriors of both Asgard and Themyscira. They fought at our side bravely shedding their blood and their lives so that our planet won’t be destroyed by Darkseid. I want to thank Princess Diana and Queen Hippolyta of Themyscira; Odin and Thor of Asgard for chosing to stand at our side during this time of extreme need. The General Secretary and the representatives of the planet stated their peoples pledge to forge eternal ties of friendship and alliance. But I, Superman, am representing only myself so I can express my personal gratitude and loyalty to the proud people of Asgard and Themyscira and promise to be always at their side…”

Bruce watched the ceremony in the built-in the wall 46’’ TV. He felt the same internal jolt seeing Superman standing in the podium: beautiful, unscathed, strong so much unlike when he found him in Mannheim’s Mansion. Humble again with his eyes filled with benevolence as he gazed at the people; At least, this nightmare was over.

Superman looked at the reporters gathered.

“Now I’d like to speak about someone whose contribution wasn’t enough appreciated. I refer to
Batman… He was the only one who figured Darkseid’s plan and organized our defence and counterattack so that no civilian lives were jeopardized; he was the one who discovered Darkseid’s weaknesses that led to his defeat; he was the one who brought all the heroes together to fight for the ultimate common cause. He risked his life; he sacrificed more than anyone can imagine” he inhaled deeply. “He saved my life…”

Bruce clapped his hands frustrated shutting the TV set. He was on his bed, in his hospital room, sitting with his back on the inclined headboard. He was cold so he wore his warm nightrobe over the hospital’s gown. Three weeks had passed since his operation and he hadn’t managed to walk or even reach his physical condition before the surgery.

His Cosmos vibrated on the nightstand. He answered the call: it was Lucius who informed him that he had made the necessary procedure so that Ms. Elliot’s clinic would from now on be paid by Bruce exactly as Bruce had asked; also, that a wreath was sent to Kelly Robinson’s funeral again as Bruce instructed. He thanked him and let the Cosmos in its place.

His body felt drained and it drove him crazy. That exhaustion didn’t subside even a bit nor his mood changed. He pressed his lips: he could imagine Darkseid in his planet cackling satisfied because his omega beams might have not killed Batman but definitely contaminated him with Darkseid’s malevolence and all the darkness he wanted to spread to the world.

He shouldn’t let him win Bruce thought and ran his hands through his hair. Yet his legs or his body didn’t seem willing to cooperate. He rubbed his thighs: he could feel perfectly but he couldn’t move.

An idea crossed his mind… He could always use the Immortality Water yet… A sigh left his mouth. No, that solution was crossed out. No way! He would never resort to the means Ra’s Al Ghul used. He had to make it himself or rot in this chair.

The birds’ cheerful song from outside made him realize that the world out of his window was completely strange to him; thankfully, the curtains that covered the big window at the right of his bed were thick and didn’t let him see the landscape.

Polite knocks on the door; certainly, Alfred.

“Come in” he said taking his nonchalant expression.

But Alfred wasn’t persuaded. He immediately noticed the warm night robe and the thick curtains that stopped spring from entering his master’s world.

He left the tray he was carrying on the night stand; he brought Bruce’s lunch. Alfred couldn’t let anyone else take care of his young master, especially now that he sensed the youth so distressed. So he used the facilities kitchen to cook for Bruce.

“I’m not hungry, Alfred.”

Alfred pressed his lips. All these days he was watching his young master trying fruitlessly to walk and getting disappointed, disheartened, loosing his courage. Dr. Strange and Leslie with Master Anthony and Lucius contucted every kind of tests and analyses to discover what went wrong with the implants and the procedure; but everything was as it should. The problem resided inside Master Bruce and had to do with what Darkseid did to him.

After the battle Bruce was always pale and tired so much so that he was forced to sleep even though his intention was to hide his exhaustion. But the worst was the youth’s eyes: when other people were around, Bruce managed to make his eyes seem like before but when he thought that nobody watched
him and let his guard down, his beautiful eyes were blank, lifeless, bereft of their familiar light. Alfred's hair stood on edge every time he saw his eyes because they were like the day he had gone to Dolcetto and found little Bruce cruelly abused.

“This is quite obvious, sir: you have lost weight and you know that this is not good for your recovery.”

Bruce discerned his butler's agony and huffed.

“Fine, I'll have some.”

Alfred grinned and placed the bed table over Bruce's legs; he placed the tray. Bruce began eating and Alfred turned to the window to give him some space. He knew that his young Master was eating only to please him. The bitterness and sorrow inside him choking everything.

“It's a wonderful day, sir.”

“I'm sure…” Bruce answered indifferently feeling inside the urge to snap that he didn't give a fucking damn. But it wasn't Alfred's fault he was feeling like this.

Alfred turned to look at him.

“Would you like to explore a bit the grounds after you finish your meal, sir?” he asked avoiding using 'to take a walk' that first came to his tongue.

Bruce's chest ached from Alfred's effort to lighten his mood yet he didn't want to be outside.

“No, Alfred; I prefer to stay here and have a nap” it was true; he was extremely tired all the time. Sleep was the most desirable thing to do.

“As you wish, sir” Alfred bowed slightly his head. “Are you cold?” he inquired swallowing his misery: all these years, Master Bruce encouraged himself but now that the youth’s reserves quivered, he had to do it. “Do you want me to increase the room's temperature?”

Bruce shook his head in denial.

“I'm done” he said looking at his food and Alfred took it off his legs.

“Alfred, don't be sad. I might not be able to walk again but I’m satisfied that Batman would be capable to do his job” he smiled reassuringly. “And the surgery was successful even though I didn’t manage to walk so many people will benefit from that.”

“Sir, if I may, I’m quite sure that you will walk again soon. But you need to rest and relax. In your very young life you never gave up and always found a way to prevail despite the opposite odds. So I’m sure that you will make it this time too… You have learnt better than anyone that patience is necessary for success and you are the one who knows perfectly to use patience to his advantage. I implore with you, sir, do not let disappointment stop you.”

Bruce lowered his gaze thoughtful.

Knocks on the door again. Alfred frowned: it wasn’t the time for the doctor’s visit and they didn’t expect anyone.

“Come in” Bruce said though he would prefer to sleep.

Alfred huffed shocked seeing the visitor; Bruce was also surprised that he came there but not
shocked seeing him.

Oliver Queen walked inside.

“I’m sorry if I’m bothering you. I can leave and come some other time if you want.”

“No, not at all” Bruce said. “Please have a seat.”

Queen smiled and sat on the chair by Bruce’s bed.

“I spoke to Mr. Stark first and he was kind enough to give me the permission to come. Of course, he was rather indecisive and I understand that for him as for you I am probably a surprise rather unpleasant.

Bruce shook his head.

“But I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Wayne.”

Alfred cleared his throat.

“If you’ll excuse me, I must take the tray back to the kitchen” he said and took the tray; Bruce nodded.

“I want to thank you, Mr. Wayne” Oliver said as soon as they were alone.

“I don’t understand” Bruce feigned ignorance.

Queen leaned to him.

“You persuaded Bagdana to free me…without killing me.”

Bruce rubbed his forehead.

“Mr. Queen, you make a mistake…”

Oliver shook his head.

“The demon freed my body but some things were left behind. Skills and abilities I didn’t have before…Memories of his discussions with you: your request to him to let me free” Bruce pressed his lips. “Knowledge” he added pointedly meeting Bruce’s eyes “of your secret.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes and pretended surprise.

“My…secret? I don’t understand.”

“That you are the Batman…”

Bruce chuckled.

“This isn’t truth; some things must have been confused in your memories.”

But Queen raised his palms reassuringly.

“Your secret is safe with me, Mr. Wayne. You saved my life and I’m grateful so the least I can do is honor your secret. And although you are younger from me, I’d like to ask your help.”

He arched his eyebrows.
“My help?”

“You know that Bagdana was the Arrow. Well, lately I realized that the demon’s skill in archery remained to my body: I can do things I couldn’t – I’m strong and skilled with the bow” he pursed his lips “and I want to continue the Arrow’s action fighting crime. Your guidance will be valuable for me…if of course you want.”

Bruce turned his focus inside him for a second.

“I don’t know if I can offer you the guidance you ask, Mr. Queen. But it’s admirable that you want to fight crime and I’m willing to assist you in any way I can.”

Queen grinned.

“You are my inspiration…” he said “the memories of you that the demon left me were fascinating.”

Bruce shook his head.

“I’m hardly an inspiration to anyone.”

“You are very modest but the reality is different. I was left with the knowledge of everything you did to achieve Darkseid’s defeat…” he hesitated to continue “also, I was left with the strong memory of a great love.”

Bruce felt his spine freezing and Queen moved his hands appeasingly.

“I didn’t want to upset you…I was hoping to continue the business collaboration you signed with Bagdana and…maybe, we can be friends?”

Bruce nodded thoughtful.

“I guess we could do that…”

Queen smiled.

“Thank you, Mr. Wayne. And I’m sure you will walk again very soon. I know you will!”

Bruce grinned and took the hand Queen offered him for a cordial handshake.

“I’ll be better going now to let you rest” he said getting up. “I promised Mr. Stark that I wouldn’t weary you. I hope we’ll talk again soon.”

“I’ll be happy too” Bruce answered and watched with mixed feelings the familiar silhouette walking towards the door: he was satisfied that the real Oliver Queen was alive and free but on the other hand he felt a bittersweet sadness remembering the demon that chose to live as a mere human to approach him.

“Mr. Wayne” Oliver said opening the door “the day is beautiful: you should see the world you saved in all its beauty” he grinned. “I think that the planet tries to show to you his gratitude.”

It was so easy to sense Alfred’s happiness as he pushed gently the wheelchair to the beautiful, tiled pathway to the flower field that surrounded the facilities.

It was so easy to make Alfred happy… Bruce thought. It took only for him to ask him to accompany
him for an...exploration as his butler diplomatically put it to not remind him his failure.

He wore his casual black jacket because as always after the battle his body was cold. But the sight of the blooming nature made at least his heart warm. It was afternoon but the sky was clear and the sun shone so sweet that made the blue color dazzling. The field around the pathway was filled with various flowers which various colors created random shapes. The natural perfumes were intoxicating as they reached his nostrils with the light breeze.

Bees buzzed around and butterflies popped up from the flowers’ petals: despite everything Ivy believed the nature seemed happy that humans were still there.

Bruce raised his eyes to watch some birds crossing the sky above him chirping happily.

“It’s like the world is celebrating…” he said.

Alfred leaned to him.

“Thanks to you, Master Bruce.”

He shook his head.

“Please, Alfred, don’t say that. Too many people fought for this and some of them died” he remembered the Asgardians and the Amazons who fell during the battle.

Alfred pressed his lips nodding.

“But their sacrifice would have been in vein if you hadn’t planned everything so perfectly.”

Suddenly, light running footsteps broke the scenery’s peace and Bruce turned to see Dick and Jason rushing there; but it was Hero the first to reach him. The kitten climbed on his lap and began licking his jaw making Bruce laugh loud for the first time after long.

“At last, man! Ya left that depressin’ room” Jason exclaimed standing out of breath with his hands clenching his waist.

“You need coming out every day, Bruce” Dick said squatting at his side. “I’ll come every day with you if you want me.”

Jason gave him a light smack at the back.

“Don’t leave me out, ya sneaky dork!” Jason said and Alfred chuckled.

“You both have your school” Bruce answered smiling and Jason grimaced.

“Ugh! That school…Ya need to remin’ me of that every time, dude?”

Dick cackled but then looked seriously at Bruce as if a thought had crossed his mind.

“You will walk again, Bruce.”

Bruce saw in the boy’s eyes the distress, the guilt, the regret.

“I hope you rot in that chair!”

He had yelled at him when he believed Bruce was his enemy and now Bruce could see that Dick was haunted by what he had said.
He nodded.

“I will, Dick” he said with conviction to give some comfort to the boy.

The boys played around running, jumping with Hero at their heels and Bruce watched happy. But after a while he raised his eyes to Alfred.

“Alfred, is it possible to be left alone for a bit?”

His butler’s relaxed expression changed a bit but he bowed his head stoically.

“Of course, Master Bruce.”

The Englishman gestured to the boys.

“Would you be so kind to help me with the dinner, young masters? Since we are eating all together it should be something special.”

“All together?” Bruce asked.

“Ms. Turner and Todd, Harvey, Rachel and Mr. Petrou, Lucius and of course the usual suspects: your personal gang.”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I’m sure it will be wonderful as always.”

“Ya betca!” Jason said. “This hospital needs some brighten an’ since we’re the only residents we can do whatever we want!”

Dick made to take Hero off from Bruce’s lap where the kitten had climbed again but he resisted.

“Leave him, Dick” Bruce said caressing the animal.

When their footsteps distanced Bruce inhaled. His love for them dripped from his heart but it pained him; he wanted to make them happy – their happiness was his as well. He had to walk again; he had to overcome that exhaustion, that coldness that numbed his body and his will. He couldn’t let Darkseid win now…

He guided his chair to the waist tall, wooden fence: Tony obviously wanted to give an idyllic tone to the rehabilitation center that his friend revealed that it would have the names of Tony’s parents. He let Hero down to chase a bee.

He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes to concentrate. He grabbed the pole of the fence and pushed his body up.

He was standing.

“No, mind power” he reminded himself “it must be natural.”

He moved his foot in front of the other and grinned taking in Hero leaving the bee alone and fixing his eyes on him. Now, he moved carefully his other foot in front of the other. Slowly…

…two blazing crystal blue eyes were watching him avidly sharing the same senses through reading his brain waves.
For an instance, he was hesitant: he didn’t want to have his hopes crushed by a failure… But life flooded his legs and flared his body. So he pressed his lips determined, clenched his jaw and tightened his grasp to the armrests.

Clark jolted to hold him if he fell but Bruce cast him a sharp glare to stay at a distance.

He could sense Clark holding his breath…

Clark jerked in his place but didn’t intervene as Bruce slowly let go of the armrests… standing… well, not very steady but it was amazing since he wasn’t using an ounce of his mental power to assist his body.

He concentrated on his body and the shaking eventually stopped; Clark was rasping now but Bruce didn’t look at him to not lose his focus. He inhaled deeply and his eyes were sparkling in determination as he ordered his left foot to move forwards. He felt Clark’s eyes stilling at his foot as if transferring some of his insane power to the human limb; Superman was so tense that didn’t smile when the foot settled an inch ahead. Neither did Bruce: he just controlled his breath and ordered his right foot to go ahead the left.

A small step for a human, a huge step for Bruce… He smiled to himself encouraged; his brow sleek with sweat; he staggered a bit and stretched his arms for balance – Clark’s body resembled the body of a lion ready to attack but not really attack but catch.

He had stability now and breathed: time for a second step. First the left then the right. A faint smile carved his face and for the first time he turned his eyes to Clark whose face was still tense with apprehension, a lump evident in his throat.

Bruce moved again his feet to reach him enjoying how the beautiful body was coming closer; he was inches from him and Clark was beaming – was right for Superman to shed tears? Bruce didn’t want to see Clark crying even if it was from joy…

…The floor left from his feet and Bruce after all this time wasn’t able to retain his balance… he was falling and it felt awfully…

But then two unbelievably strong but simultaneously gentle arms caught him from the armpits and suddenly the lack of floor didn’t feel terrifying but thrilling. He was ascending to the sky – he was flying…

“I got you… I’ll always be the faster to catch you…” Clark’s face was touching his and Bruce attacked his lips more aggressively, more enthusiastic than ever. “Yeah, Bruce…” Superman whispered “you made it!”

But suddenly those soft, sweet lips were gone and the beautiful world was upside down and his body was falling…

A whoosh and two strong arms took him gently from the armpits and set him again on his feet.

Bruce didn’t need to see to know; he knew the body’s perfume, the breath, the feeling of those hands, but most of all, his body was shaking, pleasantly paralyzed. He turned swiftly and stabbed his angry eyes at the Man of Steel; Bruce could discern his worry but also his joy for seeing him.

“What are you doing?! Don’t touch me!” he roared.

Clark’s eyes widened realizing what his touch must have reminded Bruce; the same crime that haunted Clark. He grabbed the wheelchair and dragged it there so that Bruce could sit without his
help.

“I’m sorry…” he mumbled uncomfortable and pulled his hands. “I just saw you falling and I thought
that this would be bad for someone that had recently a surgery so I…” he brushed his mouth. “I
guess, I didn’t think it…”

Bruce shook his head and looked at Hero who hissed at Superman.

“It’s alright, Hero.”

Superman nodded.

“He is right to be aggressive; he is afraid for his human… He has grown up; he thrives with you.”

Bruce could hear the guilt in Clark’s voice; a voice that was sweet and sympathetic like before.

“What do you want?” he spat and Clark inhaled.

“I know that I’m unwelcomed.”

Bruce cocked his eyebrows and snorted.

“But you still came.”

“I wanted to see you…Tony Stark made the facilities so that I wouldn’t be able to locate you and he
was right…after everything I did to you.”

Bruce stabbed him with his eyes.

“What do you want?” he pointed every word separately.

Superman nodded lowering his eyes.

“To speak to you; to thank you…and as soon as I felt your vitals I…I couldn’t hold myself.
Unfortunately, I couldn’t ever do that to not hurt you…”

Bruce yanked his head.

“There is no need to thank me! Leave now!”

“There is…” he fell on his knees in front of Bruce who narrowed his eyes.

“What are you doing?”

Superman licked his lips.

“I should be on my knees for my entire life to thank you enough for everything you did for my
mother…and me…”

Bruce closed his eyes.

“I repeat: I don’t want your thanks. I did nothing.”

Superman chuckled.

“Oh! Bruce, I feel even more like a worm…I caused you so much suffering, I insulted you, I treated
you despicably, I cheated you and you never stopped caring for me. Not only working constantly to
save me but also supporting my mother the way I didn’t… Forgive me, Bruce.”

Bruce turned his head to the other side away from him.

“I have nothing to forgive.”

Clark arched his eyebrows.

“There are so many awful, hideous things I did to you that, honestly, you shouldn’t ever forgive a scum like me.”

Bruce looked at him.

“Stop that nonsense! You did nothing!”

Superman cocked an eyebrow.

“Under Ivy’s effect really I thought that I didn’t do anything wrong…but when the effect was gone, when my mind cleared I realized what I did. In my cell, they took care to deprive me from my super powers but my eidetic memory was intact…” he pressed his lips. “The worst of my tortures was reliving in every detail what I did to you…”

“Stop it!”

Superman gritted his teeth: he wouldn’t let Bruce’s generosity spare him.

“I hit you, Bruce!” Bruce’s eyes flashed. “I raped you, for Heavens’ sake!” Superman bit his lips. “While I knew what you suffered all these years, I raped you.”

Bruce inhaled, his heart stopped beating. All this time that he fought to save Superman from Poison Ivy’s effect and Darkseid he dreaded this moment…He dreaded that moment because he was afraid that he would bend…

“You didn’t. It happened with my consent – you must remember that I never asked you to stop.”

Clark shook his head.

“Because you knew that I wouldn’t have stopped; because you didn’t want me to become a rapist… but I am one, Bruce. I raped the purest being on the planet… I want to confess everything to the police so that everyone knows the gravity of my crimes to you.”

Bruce yanked his head.

“Are you nuts?” he growled.

“I deserve that, Bruce.”

“You want to force me admitting that I enjoyed it?”

Superman frowned.

“No, no, no…Bruce…”

“If you do such madness I’ll say that.”

Clark lowered his head, his guilt weighing over his shoulders.
“I would never do something that will hurt you…again. But I must be punished and Darkseid’s tortures weren’t enough.”

Bruce narrowed his eyes watching him pulling out of his attire’s hidden pocket a small box. The Man of Steel opened it, clenching his jaw and grunting as the green radiation hit him.

It was Kryptonite.

Clark’s eyes met Bruce’s. Some sweat drops had already appeared all over Clark’s forehead but he pressed his lips placing the green sharp stone on Bruce’s lap.

“Now…Punch me, Bruce” he said. “Beat me to a pulp like I did to you that night…kick me…take the stone and stab me countless times. Make me bleed like I did to you…Bring justice on me!”

Bruce felt his head spinning; he? Causing pain to Clark? His angel? He gulped and rubbed his forehead. Clark was watching him begging with his beautiful eyes; craving to be punished, to be redeemed.

But Bruce couldn’t. He closed the box and immediately saw Clark regaining his healthy color, the sweat drops vanishing. But Superman’s sadness was overwhelming.

“Why?” he pleaded. “I deserve that…you have every right to do that…”

“You were under a powerful effect, spells and pheromons…it wasn’t your fault.”

Bruce gave him the box, snapped his head to the other side and then after a few seconds he looked again at him.

“Is there anything else you wanted?” he said cold as ice. “Alfred and the boys wait for me.”

Clark bit his lips. He could sense the coldness inside Bruce; the ice. He had done that. He who promised Bruce that would heal the wounds…

“Darkseid didn’t die and he could attack again wanting revenge” he fixed his eyes on Bruce: he could imagine whom the New God would want to punish. “And there might be other dangers coming from the planet and outside. So we must be in constant vigilance.”

Bruce crooked his lips and snorted.

“I thought we were.”

“The Avengers are not enough. My failure to keep my senses showed to me that we need to cover each other constantly. All in all, I am forming a team with heroes who fight for justice. The Justice League of America: Diana and Flash have already joined.”

Bruce wasn’t impressed.

“Congratulations!” he spat. “Are you going to play rugby for charity with the Avengers once a month?”

Clark sensed the sarcasm but smiled; Bruce was right to be like this with him – he was making him a favor even allowing him to be in front of him.

“That’s a great idea! But it could work only if Batman is the referee. Are you interested?”

Bruce inhaled deeply: he wanted this to end.
“Say what you have in mind.”

“Right. The Justice League will be incomplete without Batman.”

Bruce snorted: his disability, the failures of the past days made what Superman was saying ridiculous.

“No way! I work alone.”

Clark yanked his head.

“You? But you were the one who united twice every hero the planet has…Bruce, we need you.”

“No. Besides you really don’t need me; all of you the superpowered heroes.”

“We do need you. You’re irreplaceable, Bruce. You were the one who figured out Darkseid’s plot; you were the one who discovered Themiscirra and the real Diana; you were the one who organized the perfect plan.”

Bruce remembered Superman’s speech where in front of the planet he revealed Batman’s role in Darkseid’s defeat.

“You had no right” he said dryly stabbing him with his eyes.

Superman still on his knees shook his head.

“I…” he did a lot of bad things but he didn’t know to what Bruce was referring.

“You had no right to speak in front of everyone about Batman’s role.”

Clark lowered his eyes and then raised them again.

“I have done so many bad things that I felt the need to say for once the truth: let the world know what an extraordinary being you are.”

Bruce gritted his teeth.

“I’m not!”

Clark raised his hand to touch him but managed to hold his hand just to an appeasing gesture.

“Bruce, what I revealed to the world was nothing in comparison to what you actually did. You saved me from Darkseid’s cell and…” he gulped feeling his body being hot with the memories “despite what I had done you gave me your body to heal me.”

Bruce laughed.

“I don’t know what you are talking about! They must have had some hallucinogen along with the radiation in your cell. I did not do anything of the like!”

Clark understood: Bruce didn’t want to admit it.

“There was no other way to regain my powers in time to fight. The artificial and the real sun light weren’t enough for me to recover so fast and we both know it. Only your body has such a healing effect on me and you knew it…”
“The artificial light was reinforced” Bruce said dryly “we didn’t do what you said – you imagined that.”

Superman knew that everything was real, not his imagination but he didn’t insist; he didn’t want to upset Bruce. He could sense that the man was exhausted, drained, stressed, cold…

“Still the world had to know who saved them.”

Bruce growled.

“I didn’t!”

His breath was caught in his lungs and Clark got scared.

“Please, Bruce…calm down. I’m sorry…I’m sorry. I am the reason you don’t want to join Justice League…I understand…but Bruce, you believed in me when nobody else did so…we could still be allies…maybe in time you can give me a second chance.”

Bruce yanked his head.

“You have your second chance” he said and Clark’s eyes sparkled with hope. “You escaped Darkseid; you’re alive; you can make your life; be happy, real happy. The real Princess is more beautiful than Ivy” Clark frowned disappointed. “She is charming.”

Clark rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“I talked with Diana.”

Bruce felt his heart sinking a second before he made the annoying muscle shut up.

“I apologized to her though it was quite awkward trying to apologize to someone for being in a relationship with someone impersonating her… Eventually, we talked about Justice League: she will remain to our world as Themyscirra’s ambassador and protecting justice. And then” he inhaled – oh, it was like the old days when they discussed about things! “We talked about Batman…she thinks very highly of you.”

Bruce understood his attempt to deny the chance.

“And there’s always Lois who loves you. Go make kids; claim the things you deserve…Be happy.”

Clark locked eyes with Bruce.

“I tasted happiness once…Only with you I can be happy but they ruined it for us…I failed to fight for your happiness. I failed to protect you for me…I know that what I did to you is too hard to be healed…But I can’t be happy with anyone else: and I deserve to be miserable for not having the power to fight the effect Ivy and Bagdana set on me.”

Bruce pressed his lips.

“You saw that we can’t be happy together; it was an illusion; a big mistake. And now, you are once again misguided and blinded by your guilt…but soon you will realize that your happiness isn’t with me.”

“You are right to be disgusted; to kick me away… and you’re too kind to me. But no, there’s nobody else for me: we, Kryptonians, have only one mate for our entire life: for me, that mate is you; my lucky Kryptonite. So I’ll wait forever; I’ll be the Earth to your sun; your satellite…Depending on
your warmth, your light, your existence to live. I’ll fight all my life to prove that…Oh! Rao! Why I did those things! I’ll fight to prove that I’m worthy of your forgiveness and maybe I’ll manage to heal the wounds I made.”

His eyes were locked with Bruce’s but the human kept his eyes cold.

“I don’t want you to do any of these” Bruce said. “I just want you to leave me alone and never bother me again: can you respect at least that?”

Clark gulped; he nodded.

“I understand; you’re right…I’m sorry. I have no right to be in front of you” he pulled out of his suit something and gave it to Bruce; it was the case from black platinum he had made for the Black Butterfly. “It was made for you – please, take it.”

Bruce shook his head.

“No.”

Clark got up and grinned to Bruce though his eyes were wet.

“You’ll walk again, Bruce” he said. “Please, let your loved ones make you smile more…I broke your heart and I turned it into ice…I will always hate myself for this. I wish I was the one who was killed to save you from Darkseid. But you, Star, you shouldn’t suffer anymore…” he shook his head and huffed remembering how cruel he was calling Ivy ‘Star’; he was sure that Bruce remembered the same thing. “There is only one star for me and even if you don’t want to see me again…your existence in this world will be the sun for me; the star that will guide me…” he smiled. “Thank you for existing, Star.”

He turned to live but stopped and looked again at Bruce.

“If you ever need something from me do not hesitate” he gulped; it was so hard to part again from Bruce but he had to respect his Star’s wish. “Goodbye.”

Bruce watched him taking off with blank, emotionless eyes but when the beloved spot was lost from that patch of sky he lowered his eyes to stare at his clenched fists: the late afternoon suddenly darkened; the approaching night seemed like threat. His eyes stung and burnt; his throat felt filled with thorns but he found out that he couldn’t cry… He shouldn’t cry: he did the right thing.

Hero looked at him sad and meowed.

“I got the impression that you want to punish yourself, not him.”

Bruce raised his eyes to see Selina walking towards him.

“How long are you here?”

“Enough to see him leaving…He’s got quite the nerve to come here…after everything he did.”

Bruce licked his lips.

“He came to thank me and apologize.”

She leaned her waist on the fence.

“As if this is enough…” she stared at her friend’s pale face and sighed “but you still love him and I
know that every time you see him leaving your heart bleeds all over again.”

“No, that’s not truth.”

Selina smiled.

“I’m your Selina, remember? You can’t fool me…This bastard is your first and only love.”

Bruce yanked his head backwards.

“That kind of love isn’t for me…there is no place in me for that kind of love.”

Selina squatted and looked him in the eyes.

“But you are pure love, sweetie…”

“I’m not, Sel.”

She snorted.

“You love so much that you don’t hesitate to sacrifice yourself.”

Bruce frowned.

“You gave yourself to the demon to save my life” she said “you thought that I wouldn’t figure out? You did it knowing what the demon would do to you. You shouldn’t, Bruce!”

He took her hands and she noticed how cold they were; he locked his eyes with hers.

“Between losing you and having someone use me once again it was a very easy choice…”

Selina shook her head.

“Don’t say that to me. I know how much you suffered every time…and how dreadful it is for you each time…each time is like the first…You did it once to save me in Dolcetto’s storage. You shouldn’t have done it again.”

“I wouldn’t lose you, Sel…I’ve lost enough people…I couldn’t live without you. What happened with Bagdana passed like the rain over a rock but if I had lost you…” he closed his eyes unable to continue.

Selina hugged him.

“You deserve to be happy, Bruce.”

“I am. I have all of you around me.”

“I mean the ultimate happy you shared with him…you can punish him and then begin all over again.”

Bruce pursed his lips.

“I don’t think that I was ever meant for this kind of happiness and letting myself get into this led to disaster: Clark almost died because I loved him” he shook his head. “I won’t let myself ever again be carried away from this kind of love… Besides there are things I have to do and this…I had enough of this for many lifetimes – I don’t want it anymore.”
Selina caressed her friend’s hair.

“There is always hope, Bruce; you gave hope to all of us…so there is hope for your happiness too” he kissed his cheek.

“The dinner is ready!” Tony’s voice reached them before he reached them huffing and puffing from running.

He crouched and patted Bruce’s back while Selina took Hero in her hands.

“She tries to monopolize you, littl’ guy: I feel neglected, I’m officially jealous - oh! I mentioned that I’m starved? And Alfred had prepared a delicious dinner that we shouldn’t let waiting - those little rascals are going to eat everything!”

They took the path back to the facilities. Bruce turned his head and gazed at the sky where Clark had vanished; in his ears echoed that song he had heard in Thasos about the lover that was left alone...

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