Stiffen the Sinews (Summon Up the Blood)

by Whisky (whiskyrunner)

Summary

There are only men in the pit, and John’s not strong enough to protect himself forever. But Bane is strong enough for both of them.

Notes

This is not the happiest of stories. It contains imprisonment, abuse, and noncon (by Bane and others), as well as references to child abuse. You have been warned!

Credit for the title goes to geekbymnight and Shakespeare.
Chapter 1

When John wakes, he's surprised to find a blanket over him. He's been shivering his way through each night, too proud to curl up next to his protector for warmth. The blanket is old and worn and it smells musty, but he's cocooned himself within it and it holds body heat better than his clothes alone.

He brings his hands closer to his face, curled up in a tight fetal ball, and blows warm air over them. He's sore, as usual, and his inner thighs feel uncomfortably slick, but even that is something he's beginning to adjust to. The light is still dim and murky; few bodies are stirring beyond the iron bars of the cell. If he can move past his discomforts and go back to sleep, he might get another couple hours of peace before Bane rouses him.

Then he realizes Bane is already awake. He raises his head and squints in the dark, trying to work out what his—guardian—is doing. Bane is crouched at the far end of the cell, next to the adjacent wall of bars. That cell is closed off from the inside by a wall of dark curtains, shielding its contents; it has been since John got here. He always assumed it held supplies of some sort, probably medical—only the doctor has keys to that cell—but now, at Bane's side, the curtain twitches.

Bane speaks softly in some other language, maybe Arabic. There's a quiet reply. John soon stops straining to hear: the rest of the conversation is carried out in this other language, indecipherable to him.

He's surprised. He's been here for two weeks, judging by the marks he's left with a flinty piece of stone on the wall, and he never knew they had a neighbour. The man next-door must be very quiet during the day.

He's curious only until men start rousing themselves outside, and Bane leaves the bars and goes back to bed; then John says, “Who's in the other cell?”

Bane hesitates, and it occurs to John that Bane didn't know he was awake, or he might have cut his hushed conversation short sooner.

“No one of concern,” Bane says finally, “to you.”

John considers this, decides the knowledge won't help him, then rolls over and decides to sleep for as long as Bane will let him.

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John can't remember how he got into the pit. He remembers this: Waking up with a throbbing headache and a dry tongue, sprawled on a rock floor, hands tied in front of him; suddenly conscious that about a dozen men are peering down at him. Some are kneeling at his sides, fingering his clothes with open curiosity. Above them, a hazy circle of blue sky floats into view.

John flinches away from their hands and eyes. Seeing that he's awake, a couple of them try speaking to him, but he shakes his head until one particularly hulking, dark man says, “English?”

John nods and tries to sit up. Half a dozen hands press him back down. He jerks away angrily, then nearly swoons when nausea makes his surroundings whirl around him. A few men chuckle
“English,” he affirms, sinking weakly back down. He swallows; his saliva is tacky. “Where am I?”

The man—dark hair, cunning dark eyes—tries to pull him upright. “Come.”

“What? Why?” John says, resisting, and the other men protest, too. One of them even pulls a sort of primitive blade out from under his cloak, getting to his feet, a challenge which the dark-eyed man meets with a brief, laconic glance. He utters something that’s probably meant to be a warning, but two other men stand up on either side of the armed man, and they look angry, too.

A smaller man is beckoned to the dark one's side, and sent forward, where a fist-fight breaks out. Other men get up to look on with bored apathy, and while the rest are watching, an older man brings a little flask to John's lips. John resists, until he realizes it's water—slightly gritty, but cool water—and he drinks gratefully.

“Thank you,” he says, and the old man's face creases in a smile. He says something John doesn't understand, trying to slide a hand under John's shirt. John rebuffs him gently but firmly, thinking this a mistake at first, and then he hears a new voice:

“He expects repayment for the water.”

Grateful just to hear another English voice, John twists around. The speaker is watching from a short distance away. He wears a hood, and some sort of muslin shroud conceals most of his face, but his grey eyes are visible and glittering with amusement.

The older man withdraws abruptly, hissing at the newcomer. The fist-fight stops.

“You were smart not to go with the big one,” the hooded man says, ignoring all the others, who are watching his and John's exchange with a rapt air. He approaches, pulling out a blade of his own, and up close he's nearly as big as the dark-eyed one. John shrinks away, but all the man does when he stoops down at John's side is slash the ropes binding his wrists together. John bites his lip and rubs his hands carefully. The man's eyes skate swiftly up and down his body, not in the salacious way the old man's had. “He would not have treated you well.”

John senses he has a friend. He hopes he's found one, in this grim unsettling place. He tries to ask, “Why are they all looking at me ...” but can't say “like that”. His companion seems to understand.

“They all desire you,” he says matter-of-factly.

“Why?” John choked out.

“Because you are young,” the stranger says. “Because you are something new. There are no women here, so men like you must suffice.”

John’s head whirls and throbs. He has to fight not to let his panic suffocate him. “Where's ... here?”

“Home.”

It occurs to John, slowly, how quiet the place has become. The other men, even the hulking dark-eyed man, are all watching the hooded one with what looks like a mixture of wariness and hatred and, in the dark one's case, disgust. Stepping forward, the dark one barks a sentence in some harsh-sounding language.
John's companion makes some reply, then stands up and helps John to his feet. John has to hang onto him for an extra moment before he's steady, while the other man spits scornfully on the ground.

“What did he say?” John asks.

“He asked if I intend to claim you right here and now.” The stranger pockets his blade. “I reminded him I have never taken a bedslave and I don't mean to now. He thinks I'm lying, to avoid a fight with him. Which is good, for you,” he adds. “He won't take you just yet, not if I thinks I am interested, nor will anyone else.”

“And what happens when he decides you don't want to fight him after all?” John asks uneasily.

Grey eyes crinkle at the corners in a smile. “That will be a bad day for you, small one.”

“I'm not supposed to be here,” John blurts out. “I'm not—”

The hooded man shrugs. “What does it matter down here? There's no escape for you, or any of us.”

He starts to walk away. Desperately, John says, “Aren't you going to help me?”

“My help won't change your fate,” the man says, careless. “It's better that you learn that now.”

*

The prison is circular. Barred cells line the stone walls. Men roam freely—there is, after all, nowhere to go.

When night falls, and the ring of sky above them goes black, John lies down on his coat on the bare floor against a wall and tries to relax without falling asleep. He can hear the muted sounds of garbled screams and flesh hitting flesh.

That's when they come for him. Hands sliding over his body, forcing fingers into his mouth. He thrashes, and finds himself shoved onto his back and pinned there. He can't count how many there are. He can hear their feverish panting. Their palms are sweaty where they touch him, tugging at his clothes. A couple hands make their way down the front of his pants, groping hard enough to make his eyes water; he bites down on the fingers in his mouth and gets his head slammed against the rock for his troubles.

It lasts maybe a minute, though it feels like an age—there's a shout in the dark, a true snarl of a voice that makes John's blood run cold. His attackers' hands slide away. A second barked command, and they slink back into the shadows where they came from.

Silence falls temporarily over the prison. John dry-heaves a couple times, trying to get rid of the taste of sweat and dirt on his tongue, and pulls his clothes back into place with shaking hands. Then he picks up his coat and abandons that patch of floor. He makes his way along the stone wall until he can find the narrowest crevice, and he wedges himself into it to wait until morning.

*

His second day in the pit is a haze of fear and alertness that leaves him exhausted. He catalogues as much information as he can. One of the first things he learns is that there are no guards here, which strikes him as strange, since he'd thought it was a guard who saved him in the night.
Nobody touches him, although he can feel how high tensions are whenever other men are close. Some offer him food or drink; he declines each time, though his stomach cramps and his throat burns. He returns to his crevice at night, and no one approaches him there.

The next day, emboldened by his temporary immunity, he decides to make his way down to the water basin in the middle of the pit. Men watch him go by, not moving to stop him. He travels the spiral path all the way down until he can stoop down next to the pit of muddy water and examine it closely, trying to decide if it would be okay to drink. Probably not, but he’s never been this thirsty in his life.

There’s one other man there at the edge of the water, soaking some clothes and wringing them out by hand. His appearance is a surprise to John—he hasn't noticed this man among the others, all the time he’s been watching. This man is boyish and slight. He has longer hair than the rest, and his eyes are lined with what looks like kohl. He smiles when he sees John looking, which John returns uneasily, noting that the man has no teeth.

He finally decides to just go for it, cholera be damned, and scoops some water into his cupped palms, when the other man waves frantically at him to get his attention. John looks up. The man starts to say something, stops, then mimes drinking the water the same way as John is about to, and does a pretty good impression of puking.

John laughs, letting the water run out of his hands, and wipes his palms on his jeans. It's somehow deeply refreshing just to see a friendly face. He points to the clear plastic bottle of water resting next to the man. “Can I get some of that, then?”

The man's smile falters. Verifying that John is pointing to the water, he at last reluctantly picks it up and holds it out. John smiles back, reaches to take it.

“Don't take that,” a low voice warns.

John startles, and twists to see the man with the hood standing behind him. How did he get there so silently? John's friend with the kohl quickly drops the bottle, lowers his eyes and goes back to washing clothes. The hooded man says something to him, briefly, and the man hunches over even more, thoroughly abased.

To John, the man says, “They call this man Aisha. A woman's name. If you drink his befouled water, you become like him. No one may touch him unless they are raping or beating him; if a man here wants sex, he must obey. He is the lowest caste of prisoner here.”

John takes his hand away from the bottled water quickly. “Isn't that what they're going to do to me anyway?” he asks, trying to sound annoyed rather than afraid. The hooded man tips his head to one side.

“Many of them want you for a wife. Then you become like him; but only your husband may have you, or say who else has the right.”

“Great,” John says. It's getting harder to swallow his fear and pretend he's aloof. “Anything else I should know?”

The man's grey eyes smile. “Don't drink this water.”

“I got that.” John gets to his feet. “What's your name?”

“I have none,” the man says. He looks aside, disinterested. “The men here call me Bane.”
“Okay, well, Bane,” John says, “how do I not become anyone's bitch?”

“Best them in combat.” Bane's eyes smile again; he looks John up and down. “If you are unable, better to have a husband to protect you.”

John tries to picture himself beating the dark-eyed man in a fight and can't. He's not even a cop; he was plucked right out of the academy. All the experience he has in fighting was gained as an orphan kid on the streets of Gotham, and not for anything like this. He's a very long way from the small-time crack dealers in Gotham. In this hellish place, men have only one outlet, and that's each other. They'll fight tooth and claw for the right to his body, and pass him around like a party favour afterward.

He sinks to his knees again, not knowing what to say. He wants to curl up in a ball, to hide himself away from everyone's eyes, but there is no place to hide here.

Above him, the man called Bane sighs. He hunkers down and pulls a bottle of water out of his clothes. “Drink,” he says.

John falls on the water desperately. It tastes better than anything to have ever passed his lips. His aching, parched throat relaxes as he wets it. He doesn't even care that he's gulping it, instead of sipping.

When he's drained the bottle, Bane takes it back wordlessly.

“Thanks,” John says. Only now does his wariness return. “I thought you weren't going to help me.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Am I supposed to repay you for that?”

“You will,” Bane says, eyes crinkling. “What's your name?”

John swallows; his throat eases the way. “John Blake.”

“John Blake.” Bane practically purrs it. “Can you fight, John Blake?”

“Not against those guys.”

“Then,” Bane says, standing, “I wish you luck.”

What a liar, John thinks, feeling slightly let down, as Bane walks away. He's not helpful at all.

*  
It happens the next evening, when the light is low.

Amir, the dark-eyed one, has timed it well. The water from the day before took the edge off John's thirst, but his mouth is dry and parched again, and he's gone days with no food or sleep now. He's weak and tired. The fact that Amir comes for him is not a surprise. The manner in which he does it is.

John is just slinking away to his crevice when the bigger man catches him by the hair and drags him into the open, where plenty of men are around to see. He throws John to his knees in front of him and points commandingly at his crotch.
John leans away, weak but too proud to give over so easily, especially in sight of so many other men. Amir scowls and grabs him by the chin, trying to force his thumb into John's mouth.

“Open,” he demands. John shows his teeth angrily. He's not going to roll over and let another man fuck his mouth without a battle.

He gets one. Amir drags him to his feet and backhands him hard enough to send him spilling to the ground again. He doesn't even give John time to submit (not that he would) before laying into him viciously.

The surrounding men watch and cheer as John is brutally beaten with fists and feet. They form an impenetrable wall, kicking John scornfully back toward his attacker when he tumbles up against their legs. Amir pursues him everywhere, kicking him in the ribs, in the back, striking him over and over. He means to thrash John into submission, and he's not going to stop until he's satisfied.

Eventually alarm breaks through the fog in John's brain, and he starts to panic. What if this doesn't stop until he's dead? Which alternative is actually better? He only knows which one produces the most immediate fear.

“Stop,” he croaks, trying to shield his face with his arms.

Amir throws him onto his back and straddles his chest. He punches John in the face systematically, taking his time about it. John tries to lash out at him, but is swiftly blinded by his own blood. Amir's sweat drips onto his face. He's enjoying this. John feels his nose break, hears the crunch of cartilage. He tastes blood; his mouth is bleeding.

He goes limp. He can't win.

Amir is satisfied by this. He pulls John over onto his belly, hauls him onto his knees and yanks his pants down. John clenches his hands into shaking fists, buries his face in his arms. The men are cheering. They're all here to witness this, his terrible defeat. Maybe they'll all take a turn and then kill him afterward. He's not even supposed to be here; this is punishment for a crime he didn't even commit—

Amir is just mounting him when John hears a new voice, a sharp, rasping bark of a voice. Amir moves away. The men are going quiet. John lifts his head blearily and sees another man there—not wearing a muslin mask now, and difficult to place for a moment. The grey eyes are familiar, and so is the voice, but the face— This man could nearly be called handsome, but his lips are bisected diagonally by a long gash that twists his mouth mockingly and gives him a brutish appearance instead. For a second John is more afraid of him than Amir.

Amir says something, and Bane barks back. For the first time, unmuffled by a shroud, John recognizes the growling voice that had saved him on his first night.

After a tense pause, Amir steps aside, waves at John and says something that sounds appeasing. Bane moves forward. When he's close to John, Amir lunges at his unprotected back.

Bane whirls around, grabs his outstretched arm, and in a swift economy of movement he breaks Amir's arm and sends him hurtling into the mob of onlookers. The other man's howl of pain is terrible. A few of his friends start forward, but Bane has only to fix them in a cold glare to freeze them in place.

He turns back to John, offers him a hand. John coughs, reaching clumsily to try and pull his jeans up, and spits out a mouthful of blood.

“So much for not helping me,” he rasps.
Bane stops him when he tries to rise from a kneeling position. “Your opinion may change in a moment,” he says.

He’s not even winded. He works one-handed at his own pants, quickly, and when John grasps his meaning he tries to pull away.

“I’m not,” he says weakly, his eyes stinging with something apart from blood and sweat, “fuck you, I’m not—”

A hand tightens in his hair.

“Suck. This will go better for you if you do.”

At eye level Bane's swelling cock is huge. Any dick must seem huge when you're about to put it in your mouth, John thinks distantly. He screws up his eyes and lurches forward, putting his mouth on it. It throbs, blood-hot, on his tongue, and he nearly gags.

The crowd of men might be totally silent or yelling; John can't hear anything over the pounding of blood in his ears. They might even be gone entirely. He wants desperately for this to be over, and can only think that maybe, if he keeps doing this, it will be. He sucks inexactly, surprised to find his mouth producing saliva. Let this be over soon, he thinks, a mantra. Let this be over soon. Let this be—

Bane, breathing raggedly above him, grabs John's arm, makes him offer a hand. He curls John's hand into a loose fist with two fingers outstretched, tries to force them into John's mouth alongside his prick. John splutters and backs off, shaking his head.

“Open yourself for me,” Bane says. His voice is low and grating, almost bestial.

“No,” John chokes.

Bane makes an impatient sound and shoves him back onto all fours. Shaking, John notes that the other men are still there, still watching, rapt, while Bane positions himself.

“Stubborn,” Bane growls behind him. Then he puts the head of his cock at John's hole and pushes in.

John screams. It's involuntary, his whole body rebelling as Bane's cock splits him open. It is big. Big and too much of an intrusion. The friction is unbearable. John drops onto his elbows, unable to hold himself up, and puts his head in his arms again so he won't be blinded by his tears and blood and sweat as Bane forces every inch inside him. He feels dangerously lightheaded by the time Bane's hips are resting flush against his ass. Then Bane takes him by the hips, holds him in place as he slides back out, making John cry out again. He's never felt so powerless.

After the first few shaky thrusts, Bane stops being careful with him and sets a quick, savage pace. He grunts softly as he slams in, forcing himself as far inside John as he'll go. Something tears deep inside and blood helps slick the way for him. Every drag of his cock past the tear is like a shard of glass biting into John, a sensation he doesn't know what to do with any more than the rest of it. He grinds his teeth until he thinks they'll break, muffling his groans and sobs; and Bane, too, is quiet, at odds with the awful violence he's wreaking upon John.

Just when John thinks his body has had as much as it can stand, Bane leans down against his back and quickens his pace. John knows what's coming, and his mind rebels briefly in response, but all his body can do is fling an arm out feebly. Bane catches his wrist, twisting and pinning it to the ground, and he tenses and comes with a snarling, animal sound. He spends himself in hot spurts.
inside John—*claiming him*—and there's nothing John can do about it.

When he pulls out, John feels a thin trickle of liquid run down his inner thigh. He doesn't look to see if it's blood or come. He just collapses against the rock. He feels wrung out like a sponge, exposed and empty, like he's been squeezed in a giant fist and drained of every drop of strength left in his body.

Bane shouts something at the throng of men, who are presumably still standing there, staring. John can sense them dispersing at the very fringes of his senses. Rough hands tug his jeans up and his shirt down, and when he doesn't move, Bane lifts him bodily in his arms. This is when John finally blacks out.

*  
He blinks and finds himself lying on a cot in a cell, shivering uncontrollably. He rolls onto his side clumsily. His teeth chatter with every wave of shivers.

Bane is sitting on the edge of the cot, watching him.

“I—” John tries to say, but his voice cracks and fails, his throat too raw to produce words. How long had he been screaming?

“You belong to me,” Bane says. His voice is still a rasp. “No one else may touch you. Do you understand?”

John nods; he can still do that. Yesterday the thought of belonging to Bane opposed to Amir might have given some modicum of comfort, but not anymore. He can see why the other prisoners regard Bane with fear and hatred. The blunt strength in the tips of his fingers is unreal; the speed with which he'd incapacitated Amir inhuman.

Bane holds out a bottle of water. John hesitates for a long moment before taking it. Dried blood itches and flakes off his face.

When he's finished half the bottle—he's afraid he'll throw up if he has any more—Bane carefully wets a dirty, threadbare cloth with a bit of water and wipes John's face for him. He's not tender, but he isn't purposefully rough, either. John's nose feels hot; it throbs nauseatingly. He winces when the cloth comes near it.

“I set it while you were asleep,” Bane says. “You can see the doctor if you like, though I expect he's passed out by now.”

John shakes his head. He wants to confine this shame to as few people as possible.

When Bane reaches for John's pants, John gives a full-body flinch. He can't help it. It's difficult to read Bane's scarred face.

“I wouldn't have torn you,” he says, “if you'd only relaxed.”

A whisper is the best John can do. “You relax when someone's raping you.”

The word's never sounded so ugly and sharp but he has to say it, so they both know exactly where they stand. Bane's eyes flicker.

Finally, after a long, silent staring match, Bane stands.
“Sleep,” he says. “I'll find food for you, but sleep first and heal. You're safe here.”

Funny. John's never felt less safe in his life.

*  
Bane's cell isn't what John expected. After three nights of wedging himself into a stone cranny to await dawn, it's somewhat of a surprise to find actual furniture in here. Bane has a cot with a pillow and a couple blankets—wide enough for them both, but after that first night, John starts sleeping on his coat on the floor. There's a table in the corner against the front bars of the cell, and a wooden chair. In the back corner there's a deep pit that serves as a private latrine, which is preferable to the communal one.

Most surprising of all is Bane's collection of books. They're arranged in several stacks on the table, from children's picture books to thousand-page tomes. There's a King James Bible and what John guesses is a Koran. The languages range from English to French to Russian to symbols John can't even guess at. Bane has four of the seven Harry Potter books, but they all look to be written in Arabic.

John comments on this eventually. He tries the first day not to look at or speak to Bane, but he can't stand the other man's silence for long. Silence gives John too much opportunity to think about what's been done to him. So he asks.

“I know every language spoken in the pit,” Bane says simply.

That must mean there are other English speakers here. John wants to find them, to give himself someone else to talk to, but the thought of leaving Bane's cell has become terrifying.

There are limits to Bane's English, he learns—vast gaps in his knowledge. Bane knows everything about how the prison works, but almost nothing of the outside world. John realizes this when he's telling Bane—stupid, nervous chatter to fill in that intolerable silence, to which Bane listens and says nothing in return—that he never read the Harry Potter books, but he did see some of the early movies, when the priest at the orphanage organized some lame little “fun night”, and—

Bane interrupts, unexpectedly. “I don't know that word.”

“What word?”

Bane reclines on his cot, arms folded behind his head. His eyes are half-lidded; the shroud covers most of his face, as usual. “Movies.”

“Oh,” John says. His brain turn momentarily to static, thrown off. He didn't think Bane was even listening to him. “Uh—video? Films?”

“I've heard of that,” Bane says, looking mildly intrigued now. “The pictures truly move?”

“Oh, yeah.” John might smile if he could remember how. “Jeez—how long have you been down here? It's not exactly a new concept.”

“A very long time,” says Bane.

“What did you do?”

Bane's eyes flash. “Don't ever ask a man what his crime is,” he warns. “It wouldn't be wise for you here.”
“I didn't do what they said I did,” John says, impulsively.

“It doesn't matter,” Bane says. “You're here now.”

Choking anger constricts John's throat momentarily. “And I belong to you.”

“Yes,” Bane says, without feeling. “You belong to me.”

*

It could be worse.

That's what John tells himself.

At least Bane knows English. At least he tolerates John’s constant inane chatter. He doesn't beat him the way Amir did; he has nothing to prove. He knows he's stronger than John. He brings John food and water and new clothes, made of some soft cloth, and he doesn't stare when John changes. John doesn't touch his things, but when he asks if he can borrow a book, Bane digs through his collection and tosses him A Tale of Two Cities. The only time he seems to show any sign of temper is when John, curious about the wall of bars adjacent to the table, sticks a finger through and strokes the dark curtain within. The whole cell is walled off from within by curtain on all sides.

Bane is there in a flash. He moves in total silence, like a cat. He grabs John's wrist and wrenches, pulling him away, up off the chair and onto his feet until John is on tiptoe.

“Do not ever touch that curtain,” Bane says flatly.

“Ohay,” John gasps. “Okay, okay—”

Bane lets him go. John immediately cradles his wrist against his chest, pretty sure it's not sprained, but sore all the same.

“Better to have no sense of curiosity down here,” Bane says, and John understands that Bane is not angry. He was just teaching John a lesson, in his swift, brutal way: Don't go poking around. Despite his roughness, Bane is actually trying to keep John safe.

John hates him anyway.

The door to the cell is open all the time; Bane comes and goes freely. John stays in, but even with the door open and him penned in, nobody enters to bother him. They stare openly through the bars, they make obscene gestures at him and jeer mockingly in their own tongues, but nobody enters; and if they turn to leave and find Bane standing silently behind them, John has the pleasure of watching the colour quickly drain from their faces.

“Everyone is afraid of you here,” John says one night, curled up uncomfortably on his coat.

Bane is quiet for a long time. Long enough to make John think he's said something he shouldn't.

Then, from the cot, Bane says, “Are you afraid of me?”

Resentful, John says, “Yes.”

“You needn't be.”
His throat almost closes again. “You raped me.”

The cot creaks audibly. John curls up tighter, afraid Bane is coming for him, but after a few agonizing seconds of silence, when Bane speaks, his voice is still coming from the cot.

“You don't hear what they say. I do,” he says, flat and unemotional. “They call you proud. You look men in the eyes and pretend to be their equal. Even with me.”

“I'm not—”

“What happened that night was not unplanned,” Bane says. “Amir would have taken you. Then his friends, one by one, and then any man who cared to pay for his turn. They meant to rape you day and night until you had no voice left to scream with, until the pride and anger had been fucked from you, and when they were bored, when you were no longer tight enough to please them, they would have slit your throat.”

“So what you did was to save me,” John says scornfully.

Bane’s eyes flash in the dim light. “Yes, John,” he says sharply. “I saved you. And then I fed you and clothed you, and I gave you time to heal, even though you are mine to do with as I please and I owe you nothing. Your gratitude wouldn't go amiss.”

“Are you going to fuck me again?” John asks.

“Yes,” Bane says bluntly. “I own you.”

He pauses a moment. Then he adds, “It won't be as painful, the second time.”

John rolls over abruptly. “I'm going to sleep.”

Bane mutters something in Arabic. But he lets John sleep. At least there's that.

*

It's only a few days after John moves in with Bane that he sees the first attempted climb.

He hears the shouting first, cheering and yelling and chanting that wakes him from a shivery slumber. Bane is already getting out of bed and going to the door of the cell, and John yawns and stretches and joins him.

“What's happening?” he asks, rubbing at his arms to get the blood flowing. Bane looks down as if just noticing him, eyebrows furrowed, and John makes a conscious effort to stop shivering. He won't be forced to Bane's bed, not for any reason.

Bane turns away and points. “He's nearly at the ledge. Few men make it that far.”

John looks in the same direction everyone else is: up. It takes him a moment to pick out the man climbing the rock face that goes all the way up to that circle of blue sky.

“I didn't know you could climb out,” John says, feeling severely cheated.

Bane just grunts. “Watch.”

The man hauls himself onto a ledge near the top. He stands up, and John sees that he's got a rope harness wrapped around him. The shouts and chants rise to a fever pitch. The man walks to the edge of the rock shelf, sights set on another ledge that looks to be a short jump away. He swings
his arms a couple times and backs up, then bounds forward and leaps.

It's not such a short jump, John realizes when the man misses his mark entirely. He plummets, screaming, until the rope snaps taut and sends him crashing into the rock wall. Stunned, the man is lowered. The watching crowd begins to disperse, grumbling.

Bane turns away. John follows him back into the cell.

“What happens if you get to the top?” he asks, just to make sure there's no catch.

“It doesn't matter,” Bane says. “No one has ever made it.”

“But what if you did?”

“You would leave here a free man,” Bane says simply. “That is the unique torment of this place. Freedom is there, just beyond reach, every day. Unattainable, but the hope drives men mad down here.”

“I want to do it,” John says. Bane shakes his head irritably.

“You can't.”

“Have you ever tried?”

“Once,” Bane replies, “when I was young, and stupid, like you. That was before I had watched men's spines snap as the rope caught them, or seen their skulls dashed against the wall. Men who make that climb are willing to die for their chance to escape, even knowing they have no chance.”

“That guy fell without breaking anything,” John pushes recklessly. “I could try. I haven't been down here that long, I'm still pretty strong. I could—”

Bane turns to him, eyes blazing.

“Enough,” he says. “This is not a discussion. You are forbidden from climbing that wall. Do you understand? Nod your head.”

John nods, smoldering inwardly with anger.

“Good,” Bane says. “Look down, John. If you look at me like that in front of anyone else I'll have to beat you. That's better. See, you do learn.”

*

John remembers that day vividly. It marks the second time Bane fucks him.

He's changing his clothes in the corner that evening, trying to do it as quickly as possible. As soon as the sun starts to set in the sky, the cold creeps into the pit. It seems to get colder every night. John's teeth are chattering as he pulls his shirt on quickly.

“Does it ever get warm in here?” he asks.

“Not at night, no,” Bane says behind him. “Stop dressing. Come here.”

John stops. He turns, slowly, and goes to Bane.

“On the bed,” Bane orders.
Of course. He's given John a few days to heal; now he gets to fuck him all over again. John gets on the bed carefully, numbly. Bane is breathing quickly and lightly next to him, pulling the muslin mask down to reveal the ugly gash over his mouth, then tugging his hood off. John only notices then that he's never seen Bane without the hood. It makes him look astonishingly young, baffling John for a moment until he realizes Bane probably is young, for all that every other prisoner in this place is scared of him. He can't be more than a few years older than John, who is only twenty. He has fair hair.

He sets down a small canister of something next to John. John sits back, unscrews the cap uncertainly and peers at the glistening substance within.

“What is that?” he asks.

“Grease. I bartered for it.” Bane nods toward it. “I can make you ready, or you can do it yourself.”

A sickly weight settles in John's stomach. “I'll do it,” he says, abhoring the thought of Bane's hands on him. The bruises from the first time still haven't faded.

Bane watches as John kneels awkwardly, peels his pants down just a bit, and collects a little grease on his fingertips. He hates the feel of it, sticky and cold. He has to take a few deep breaths before he can actually press a finger just behind his balls, smear a little of it over his hole and finally try to press in. His hand shakes and he thinks about Bane's cock spearing him open.

“Don't take all night,” Bane growls, pacing.

Squeezing his eyes shut, John forces himself to just push his finger in. It still feels horribly like an invasion. He moves his hand awkwardly, trying to spread the grease around. Not enough. He has to withdraw his hand, collect a bit more, and try again. His breath comes shakily in and out.

When Bane finally deems him ready, he scoops a bit of grease and takes his cock in hand to slick it. It's too cold to do anything more than pull their pants down just far enough; John's relieved when Bane doesn't make him remove anything. When Bane settles behind him on the bed, pushing John's shoulderblades so that he's on all fours, something in John quivers and breaks.

"Please don't do this," he says in a small, cracking voice. "Please."

Bane growls. “There are men here who would give anything to be in your position. This is the price you pay for shelter and safety, food and clothing. Should I send you back out there to fend for yourself? There's a line-up of men who would gladly take your place."

“No. I'll stay,” John whispers. He won't let himself cry now. He lowers his head, and gradually feels Bane relax behind him.

“Good.” A rough palm settles at the base of his spine, then lifts away. “You made a good choice.”

It sure doesn't feel like a good choice when he pushes in. But John doesn't scream this time. He's proud of himself for that. Bane is right: it hurts less; but that doesn't make it much more tolerable. Bane is slower, too, not in a hurry to lay his claim on John this time. Every thrust is deep and powerful and John shakes through it, biting his lip until it bleeds so that he doesn't cry out. He's not sure if this is better or worse than the quick, brutal fuck of before.

Just before he finishes, Bane wraps an arm around John's belly as if to hold him up, and John can feel the weight of him on his back. He shudders, and then Bane is coming, inside him again. John wants to buck, to throw him off in revulsion; but he's got no strength, and Bane is pressing them close together with a sort of quiet strength that's impossible to fight against.
For a moment, when he's done, Bane touches his forehead to John's shoulder while he catches his breath. Then he's pulling out, straightening up, leaving an oily slickness between John's legs.

"Sleep in the cot tonight," he says as he's drawing his pants back up. John does the same, painfully. "Warmer."

The thought of lying beside him is nauseating.

"Fuck you," John says weakly, without thinking.

Bane's marred mouth twists angrily, and John knows he's made a mistake.

Before he can shrink away, Bane is on his feet, dragging John by the scruff across the cell and hurling him viciously to the floor. He snatches John's coat up before he returns to the cot.

"Freeze and die for all I care," he snarls, and drops onto his bed.

John curls up on the floor dizzily, the cold from the rock leaching into his muscles and making him ache. He aches all over.

He doesn't get very much sleep that night, but he still manages to dream about making the climb, going home to Gotham, and leaving this pit far, far behind.

*

Every night is colder than the last. After two weeks, the blanket appears.

Bane must have bartered for it. John doesn't ask what he gave up. He doesn't care.

Bane uses him twice a day on average, every night and once in the morning. He uses the grease, so that it doesn't hurt as much as that first time, but John sometimes wonders despairingly if he'll ever find it tolerable. If he seems particularly squirmy or in pain one night, Bane won't fuck him the next morning, but he will make John suck him, which is almost as bad. Bane is demanding, his sexual appetite a seemingly bottomless well. It's a hard slog to get him off, and he expects John to swallow. Sometimes he wants John three or four times in a day, and that's the worst, when there's light outside the cell and men can look in and watch his degradation.

He folds all his shame and humiliation into a tight, hot ball inside him and refuses to open it. He won't cry, either. If he cries, he thinks, he'll be acknowledging that his situation is futile. It will mean he accepts that Bane is his master.

Eventually, the cell becomes too claustrophobic. He follows Bane out one day, and is surprised when Bane says nothing. John follows him around the prison, watches him perform little errands and converse briefly with other men. Being around the other prisoners is terrifying—as far as John knows, they all watched Bane break him that first time—but he finds comfort in the last place he expected it: Bane's presence. When he's lurking in Bane's shadow, the men's eyes slide right over him. Nobody looks John in the eyes or lets their gaze linger. He's invisible.

John wanders away a little bit one day, curious about the cell next to theirs, wondering how close Bane will let him get to it, when he runs into a tall, slightly-built man who regards him curiously. He says something to John in a friendly enough manner, but when he brings a hand up and brushes his knuckles down the side of John's face, John flinches.

The blood drains from the man's face when Bane appears at John's side. He starts to speak,
probably babbling some apology, but Bane cuts him off by wrapping a hand around the man's throat in a casual, almost thoughtful way. Then John gets to watch as the other man's knees almost buckle under him. His eyes bulge, the whites flashing. He seems to be begging, though curiously not fighting. The muslin shroud covering Bane's mouth flutters in and out as he breathes, and John watches, sickly fascinated, as a dark stain spreads over the front of the man's trousers. He starts crying.

John comes back to himself abruptly. “Jesus, let him go!”

Bane blinks, appearing to come out of a trance of his own. He releases the man, who runs away.

“Don't do that,” John says angrily, conscious that he is in no position to make demands. “He pissed his pants, for Christ's sake. No wonder everyone here hates you.”

“They respect me,” Bane corrects, eyes narrowing.

“Because they're terrified of you. What the hell did you do to these people?”

“I earned my name,” Bane says darkly. “And the next time a man touches you, I will kill him.”

_I don't need you_, John wants to say. But that's a lie, so he doesn't.

*

He wakes up early one morning—earlier than Bane—and he knows that, within an hour or so, Bane will wake and want to fuck him. He rolls over and stares at the figure on the cot.

He can't just lie here anymore.

He gets up and leaves the cell, alone. A couple men are milling around in the dim light: they ignore John utterly. He walks across the prison until he finds a man standing at the base of the wall where the rope harness is. He has to repeat his request twice before the man will even look at him. Then the man laughs, shakes his head, holds up a hand.

“Give me the rope,” John repeats stubbornly.

The man just laughs, so John grabs the harness himself and carefully loops it around him. He doesn't care what this man thinks. The men down here are malnourished and old. John is young and strong, fresh out of the police academy. He climbs obstacles like this all the time. Most importantly, he remembers the outside world. He can feel how strong its call is. He finds a good, solid foothold, and starts climbing.

From the ground, at first, the man jeers at him. “You go up, you die!” he says. Then another couple of men trickle over to watch. The higher John gets, the quieter they are. When he glances over his shoulder, a small crowd has formed.

He's halfway up the wall and climbing slowly when his foot slips. He clings to the wall with both hands, arms straining, and scrambles to find another hold. The crowd starts making noise on the ground. Vultures; they want him to fall. Furiously, he pulls himself up a short way and finds a foothold, and he's shocked by the cheer that suddenly breaks out below him. He keeps going, and the noise starts building.

He thinks carefully about every hold. He plans the next couple yards in his head as he goes. And he climbs up the wall like a human gecko, sometimes stretched out uncomfortably, sometimes bunched up and trembling with effort. But he's doing it. The men below cheer him on.
“John!”

One voice cuts through the rest, sharp and commanding. John's nostrils flare; he keeps going, inching his way up the rock face.

“Stop!” Bane orders. “Get down now!”

_Fuck you,_ John thinks savagely. When he glances down, Bane is pacing anxiously below him, staring up, the muslin dragging in and out as he breathes. Nothing could make John turn back right now.

The chanting starts when John hauls himself up onto the ledge. _Few men make it that far,_ he recalls Bane saying, and he feels a sudden rush of pride. He gets shakily to his feet and looks down over the ledge, where a large flock of men has gathered to watch him. Their chanting buoys him up. Only Bane is silent, not pacing anymore, just watching him with burning eyes. If John had had any doubts about making that jump, they're washed away now.

_That's right, asshole. You don't own me up here._

He walks to the edge of the ledge and looks up. The next ledge seems a long way away. He thinks about Bane on the ground, waiting for him to fail, and he musters himself. He backs up, and goes for it.

One hand grazes the ledge. Then he drops like a stone.

The rope tightens around his ribcage and yanks, sending him careening into the wall. Something cracks, and the rope tangles around John, tightening viciously when he comes to a stop, snarled up in the harness and swinging above the men's heads. Pain lances through his whole body; the world spins around him. The men are already beginning to disperse, disappointed.

“No,” he hears Bane snap when the man starts to untether the rope and lower John. “Leave him there. He can come down when he's ready.”

John groans, letting his head fall back. He thinks he might puke.

Bane leaves him there until evening, when the light is starting to go dim. All of John's limbs are numb and bloodless from the rope twisted around them. He feels like a demented piñata. Bane stands under him as another man starts to untie the rope, letting him down slowly.

John whimpers when he's lowered into Bane's arms, realizing only as blood starts to trickle back into his limbs that his right arm is broken. Fuck. Bane knows it, too; he palpates the limb briefly before he starts to cut the ropes away. He gathers John into his arms gently, surprising John.

“Have you learned your lesson?” he asks when the last of the rope falls away. “Or do you still think I talk for the pleasure of hearing my own voice?”

John opens his mouth to speak, and that's when Bane coolly dumps him on the floor. He walks away, leaving John in a miserable puddle of agony, feeling like a fool.

*  

When John can finally walk, he drags himself unsteadily back to Bane's cell. His protector is already lying on the cot, apparently asleep. John moves his blanket around and lies down gingerly, curling himself around his arm.
Between the cold and the pain, he doesn't sleep at all that night. Every now and then he moans softly, holding his arm. He's got ropeburn and a wrenched shoulder but it's the broken limb that aches nauseatingly, eclipsing all other pains.

In the morning Bane rolls out of the cot and looks down at him scornfully.

“Up,” he says.

John struggles to comply. “Why?” he asks wearily. Surely Bane won't fuck him now.

Bane just flicks his head in the direction of the door.

John follows him out, staying close to him. They make their way across the pit to another spacious cell, this one lined with even more furniture than Bane's. John recognizes the prison doctor, slumped against the wall, fast asleep. John's seen him a few times before, usually visiting the curtained room next-door late at night.

Bane crouches and gives the man a shake. The man snorts and slumbers on. Bane backhands him, and he comes awake with a startle, blinking bleary eyes at them both like he's not sure where he is. For the first time, John notices the needles on the floor. The doctor mumbles something.

“Broken arm,” Bane says.

“Eh?”

Bane switches to a different language. He gestures impatiently at John's arm and repeats himself a few times while the doctor just stares uncomprehendingly at them. Finally Bane grabs him by the front of the shirt and hauls him to his feet, snarling into his face.

The doctor shuffles his feet and says something non-committal. Bane lets go of him in disgust and searches his pockets. He holds out a hand and deposits something into the doctor's upturned palm. John leans closer to see what it is: two batteries.

The doctor pockets both. He seems to wake up a bit more, motioning for John to have a seat while he goes through his things. Bane paces the length of the cell, radiating impatience, while the doctor finds a long piece of wood and binder twine, a few strips of cloth.

“Seriously?” John says.

“What did you expect?” Bane snaps. “Do you think you're still in America? I told you what would happen if you climbed that wall. Don't complain now.”

John subsides. It hurts like hell when the doctor splints his arm. He's forced to hold it out in a stiff line, to set it. The next month is going to be really uncomfortable. The doctor goes back to sleep as soon as they leave, and John's arm is still killing him.

“Stay put,” Bane orders when they return to the cell. “I'll be back later.”

“Fine,” John mutters, taking a seat on his blanket in the back corner. There's a dangerous glint in Bane's eye that tells John he should be on his best behaviour for the next few days. He wouldn't go anywhere even if he wanted to.

He wraps the blanket around himself, awkwardly, and slumps miserably against the wall. He wonders where Bane is going, and then reminds himself what Bane said about curiosity down here. He doesn't care what Bane does, anyway, as long as he's leaving John alone.
John sighs and scratches at his nape with his left hand, twisting his head a bit. He nearly jumps out of his skin when, from the corner of his eye, he sees a dark eye watching him from the curtained-off cell.

“Jesus—!”

The eye blinks, and a small hand appears to push the curtain aside more than a crack. John's heart is pounding. He'd totally forgotten there was someone in there. As a face appears between the edge of the curtain and the wall, he realizes with a jolt that the person is a child.

“Do you like the blanket?” the child whispers.


“The blanket,” she—or he?—repeats. “Me and Mama gave you it, but it's a secret.”

“Uh,” John says. He peers a little more closely. The child's head is shaved and it wears a plain, dirt-brown tunic. Boy, he decides. “Yeah ... thank you. It's warm.”

The little boy smiles. “Do you live with my friend?”

“Who's your friend?”

The kid pulls the hood of his tunic over his head and covers his mouth with his collar. Bane. Rapist, killer, friend to little children. John's learning all kinds of new things today.

“Yeah,” John says. “You like him?”

The kid nods vigourously. “He teached me English.”

Not very well, John thinks but doesn't say. He's starting to smile a little bit, for the first time in days.

“And you live in there, with your ... mama?” he asks.

The kid nods again. “Mama's sleeping,” he says. “She sleeps in the day, but sometimes I can't sleep. Do you know who my daddy is?”

“No.”

“He's big and strong and he's going to find Mama and me and kill every man in this place except my friend,” the child says, with firm conviction. “And he's going to take us away and then we won't live in a pit.”

“That sounds nice,” says John.

“I can tell him to not kill you,” the boy adds. “Are you my friend?”

“Yeah,” John says, smiling again. His chapped lips crack a bit. “We're friends. What's your name?”

The boy picks at a little flake of something on the bars. “It's a secret.”

“Your name's a secret?”

“Yeah.” He looks up again, with round blue eyes. “What's your name?”
“I’m John.”

“I like that name.” The boy picks at the bars a bit again. “Mine is Talia.”

Talia... Oh. Oh. The boy isn't a boy at all. John swallows, and his saliva is thick and tacky in his throat.

“That's a pretty name,” he says hoarsely. Talia blinks up at him.

“What's pretty?”

“Pretty is ... you,” John says. “It's nice.”

She smiles suddenly, a wide smile. “You're pretty, too.”

“Thanks.” John smiles back, even though his heart is breaking for this kid, who lives here in this disgusting pit where there is nothing worth describing as pretty, and has never known anything else. What does she have to look forward to? She'll have to be locked up like this forever, or the prisoners will— Christ, this place is so fucked up.

There's a gasp from within the cell. Talia's eyes widen, and then someone is pulling her away, bundling her out of sight. Someone else appears in the gap between wall and curtain, eyes flashing furiously, and John has the curious experience of laying eyes on a woman who could be his twin. Dark hair, dark eyes, full of fire. She says something rapidly in another tongue, maybe talking to Talia. Then, to John:

“Stay away from my child.”

Her accent is heavy and exotic, much more so than Talia's, but John understands her just fine. With a crackle of indignation, he says, “You let her hang out with Bane, but I'm dangerous?”

Her eyes widen when she realizes John knows her secret: that her hidden child is a girl. She presses closer to the bars.

“Bane is a good man,” she says in a low, furious voice. “What he does to you is for your sake. Few would bother.”

“I'll be sure to thank—” John starts bitingly, but stops suddenly. A chill has just shot down his spine. He doesn't dare look up.

With a snarl, Bane grabs him by the shoulder and drags him off the ground, almost throwing him into the opposite wall. He's in John's face at once, breathing hard enough to make the shroud flutter, his eyes sparking with rage. His hand closes tightly around John's unbroken arm and John cowers against the wall, trying to make himself small. For all his big words, he will never stop being terrified of Bane.

“If I see you near those bars again,” Bane rasps, “I will break your other arm, do you understand? Nod.”

John nods quickly. There's a soft, stifled sound from behind the curtains, and he knows Talia is there.

Bane hears it, too. He glares into John's eyes, breathing hard, squeezing until all the blood has stopped flowing to John's arm. They can hear Talia's mother murmuring to her in the next cell.

“I bet she hears you at night,” John whispers impulsively.
Bane lets go of his arm. Then he backhands John hard enough to send him crumpling onto the cot, head ringing. Bane has him by the shirt collar before he's even recovered, yanking him up and leaning down until their faces are almost touching.

“Never talk to them again,” Bane seethes, “or I will kill you.”

Then he's straightening up, leaving John on the cot, bewildered and in pain. Bane drops into his chair and opens a book.

In the next cell, everything is quiet.

*

A couple of things happen over the next week or so.

John learns that the woman in the cell next-door has a name, and it's Nadiya. He doesn't talk to her or Talia again. It pains him, because he knows how it feels to be trapped here and totally alone, but if he lets himself give in and start talking to Talia, Bane will surely find out. He leaves the cell only in short stints now, as if he expects John to strike up a conversation with the inhabitants next door as soon as he's gone. John doesn't. He hardens himself to the plight of Talia and her mother. He sits straight and still and keeps his eyes on his book even as he hears Talia whispering to him through the curtain, John, John.

The other thing is that John makes a friend. He has to leave the cell and go for walks when he doesn't think he can ignore Talia any longer. He's getting braver. He doesn't need Bane nearby anymore: the men still walk past him as though he isn't there. Everyone knows who he is by now and they don't dare touch him or even look at him—except for one. He's an old Frenchman named Renard and he invites John to sit and talk in his cell. Because John is starved for company and English conversation, he obliges, though warily, at first.

Renard has been in the pit for a long time and he doesn't have the same fear of Bane that everyone else does. The first thing he says to John is, “So you're old scarface's wife, eh? He's a ugly son of a bitch, no?”

“Yes,” John says firmly, making the old man laugh.

He's a friendly face and a wealth of knowledge, and he doesn't want to fuck John, which is nice. John learns Nadiya's name from Renard, who naturally knows of her existence.

“Have you met the desert beauty next to your cell yet?” Renard asks. John nods. “Lucky you. Lots of men push their luck trying to get a glimpse of her, just to give themselves something to think about at night. Bane likes to keep her to himself, selfish bastard. Nadiya is her name. It means hope. Ironic, no?”

“What did she ...” John trails off, remembering what Bane said about asking people's crimes. Renard smiles, squinting at him.

“Something bad, no doubt. Just like the rest of us.”

He doesn't seem averse to questions, at least, the way Bane is, so John asks, “How'd Bane get that scar, anyway?”

Renard's thick white eyebrows shoot up. “That is a story your master would not like repeated.”

“Oh,” says John. Of course.
“I have no quarrel with Bane, but a wise man doesn't put his hand in a lion's mouth.” Renard grins slyly. He's missing a few teeth. “You could ask him yourself.”

John shakes his head quickly, and Renard laughs again. John visits him a few more times that week. It's hard to leave his cell and force himself to return to Bane's. Once Bane comes to fetch him, and though John is certain he'll be in trouble, or Renard will be, Bane simply nods to the old man politely, as if thanking him for keeping an eye on his wayward wife.

He doesn't fuck John for two days in a row, and John isn't sure if this is because of his arm or because Bane's thinking of what John said about Talia hearing him. Bane paces instead, incessantly, and he keeps his hands busy playing with pieces of string. John can't see what he's doing, but he catches a glimpse of Bane's handiwork one day and is startled to find that it's lace, or something very similar. Predictably, though, Bane soon puts down the lace and orders John to his cot, and then it's life as usual.

John could almost forget Talia and her mother are there, by the end of the week. Bane fucks him in the day more than usual and less at night, and that means John's too worried about keeping his arm straight and trying to avoid notice from other prisoners to think about whether the kid in the next cell can hear them or not. He grits his teeth and suffers through each ordeal silently, reminded of how much he hates Bane every time the other man finishes inside him and pulls out to leave a trail of come running down the inside of John's thigh. It's humiliating.

They speak to each other almost not at all, that week. John feels as if he's crossed some line, and doesn't know what it is—trying to escape, or discovering Talia. Bane just ignores him, taciturn as always. It's he who breaks the silence at the end of the week, stirring in his cot and saying, “John, come here.”

He'd had John the night before, rougher than usual, and John hasn't slept at all. It's freezing, and his whole lower body is sore on top of his arm. He's too proud to say so, though, and he goes to the cot slowly. He finds, with a mild sense of surprise, that Bane is already holding himself in hand. He'd been jerking off. John's never seen him do that before.

Bane sits up so that John can join him on the bed. His breathing is rapid and the hand that rests on the back of John's neck is warm. John lets Bane push him down onto all fours, a firm pressure. It's early morning, at least; still dark outside the cell. Nearly everyone is still asleep. Even so, for some reason it's now, exhausted and hurt and knowing that Bane won't bother to use more grease when John is still slick from last night, that John suddenly digs in his heels.

“Why don't I just suck you off?” he asks wearily. “Why do we have to fuck?”

“Because I own you,” Bane says in a low rumble, “and I say what we do.”

“My arm hurts.”

“That's not my fault.” Bane releases the back of his neck and tugs John's pants down a short way. John shifts on his knees, closing his eyes.

“You hurt me last night,” he finally admits.

Bane says nothing. He traces John's hole with a finger—John twitches away—and then slides it in, crooking his knuckle to stretch him a bit. John gasps, legs shaking. Bane removes his finger.

“Fold your arm under you,” he says suddenly, guiding John's arm gently. “Like this. There.”

In this new attitude, John is flat on his chest with his ass in the air. He hates it. Bane goes back to
studying him, pushes a thumb into John's hole, and John shudders and screws his eyes shut.

“I can’t,” he gulps. He feels swollen, too tight. Bane rests a hand at the base of his spine.

“Relax,” he growls. “I won't hurt you if you relax.”

Too soon, his thumb is gone and it's replaced by the thick head of his cock, pushing steadily until it breaches John's hole. A strangled cry escapes John and he clenches a hand tight in the blankets. His whole body is tense. His eyes leak.

He's prepared to weather this until it's over—nothing will stop Bane, that's clear—but there's a sudden scuffle from the next cell and a shrill voice cries, “Don't hurt him!”

Bane pulls out so fast it leaves John dizzy. They both pull their pants up, though when John looks, he sees that Talia is behind the curtain still, pressing against the bars. Nadiya's voice is just audible, soothing and hushing and speaking Talia's name, but Talia is crying, fighting her way to the crack between curtain and wall.

“He's my friend!” Her face appears, wet with tears in the dim light, between the bars. “I love him.”

Bane goes to her swiftly, crouching down and saying something in Nadiya's language. His voice is uncharacteristically gentle. John hears his own name a few times, and the word he thinks means cold. He sits up unsteadily, straightening out his clothes. As he watches, Talia pushes Bane away and reaches for him, for John.

“You always hurt him,” she says to Bane in English. “You're making him sad!”

Abruptly John thinks, fuck Bane. He doesn't want to sit here like a polite little domestic victim and say nothing. The kid is upset, and even though that's Bane's fault, it's still not right. John goes over, pushes Bane out of the way and takes one of the hands Talia reaches for him with and clasps it in both of his.

“Hey,” he says. At his back he can sense Bane moving aside, watching fiercely. “Don't be upset, okay?”

Nadiya is watching closely, too, lit by kerosene lamp from within her cell. She hovers protectively but doesn't move to intervene. Talia gazes up at John.

“He's hurting you,” she says.

“No way,” John says. “You remember the secret blanket you and your mom gave me? Well, some nights it's so cold, even that can't keep me warm. So then I lie down on the bed and he warms me up.”

Talia's tears are drying. She wipes at her face. “Really?”

John nods. “You know what, though? I did something really dumb. I fell and hurt my arm. Sometimes he forgets and lies on my arm by accident, and that hurts. But only for a bit.”

Talia's wide blue eyes scrutinize him. “You're always sad.”

“Bane is your friend,” John says firmly. “He's my friend, too.”

She thinks about it. Then she says, “Are you sad because you miss your home? Sometimes Mama's sad because she misses her home.”
John’s throat tightens. He swallows hard and keeps his voice steady. “Yeah, I miss my home.”

Nadiya breaks in then, saying something to Talia. Talia looks up at her, then back at John, pulling her hand back.

“I have to go,” she says. “I’m sorry you hurt your arm, John.”

“That's okay,” John says. “It was my fault.”

Bane pulls him away then, and John falls over and has to catch himself on his good hand. Bane steps past him and has a quick, hushed conversation with Nadiya, from which John can't discern anything at all.

When the curtain is drawn again, Bane looks down at John, who is curled up uncomfortably on his blanket again.

“Why did you say that?” Bane asks.

“Because she's a fucking kid,” John mumbles. He just wants to sleep now. “Her life's fucked-up enough without knowing all this. Are you going to fuck me, or can I sleep?”

“You can sleep,” Bane says. “I’ll wake you later.”

He pauses. Then he says, “She likes you. Did you have children ... before?”

“No.” John pulls the blanket over his head. “I just spent a lot of time with kids.” He doesn't feel like elaborating, and Bane doesn't ask.

Just before John finally goes to sleep, he realizes that he and Bane have something in common—they both care about Talia. They'll share a lie to make her happy. It's a weird feeling.

*

Bane doesn't order John to his bed again. Not until it's so cold at night that there's a sheen of frost over every stone surface in the morning. John initially resists, because all he can think is that it's been days since Bane last fucked him and how much it will hurt to be stretched open again.

“You're cold,” Bane says dryly. “Let me warm you.”

Fucker, John thinks angrily, using his own stupid lie against him. Then he gets up, and Bane says, “Bring your blanket.”

He does. He gets on the bed and Bane arranges the blankets into a rough cocoon. He grunts when John brushes him.

“You're frozen,” he says. “Don't sleep on the floor anymore.”

“Fine,” John says, unable to believe Bane isn't getting on top of him. He huddles under the blankets and waits, breathless, but Bane just rolls over, and is asleep within minutes.

*

Some sort of barrier has crumbled between the occupants of the two cells. Now John gets to see how Bane interacts with them, and it's interesting.
Talia and her mother sleep mostly during the day, to avoid being bothered by other prisoners. At dusk and dawn Nadiya draws back the curtain between them so they can interact freely, and John figures this is how it used to be, before he came along. Men lurk outside Bane's cell more frequently when he's away, probably trying to catch a glimpse of her, before Bane returns and scares them off.

Her cell is lavishly furnished, compared to everyone else's. There's an actual bed with red-and-gold patterned blankets on it, a rug on the floor, and a table for them to eat at. It's deeper than it looks, too, giving them a lot more space than John and Bane have. There's plenty of supplies, but no toys or anything to indicate that a child lives there. Nadiya's father funnels supplies to her, Bane explains, and he doesn't know about Talia.

He talks to Nadiya daily. He sits in the chair and has long conversations with her while Talia plays with crudely-constructed toys on the rug. When Bane is near Nadiya, he touches the shroud over his face repeatedly, like an unconscious tic. He gets quieter and the rasp in his voice is less pronounced. It's an unsettling transformation for John, who's gotten used to Bane the monster.

He himself doesn't interact with Nadiya. There's something intimidating about her cool, imperious demeanour, which thaws only for Bane. She's beautiful, despite, or perhaps because of, their surroundings—a diamond in the rough.

A month after John's arrival, another man is lowered into the pit. He's young, dark-skinned and attractive in a fairly feminine way. His fate is sealed. By nightfall his screams and sobs are echoing around the stone walls as the men take their turns with him. Bane looks out broodingly; John sits against the wall and tries to shut the noises out. In the next cell, Nadiya cradles a sleeping Talia in her lap, covering her ears, her features blank and unreadable. John can't imagine a worse hell to raise a child in. He understands the curtain now: not just to shield them from sight, but to block out sounds.

That could have been me, he thinks distantly, nauseous. His eyes meet Nadiya's for a moment. John looks away first. By the door to the cell, Bane murmurs something in Arabic and turns away.

John tries not to talk to Talia. He doesn't want to care. Bane talks to her, though, and he's just as gentle with her as he is with her mother. He crouches down next to the bars and shows her the picture books from his collection. He's teaching her to read. They read aloud to each other, his voice a soft rumble, hers small and halting. He never rushes her. Time ceases to matter when Bane is with Talia; he has all the patience in the world for her.

"I'm tired of these," she says one evening. Bane only has four children's books.

"Should I tell you a story?" he asks.

"Your stories put bad pictures in my head," she protests. "I want John to tell me a story."

John is already in bed, trying to sleep, bundled up in the blankets. He groans when Bane puts a hand on his shoulder.

"You said I'm not allowed to talk to them," he reminds Bane sarcastically.

"Tell her a story." The edge in his voice that's never there with Talia and her mother is already back.

"I'm not a baby-sitter."

Bane grabs him by the arm and literally drags him out of bed. He leans down to put his face close to John's.
“I have overpowered you again and again,” he says with quiet menace. “And still you fight me. Should I be harder with you, John? Do you think we don't have whips down here? Or will you accept that you are whatever I tell you to be?”

John shoves him off resentfully and walks past him. He can hear Bane's warning growl behind him, but Bane doesn't come after him. John crouches down next to Talia, who's heard nothing of their exchange. Her thumb is in her mouth; her eyes light up.

“Hi,” John says, tamping down his frustration. None of this is Talia's fault, he tells himself. “You want a story, huh?”

“Yes,” she says, removing her thumb.

Nadiya is watching John like a hawk. She murmurs Talia's name and Talia says, “Yes, please.”

“Okay,” John says, shifting around till he's almost comfortable. “Let's see. Have you heard of ... Goldilocks and the Three Bears?”

The thumb goes back in her mouth. She shakes her head.

“Let's start with that one, then.”

When he's done she wants another story, so he tells her Cinderella. She likes that one and wants to hear it again. By the time he's finished, he can't stop yawning, and Nadiya beckons Talia away from the bars.

“Let your friend sleep,” she says in English. To John, she says warily, “Thank you.”

John is finally allowed to crawl back into bed, where Bane is waiting. Curious, the other man says, “Did you make those up?”

“No. They're just kids' stories,” John mumbles. Bane lets him sleep.

Talia wants more “John stories” the next night, pushing away the book Bane hands her. Bane turns to him, but John is already getting out of bed wearily. He doesn't sleep well, lying next to Bane; he's tired. But he dutifully recites Snow White and then Sleeping Beauty before he's relieved of story-telling duty. The next night Talia asks what John's favourite story is, and he tries to think what he liked best when he was a kid.

“I guess The Lion King,” he says.

“Tell me that one.”

“I don't know. It's long.”

“I want The Lion King,” Talia says stubbornly. “I want that one.”

“Tell her,” Bane growls.

John has a headache. He wishes he'd gone with something simpler. He starts talking.

Talia knows what lions are, from pictures, but some of the other animals stump her. John's midway through struggling to describe a hyena when Nadiya wordlessly slides a pad of unmarked paper and a stick of charcoal under the bars. John starts drawing with his left hand, not very well, but enough to give her an idea as he goes along—hyena, wildebeest, meerkat, warthog—and
Talia thrills over his pictures, touching her fingers to them and smudging the lines, so he draws all the characters for her. She’s a captive audience and John starts to get into it, even recites lines from the movie.

By the time he's finished, he’s hoarse and his throat aches. He wants to sleep.

“That was my favourite story,” Talia tells him. She touches the pictures again. “Can I have them?”

“Yeah, sure,” John says, reaching for a bottle of water. In the other cell, Nadiya calls to Talia softly.

“Bye.” Talia reaches her little hand through and strokes John's shoulder before leaving. Nadiya casts John a rare, enigmatic smile, then draws the curtain, blocking the light from their lamps so that John and Bane can sleep.

While John drinks his water, Bane observes him and says, “That was a good story.”


Bane seems surprised. “A film? Of talking lions?”

“It's a cartoon.”

“I don't know that word.”

“How can you not know what a cartoon is?” John says spitefully. “Christ. Everyone knows.”

“I don't,” says Bane.

“It's like ...” John gets up, grabs a picture book and flips it open. He jabs a finger at the illustrations. “Pictures. They put a bunch of pictures together so it looks like they're moving and add voices.”

“How?” Bane asks curiously.

“I don't know!” John tosses the book aside impatiently. “I'm not explaining animation to you. Surely you've seen a cartoon. Don't be an idiot.”

Bane's eyes narrow. “You think we have talking pictures down here to entertain us?”

“I don't mean in here,” John snaps. “I mean out there. When you were a kid.”

“I've always lived here.”

“You did something to get put down here, didn't you?”

“My crime was being born,” Bane says. “My father had died before he could be sentenced, so I was sent in his place.”

“But that's—when do you get out?” John says, genuinely thrown for a moment. “You've been here, what, twenty-five years or so?”

Bane gives him a puzzled look. “Nobody gets out,” he says. “I serve a life sentence, the same as you.”

There's a faint roaring in John's ears.
“What?” he hears himself say.

“Nobody leaves. The only men who come down here are prisoners. Nobody visits, and nobody is taken out.”

“That's—not true,” John stammers out. His knees feel weak; he sinks onto the cot. “Someone has to come down here sometimes.”

“Never,” says Bane. “They lower in the supplies.”

“But I'm not supposed to be here.” Panic swells in John like a rising chorus of screams. Bane says nothing. Frantic, John repeats, “I'm not supposed to be here! Someone was supposed to—to clear my name, come and get me—”

“I doubt that anyone knows you are here,” Bane says, not unkindly.

“I didn't do anything!” John says shakily. “I don't belong here!”

He rises, lurches to the door, but Bane blocks his way. Turning, John attacks the wall. He can't think. Can't breathe. Until now he's been living down here as if at a remove, seeing and experiencing everything through a translucent lens like a soap bubble. He's been living every day in the present, unable to think about what tomorrow will bring, just waiting, waiting for someone to say yes, we made a mistake, John Blake is innocent. Suddenly this place becomes real. The horizon stretches away and John can see the next month, year, decade before him, a life of living with Bane in this awful fucking pit that freezes at night and smells like shit and drains the life out of you. He slams his splinted arm against the wall and cries out, recoiling momentarily.

Bane is behind him, trying to pull him away. “Stop.”

“I have to get out of here!” For the first time John realizes he's crying, sucking in great sobbing breaths and blinking away the tears that stream down his face. He claws at the wall mindlessly; his nails break. Bane seems alarmed by this overt show of emotion. He doesn't know what to do with it.

“You're upset because your arm hurts,” he hazards, finally, and John shouts back:

“I'm upset because I'm stuck here with you!”

That does it. Bane gathers him up in his arms, fighting and struggling, and drags him onto the bed. He holds John down, restraining rather than hurting. John fights him. He writhes and claws and thrashes, and none of it does any good. He will never be stronger than Bane. This is his life now. He is whatever Bane wants him to be.

He goes limp, gasping and shuddering. He tilts his face into the blankets and lets them soak away his tears. Bane sits up and maneuvers them until John is half sprawled across his lap, and John doesn't fight this.

“I don't understand,” Bane says, when a few minutes have passed and John is starting to go numb again. “You have a good life here, compared to most. You are fed and clothed and relatively safe. I don't even rent you to other men. This is the only place I have ever known; I've seen how terrible it can get for a man like you. I've been as kind to you as I know how to be. And in return I get disrespect, and insults, and now your tears. Most men would have beaten you to death by now, but you weep because you belong to me. Why?”

“You think it's kind, what you do?” John gasps out. “Shoving me around and hitting me and—raping me? That's kind?”
“Kinder than the alternatives,” says Bane. He seems puzzled, again. “Somebody here has to have you.”

“But I don't want—”

“You're too ... attractive, to leave alone,” Bane says slowly. “If I don't use you, they will come for you. I can fight two or even three men at a time, but they would mob the cell to reach you. Even men who know they don't have a chance of tasting you will come just to take you away and give you to someone who will make proper use of you, so that they can pleasure themselves to the thought. Have you noticed them outside the cell, waiting like jackals? They haven't heard you crying out for days. I stopped because it upset Talia, but if I don't take you soon, in plain sight, they will lose patience.”

He pauses, then says, “Many are angry that I claimed you. They want you to belong to a man who will sell your favours. They all want you, John. I've been in too many fights to count, over you.”

“Fuck,” John breathes. He can't quite believe what he's hearing. “Why ... why didn't you say?”

“Nadiya said it wouldn't matter,” Bane says quietly. “That I would earn your hatred either way. I don't need you to like me, John. I only need you to believe I'm keeping you safe.”

“And you ... you have to fuck me, to keep me safe?”

“Yes.” He strokes John's head briefly. John feels sick. “The more violent and conspicuous, the better.”

“Don't. I don't want you to.”

“I know.”

“But you will anyway,” John says with a sickening throb of renewed hate. “Because you like it.”

“Yes,” Bane admits quietly. “I enjoy our coupling.”

“I want to go home.” It's the first time John's said it or even let himself think about it. He wants Gotham. He wants the familiar streets and trains and delis and people. Not this place. Not Bane, who communicates in violence and aggression because it's the only language he ever learned.

“I know,” Bane says again. “I'm sorry,” he adds.

John lies there with his head in Bane's lap and says nothing for a long time, just lets his tears seep into Bane's clothing. Bane strokes his hair a bit more. It's already grown longer since John's been here.

Forever. He's going to be here forever.

*

The next eleven months pass more quietly for John than the first one did. He learns more about the prison than he ever expected to.

As in any prison, there are cliques and gangs and rivals. An attack on one man may mean
retribution from twenty more. Bane has no friends, and respects only the older men in the prison—who, John now knows, must have virtually raised him from infancy—but he also has no enemies. All men respect Bane, even Amir, the one who'd tried to claim John first. They hate him, but they respect him. This balance amongst the prisoners is tenuous: when a new man is lowered into the pit, everything is unsettled for a few days while he finds his feet in the prison hierarchy. To some, this hierarchy is all they have.

When the really cold season hits, about a month after John's arrival, relations in the pit thaw. Everyone comes together then to scrape up any piece of wood they have, and construct a bonfire under the circle of night sky. Enmities dissolve for the sake of warmth and company. Only the “women”, like Aisha, are relegated to the sides. When John asks, Bane takes him to the communal bonfire. He lies with his head pillowed in Bane's lap and listens to the men laugh and joke and swap stories, while Bane slowly strokes a hand through John's hair, over and over.

It's a strange culture in the pit. Violence is commonplace to them; they think nothing of it. They talk about rape as other men would discuss the weather. Evil, John realizes, becomes banal when one is surrounded by it.

Talia longs to see the fire up close, when there is one. She's fascinated by it. John ends up begging Bane to go to the doctor and ask for the keys to Nadiya's cell, so that they can let Talia out every now and then. Bane hedges, but when Nadiya says it's okay with her, he gets the keys for them. This sudden vast expansion of Talia's tiny world is initially overwhelming to her, but soon she's running and playing with John just like any child. The men, who think she's a boy, regard her with either indifference or indulgence, and when there's a bonfire, John isn't the only one cautioning her from touching the flames.

“I realize we seem like barbarians to you—I know, I was new here once, too,” Renard says dryly when John asks what makes the prisoners so tolerant of Talia. He expected Bane to have to constantly protect her, even if she is a “boy”. “But even the men here have their limits. They don't harm children.”

“Was everyone this nice to you, when you were a kid?” John asks Bane curiously later. Bane just grunts, and tells him not to ask questions.

Talia very quickly becomes the light in John's dark world. Bane's sexual appetite is ravenous once again. Two times a day is normal, sometimes with an additional blowjob thrown in. He stops fucking John briefly when they run out of grease, but he very quickly procures a much larger quantity. John is always sore, and always hungry, even though Nadiya shares her supplies with them. He can't recall being this hungry since his first days outside the boys' home, on his own. It's an every-day ache, a hollowness in his stomach. When supplies are low before a drop, Bane makes sure everything goes to Nadiya and Talia, so that some days he and John eat nothing at all. Starvation is normal for Bane, and he carries on as usual, but John usually ends up lying down, light-headed, when he can't do anything else. Those days are long.

Most days are miserable, but then there's night. Then there's Talia, awake and alight with happiness, begging John for a story. He tells her everything he knows—The Little Mermaid and The Jungle Book are her favourites; she always makes him go back to those—and when he runs out of movies and fairy tales, he makes something up. On the nights that Bane has the keys, and is able to let Talia out, she settles herself in his or John's lap, sucking on her thumb, listening rapt to whatever tale John spins. When she's feeling more active, she uses Bane as a jungle gym, climbing on his shoulders and giggling when he tumbles her onto the cot. Nadiya scolds her from the other side of the bars, pacing up and down, but Bane never stops her from playing her games. He is her tireless mule, toy, and playmate. She crawls into his lap, touches his face, even pulls away the shroud and traces his scar curiously, and Bane does nothing. When John reaches for that
shroud, he gets his wrist bent back painfully.

One of the best things about having Talia around is the strange truce that Bane and John settle into when she's awake and nearby. Bane doesn't use John or hurt him if he thinks Talia will see or hear. They play, if uncomfortably, at being friends. John has numbed himself to his fate once again, and he forces himself not to think about the morning, when Talia is asleep in the next cell and nothing is between him and Bane—but sometimes when he looks up he finds Nadiya watching him with sympathy in her eyes. She likes Bane, understands why he does what he does, but she still pities John.

He pities her too. Talia may be free to leave the cell and wander, free of harassment, with John and Bane at her sides, but Nadiya is truly a prisoner. Men lurk like hungry wolves outside her cell. If there are too many, Bane won't open the door even to take Talia out.

“Do you think Talia's dad will ever really come for them?” John asks Bane late one night, when Talia is back in her own cell and they've just finished fucking, quietly. He can't sleep. Bane traces his lower lip with a thumb.

“This is what you think about in my bed?”

“I have to think about something.”

Bane grunts. “No. He will never come. Talia has been saying that since she could talk, but Nadiya accepted long ago that her husband doesn't know she's here.”

There goes John's last chance, too. “Oh.”

“Even if he did know, what man would risk his life coming down here?”

“Wouldn't you, for Talia?” John asks.

Bane is quiet for a minute. Then he says, “For either one of them. In a heartbeat.”

*

On an especially freezing night, the last of the wood is dragged out and made into a crackling fire. Bane gets them a good place near the flames, John at his side, with Talia sitting in John's lap. She soon falls asleep.

Bane nudges John. “We should go to bed, as well.”

We should go to bed and fuck, is what he isn't saying. John hunches his shoulders around Talia instinctively.

“A little longer?” he says. “Please. It's cold.”

Bane's eyes narrow. But he says, “Come to bed when you're ready,” and gets up, leaving John there.

“What an excellent mother you will make to his children,” one of the other men says when Bane is gone, and those who know English start snickering.

Another man says contemplatively, “The last babe we had down here was Bane himself. You remember? He was about that size when he got that scar.”
“Little older.” That's Renard, shoving a stick in the pile with his foot and sending a shower of sparks into the air. Talia stirs. “Don't speak of it.”

“I want to hear,” John says recklessly. He looks back to make sure Bane is gone, then says, “Tell me.”

There's a shift in the attitude of the men grouped around the fire. Their attention is arrested. They all want to hear; but John's the only one bold enough to ask. The other man cracks his knuckles, relishing the spotlight.

“Well now,” he says. “I think few of us have any memories of Bane as a boy. Quiet, you know. We made sure he was fed and clothed, gave him blankets for the cold nights. He stayed out of the way. Nobody bothered him—he was just a boy, not worth it.”

The man holds up a finger. “But there was one who thought, he would make a good bed warmer. Raised up to it, you know? He convinced his friends of the same. This boy is small and tight, he said. He will give us no trouble. We can share him. We will get him young and teach him to be docile.”

All the other men around the fire are hushed. A few keep looking over their shoulders for Bane, just in case. This is a campfire story, John thinks, transfixed as the rest of them; something to make them shiver and lie awake at night. In this black pit of murderers, Bane is the boogeyman.

“There were seven of them. They cornered the nameless boy. Their leader, Cyrus, he pulled out a knife and said, Here, boy. You're gonna learn to suck cock today. And the boy said, No. Just like that. No.”

The man leans closer to the fire. “Cyrus flew into a rage. No man said no to him, and now a little boy dared? So his friends held the boy down and Cyrus choked him, hard, so that his voice was never the same after that, and when the boy was half-dead Cyrus took his knife and carved his mouth wide open—” He demonstrates, tracing the line with his thumb. “And he said, Now you say no to me. Now you try to shut your mouth against a cock.”

“You should stop talking,” Renard warns. The man waves a dismissive hand at him, enjoying the attention.

“Of course, that was when we got there. Some men pulled Cyrus off, scared away his friends. Sewed Bane up and saw that they never bothered him again. We liked the boy, you know? But he was different then. He stopped talking for years and years. We did what we could for him.” The man shrugs. “Eventually you have to give up.

“Then—some years later, when he was a little bigger—we woke up one morning and there in the pool at the bottom of the pit was one of Cyrus's friends, face-down and drowned dead. No mark on him. We hauled him out, tossed away the body, said, maybe he slipped and fell in the night. But no. Because a few months later, another morning, there was another one of the seven, unmarked and stone-cold dead, and lying right where you're sitting.” He nods at John.

“That went on for years. Sometimes many months would pass and nothing would happen, and then we would find a body in the morning. Nobody ever saw him do it. It had to be him, though. Who else would have the patience? Must have taken him ten years to kill all seven.

“Cyrus was the last. He knew it, too. He knew the end was coming. He paid some bigger men to be bodyguards. They protected him every night. We knew, though, that his days were numbered. He was older, you see, and Bane was just in prime. And he did it. He took his time, let the man sweat, let the bodyguards grow lazy. No man could touch him in the day—he was too fast to be
surprised, too strong to be overwhelmed—and he owned the night.

“Those two bodyguards were found with their throats slashed wide open. And Cyrus?” The man leans even closer, voice hushed. “Hanging from the very rope we use to try and leave this place. His limbs were all broken, his face purple and swollen, piss and shit running down his pants. And they say ...”

His voice drops to a whisper, so they have to lean closer, too. “They say that when Cyrus begged for his life, as Bane was putting the noose around his neck, he said the first thing he'd ever said in years, the last thing Cyrus would ever hear: *Now say no to me.*”

They're all silent. The fire gutters in a phantom breeze. It strikes John that if someone jumped out of the shadows and yelled “boo” right now, they'd probably all scream like girls.

Renard breaks the silence, shaking his head. “That story should not be retold.”

The man waves a hand again. “What do you worry about? He likes you.”

“Bane doesn't like anyone,” Renard says flatly. “He merely tolerates them.”

He's wrong, John thinks, quietly excusing himself from the group with Talia bundled in his arms. Bane doesn't tolerate Nadiya and Talia. There's no other word for it—he loves them.

When John has taken the keys and returned Talia to her mother, he crawls into the cot. Bane pulls him close, soundlessly, and John goes. He doesn't understand how Bane can do this, knowing what he does now—that Bane was once made helpless under another man, made to hurt and bleed—and his hatred throbs anew. The story gives him no sympathy for Bane. It only confirms what John already knew: that Bane cares nothing for him. The only kindness Bane's got in him is for Talia and her mother. There's nothing left for John at all.

*  
“Are you happy, John?” Bane asks one day.

It comes at the end of a stroll around the pit. Sometimes John is inclined to spend several days in a row holed up in the cell, if the men outside are in a particularly brutish mood, if the screaming at night sounds especially tortured; or worst of all, if someone else's wife has been badly injured or killed. Those are the only occasions, these days, when a man will feel inclined to fight Bane for the right to John's body.

Bane is observant—maybe the most observant man John has ever met, and he worked with cops—and he reads the mood in the pit unerringly. So when tempers are high, and John's courage has flickered low, he'll ask John to join him on an errand. It took John months to realize there is no errand. Bane will usually stop and chat with one of the older men in some other language, but that's all he does. It's just a walk, a short exercise so that John can stretch his legs and move around unmolested. It's a thoughtful gesture, coming from Bane. John supposes it's one of the few nice things Bane can do for him.

On this walk they passed by another man, a hulking brute of a man even bigger than Bane (who is far from the largest prisoner in the pit, but still considerably imposing). Knelt at the man's feet was one of the women, sucking his cock. The “woman”—shirtless, with kohl smeared around his eyes—had a hand thrust into his own pants and was touching himself openly, something the bigger man evidently permitted.

Bane actually stopped, curious, before John pulled him along in embarrassment. Nobody in the pit
seems too shy about other people watching their transgressions, but John still has a sense of shame to cling to. Moreover, he didn't want Bane to think this was standard behaviour, something John should be doing when he's choking himself on Bane's dick.

It seems to have planted a thought in Bane's mind anyway, because now he's asking if John is happy. As if that were at all possible.

“No,” John answers him, finally. “I'm not happy.”

Bane's brow furrows. “Still?”

“I'll never be happy here,” John says tiredly. “Don't you get that? Where I come from, I don't belong to anyone, and I don't have to do anything for anyone else to protect myself ...”

He can see Bane's lack of understanding in his eyes. Bane has never known any place but this pit. It doesn't matter how hard John tries to explain: as far as Bane is concerned, John is here now and he's better off than most other men in the pit. Where he was before is irrelevant. John tries again, anyway.

“I used to have my own place,” he says, “and—all right, there wasn't heat, but I had a space heater, and I always had food, and clean water whenever I wanted it ...”

“You miss your home,” Bane says carefully.

“Yeah, but not just that. I used to have friends, and ... and girlfriends, occasionally ...”

Now Bane's interest is sparked. He understands this need. “Do you want—I could bring you a woman,” he offers. “Aisha would—”

“No,” John says wearily. “Just forget it.”

“You don't pleasure yourself.”

“No, because I don't feel good.”

That seems to leave Bane at a loss. He sits down, picks up some string, untangles it carefully. He ties a little noose. Unties it. John watches him from the cot.

“What would make you feel good?” Bane asks without looking up when he's on his third miniature noose. John can't believe the deftness in those blunt fingers.

“Nothing,” John says dully. He revises, “Not getting fucked by you.”

Bane growls softly. “Not an option.”

“Then I don't know. You can't ask me to like it.”

“Fair enough,” Bane says. They both fall silent again.

*

In the middle of the warm season, when the pool at the bottom of the pit has almost dried up, a net full of chickens is lowered into the pit along with the rest of the monthly supply drop. One man eagerly slashes the netting to get at them, and in another moment the flapping, screeching birds are everywhere. It's almost comical to watch the men try to catch them.
Bane has seen chickens in the pit before and isn't as interested as John is. He watches John chase a particularly fat specimen for a few minutes, then, as soon as it starts to flap past him, he expertly stoops and catches it by the legs in one hand.

“Useless to try and pick them up,” he admonishes John, and then, with neat precision, he snaps the chicken's neck. It bursts into a wild frenzy of flapping before it's still.

John is annoyed with him at first, thinking foolishly that it might have laid eggs for them; but Nadiya, awakened by the commotion, tells him it would need warmth and sunlight for it to start laying, and Bane adds, more sensibly, that they would need to feed it. He sits and starts plucking the bird, and bids John to use the downy feathers to stuff a little cloth doll he's been making for Talia out of an old shirt.

The prison gradually goes quiet again as all the chickens are wrangled and killed. Someone starts a fire. Men start bartering: those with chicken parts to sell are suddenly rich. Bane guts their bird and takes it away; when he returns, the smell of roast chicken makes John's stomach growl like it hasn't in months.

Of course, because Bane is the one with the knife, he gives the lion's share—the upper half—to Nadiya and Talia. John is secretly glad when Nadiya refuses one of the breasts, arguing that Bane's given them plenty. Bane shrugs, and hands it to John.

It tastes better than anything John has ever eaten. The meat is moist, tender and juicy, glistening with fat, nothing like the dried, salted meat that is usually sent down. He tries to savour it, but ends up wolfing it anyway. He eats everything, sucks every last bit of flesh off the bones; when he cracks the bones with his teeth, he finds he can suck the marrow out. When Bane hands him the chicken's heart, he eats that too. The leg is the best, both drumstick and thigh, and he hangs onto the bones afterward, trying to leach every last bit of flavour out of them, until Bane gives him a piece of the back to work on. That's good too—there's plenty of fat on the back, and he feels like a dog worrying a bone, seeking out every small bit of meat and scraping it off with his teeth.

While Bane eats, he watches John. John is aware of his gaze, but he doesn't care. He's lost in a blissful haze, his stomach full for the first time in months. Chicken. It's something that ties him to his former life. It's delicious.

“That was the best meal I've ever had in my life,” he sighs, tossing away the bone when he's finally decided there's absolutely nothing nutritional left on it. He gets up off the floor and flops onto the cot, where Bane is sitting. “Never thought I'd appreciate a chicken so much. Usually I just eat the wings.”

Bane's eyes smile. His shroud is pulled up around his face and John realizes he stopped eating a while ago—because he gave more meat to John.

“I'm glad you enjoyed it,” Bane says.

“How often is there chicken?” John asks. In the back of his mind he wonders what they could sell, just to get one more leg.

“Once or twice a year.” Bane shrugs. “Usually I can get one.”

“Next time get two.”

Bane smiles again and rolls him over onto his stomach. “And what do I say to the other men? That my greedy wife wanted one all for himself?”

“Yeah.” John rolls back over, then grabs Bane's wrist before he can pull his hand away. The
grease from the chicken is all over his fingers. John doesn't even ask before sucking Bane's fingers into his mouth.

Bane's eyes are hooded, all of a sudden. It only takes a few swipes of John's tongue for him to collect the last remaining taste of chicken from Bane's fingertips. He does that to each finger; then, deciding Bane has earned some attention in this vein, he lets go and beckons for the other. Bane gives John his hand soundlessly, and John lowers his eyelashes, making more of a show of it now: sucking two fingers in, grazing the pads with his teeth.

He's never teased Bane like this before, or offered himself—which, he realizes now, is probably how Bane will take this. He's just grateful, and doesn't know how else to say thank you. This is the language he and Bane speak when they're alone together.

Bane pulls his hand away as soon as John has lapped away the grease. His voice is gravel. “Done?”

“Yeah.”

Bane gets up and starts gathering up all the dropped bones. John wonders why, idly, and then thinks: tools. You use what you can get, down here. When Bane has made a tidy pile on the table, he returns to the cot. It squeaks under his weight as he lies down next to John.

It's late afternoon, the time of day when John usually has a nap, and is usually woken up by Bane wanting to fuck him. Bane's aroused now, it's obvious. He pulls John close, and John shuts his eyes and tenses, waiting for it—but all Bane does is press his masked face to John's neck for a moment, breathing deep. Then he lets go.

“Sleep,” he says. And they both do.

* 

“John, you're Ariel!” Talia is virtually bouncing off the walls in their cell. “Bane, you be Prince Eric.”

“I can't sing,” John informs her. She scrambles up into his lap.

“Of course not, Ursula took your voice. But you have to make Bane give you the kiss of true love anyway.”

Bane looks deeply aggrieved by this, even more so than when Talia demanded he play the Scar to her Simba and John started snorting with laughter. John smiles.

“Who are you supposed to be, then?”

“Ursula.” Talia bares her little teeth. “I have your voice. Stop talking.”

“Pretty small for a bad guy,” John says, and flips her onto the cot, tickling her to make her squeal. She thrashes, shrieking and giggling.

“Kiss him!” she yells. “You have to kiss him. You can't talk till you do.”

John scoops her up. “Boys don't kiss each other, Ursula. It's boy code.”

“But you're Ariel! You're a princess. And he's your handsome prince.”
“I’ve seen handsomer,” John says. He puts her down. “Why don't you be Prince Eric?”

“Bane's the prince,” she says. She tugs at Bane's hand. He's sitting in the chair, observing them. “Kiss Ariel. You're in love.”

“You should go to bed,” Bane says, not looking at her.

“Kiss Ariel!” She starts jumping up and down. “She can't talk until you kiss her. Then you have to get married!”

“Enough, Talia!” Bane snaps.

It's the first time John's ever heard him snap at her. Talia flinches back from him swiftly. In the next second she's recovered, piling into John's lap to be tickled again.

“Eric's grouchy,” she says, a word that John taught her to describe Bane. She flings herself on top of him, cackling as she tries to press their lips together. John struggles gamely. “Now you have to marry me!”

He plays with her until she's exhausted and Nadiya is calling to her softly that it's time for a nap. As John unlocks their door, Talia says goodnight to Bane brightly.

“Goodnight, Talia,” Bane replies gently.

John locks the door. He gives it a few minutes before he attacks Bane.

“Why'd you snap at her like that?”

Bane looks surprised. “You were the one who said no to her.”

“I said it nicely. You bit her head off.” John drops back onto the cot, clenching the sheets in his hands. “Whatever there is between us, you keep her out of it.”

“I don't understand,” says Bane.

“I mean if you're mad at me for going along with her game, or whatever, don't take it out on her. You don't have to bark at her because you're pissed off at me.”

“I wasn't—”

“You hurt her feelings,” John says. “Don't talk to her like that again.”

He flops onto his side and drags the covers over himself, hoping to end the conversation. Then he feels Bane's fingers digging into his shoulder.

“You're telling me what to do? In my own cell?”

John doesn't say anything.

Bane drops onto him. He shoves John onto his back and wrests the shroud off his face. John flinches. The sight of the thick, ugly gash that twists Bane's mouth into a fixed snarl is always, somehow, a surprise.

“Do you want to kiss me, John?” he demands.

John remains quiet. He's found silence works well when Bane is angry with him. Sure enough, after a moment, Bane is breathing less harshly. He moves aside.
“Don't ever tell me what to do,” he says. “I own you.”

“I know,” John says bitterly.

He regrets it immediately when Bane's fingers dig sharply into his shoulder again. He stiffens, clamping his eyes shut. Then Bane lets go, snarling under his breath.

“Sleep,” he growls.

Nights like these, John really wishes he could sleep with one eye open.

*

One good thing about Bane is that his dark moods are about as fleeting as his good ones. In the morning he acts as though nothing happened. He fucks John no more roughly than usual and lets him go back to sleep afterward.

When John wakes up again, and climbs stiffly out of bed, he finds Bane standing by the door, gazing up. John joins him. Everyone is watching a man make the climb out of the pit. He doesn't even make it as far as John did.

There's no surprise in John when the man fails. He's becoming as resigned as Bane. There's no point to climbing the wall when it will only mean an injury that could make him potentially vulnerable. He refuses to believe he'll die down here, but if he ever gets out, it won't be by climbing.

Bane goes out, does some bartering, while John stays behind and finishes sewing the cloth doll for Talia. It takes all the chicken feathers they saved to stuff the little doll, once John has cut off the pointy ends of each quill so they won't poke through the fabric. The doll is simple but it's padded and soft now, squishy enough to hug. Bane is pleased when he returns and finds that John has finished it. He tousles John's hair with his hand in passing, a strangely fond, unfamiliar gesture.

“You can give it to her tonight,” he tells John, even though it was he who did most of the work.

John brightens. Another reason to look forward to the night. In the evening Bane takes him again, as usual, and John braces himself through it, thinking of how happy Talia will be. She loves getting gifts, no matter how banal. The doll will thrill her. He fixates on that and can almost ignore the quick, hard snap of Bane's hips as he fucks into John. He can almost forgive himself for the soft, pained noises he makes.

When Bane is done, he drops onto the cot at John's side, panting. John lowers himself from all fours onto his belly, then rolls onto his side, curious. Bane's taken off both shroud and hood—a rare occurrence in the daytime. Thinking of how Bane had ruffled his hair, John reaches over and touches a strand of Bane's own fair hair, on an impulse.

Bane catches his wrist in a lightning-quick motion and glares. When John moves away from him, flicking his eyes downward, Bane seems to relax.

“Don't touch,” he says darkly, releasing John's wrist.

“Okay,” John says.

The next minute is long and tense. Then there's a commotion outside the cell. A man shouts Bane's name. Judging by the expression on Bane's face, he's not expecting it. He rolls out of the
cot and yanks his pants up, pulling hood and shroud back on. John follows him.

“What's happening?”

“Stay,” Bane orders as he leaves the cell. John hovers in the door of the cell to watch.

It’s Amir, the one who'd also wanted John, whose arm Bane had broken for trying to take John first. His arm is long healed now and he waits outside, loose-limbed and arrogant, with his friends behind him.

He speaks. Bane replies. Amir points to John, and Bane shakes his head. John appraises them quickly. Amir is bigger, but Bane is fast and vicious. Nobody beats Bane.

From the corner of his eye Bane sees John standing in the doorway. He turns his head and growls, “Go back—”

Amir lunges while Bane is still speaking. Bane reacts without missing a beat, ducking out of the way of the blow and attacking at once. He snarls as he fights, like an animal. Amir's friends fan out, pacing and cheering him on. Other men hang back and watch warily. In the next cell, John hears Nadiya awake and soothe Talia.

It happens too fast for John to see or warn Bane. One of Amir's friends bounds out of the dark, swinging a heavy block of wood. He smashes it into the back of Bane's skull.

Bane stumbles. Amir has him on the ground in the next instant, and John knows then that they've lost.

Three more of Amir's friends pile onto Bane, beating him savagely. John backpedals, scrambling to retreat into the cell and shut the door, but one man has already positioned himself close enough to grab John by the arm and drag him out. “Come,” the man orders.

John hits him. Almost at once a crusty sack is flung over his head and he's hit in the head by something hard, maybe the wood plank. Stars explode in his vision. He thinks he's falling, but rough hands pull him up and start dragging, half carrying him. He can't see, he can't even tell if he's upright. He's too dazed to think straight. All he can see in his mind's eye, over and over, is the last glimpse of Bane he had before the sack was thrown over his face: curled up on the ground in pain, trying to protect himself, while blood steadily blossomed over the shroud like scarlet flowers.

* * *

The men who take John away from Bane are in a joyous mood at having not only beaten Bane but stolen his wife as well. They celebrate by raping John all night.

He doesn't really remember it, afterward. He knows it happened, but he just sort of goes blank, inside and out. He's an empty shell. Nothing penetrates the fog.

He does learn that it can get worse than being forced to live in the pit with Bane. It can get much, much worse.

Amir doesn't have a cell. There are a few tunnels that wind around the pit like the passages of an ant colony, and he's claimed a sort of burrow for his own. The floor is strewn with cushions. The only light comes from kerosene lamps. Not even sunlight can find its way here. John wakes up in the morning—or maybe he was awake all along—shivering among the cushions, arms wrapped around his knees.
He fights, at first. It's a mistake. Amir beats him viciously, and spits on him with contempt afterward. He has John the most. While he rests, he watches his friends take their turns until he's excited enough to join in again.

He has six friends, whom John nicknames privately to separate them in his head—Shorty, Grumpy, Fatty, Sweaty, Beardy, and Grabby. He never learns their real names. None of them are like Bane. They don't read or have hobbies or make much conversation, even amongst themselves. John is their toy and, for the moment, their only means of entertainment. They hit him for no reason, they mock him, ask him in broken English how it is to be fucked by Bane, the ghul, the monster; if he ruts like a bull between John's legs. Unlike Bane, they don't tolerate any talking at all, especially talking back—he learns that very quickly. And they touch him, which adds a new level of humiliation to the rapes. They reach between his legs and grope him there, leaving dark bruises in the shape of their fingers. Bane never touched John any more than he had to. John hates and fears every single one of the six.

But it's Amir he hates most of all: smiling at John with dark killer's eyes, gripping a handful of his hair before throwing him to the floor to be fucked. He's drunk on his success for days; he can't get his fill of John, this tangible evidence of his mastery over Bane. He wants John at his side always and keeps him on a rough noose, a leash and collar, even though he doesn't leave the tunnel. When John can't stand fast enough for his liking, Amir strangles him with the rope until John's vision goes black. He rarely speaks in English to John. It's hard to see him as a person or anything more than a mindless brute. He's the real monster down here.

His only concession to John's abuse is to turn down the men who, even on that first day, seek him out to offer him goods and favours in exchange for a turn with John. News travels fast in the pit. It's not much of a kindness: John gets the feeling that Amir just wants to break him in first.

Nobody ever asked Bane if they could use John. They probably knew what the answer would be. Bane doesn't share his belongings with anyone.

* 

It's impossible to judge the passing of time. John is dizzy all the time. He's so hungry.

“Johanna,” Amir proclaims on the third or fourth or fifth day.

“My name is John,” John mumbles confusedly past a split lip.

“Johanna,” Amir repeats. He leans down, gripping John by the jaw. “A fine name for a fine woman.”

And that's what they call him from then on. Even after everything, John still feels a little prickle of shame every time he hears it. If he doesn't respond, they beat him. He never thought to be grateful for something as simple as being allowed to keep his name. There's a lot of things he wouldn't have thought to be grateful for.

He doesn't hear anything about Bane, those first days. His worst fear is that they killed him. For a few days he's sick over the certainty that Bane is dead. Any man would have killed Bane, after taking John away from him. Bane is the scariest guy down here. Any man foolish enough to steal something from him would make damn certain that Bane couldn't steal it back.

Eventually, though, John starts to wonder. Amir is so confident, so arrogant, that maybe he let Bane live. Maybe he wanted to see Bane reduced to the bottom of the food chain for a while, lording over him from the top. Maybe he wants to flaunt his triumph. John has no way of
knowing, not from the cold little hole where he's forced to spend all his time servicing the men.  

When it's quiet, he wonders if Talia is okay, and what Nadiya has told her. He wonders if she got the doll that John and Bane made.  

But quiet moments are few. He spends most of his time thinking no further than how to survive the next moment, stressed to his very last frayed nerve. He's treated like less than a pet, more a toy. They don't care if they damage him. He's expendable. He understands now how some of the other men like him simply go to sleep and never wake up, down here. Their minds break first: it just takes time for the body to catch up.  

*  

When John has been in the tunnel for—a week? more?—Amir yanks on the leash around his neck, choking him until John gets his feet under him.  

“You can wash?” he says, shoving dirty clothes into John's arms. John staggers slightly under the weight. His legs are as lax and wobbly as a newborn colt's. “Wash this.”  

“Where?” John asks tiredly.  

Amir backhands him, and kicks him in the soft part of his stomach when he stoops to gather up the dropped laundry. Bile stings the back of his throat; he coughs for a minute before he's able to stand up again, eyes watering. Of course; he's not supposed to talk unless he's told.  

“Come,” Amir orders.  

He drags John on the leash. When they leave the winding tunnel and step into the open area of the pit, into the sun, John is nearly blinded by the light. He winces and squints his eyes against the glare. Amir marches on, tugging him along to the winding path that leads down to the pool. When they reach the water, he shoves John to his knees.  

“Wash,” he says.  

All of the clothes have bloodstains in them. Some are surely John's, but he wonders if Bane's blood clings to any of the garments. It makes him feel closer, in a way, to Bane.  

He has to put one of the shirts down. His eyes are stinging. He throbs with yearning and regret.  

Noticing that he's stopped, Amir grabs a fistful of his hair and starts to shove him down toward the water again, then changes his mind and drags John closer to him, unfastening his pants. Amir and his friends don't spare any of their water to bathe themselves; he tastes sour and musky when he forces John to suck him. John's throat is already swollen and sore. He almost chokes, and his eyes sting even more hotly.  

He's struggling to detach, gagging on Amir's cock, when Amir suddenly shouts, “Hey, scarface!”  

John snatches a fraction of a second to look up. His heart clenches. Above them, watching soundlessly, is Bane. His face is nearly as bruised as John's, and one of his eyes is almost swollen shut, the white around his pupil stained red, but he's there, alive, standing. What's visible of his face shows no emotion. Amir raises an arm.  

“Thank you for keeping my woman tight!” he yells. It's in English for John's benefit.  

Bane says nothing. When John flicks his gaze upward again, Bane is gone.
For days now John has been hoping, praying even, that Bane is alive. He was convinced that if Bane were alive, he'd come for John. For the first time, when he's back in the tunnel, he starts to have doubts. Maybe he's overestimating how much he means to Bane. Perhaps Bane will decide he's not worth the trouble, and leave him here. Maybe he'll accept that he's no longer strong enough to lay a claim to John and move on philosophically, the way everyone does in the pit. He'll find himself a wife who's less sought after, who doesn't make trouble for him or sass him or try to tell him what to do, and John will be stuck here, dying a little more every day. Maybe John's not even desirable to him anymore, maybe he's ... tainted now.

Bane doesn't share.

He hurts all the time, so much he can't sleep even when they leave him alone for a couple hours. He bleeds, constantly. Amir and his cohorts aren't careful with John and they don't bother with grease when they f*ck him. He's always hungry, always thirsty; he can't even ask for water without risking a beating.

He's at his very limits. They're going to kill him. It takes him a long time to realize, they mean to kill him. They know he's growing weaker; they don't care. They'll be glad of him for as long as he lasts, and then they'll just f*ck someone else.

The worst part is, as young and healthy as John is, he's going to last a while.

He misses Bane. He would never have thought it possible. He misses the cell and Nadiya and Talia and the books and the food, and he misses Bane. When he's left alone for an hour or two, and he can't sleep, he curls up and tries not to think about it. When he thinks about Gotham and the life he left behind, he cries. He wants to go home.

* Although the days he spends in Amir's dark, stinking burrow mark the darkest days of John's time in the pit, it's ultimately a short chapter in his long sentence. He shouldn't have doubted at all, of course: Bane comes for him in the end.

In the open part of the pit, there's always at least a little light—even when the moon isn't visible overhead, there are stars to see by. Total darkness is a rarity, but that's what Bane waits for. That's when he strikes. There's a full moon beaming down on the pit: when a cloud slides over to obscure it, an eerie hush falls over the entire prison.

John, awake in the burrow, is lying next to Beardy, who snores at his side with his pants still partway down. There are two men in the mouth of the burrow who guard him, as if he's the flag in a twisted game of Capture the Flag. Even John doesn't see or hear Bane kill them. He only hears the expulsion of breath at his side, like a feeble whine and a brief gurgling sound. Then a warm hand is pressed over John's mouth and Bane's voice in his ear says, “Be quiet. Follow me.”

John scrambles to obey as silently as he can. He can't see a damn thing; he has to trust Bane's guiding arm, and he still stumbles over a few pillows. It takes him a minute to realize they aren't leaving right away. Bane is still angry.

The slaughter is quick and bloody. None of Bane's victims hear him coming: most are asleep. John only hears their muted whimpers, the slice of tearing flesh, the spatter of blood hitting the walls and floor, and Bane's harsh breathing as he hunts. Within five minutes, he's back at John's side, a presence that looms over him, larger than life. It makes John shiver.

“Are you injured?” Bane asks when they leave the tunnel. It's still pitch dark; John can't imagine
how he can see.

He opens his mouth to answer, but he's cut off by a furious shout. Out of the shadows, Amir lurches toward them, eyes wild, knife in his hand. Bane leaves John's side and moves directly toward him: like a shark, with nothing but raw, hungry purpose.

All of Amir's friends lie dead in the tunnel. There's no one to take Bane by surprise now. John listens to them grappling in the dark. Bane is utterly silent, and that's almost scarier than the snarls of before. There's a clatter as the knife goes flying, a pained huff as someone hits the rock floor.

The cloud slides away from the moon, and light suddenly comes beaming back into the pit. John is startled to find men already hovering nearby, attracted by the sounds of the fight. Bane is on top. Amir struggles underneath him, groping for his knife; Bane takes his hand and bends back his fingers until they snap, then gives Amir one hard shake, cracking his skull against the rock. It's done with callous efficiency. Amir screams, and that's when Bane starts hitting him. He's controlled in his violence, not rushed, but there's something chilling in his eyes that once again reminds John of a predator. He's not going to stop until this is finished.

He's still hitting Amir when Amir's screams taper into a gurgling moan, when the sound of knuckles hitting bone starts to turn into the sound of a wet melon being struck over and over. Amir's blood is all over the ground by the time Bane finally stops, panting.

He gets up. The rest of the prison is silent. Most of the population is watching him.

Bane glares at them. Throwing an arm out toward John, he barks a challenge. When there's no answer, he repeats it in English, a roar: “Who else would take him?”

Men start to retreat, fading back into the shadows. Bane turns to John. Flecks of Amir's blood stain the new shroud on his face. His grey eyes are like chips of ice.

“Nobody will ever touch you again,” he grates.

When he heads for the cell, John stumbles after him, feeling like he's in a dream.

In the cell Bane sits and pours some water onto a cloth, and starts wiping away the blood all over his fists. The crackling, angry energy around him is fading. The cell is no different, and yet to John it seems bigger, warmer. It seems like home.

He opens his mouth to speak, and only a strangled sound comes out. Bane looks up.

“John?”

“You came,” John croaks out. He's safe. He's back in the cell. Tears are already falling when he sinks to his knees on the cot. It hurts to talk. “God, I. I can't believe you came.”

“You are mine,” Bane says, looking away from John's tears. “No man takes what is mine.”

John forces a sobbing, shaky laugh. “That's why you came for me,” he says, too relieved to care—but then Bane looks at him, his gaze fierce and soft at the same time.

“Oh, John,” he says quietly.

He pulls John to him, carefully. John goes limp and lets it happen. Bane's hands cradle him, pressing John against his chest, and one hand comes up to start stroking through John's hair. John's breath shudders in and out of him. His whole body hurts. All the strength it took to survive is threading away and leaving him raw and open and weak. Bane holds him even more tightly.
“I was always going to come for you,” Bane says. “Always.”

There's so much pain in his voice, it shakes John more than anything else that night.
Chapter 2

*Bane nurses John a bit that night, a kindness John knows won't last, but soaks up anyway. The first thing Bane wants to do is take stock of the physical damage, but John manages to deter him for the time being. Bane gives him rice and water when he realizes how starved John is. John falls on it ravenously, but it hurts so much to swallow that he only manages to get a little bit down. Bane cautions him against drinking too quickly, and frowns when he sees the dark ring around John's neck where the rope had strangled him. He touches it lightly, but makes no comment.

Bane himself looks rough from his scuffle with Amir, and from the previous beating. He has a new scar, an ugly red split over the bridge of his nose, running partway down across his cheek. Kicked in the face with a sandal, John thinks. He seems self-conscious of it, even though John looks like shit too; he shares some of John's rice and pulls his shroud back on quickly. He moves around stiffly, much more so than when he'd been rescuing John. John comments on this.

"Cracked ribs," Bane says, touching a hand to his side. "They've been bound."

"Are you crazy?" John says, but not with much emotion. He's so tired. His tongue keeps snagging on a chipped tooth when he talks. "You could have snapped a rib, fighting like that."

Bane shrugs. "I had to get you," he says. "Talia missed you," he adds, like that explains everything.

"How long was I gone?"

"Seventeen nights," says Bane.

"Only?"

Bane points to the wall, where, John sees, he's kept up the little tallies John's been marking since he got here. His chest clenches hotly. Just two and a half weeks, and yet he feels like a different person. Everything that was John Blake has been washed away in a tidal bore of hurt.

"I have to sleep," he says, because the alternative is to vomit up the rice and water right then.

Bane lets him lie down, and gets into the cot carefully beside him. He grunts softly, a pained noise, when he lies down. Cracked ribs. Guy doesn't know when to quit.

John doesn't sleep. Can't sleep. He lies awake and stares up into the dark, struggling to keep all his thoughts at bay. Then he seems to blink, and Bane is sitting up next to him, framed by the dim morning light that seeps into their cell.

"Did you sleep?" Bane asks.

John shakes his head.

"I want to bathe you," Bane says.

John waits almost a minute before he realizes Bane is actually asking permission.

"Uh ... yeah," he says hoarsely. "Okay."

Bane pours a little water into a bowl, then helps John peel off his shirt—dirty and stained, too big
for him—and wets a cloth. Before he does anything else he just looks, cataloguing the damage. John's whole torso is mottled with bruises; some dark purple and fresh, others growing yellow-green around the edges and fading. The mark around his throat is the worst.

Bane washes him without saying anything. He gives John a different shirt, a softer, cleaner one, and John pulls it on stiffly. Then Bane pauses, and John has to nod before Bane will take hold of his pants and pull them off.

His lower body is a landscape of bruises, too. He doesn't know what his hole looks like, but when he draws up his knees and parts his thighs for Bane to look, he can hear a soft growling from behind the shroud. He can see Bane's eyes darting over him, disbelieving. Bane takes good care of all his possessions: even the books, after many years of repeated readings, are no more than slightly worn. For them to misuse John the way they had makes no sense to him. It'll be at least a week before John is any good to him.

He says nothing. He just wets the cloth again and starts wiping away crusted blood between John's thighs.

When he's done, he gives John different pants as well. He helps John pull them on, and John feels profound relief that that's over.

“When did you last sleep?” Bane asks.

“Don't know,” John says. It hurts to talk, too, he's just learning—he hasn't had occasion to use his voice for a while—and he doesn't elaborate. Bane nods once, thoughtfully.

“Come,” he says, standing. John follows him, unsteady on his feet.

The last thing he wants to do is leave the cell, but that's where Bane takes him: outside. He stops John almost as soon as they've left, though, and takes out the key to open Nadiya's cell door, after making sure no men are around. John's confused, at first, then annoyed—he didn't have to walk here just to watch Bane get Talia. Then the door is open, and Bane pushes him gently in, past the curtains. The door creaks and clicks shut behind John.

John whirls around. Bane is gone. For a moment he panics, grabbing at the curtain; trying to find his voice so he can beg Bane to come back, to not leave him. Then rational thought returns. He turns around. He's never been in Nadiya's cell before. It's dark and closed-in and claustrophobic—and it's dark and closed-in and safe.

He has no bad memories here. Not like in Bane's cell.

There's a lamp flickering dimly next to the chair where Nadiya sits. She's—crocheting, he thinks. But when he turns to face her, she puts aside the needles and yarn and gets up.

“John,” she says gently, her face full of sadness, “come here, child.”

Mouth dry, he goes to her. She opens her arms, and it seems like the most natural thing in the world to fall into her embrace, to be held and soothed like a child. His eyes prickle hotly and he squeezes them shut. He has few memories of his mother, but he thinks she must have hugged him like this. Nadiya smells like cinnamon and other spices, like a woman. Like someone else's home.

He lets himself be weak for a full minute before pulling himself together, carefully disengaging himself from her arms. He doesn't look her in the face, because he thinks if he sees pity there this time he'll fall apart.

“Thanks,” he manages to croak.
“Sleep,” Nadiya says. She squeezes his hand. “You are safe now.”

He looks around wearily for a place to curl up, but she shakes her head and points.

“In the bed.”

“Where will you sleep?” he asks. She smiles.

“The chair is comfortable.”

He doesn't fight it. He goes to the bed and lies down next to the wrapped-up bundle of Talia. When he pulls a corner of blanket over himself, she wakes up.

“John!”

She's all over him in the next instant, her little arms latched around his neck, snuggling fiercely into his chest. He sits up so he can hug her properly. She's overjoyed; but then he catches a glimpse of tears.

“Hey,” he says. “What's wrong?”

She hiccups a little sob. “Mama and Bane said men took you away. To hurt you.”

“I'm back now.”

“I don't like it when you hurt.”

He rests his chin on top of her head. She struggles free of his arms, and sits back in his lap so she can touch her fingertips to the rope mark around his neck. She looks sad beyond her years. John doesn't know what to say.

She brightens, suddenly, and scrambles off the bed. When she returns she thrusts something into his hands. He looks down. It's the doll.

“Bane said you made her,” Talia says, petting the doll's face with her finger and gazing at it. “He said you gave her a hug, so I could hug her and it would be like you hugging me.”

“Yep.” John's voice is just a whisper now.

“I hugged her a lot. You can hug her, too, if you're sad. Then it would be like me hugging you.”

“Thank you.” John holds the doll to him gently. Talia watches him with wide blue eyes. He pulls it away, feeling something hard, not feathers, inside. Probing at the doll's back, he finds a little pocket. “What's this for?”

“That's where I keep my wepping,” Talia says.

“Your wepping?”

She takes the doll from him, and inserting a hand into the back, she takes out a short knife. Her weapon. John tenses.

“What's that for?” he asks, his eyes flicking uncertainly to Nadiya, who is watching.

“It's so I can kill the bad guys who try to hurt me,” Talia says knowledgeably, twirling the knife around in the air like a toy airplane.
“I asked him to give it to her,” Nadiya cuts in.

“She's a kid,” John says. “What if she hurts herself?”

“Better she learn to use it now than in the future, when she has to.”

Troubled, John takes the knife from Talia and puts it back inside the doll. He lies down. She lies down with him, and traces her finger over his eyebrow, his cheek. Then she kisses his temple, probably the way Nadiya kisses her goodnight.

“You sleep and when you wake up I'll show you all my things, okay?”

“Okay,” John agrees. But he still doesn't sleep.

*

Bane doesn't come back for John that night. He gets to watch Nadiya and Talia as they wake and go about their normal nighttime routine, which is somehow not what John expected.

Nadiya has matches, and she lights lanterns all around the cell so that it's almost cheery. They eat breakfast first—bread and some preserved fruit. Talia chatters to her mother in a constant stream of Arabic, from which John gleans nothing. Then she clambers onto the bed and she's pulling and pushing at John, imploring him to get up and see all her things. She shows him everything in the cell, including the bed he'd rested all day on, the table, and the rug. They're all as special to her as friends; she's grown up with these seemingly mundane objects. She shows him the stain on the rug where she was born and the burn mark on the corner of the mattress where she lit one of the matches once and dropped it.

“I was little then,” she says, with self-importance. “So I didn't know what I was doing.”

John's chest gets all hot and tight again when she pulls out a stack of papers from under the bed. It's everything he's ever drawn her; the crappy sketches from when his arm was broken, the gradually improving illustrations to go with his stories. She's copied some of them, drawn herself and John and Bane and Nadiya into them. In some of them, John and Bane are holding hands.

Nadiya calls her away then, tells her to let John rest. Talia scrambles up into a chair at the table, where Nadiya has some blank paper and charcoal waiting, and their conversation is in Arabic so it takes John a while to realize that Nadiya is actually giving her a math lesson. Talia is an avid student. When they're through with that, Nadiya gets her to exercise by jumping up and down, has her run across the cell and back fifteen times. They play a game that looks just like Simon Says, and John guesses that in Nadiya's miniature school here, this is gym.

They share their lunch with John, who joins them at the table, and after that Nadiya takes out a book of Arabic poetry that she has Talia read from. Then it's Talia's turn to give her mother a lesson, and they go over the English alphabet together, painstakingly.

John watches all this, curious. He tells Talia she's a good teacher and asks her to show him the Arabic alphabet. He's intrigued. She's happy to comply, and starts by showing him his name, the tip of her tongue poked out in concentration as she writes it especially neatly. When he's starting to memorize some of the alphabet, she writes a few symbols and tells him to read them, and giggles as he does. Then she bursts out laughing.

“You're reading them backwards!” she crows. “I tricked you!”

John smiles for the first time in weeks, feeling his dry lips crack. “You sure did.”
John smiles for the first time in weeks, feeling his dry lips crack. "You sure did."

She's still laughing, so pleased with herself that he has to laugh too, even though it hurts. Nadiya smiles, and John understands then why Bane sent him here. This, in the pit, is therapy.

That morning, he sleeps.

*  
John sleeps and dreams.

He's on his back, sprawled limply between someone's spread thighs with his arms pinned behind him, while another man fucks him hungrily. It hurts. He arches against it, groaning. It's not a sharp hurt, it's *hot*, blazing, traveling a path up his spine. He can't quite open his eyes to see who's fucking him.

But it's Bane holding him down. In John's ear he says *you're doing well, John, we're almost there*, and John tries to pull his arms free but Bane's grip is iron. John is grinding his teeth, sweating, moaning in pain, and a cool, comforting hand passes over his forehead, settling him for a minute...

He's in Gotham and he's all wet, he's in his shower, trying to turn the temperature down from boiling but it won't work. His skin is reddened and prickling from the heat. Just a little cooler, that's all he wants, but the knob keeps slipping under his fingers. His skin is dripping. He's supposed to be making himself ready for them, but how can he when he's already bleeding all over the tiles?

*John's all hot, Mama,* he hears an alien voice say, *very far away, like fire...*

They come for him when he's still in the shower, dragging him out and pinning him down so he's paralyzed. He wants to fight but there's a great weight smothering him, holding him down, and he can't move. He's not ready yet, Amir is saying. They're all so hungry and there's no food, so John will have to do, but they have to cook him or he won't be any good. John can't do anything but watch as Amir forces a burning metal rod inside him, and it hurts worse than anything, it blinds him. He wants to fight but his body is so heavy and it hurts so much. He's burning alive.

Hands pin his wrists above his head. Other hands are prying him open, laying him bare, and when he gives a choked sob and tries to pull his hands free a gentle, accented voice is saying *it's okay, John, it's almost over...*

It's Bane on top of him, holding him down now as they fuck, and it's never been like this before, he always takes John from behind. Now their bodies are pressed together, he's smothering John with his weight and heat and John squirms, can't catch his breath, wants to struggle free, and then Bane leans down and kisses him and warmth ignites in the base of John's spine...

The fire swallows him up.

*  
He wakes up shivering on the rock floor with cold wet cloths all over him, under his clothes, seeping down his skin. He peels one off his forehead, off his neck, and feels a little better. Nadiya crouches down at his side and touches his face.

"Less hot," she says.

"I had a fever," John says, confusedly.
“Infection,” says Nadiya, her beautiful face creased with concern. “Do you feel better now?”

He's not sure. She helps him to sit up a little, just enough that he can drink the medicated tea she makes for him. The doctor's been here. John's head spins. He knows he's been sleeping for a long time, but he's still so tired he can barely hold his head up. Talia's asleep in the bed, clutching her doll.

When John has finished the tea, and feels slightly more clear-headed, Nadiya shows him a little bottle the doctor gave her.

“Ointment,” she explains. “For the infection. I can help you ...”

She trails off, and John figures it out, where the infection is. He licks his lips and shakes his head.

“Bane,” he says hoarsely. She looks surprised.

“Are you sure?”

“Ask him,” John says, and he rolls over on the floor and shuts his eyes. Nadiya hesitates for a minute. Then she steps over him to the cell bars. There's a hushed conversation in Arabic.

John's drifted off again when a pair of arms lifts him off the floor as though he weighs no more than a kitten. Bane hefts him and walks out of the cell without saying a word. In his own cell, he lays John down on the cot carefully.

“Why do you ask me to do this?” he asks. He's not angry, just curious.

“Can't do it myself,” John says thickly. He's still hot and hazy from his fever-dreams; his last memory of Bane is a confusing one.

Bane's voice is quiet, the way it is when he speaks to Nadiya, not as raspy. “I'll hurt you.”

“It'll hurt anyway.”

Bane accepts that and picks up the ointment. He peels John's pants off slowly, too slowly for John's liking. He just wants this over with. But Bane's movements are uncertain, as though he expects John to stop him at any moment. Ridiculous: John has never been able to stop him before.

When he has John's thighs spread, and the ointment coats his fingers, he hesitates. John groans inwardly. He wanted Bane to do this because he thought it wouldn't matter, that Bane would just flip him over and do what had to be done without regard for John's comfort, the way he's always been. He's making it awkward for both of them.

“Just do it before either of us have time to think about it,” John says.

Bane presses his fingers in, a little too quickly. He rarely fingers John. Even when John's arm was broken, he just used his left hand to prepare himself with grease and make way for Bane's cock. Bane doesn't seem entirely sure of what he's doing. He probes around cautiously, spreading the ointment. John bites his lip until blood trickles down his chin. The ointment is a peripheral stinging, then it soothes.

“That's good,” John croaks finally, and Bane draws his hand away. When the ointment is put away and John's clothing in place, Bane scoops him up and carries him back to Nadiya's cell and her care. He doesn't say a word before he leaves.
Day by day, John gets a little better, a little stronger. His throat starts to heal, less rusty when he talks, and he eats more solid food instead of just the teas Nadiya brews for him. He starts to feel like he could be himself again, one day. Given enough time.

Talia sits in his lap and touches the fading bruise around his neck and says, “I would kill them.”

“Who?”

“The men who hurt you,” she says. Her gaze, tracing the bruise, is far away. “If it was me, I would kill them.”

“Don't say that,” says John.

“I would.” She looks up at him now, her eyes wide and earnest. “I would be just like Bane and I'd kill everyone who tried to hurt you or me.”

He hugs her. What else can he do? He knows that Bane and Nadiya don't believe in shielding Talia from everything, but John wishes he could. He wishes he could hide every atrocity in the pit from her, so that she wouldn't need to hide a knife in her doll. It makes him think just how much more sheltered she is from all this than Bane as a boy ever was.

When Talia is in bed that morning Nadiya makes tea and John sits at the table with her.

“I get it now,” he says. “You told me Bane is a good man. You were right.”

Before now he'd never really spoken to Nadiya one-on-one. A year of listening to Bane and John and Talia converse has honed her English, but she still thinks carefully about her words before she selects them.

“His actions to you are not those of a good man,” she says, finally. “But he means to be good, I think.”

Before, John had always tried to fit Bane into the context of home, where monsters like him are locked up. But now, at long last, he sees Bane in the context of the pit. This is a place where rape and subjugation are normal, mundane things, where the stronger man always has mastery over the weaker. Amir and his friends used this law to turn John into a toy and a slave. They never wasted food or water or clean clothes or conversation on him when they could avoid it. Why would they? John wasn't strong enough to fight them for his food; and access to food and water isn't a right in the pit. It's a hard-won privilege.

Bane lets John sleep in his bed, where it's warm; he divides food and water evenly between them, and washes his own clothes. He lets John do errands for him if John is feeling restless and asks; he never forces John out of the cell. He's kept John safe, at risk of his own life. He doesn't hit him needlessly or mock him or torment him. Instead, if he's bored, he reads a book or makes lace out of string. All he does when he wants to make use of John is get on top of him and thrust until he comes. John doesn't even have to do anything. That, and the occasional blowjob, are the only price he pays for food and water and comfort and safety.

“I don't think I'll ever like him,” John says. Nadiya touches his hand gently.

“He knows.”

John goes back to Bane's cell that day. He's just about healed; Bane's done coddling him. He fetches John early in the afternoon. John thinks about it all day, and when it's evening and Bane
climbs into the cot with him, John says:

“T’ll be good now.”

This brings Bane up short. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m going to behave,” John says. His eyes are watering and his teeth are starting to chatter a bit at the thought of what’s about to come, but he has to say it aloud, to remind himself. “I won’t—fight you or try to tell you what to do anymore. You can just do what you’re gonna do, and I’ll... I’ll accept it.”

Bane huffs softly in surprise, sitting up on his knees at John’s side. His eyes are curious in the low light.

“All the spirit has gone out of my wife since I’ve been gone,” he says.

“I just—know you've been nicer to me than you have to be,” John says, starting to have to choke the words out. “And I don’t want to be ungrateful anymore. I don’t want to belong to someone else. So you can fuck me now, if you want, and I won’t—”

“John Blake,” Bane rumbles, touching a fingertip to John’s lips and cutting off his babble. “You are not well enough for me to fuck yet. Did you think that was my intention in bringing you back?”

“I can suck you,” John gasps out when Bane takes his finger away.

Bane’s eyes darken all of a sudden. His visible face turns blank and he drops to the mattress with a creak at John’s side.

“Sleep,” he says, ending the conversation. “No more talking. Just sleep.”

So John shuts up, and, though fitfully, he does.

*  
The cold season is late that year, but it makes up for its delayed start with a vengeance when it arrives. Soon John can't sleep at night, even wrapped in a pile of blankets and pressed against Bane’s warm body. He lies awake and shivers and tries to switch off his brain, shut down every memory he has of the dark.

It’s been a couple of weeks since he returned to Bane’s bed and Bane still hasn't fucked him. John is careful to act more injured than he is. If there’s a shred of goodness in Bane that keeps him from using John while he thinks John is still healing, then John intends to make the most of that. He wants to stretch it out for months. Forever, preferably.

Bane gets out of bed one morning when the light is still low, his breath a fine mist through the shroud.

“Up,” he says, stretching. “You're coming with me today.”

John is too stiff and cold to move, until Bane pulls the blankets off him. He groans and curls up, and Bane drops a linen robe over him.

“Put that on over your clothes. Get up and walk around, it will warm you faster.”
John never actually noticed until now how much warmer it made the bed when Bane fucked him. No wonder he was always able to fall asleep afterward, even when he felt like throwing up. He'll take the trade-off, but that doesn't make it any easier to crawl out of bed, yawning and shivering.

“Where are we going?” he asks, rubbing his arms. Bane steps in front of him and rubs them properly, forcing the blood to flow. John winces.

“Supply drop today,” Bane says. “We need to get extras.”

He's right: they wait outside the cell, soaking in the weak, watery sunlight that trickles in, and soon a net full of crates appears over the lip of the hole. It's lowered painstakingly slowly. As soon as it touches rock, the rope lowering it is slashed.

Bane walks over and starts cutting away the netting with his knife. A few other early risers join in. It's too cold and too early for enmity; they start cracking open crates without any of the typical scrapping and snarling. John wanders over tentatively—he barely leaves the cell at all, these days—and pokes through a couple crates. He shies away when other men come near him.

Bane comes to him with a stack of goods and loads up his arms. “Take those to the cell, and come back,” he says.

John obeys. He leaves them all in the cot, under the blankets, hidden. Bane drops off another load, and leads John back out. Now more men are picking over the pile, and John sees what Bane is doing: they look like they've just arrived, free to take what they need. Bane makes John carry half of the extra supplies, but they aren't going back to the cell.

“What do you want, you ugly son of a dog? Can't you let an old man freeze to death in peace?”

“I have spirits,” Bane says, setting down his pile.

“Good. Bring them here.”

“You got spirits and aren't going to sell them?” John asks Bane, surprised. Spirits are one of the biggest commodities in the pit. If Bane had kept a bottle for them, they could sell it for—anything.

Renard raises an eyebrow. “Spirits are for drinking. Where did you find this boy, huh? When are you going to let me die?”

“Perhaps next winter,” Bane says. Renard's beard twitches in a smile.

“Ah, get out of here. Go on.”

Bane bows his head and leaves with John. Renard's grumblings follow them out. Despite the way he acts, there's something almost close to fondness in the old man's face when he watches them
leave. John never had an aunt or uncle, but he wonders if that's what family is like—people who 
will grumble and gripe at you, knowing you'll still like them in the morning.

"Why do you help him?" John asks, despite himself. He's been trying hard not to question Bane or 
even speak before being spoken to. "Why give him the booze? We could've traded that."

"It makes him warm," Bane says. They slip back into their cell, and he starts pulling supplies out 
of the cot. "Down here, a debt is forgotten in minutes. But I don't forget when I owe a man 
something."

"What'd Renard do that was so special?" John asks, intrigued. The old man never does anything 
for anyone.

Bane pauses. Then he sits up and looks at John, his grey eyes unreadable.

"He stitched my face back together," he says. "And he was kind. That is all he had to do."

"Oh," says John.

Bane goes back to the supplies, sorting and stowing some things underneath the bed where they 
won't be seen from outside the cell.

"Did you enjoy the story, when you heard it?" he asks.

John shifts uncomfortably when he understands what Bane means. Then he catches Bane's eye, 
and he thinks he sees a glimmer of humour there. No trace of anger.

"I don't know," he says, slowly. "I thought it was a little over-dramatic."

"It is," Bane agrees. "I said nothing before I hung Cyrus. Even if I had, he wouldn't have repeated 
it."

John smiles. It pulls at a cut on his lip that hasn't healed yet. Bane's eyes crease at the corners, 
smiling back.

"You think me a monster. I know," he says, still without anger.

"Not all the time," John says. "Not today."

"Not today," Bane echoes thoughtfully, and John sees: He doesn't have to think about doing these 
acts of kindness for the old man. He just does them. It's the same with Nadiya and Talia, and 
maybe—

Maybe he's not waiting for John to heal.

"When are you going to fuck me?" John blurts out.

Bane's eyes flicker. Then the light in them goes out. Whatever camaraderie they just shared, John 
has ruined it by reminding them both of their respective places in the pit. He bites his tongue and 
waits for the backlash.

"Go back to bed," Bane growls flatly. "I decide when I choose to fuck you. You'll know then."

"Okay," John says quietly. He gets in the cot, curls up under the blankets to get warm. Bane goes 
back to sorting supplies, breathing hard. Now he's angry.

Two weeks in and John's already broken his promise to be compliant and well-behaved. He could
kick himself. At this point, he wonders despairingly if things will ever change for them.

* 
Another week on and it's so cold that little crystals form on Bane's shroud as he breathes. He takes it off when the temperature drops, turning his face away from John's eyes. It stays on when Nadiya talks to him, though.

They go to bed early, almost as soon as the sun sets. There's very little interacting with Talia and her mother at night. No more does Bane allow John to sleep back-to-back with him; he rearranges John the way he likes and growls irritably when John tenses in alarm. In the new attitude Bane chooses, he's spooning John, arms wrapped around him and hands under John's shirt, warming his hands and John's torso. John is tucked into the crook of his elbow, curled in a ball, surrounded by Bane's warmth.

Nestled into each other like that, John is able to sleep. It shocks him how safe he feels wrapped in Bane's embrace. In the morning, if he wakes up early, he can often feel Bane's erection, hot and heavy and pressing into the small of his back. It fills him with queasy dread every time, but nothing ever comes of it. Bane still hasn't taken him.

Every evening, before the light leaves the pit, Bane leaves on some errand and tells John to stay put. Fine by John. He stays behind and tells stories to Talia, who's keeping nice and warm in the curtained cell under Nadiya's luxurious blankets.

“I want to play,” Talia says, reaching through the bars. “Will you play with me, John? Please?”

John looks around for Bane. It's not as cold tonight, not yet. They have time to play before the light is gone.

“Just a sec,” he says.

He looks around the whole cell for the key, but can't find it. The doctor must have it. He chews his lip, staring through the doorway at the pit.

“I miss playing,” Talia says miserably. “I've had to stay in for ages. Please, John?”

“Okay,” he says hoarsely. “Yeah, okay. I'll be back.”

He leaves the cell, with none of the confidence he used to have. He wishes Bane were here. Wishes he could make himself invisible. After Bane's demonstration, though, men are careful not to so much as look at him. Their eyes slide right past him.

He's almost at the doctor's cell when he hears a sound that stops him. He backtracks a bit, swearing that's Bane's voice he heard...

There's a deep crevice half hidden by jutting rock. Bane is there, leaning with his back against the stone wall. His hand is tangled in the long, silky hair of Aisha, who is on his knees, nose buried in the coarse hair at the base of Bane's cock. He has Bane deep in his throat, deeper than John could ever take him, and Bane, head tipped back against the wall, eyes closed, makes the same low groaning noise in his throat. John's never heard Bane make that sound before.

He steps back out of sight quickly. His heart hammers against his chest. After a minute, he turns around and goes back to the cell.

It's good. It's ... considerate. Bane is not using John's body because he knows what John has
suffered, so he's simply found another outlet, another body to find sexual pleasure in. This way Bane isn't directing any of that energy toward him, and John ... John is ... sleeping in his bed, eating his food. For nothing.

So it's nice. It's considerate.

For some reason, though, the image stays in his head long after he's appeased Talia with another story. A sated Bane returns soon after and summons John to bed, and lying there, wrapped up safe in Bane's arms, John can't figure out why he feels like he's been pierced to the core.

* Aisha lurks outside their cell. Waiting for Bane. John hadn't noticed before, but he does now. Aisha probably knows the same thing John does now: that they've got a pretty good thing going with Bane.

“Stay away from Bane,” John says, hovering in the cell doorway with his arms folded over his chest, when Bane isn't around.

Aisha startles and looks at him, uncertain. No one's supposed to talk to the women if it's not for sex. John wonders if Aisha recognizes him from their last encounter, when John was new to the pit. He'd still been wearing his Gotham clothes then, his hair cropped short.

Affirming that John is addressing him, Aisha mumbles something in his own language. John notes again that he has no teeth. Does that make for a better blowjob?

“I mean it,” John says. “Stay away from him.”

Aisha spreads his hands in helpless bewilderment. He has no idea what John's saying. He looks afraid.

John softens, letting his arms fall to his sides. What can either of them do? Aisha belongs to the men in the pit. He can no more say no to Bane than John can. He's a lot worse off than John, actually—for him to say no to any man would mean being beaten to death or worse.

“I'm sorry,” John says. “I feel bad for you,” he adds, since Aisha doesn't understand. Aisha just smiles nervously, a pathetic, supplicating gesture.

“John.” Nadiya's voice in the other cell is soft, barely audible. John retreats back into the cell, to the back corner where he can peer past the curtains. Talia's asleep in the bed, but Nadiya is up, doing something with needles and yarn again. She looks at him curiously. “Who are you talking to?”

He takes a deep, shaky breath. “Bane's using some other man. For ... sex.”

“Aisha?”

John is taken aback. “How'd you know?”

“Bane had needs before you came here,” Nadiya says, smiling. “And I know more of what goes on in this pit than you think.”

Nothing John wants to say seems to make sense. It's not fair. It's supposed to be me. Of course it makes no sense, because John doesn't want to be the one on his knees for Bane. He doesn't even know what he wants.
“He wouldn’t ...” he starts. Nadiya just stares at him until he manages to spit the words out. “... replace me?”

Nadiya smiles again, the needles clicking peacefully together. “No, John.”

John is doubtful, though. Maybe he was right: Bane doesn't like sharing, doesn't want to think about all the other men who fucked John. It's different with Aisha, because John was supposed to be his.

He's doing it again—refusing to give Bane the benefit of the doubt. Part of John still thinks of him as a monster. But he's a good guy, down here.

“What makes someone a woman?” John asks when they're in bed that night, spooned close for warmth. “Are they women as soon as they get here, just 'cause they're small and weak?”

“Sometimes,” Bane says, not particularly interested.

“So that could have been me?”

“Doubtful.” Bane's nose is pressed to John's hair, at the nape of his neck. John can't tell if it's intentional or not. Bane loves stroking a hand through his hair. He noses John and growls, “You are too lovely for any man to pass up.”

His deep rumble spirals down to the base of John's gut and settles there, warm. John shifts.

“Why's Aisha a woman?”

“They say he pleasured men even before he came here.” He says this like he finds the very thought outlandish and quaint. John has to smile. He's only just noticed that when Bane is referring to the prison women, he doesn't say she or her like the other men who speak English.

“Amir called me a woman,” John says impulsively. “He gave me a girl's name.”

Bane says nothing, but John can feel the bass vibration of a growl through his back from Bane's chest.

He's hard, John realizes. He squirms around, twisting in Bane's grip until they're almost nose-to-nose.

“I can suck you off,” John says.

He can't see Bane's face in the dark, but he hears Bane growl now with audible displeasure.

“Are you so determined to hate me, John,” he bites out, “that you ask me to violate you now?”

“No,” John argues, taken aback. He takes a deep breath. “I'm your—I'm yours. That's my job.”

“Your job is to do what I tell you to do.”

“Why are you doing this?” John demands, pushing away from him. “Why can't you ever be straightforward for once?”

His eyes adjust just enough that he can see Bane glaring at him. Then, slowly, understanding dawns.

“This is about Aisha,” Bane says, eyes glittering.
He sounds amused. John wants to hit him. It's not funny.

“Don't fuck other guys in my place,” he says, his throat constricted. “It's not fair on them or—on me, even, because what if someone notices and thinks you don't want me anymore and tries to—to take me away—”

“Nobody will ever take you away,” Bane says, still amused. Complacent, even.

“If you want someone who's better at this stuff than I am, then just—sell me or trade me, why don't you, find some other bitch—”

“If I wanted that, I would have done it long ago,” Bane points out.

“I know about not being wanted, okay,” John says, his throat even tighter. “Half my childhood was nothing but orphanage after orphanage, nice families saying they'd adopt me and then never coming back—”

“How hard for you,” Bane says, suddenly cold, not amused at all.

John checks himself, remembering who he's talking to. Bane has never been wanted by a soul in his life.

They're both quiet for a minute. Then Bane says, “If it upsets you so much, I won't see Aisha anymore. I only thought... Nadiya said to give you time. So I have. Does this mean you would rather be in Aisha's place?”

“No,” John mutters, looking away. “I just think, if I have to be your wife, I shouldn't have to ... share you.”

Bane raises his eyebrows. His eyes gleam again as though John has just said or done something utterly precious.

“I see,” he says. “You have a claim on me as well as the other way around, is that right?”

“Yeah,” John says, looking back up at him. He won't be made fun of. Bane just laughs, making him smart even more.

“Your hand, habibi,” he says, unusually affectionate. “If you won't share me, I want the use of your hand. Is that fair?”

“That's—yeah,” John says, when he understands what Bane means. He thinks about it and nods. “Yeah, I can do that.”

Bane is on top of him suddenly, squeezing the breath out of John for a second while he gets his hands under him. His breath against John’s face is warm and moist through the cloth. John's heart flutters anxiously; he takes a deep breath and lets Bane guide his hand between them, under the blankets, to his erection. Once he's freed Bane from his pants, he brings his hand back up to spit in his palm, then takes Bane in hand.

Bane's cock hasn't changed. Still feels hot and thick in John's hand. He jerks Bane slowly, at first, until Bane is rumbling softly and jerking his hips in little abortive movements. Impatient. John moves his hand quicker, to Bane's satisfaction. He growls again, letting his head rest on the cot next to John’s head, and thrusts into John’s fist. John goes on taking deep breaths. He tries closing his eyes for a second, but has to stop; with his eyes closed, he can taste it in his mouth, and he feels sick.
Bane is covering him, all around him, though, and that makes it easier. He loses patience in the end and ruts against John's thigh, pushing a hand up under John's shirt. His nails scratch John's stomach lightly; then he's fucking, rough and animal-like, against John's clothes, and he comes with a sound like a snarl.

John keeps breathing evenly. He's surprised at how okay he feels. Shouldn't he be more ... traumatized? But he wasn't violated, wasn't forced into anything. He just let Bane use his hand. He could do this again, he decides. He can handle this.

Bane moves, and puts his face close to John's for a second, his masked cheek almost resting against John's, before he pulls away and takes a corner of blanket to wipe John off. Then he pulls up his pants, flops down heavily, and wraps John up in his arms.

“You please me,” he says drowsily, his voice even huskier. “John.”

John almost smiles. He closes his eyes, pretending to be asleep while Bane gently strokes his stomach, up and down.

* 

The cold snap fades, just enough to take the edge off at night and during the day. It means spending more time with Talia and much less in bed with Bane, which comes as a relief.

It's Nadiya who declares that John needs a haircut. She offers to do it herself, which John gratefully takes her up on. Last time Bane had done it with the straight razor he uses to shave them both, but Nadiya has actual scissors. She bids John to sit against the bars where she can reach through.

Bane had looked like he wanted to stop her when she brought it up, but she's right—only the women keep their hair long. John's falls past his shoulders now. He sits still for Nadiya, and Bane sits on the bed and watches them, even while Talia is teaching him a little hand-clapping game that Nadiya taught her. John would love to make some teasing comment, but he's still trying to be quiet and compliant and all the things that don't come naturally to him.

“There we are.” Nadiya brushes some strands of hair off his shoulders. His hair is now just long enough to cover his ears. “Such a handsome man, John. Like my husband.”

“Thanks.” John smiles and gets up. Talia scampers off the bed and starts collecting every strand of his hair. John looks at her curiously. “What are you doing?”

“I'm going to make a nest for the mice,” she says, cradling a bundle of hair. She deposits it in a pile on the chair. “They'll live with us and be our friends and then we can cook them and eat them.”

“Oh. Jeez.”

“Me now,” Talia says, turning to her mother and bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Do my hair.”

“You don't have any to cut,” John tells her, running a hand over her bristling scalp.


Bane hesitates. He goes to her reluctantly, pulling his hood off. When he's sitting with his back against the bars, Nadiya reaches through and runs her fingers through his hair. John wonders why she's allowed to touch and he isn't, and bites his tongue.
Talia wants to draw pictures, so she and John do that while Nadiya trims Bane's hair. There's not a lot to take off. She talks to him while she trims, a steady string of Arabic that Bane occasionally replies to. John keeps glancing over at them, and wondering at the stiff way Bane is holding himself. It's rare for him to ever look uncomfortable.

“There,” Nadiya says when she's finished, brushing away loose hairs. She smiles gently. “Now you are nearly as handsome as your lover.”

John is looking over, and he's the only one who sees the way Bane's face goes tight for a moment, his eyes full of pain, as if she's struck at him physically. Then he shakes his head and he's thanking her, getting up and pulling on his hood swiftly. John is quick to look away.

All this time, and he'd never even guessed. Bane is in love with Nadiya.

*

John brings his hand to the shroud over Bane's face that night, when it's just the two of them and Bane is on top of him. They haven't started anything yet. A candle flickers on a rock ledge next to them; Bane has just finished reading and hasn't blown it out yet.

Bane goes very still, but he doesn't grab John's wrist. This might be because he's supporting himself on both hands. John takes advantage to trail his fingers up the shroud, and then slowly, slowly peel it down. Bane turns his face away and sits back, pushing off the hood as well. Not for the first time, it strikes John how young he actually is.

“Can I see?” John whispers.

He fully expects to be rebuffed, or even snapped at. Instead, Bane blinks and then slowly turns his head to gaze down at John. John sits up, too, squirming out from under him to get a better look at his face. Strange to spend so much time in a man's company and barely know him. The scar over the bridge of his nose and cheek hasn't faded, but of course, it's the gash that bisects his mouth that automatically draws the eye. Bane holds himself very still while John traces it with his fingertips, finding little nicks at the edges where the stitches must have been. It's so long, John thinks numbly. They'd ripped his face apart.

John is unsurprised when Bane reaches a point where he can no longer tolerate this kind of touching. He grabs John's wrist tightly and squeezes: not in warning or in punishment, merely to say *stop* in the language of the pit.

“Renard told me once that you didn't always wear a mask,” John says.

“Not always.” Bane's voice is a hoarse whisper. “Satisfied?”

John nods, and Bane lets go and pushes him onto his back. John gets comfortable while Bane puts himself back to rights, adjusting the mask so that John doesn't have to look at him.

He knows Bane is going to want a handjob, and is ready for that. It's what they've done every night since that first one. When Bane leans over the edge of the bed and pulls out the canister of grease, John's heart flutters with panic.

This is punishment. He shouldn't have touched Bane's face. Why can't he just be the kind of slave who's always quiet and keeps his fucking hands to himself? Why'd he have to get complacent, thinking that Bane would be satisfied with handjobs forever? He opens his mouth to say he's sorry, anything, and then bites his tongue hard. It's not his place to talk in bed. He's a tool for
Bane's pleasure, nothing more. Bane gives him everything; John can give him this. He *can.*

He realizes, a second later, that Bane is watching his face.

“I want to try something,” Bane says.

John nods, not trusting himself to speak. Pleased, Bane moves over him, keeping the blankets on them to preserve heat. Under the covers, his hand unerringly finds its way between John's legs, and he pulls John's pants down to his knees.

John almost bites through his lip when the first finger presses in. His body tightens against the intrusion, remembering the pain and humiliation of being torn apart. The infection. His nails scratch audibly against the sheets as he grips a handful in each fist and his eyes are clenched shut.

“John.” He can feel Bane's breath on his face. “Relax.”

Easy for Bane to say. He's never been—never been fucked; he thinks it's as easy as that. John takes a deep, shaky breath, not sure if it helps or not.

“Good,” Bane says. He starts moving his hand again, pressing his finger deeper. “I won't hurt you,” he says.

John reminds himself to keep breathing while Bane strokes him open, first with one finger and then with two. He keeps his eyes open, trying to comfort himself that it's only Bane.

Bane is trying to be patient, but it doesn't last long. When he thinks John is relaxed enough, he pulls his own pants down and slicks himself liberally with the grease. He doesn't ask if John is ready; he just leans down, pressing their bodies close together, and guides himself to John's hole. John slides his knees apart as far as his pants allow—not very far at all, and he almost panics again, not enough room for Bane's dick—and then Bane is pushing in, his breath gusting out over John's forehead.

John can't quite remember what Bane is like normally; it's been too many times with too many men since they were last together like this, but he thinks Bane is moving more slowly than he used to. Bane is a pragmatist in everything, including sex: he gets down to business with the single goal of climax, and if that requires him to be hasty and rough, so be it. At least it's over quickly. But tonight he's taking his time, as if savouring the sweetness of the drink after the drought. He slides in partway, pulls back; slides in deeper, pulls back again.

“I asked another man,” Bane says hoarsely, not looking at John, “how I could make this less ... for you ...”

He trails off, and John thinks: Less what? Painful? It doesn't hurt, exactly, but John just wants it to be over. He has a memory imprinted on the backs of his eyelids of them doing it once like this before, and it hadn't been bad, but he's certain Bane always took him from behind, never like this. Maybe a dream.

Bane bottoms out, breathing raggedly, and that's when John's eyes start to prickle against the strain. God, Bane is big. Fortunately, he doesn't seem to be paying much attention to John. He just rolls his hips carefully, and every push in causes a warm pulse at the base of John's stomach. His cock is half-hard against his leg; he's not sure why or how. He wishes Bane would shove him over onto his belly and get it done. He's starting to tense again, so that it hurts when Bane slides in.

“Relax,” Bane orders again, this time with less patience, like he thinks John is doing it on purpose. John tries to nod, his throat painfully constricted, and then Bane smooths a hand over his temple.
and runs his fingers through John's hair. John lets out a juddering breath, and his muscles loosen a bit.

It doesn't go on for too long. Bane is about as careful as he's capable of being, which is to say not overly, but it makes a difference from his usual urgency. He twists his hips a bit a few times, turning that warm pulse into a hot throb, but toward the end he starts to forget himself. He lurches forward, panting, and with a few hard snaps of his hips he buries himself to the hilt inside John and spills deep inside him with a hoarse groan. John lies still, stretched painfully around the thick base of his cock.

After a minute, Bane stirs and pulls out. John winces, and schools his face into neutrality when Bane yanks his pants up for him.

“Was that ... better?” Bane asks, watching him carefully. John unsticks his throat.

“Yeah.” It comes out in a whisper. After a second, he adds, “Thank you.”

Bane sighs. Pulling his own pants up, he leans over and blows out the candle. Then he drops onto the cot, wraps the blankets around them, and rolls over so that his back is to John. John can't help but feel that he's let Bane down in some big way, and his eyes sting hotly. He lies awake for a long time.

*

John dwells on this latest sexual encounter all night. It's a few hours before he figures out what's nagging at him.

I asked another man. Bane doesn't know how to make sex less uncomfortable for his partner, so he tried to educate himself. The cynic in John says that maybe he thinks John is tender now, unable to be used roughly without tearing again, but then he has another thought. Bane lied. He can't have asked another man. If he went to someone else and said “how do I make my wife feel good when I'm fucking him?”, they would take John away from him, regardless of how afraid of Bane they are.

That means Bane had to have asked someone who couldn't use it against him, and John knows immediately who: Aisha. But then why not say so? And there's only one conclusion John can come to, after mulling it over in his head for a long time, that makes any sense: Bane's promise to stop seeing Aisha matters to him.

It's absurd, it's impossible; but Bane cares for John's feelings. He lied to spare them. He wanted to have sex again, so he went to Aisha and asked how he could cause John the least pain. It wasn't punishment at all.

This is speculation, of course, and so different from his image of Bane that John struggles to wrap his head around it. He falls into a doze, finally, early in the morning, and manages a few hours of sleep before Bane wakes him just after dawn.

“Supplies,” Bane says in a blunt, flat voice. “Come along.”

John obeys. He's not going to make Bane talk about it.

The net full of supplies is waiting; a few men are already prying crates open. John and Bane work swiftly to pick out what they need without talking. John is startled when he opens one crate and finds stacks upon stacks of old books, English and Arabic and Russian and even more languages. He riffles through them, pulling a few out.
“Hey, look at—” he starts to call out to Bane.

Another man hits him across the face, stunning him. Wresting the books out of his hands, the man hisses something at him angrily.

Bane is there at once, shroud fluttering and eyes blazing with rage. The man drops the books, immediately starts to say something, but he's cut off when Bane grabs him by the throat, gives him a hard shake, and throws him to the ground.

“Books are kindling,” he says in a cool undertone to John. He takes one, an English copy of a Dickens book, and puts it under John's shirt. If anyone else sees, they don't say anything. They give Bane and John a wide berth for a few minutes; but a couple of men shoot Bane hard glances.

Once John has tooted their supplies to the cell and returned, Bane is gathering things for Renard. A larger crowd has gathered and men are jostling each other aggressively. John hangs back, waits for Bane to emerge, and follows him. He can hear a fight breaking out behind them. It's shocking how swiftly the men down here devolve into a mob mentality; even men who are low on the prison pecking order will jump in to punish an infraction. John stays close to Bane.

In the door to Renard's cell, Bane stops short. John almost walks into him.

“What's wrong?” he asks.

Bane doesn't answer. John slips around him, and sees at once. The old man is dead. He's lying in the bed on his back, hands clasped on his chest, his face grey and still.

They both stand there for a minute. John looks at Bane, unsure what to do. Bane's eyes travel the cell, taking everything in. Thinking.

Finally, Bane puts down the pile of supplies. “Help me gather his things,” he says.

John joins him warily. Bane's already sifting through Renard's sparse belongings—clothing and blankets and dishes.

“Would he mind?” John asks.

He expects Bane to laugh or scoff at him. Instead, Bane says, “He would prefer that we, who respected him, take his possessions, than the scavengers who will come later.”

John helps him collect everything Bane thinks will be of use. They carry it back to the cell together in silence. Bane slips back out to sell the alcohol, and comes back with extra fruit preserves and salted meat. John sits on the cot and watches him sort the supplies, hiding everything away expertly. He can't read Bane's face.

“I'm sorry,” he says finally.

“Why?” says Bane, looking up at him sharply. “What did you do?”

“Nothing, I just—he was your friend. I'm sorry for your loss.”

Bane's brow furrows. He still doesn't know what John is apologizing for.

“He was old,” he says. “He was sick. Men die.”

“I know,” John says. “I just ... feel bad.”
“Which is why you should form no attachments down here,” Bane says. “Men die every day. Renard was old. Put it out of mind.”

Every time John thinks he could relate to Bane, that Bane does in fact have a heart and human emotions, he says something like that. The only man down here that Bane likes and respects is dead, and he doesn't care. John lies down on the cot. His head hurts.

“Are you sore today?” Bane asks, apropos of nothing, a few minutes later. “Don't lie,” he adds grimly, and John knows what he's talking about.

“A little.”

Bane exhales sharply through his nose, an impatient sigh. Under his breath, he says something that sounds like, “So difficult to please, habibi.”

That word again. John's a little afraid to ask what it means. He rolls over, and neither of them speak again.

*

Now that John knows how Bane feels about Nadiya, it seems obvious in everything he does. That self-conscious way he has of touching his mask when he talks to her; how he tries to make his voice less grating. John wonders if he even knows he does these things. When Nadiya turns her attention to John, with a kind word or a small gift, Bane watches longingly.

“What do you and Nadiya talk about?” John asks curiously one evening. Bane raises an eyebrow.

“My wife’s inability to stop asking questions,” he says.

John shuts his mouth. He'd forgotten himself. He lies on the cot and rests his head on his folded arms, feeling tired and cold and lonely, and then he feels Bane's hand resting on his shoulder.

“No catty answer?” Bane says. “No sarcasm?”

“No,” says John.

Bane takes his hand away. “Stand up and face me,” he orders.

John does. His misery leaves him dull-witted and empty; he has no energy to argue. Bane takes his jaw and tips his chin up, examining his face closely.

“Did you fight at all, when Amir took you?” Bane asks, surprising him.

“Yes,” John says. His bruised bones, still healing after all this time, give a sudden ache. Smarting over the memory, he says, “One of his friends got my arms behind my back and he started hitting me. He didn't stop even when I could barely move or breathe anymore. I thought he'd kill me. So I stopped fighting.”

Bane huffs into his mask, his grey eyes gentle, for once, and curious. “You never stopped resisting me until now.”

John shrugs, and lets his gaze drop back to the floor. Bane studies him.

Then he swats him, out of nowhere, the way a mother bear would cuff a wayward cub back into line. John ducks and bristles.
“Hey!” he snaps.

“There.” Bane’s eyes crease in a smile. He lays his palm flat against John’s chest while John glares at him. “You see? He left a spark in you after all.”

“It doesn't matter,” John forces out. “I'm not going to stand up to you. I'm tired, Bane.”

Bane pats his chest and lets his hand drop. “The first time I met you I saw the fire in you. It's why I wanted you.” He glances over to the other cell, where all is quiet. Talia and her mother aren’t awake yet. Bringing his gaze back to John's face, Bane says quietly, “You reminded me of her.”

That's why Bane took him. He never had a bedslave, but he wanted John, because John reminds him of Nadiya. John sits on the cot. Bane sits down next to him, uninvited.

“You like her,” John says.

“You should have seen her when she first came here,” Bane says, staring past John at something else. “She was passionate and angry. Full of spirit, like you were. And beautiful,” he says, his voice softening. “I had never seen a woman. I had no memories of my mother or the woman who nursed me before I came here. They put her in the cell next to mine. They put her in the cell next to mine, and I thought she was the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on.”

“You didn't wear a mask then,” John guessed.

Bane looks at him, eyes narrowing, and John senses he's playing with fire. He moves away a bit.

“No,” Bane says coolly. “I kept to myself. Men hung around outside, before there were curtains, to leer at her and reach for her through the bars. She stared them all down proudly. We didn't speak, not until a month or so had gone by. The doctor used to bring her supplies every other day, thinking she couldn't manage them. He forgot one day—drunk, and sleeping off morphine. He wouldn't come for days. She shouted for him, she said he was killing them, she needed water ...

“I still had two bottles left. I rolled one under the bars for her. She turned to me—she was grateful—but before she could say thank you, she saw my face, and she flinched. She was afraid of me. I had never ...”

Bane trails off for a moment, seeking the right words. He finally says, “I had never felt shame before.”

“You don't have to be ashamed,” John says.

“I know that I'm not ... pleasing to look at, like you,” Bane says slowly. “I know what I am. I've seen it reflected in your face. That first time, when Amir tried—and I stopped him—you were glad, just for a second; and then you looked at me, and you were frightened. You were more frightened of me than of him. I was angry in that moment—then and every time after that when you looked at me and were afraid. The only person who has never flinched from me is Talia.”

“I was afraid of you after that because you raped me.” John's voice is hoarse. “Not because of what you look like.”

“I hear what they call me down here,” Bane says, breathing hard now. “The monster. The devil. The hideous one. Too many times I've watched Nadiya turn away from me. She could never love me even if she wasn't still in love with her husband. I claimed you because you reminded me of her; but I would never let myself love you only to watch you pull away from my touch, like her. You have feared and hated me as long as you've known me, and I ... encouraged you. I punished you for my own repulsiveness.”
John takes this in. He feels queasy. “You could have been nice to me. You didn't have to make me hate you.”

“Yes, I did,” Bane says. “I know what I am.”

“Thinking you look like a monster doesn't mean you have to act like one.”

“If I hadn't claimed you, it would have meant watching Amir and his companions abusing you until you died,” Bane says. The edge leaves his voice. “I had to have you, and I knew it meant taking you against your will. And I knew you would hate me for that, no matter what else I did.”

It's true. John would have rejected any form of niceness—and maybe he did, more than once—and he can even kind of understand what Bane means about not being able to watch his every effort be greeted with hatred. He remembers the second time Bane fucked him, when he told John to sleep in the bed for warmth, and how he'd responded.

“Why be nice to me now?” John croaks.

“Because now you think I'm the same as the animals who brutalized you,” Bane says. The stiffness leaves him. “I can handle being hated by you. But I can't stand to see you broken.”

He reaches out cautiously, and when John doesn't move, he runs a hand through John's hair. John refuses to shiver.

“You ...” He has to force the words out of his throat. “You have to be careful. You should act like them when we're around other men. When you pounced on that guy for hitting me, you should've pretended to be mad at me, too.”

He sees no surprise in Bane's face, and realizes—Bane knew this all along. He just didn't want to act out his mastery over John if it meant crushing John's spirit even more. There are so many facets to this man, it makes John's head spin. He doesn't know what to think anymore. But he thinks he's beginning to understand.

“We'll both be careful,” Bane says, skimming his fingers down to John's lips. He pulls his hand away. “I wish things were different. But I have never regretted taking you.”

He turns away, like that's it, conversation over, like he's just resigned to John's hatred for the rest of their time down here. But John is tired of hating him. He's known that for a while.

They can faintly hear Nadiya and Talia getting up in the next cell; lamplight flickers under the curtain. Bane looks up toward their cell and just then, for the first time, John feels sorry for him. Bane, the man who has never been wanted, who thinks of himself as a monster. It strikes John that he's probably never even seen his own reflection; outside of rusty knife blades, all he has to judge his own appearance by is the reactions of others. He thinks he's repulsive.

Before he can get up, John touches his arm. He turns, and John screws up his courage and lurches forward to press a kiss to the shroud, right where he knows Bane's ravaged mouth is. It's swift, just a brush of lips against cloth, and then John is sitting back, heart fluttering anxiously. Bane is dumbstruck for a moment.

“Don't—” His voice is gravel. He breathes hard. His eyes say that he's angry, but John isn't afraid. “Don't ever do that.”

“I'm sorry,” John says. But he's not, not really.
A newcomer takes Renard's cell. He's of a similar build to John, lean and wiry, but tough-looking enough that no one is sure what to make of him for the first couple days. It's a dangler from the bottom of the prison food chain who is the first to accost him, wanting the gold band he wears around his finger. The stranger kills him at once and without preamble.

Normally there would be swift retribution to follow, and in fact for the next several days men seem to be watching Bane closely. In this place, Bane is something of a town sheriff, there to restore balance when a man moves up the hierarchy too quickly, and it's known that he was friendly with Renard. But Bane has no quarrel with the man, and the victim has no friends who are willing to make noise about it. The stranger henceforth moves unmolested through the pit, and is allowed to keep the cell.

"Why didn't I just kill someone on my first day?" John says when Bane reports this to him. For answer, Bane's eyes crinkle in a smile and he ruffles John's hair.

He seems to dwell on it afterward, though. For an entire morning he plays with his lengths of string while John reads the new book (A Christmas Carol) on the bed. Bane joins him for a nap around noon, lying on his back with John between his legs, upper body resting on Bane's stomach and chest. John likes this attitude because it isn't confining; and when he tilts his ear to Bane's shirt, he can hear the quiet noises of his stomach and the steady thumping of his heartbeat, sounds that lull him to sleep. Sometimes Bane sleeps when they lie like this and sometimes he doesn't, but he usually lets John rest. Today, however, he lets John doze for only half an hour or so before rousing him suddenly.

"You need to learn to fight," he says.

John blinks and squints at him doubtfully. "Isn't that what you're here for?"

"I can't always be at your side. You should learn to defend yourself. Get up."

Thus John's lessons in self-defense begin. The first thing he learns is that Bane is a terrible teacher. Nobody ever taught Bane to fight, so he has no wisdom to impart. Everything he learned was self-taught through brutal necessity. He's no good at explaining what he wants, and on top of that he's impatient with John and easily frustrated. For John's part, he already knows a little self-defense from the academy, and he's been in plenty of brawls as a kid. He's never fought for his life, though, not the way Bane is trying to teach him, and he can't make himself attack Bane with nothing held back, the way Bane wants. They're both nursing some lasting injuries, and John winces every time Bane connects with his tender spots. The result is that by nightfall, they're both annoyed with each other and sick of the lessons. Talia jumps up and down on the cot in their cell, watching.

"Me now," she calls to Bane. "Teach me. I'll fight you!"

Bane turns, scoops her up and slings her over his shoulder. She pummels his back with her little fists and kicks him enthusiastically. He sets her back down with an exaggerated wince.

"This one is a fighter," he rumbles, putting a hand on her head. "She may stay."

"That means you leave, John," Talia says spitefully. She's entered a possessive phase recently, and seems jealous of all the time John gets to spend with Bane. John can't really blame her for being resentful; Bane was hers first.
“Talia, hush,” Nadiya says good-naturedly in the other cell. “John, come here. These are for you.”

She's made him socks, to keep his feet warm at night. “You just made my day,” John tells her earnestly, sinking onto the chair to pull them on and nurse his bruises. She smiles one of her enigmatic little smiles.

“We match,” Talia says, jumping off the cot and showing John her socked feet.

“Our are next,” Nadiya says to Bane. “Why are you hitting your husband?”

Bane explains in Arabic. By the sounds of Nadiya's response, she doesn't approve. They start bickering. John leaves them to it and sits on the bed, and Talia climbs into his lap.

“Tell me Shrek again,” she says, her jealousy forgotten.

“But you know how it ends.”

“I know, but I like how you tell it.”


She gets comfy in his lap. “Deal.”

He only gets partway in when Bane leaves the bars, disgruntled, and picks Talia up.

“John needs to sleep now,” he says, carrying her back to Nadiya's cell. “He's very tired.”

“I want to sleep with you,” Talia's protests carry back to John. “Why can't I sleep in your bed?”

John is tired. He crawls under the blankets. When Bane joins him, John is feeling slightly less bitter toward him. Then Bane rolls him onto his back and climbs over him. He's predictably hard against John's thigh.

John bites his tongue to keep from complaining. He can't think of any protest that won't annoy Bane. So he swallows his objections and works a hand into Bane's pants, finding the familiar weight and heat of him. Bane moves the blankets around to create a cocoon of warmth, and growls with pleasure when John starts jerking him quickly.

It's not bad, this, not unlike the way he used to touch himself back in Gotham, although the angle's different. All he can think when he wraps his hand around Bane's sizeable girth is how grateful he is that Bane isn't fucking him, and that makes it easier, too. It's over quickly; as always, Bane can't help losing patience and just rutting against John's thigh until he comes. They curl up around each other afterward, and he strokes John's hair until they both fall asleep, all traces of carnal aggression simply vanished, like the daylight from the pit.

*

In the morning, as soon as it's warm enough to leave the bed, Bane drags John out for more lessons. John refuses to argue with him—he understands very well that not resisting, whatever the case, will make his life that much easier. He's still sore from yesterday, though, and half a step behind Bane.

“Concentrate,” Bane snaps. “Why is this so difficult? Hit me.”

He goads John and leaves more bruises on him, until John's old anger is simmering under his skin.
He balls up his left hand into a fist. When Bane moves to cuff him again, John ducks his fist and swings at Bane's ribs, which he knows are still bruised.

Bane moves with unreal speed, catching John's fist in his hand and wrenching. There's a dull popping sensation in John's wrist as it's bent back, and then he's shaking free and retreating as fast as he can. The backs of his knees hit the cot and he falls on his ass, clutching his arm tight in his right hand.

“Are you hurt?” Bane asks, loosening his stance, when John doesn't get up.

“No,” John says through gritted teeth. Sickening pain radiates from his wrist all the way up his arm and tears squeeze out from the corner of his eyes. After a second he's not sure why he lied, and he says, “Yeah.”

“Let me see.”

Bane reaches, and huffs when John hunches protectively over his arm. He takes a seat at John's side and pulls John's hand away forcefully. John gasps softly, rocking back and forth. He thinks he might pass out when Bane presses a thumb to his wrist.

“Doctor,” Bane says decisively. He pulls John to his feet. “Come. We'll get it bound.”

“No more self-defense lessons,” John says, panting harshly. “Please.”

Bane grunts and pulls him along.

For once the doctor is up and cognizant. A trio of other older men are sitting by his cell and passing a bottle back and forth; they watch with interest as Bane hauls John past.

“Hasn't learned not to scream when he's fucked yet,” one observes. The others nod gravely; one adds, “Poor boy.”

The doctor examines John's wrist carefully and then confers with Bane. What follows seems to be an argument. The doctor is shaking his head, spreading his hands. Finally Bane snorts and turns away.

“Stay,” he says to John. “He'll splint your hand for you. I need to find payment.”

“Sure,” John says wearily, not quite registering. All his focus is on not throwing up. He takes a seat, and Bane leaves. The doctor starts rummaging among his supplies.

“Won't sell his wife's mouth to fix his broken bones,” one of the older men comments. “Always was a selfish bastard.”

“You, boy,” another addresses John. “Is it true what they say about your master?”

“I don't know,” John says. His wrist feels hot and swollen and he wants to lie down. “What do they say?”

They exchange glances among themselves, murmuring. In English, the man says: “You don't know? You don't hear?”

The doctor brings out a splint and starts wrapping John's wrist, making him wince. Every movement sends a wave of nausea and pain over him. He ignores the men, until one of them finally mutters:
“Possessed by demons.”

“Yes,” another says promptly. “He can kill a man by putting the evil eye on him.”

“Broke Amir's arm once without even moving. I was there.”

“They say he turns into a devil when he ruts you,” the third man adds. “With genitals like a big bull. Not man. I seen it happen.”

One of them spits on the floor and says darkly, “He's a devil, all right.”

Vaguely John remembers Amir's friends mocking him about being fucked by a monster. They'd had words for Bane, too, words in other languages that John didn't know. He's pretty sure some of them meant “devil”. Part of him, the part not tired and sore, wants to be amused; but mostly he's just tired.

“He's not a devil,” he says. “He's just a man.”

Bane returns, and the three men fall silent so quickly that Bane casts them a cool glance, making them squirm. John wonders how many times that must happen in a day, him walking up to some group and knowing by their abrupt silence that they've just been talking about him. Every man down here respects Bane—but it must have been a very lonely existence, before Nadiya came along. John wonders when Bane became a man and not a monster in his mind; a person to be sympathized with, instead of feared.

Bane gives the doctor a half-empty bottle of liquid whose fumes smell like turpentine. The doctor accepts this gladly. When Bane makes another request, the doctor shakes his head and holds out a hand. With a hateful glare, Bane slaps a box of matches onto his palm. The doctor pockets it and retreats into his store, then returns with something which he places very gingerly in Bane's hand.

“These are precious,” Bane says to John, a trace of bitterness in his voice. “They will numb the pain. Don't waste them.”

He tips onto John's right hand five little pills. Ibuprofen. The same kind John could walk into any pharmacy in Gotham and buy. John swallows his disappointment. It's more than he got when his arm was broken (probably because he did that to himself).

“Thanks,” he says.

“Thank Nadiya,” Bane says. “The matches were hers.”

With John's wrist wrapped up in a splint, he's led back to Bane's cell and allowed to lie down. He swallows two of the pills and saves the rest. Bane sits on the edge of the cot and examines the splint thoroughly, turning John's arm this way and that.

“The doctor said it's not a bad sprain,” he says. “It should heal within several weeks.”

“That's good, I guess.”

Bane drops his wrist. Dryly, he says, “However will you please me now?”

John could point out that he's right-handed, but he thinks Bane knows that. He probably means that John won't be able to switch hands, which he always has to at some point, when the right starts cramping viciously. He thinks of what he knows about Bane, how much he enjoys taking pleasure in John and how, despite that, since recovering him from Amir, he's always waited for some signal from John before asking anything of him.
“I could use my mouth,” John offers.

He knows Bane wasn't thinking that. But the second he says it, he can tell how much Bane likes that idea.

“Yes,” Bane says, seizing onto it. “Do that. Yes. I want your mouth.”

“No?” John says doubtfully. Bane hesitates.

“No,” he says. “Go to sleep.” He touches John's mouth with his thumb, already thinking about it. “Then I'll have your mouth.”

John smiles against his thumb. “Okay,” he says. He likes the thought that he has this small measure of control over Bane, the ability to put an idea in his head and make this happen now so that Bane can't surprise him later, when he's not ready for it.

He dozes most of the day, lightly and fitfully because of the pain in his wrist. Bane is sometimes there when he wakes, sometimes gone. He opens his eyes in the afternoon and Bane is watching him sleep.

“Hi.” John yawns. “Give me a minute, okay?”

Bane sits on the cot and watches while John stretches and takes another pill, just one. He's forcing himself to be patient, John can tell. Bane is the least patient person he knows. He's already mostly hard under his pants.

John pushes and pulls at him until Bane is reclined on the cot. When they used to do this, Bane would sit on the edge of the cot with John kneeling between his legs, but John doesn't want that. He takes Bane's cock from his pants and starts stroking.

“Don't move,” John says. “I'll stop if you move.”

Bane's eyes narrow, and John knows he doesn't like to be told what to do. Before he can tell John off, John ducks his head and starts lapping at the shaft in front of him. It twitches, swelling, under his tongue, and he tightens a hand around the base.

He's had more practice at this since the last time. Bane was never exactly tolerant of John's inexperience, but he was a saint compared to Amir and his friends. With them John had to learn to stifle his gag reflex fast or face the beating that would follow, and he knows a couple little tricks now. He starts slow, though, just trying to steel himself before he takes the plunge. He breathes through his nose. The smell of Bane is pure musk, almost overwhelmingly male—but it's not bad.

Bane's big, but he's not the size of a bull. John can wrap his lips around him, can get about half of Bane's cock in his mouth before it starts to feel choking. He sucks and laps and keeps his teeth carefully tucked behind his lips. Amir only had to threaten once to rip all his teeth out; then he learned fast.

He's not thinking about Amir, though. Bane is quiet under him, not pushy, not forcing his way into John's throat. He runs a hand through John's hair but doesn't grip. And he doesn't move his hips. He lets John warm up to the task, and once he has, John gives it his all, trying to get Bane off quickly. He tongues salty-sweet precome from the slit, and doesn't find it so repulsive anymore. When he latches his lips around Bane's cock and swipes his tongue right under the head, he hears something that sends a tiny thrill through him: a soft, rumbling groan in Bane's throat.

Just before he comes, Bane's fingers wind into John's hair. He rumbles again and lifts his hips off
the cot, and then he's flooding John's mouth, almost too quickly for John to swallow it all. He gags slightly, pulling off, and a little bit of come escapes from the corner of his mouth. He wipes a hand over his mouth self-consciously, eyes watering.

He's ready to lie down again—now that he's not focused on Bane, the pain is coming back—but Bane sighs, unexpectedly, and brings both hands to John's face. John looks up at him, and they lock eyes for a minute. Bane's gaze is searching. He's hard to read. Sometimes his expression is plain in his eyes, even with half his face hidden, but sometimes, like now, John can't see anything in his eyes but a black, bottomless intelligence. Then he sees why men find it hard to look Bane in the eyes.

Finally Bane lets him go. He rolls out of bed, tugs his pants up.

“Does your hand hurt?” he asks.

“Yeah,” John says. “It's okay, though. I sprained it once before, when I was a kid.”

“I didn't mean to do that.”

“I know,” John says. “It's what you were trying to teach me, right? To react without thinking.”

“That's right,” Bane says.

He hesitates for a long moment. John picks himself up, scrubs a hand over his mouth again. Then Bane sits down at his side.

“You can't give up on learning to fight,” he says in a low, fierce undertone. “You can't.”

John shakes his head. “No. That's why I'm the wife and you're the boss. Amir beat the shit out of me. You sprained my wrist without even thinking about it. I'm not fast or strong enough for this place.”

“You must be,” Bane says. He puts a hand on John's knee and squeezes hard, startling John. “It's the most important thing, John.”

“Why?” John demands. Bane doesn't answer. Annoyed, John says, “Just forget it. This is what I have you for. You're not going anywhere. Right?”

“No,” Bane answers, finally. He takes his hand away. “None of us are going anywhere.”

* Talia is content when John is sent to the corner to do some painful stretches for his wrist. It means she gets to monopolize Bane's time while she's with them.

“Are you the best fighter, Bane?” she asks from her perch atop his shoulders while he walks around the cell.

“Yes,” he says simply.

She hums. “Are you better than ... my father?”

“I don't know,” says Bane. “I haven't met him.”

“Are you better than John?”
“Yes. Much better.”

“Hey,” John says from the corner. He's inclined to be a little petulant when his wrist hurts this much.

Talia giggles and pulls Bane's hood off. She pets his hair backwards with both hands, making it stick up in tufts. He looks, suddenly, so much less intimidating than usual, and John almost smiles.

“Am I a better fighter than John?” Talia asks.

“You are as good as each other,” Bane says solemnly.

“Come on,” John complains. “Give me a little credit.”

Bane quirks an eyebrow upward and his eye creases a bit, hinting at a lopsided smile. Between that and his cowlicks, he looks, for one shocking second ... handsome. Normal, at ease. It makes John want to make him smile like that more often.

Talia squirms to be let down, so Bane puts her on the bed. She holds up her fists. “Give me a fight lesson, like John.”

Bane obliges, showing her how to hold her fists and throw a punch. He's a lot more patient with her than he is with John. John watches them, nursing his wrist a bit now that Bane's too distracted to bark at him for not stretching. He thinks he's pinned down Talia's new phase: she's got a little-girl-crush on Bane. He can't take it personally. It's kind of cute—and it connects her to other kids her age. It's something normal, in this hell.

She jumps up and down, lobbing punches at Bane, but she's soon out of breath in the cold air and she starts coughing. Bane scoops her up.

“Time for you to go back to your mother.”

“But I want to sleep in your bed!” she protests, all the way to Nadiya's cell. “Why does John get to and me not?”

John takes the opportunity to crawl back into bed. When Bane joins him, he reaches to smooth out Bane's hair for him, but Bane pulls away and does it himself.

“How is your wrist?”

“Getting better,” John says, even though he truthfully has no idea. Today the stretches just made him want to scream instead of cry, so that's probably better.

The pain keeps him up at night, though. Bane falls asleep much faster than him tonight, and John lies awake in the dark for a long time, listening to Bane's steady breathing behind him. It's cold and his wrist hurts. These quiet moments are the only times he lets his thoughts turn to Gotham. He wonders if anyone misses him, if his instructors questioned why he stopped showing up to classes, or if they know about Interpol showing up at his apartment. He wishes he'd treated his last girlfriend better. He can't even remember her name, whether it was Melanie or Melody. And he wonders how the boys' home is doing. He misses those kids.

Bane wakes in the middle of the night. John's not sure how he knows it, because Bane doesn't move, and the rhythm of his breathing barely falters. But he's awake, and John feels less alone. Bane's hand moves, skims lightly down John's stomach.

Daringly, John breaks the silence.
“Did I ever tell you about my parents?”

“No,” Bane says, after a minute. He pauses. “You don't tell me anything.”

“Oh. Well,” John says. Bane is quiet at his back, and John takes this as an invitation to continue. “My mom died in a car crash when I was really young. I don't remember her much. Sometimes I think I do, but maybe it's just a fantasy or a dream or something. My dad died a few years later, he owed some people some money... They had no family around, so I got dumped in a foster home pretty much right away. D'you ... know what that is?”

“No,” says Bane, his hand still resting on John's stomach. It doesn't sound like “shut up and let me sleep”, so John keeps going.

“A foster home is where kids go when they don't have homes of their own. It's people who pretend to be your family, or your new mom and dad, even though you had a dad just the week before ... and it means new house, new school, new friends. No friends, really, 'cause they moved me around so much that I was always just the new kid. There were lots of foster homes. Sometimes it turns out that a family wants to keep you, and then you stay with them and don't move anymore, but I guess no one wanted me.

“There were orphanages, too. That's where they put all the kids that don't have anywhere else to go, and families'll come and look around and shop for an orphan of their own, but for a lot of kids it's the end of the line. That's what happened to me. I ended up in a boys' home and aged out. See, people were interested in me at first, because I was young and cut up and foster parents have this complex where they need to fix kids, but I didn't wanna be fixed, I was mad... Everyone's patient at first, but then the sympathy dries up and they just wanna know why you're so angry, only they use words like resistant and oppositional. So no one wanted me. I aged out and then I took care of myself.”

The silence that follows is slightly awkward. He hadn't meant to say so much. Bane has nothing to say in reply, which is no surprise. John lets go of a quiet sigh, hoping that sleep will finally come to him now.

Bane's voice startles him a few minutes later.

“I don't remember my mother,” he's saying. His tone is distant, thoughtful. “They took me away from her.”

“I bet that was rough on her,” John says.

“I don't know,” says Bane. “She might have made them tear me from her arms. She might have handed me to them. I don't know what my father's crime was or who my parents were. There was a woman who nursed me until I could be sent down here; that's all I know of my life outside the pit.”

“But you were a baby,” John says, thinking about it. “Who took care of you?”

“The previous doctor. He kept me fed and clothed. He died when I was young. I have a few memories of him.”

“What was he like?”

“Not cruel. Not kind. Decent.”

“You must have been lonely,” John says. He feels Bane shift behind him.
“I don’t know lonely,” he says. “I have always been alone.”

John opens his mouth to ask another question—he can't remember what, afterward. There's a commotion in the next cell. Nadiya sweeps the curtain aside, bathing their cell in soft light, and calls desperately to Bane. He bounds out of bed, at her side so fast that the cold hits John's back like a blast of arctic wind. He shivers and rolls over. Nadiya's tone is urgent, even panicky.

“What's wrong?” John asks, but they both ignore him, immersed in conversation.

Bane turns suddenly from the bars, goes back to the cot and reaches for a little rock shelf on the wall above it, almost invisible from most angles. The key is kept here when it's in their possession. He finds it by touch and turns away again.

“Wait,” John says, getting up. “What's the matter?”

He gets in Bane's way—not on purpose, the cell is a cramped space—and Bane rounds on him with cold eyes. John feels himself flinch, an instinctive reaction. Bane sees it.

“Talia is ill,” he says, after hesitating a moment. “She fell asleep earlier. Nadiya just went to wake her and found her hot to the touch.”

“Talia's sick?” John says, but Bane is already moving away.

John's brain works rapidly—wasn't there a man coughing at a bonfire a few nights ago?—and he darts into Bane's path again, this time intentionally.

“Don't go in there,” he says quickly. “If it's contagious, she'll give it to you.”

“Move,” Bane growls, sweeping past him. “And speak sense.”

“Talia's sick because she leaves the cell, and she caught it from someone else, but Nadiya's not sick because she has—this thing called immunity, but you don't have that, so—would you listen to me!” John snaps, actually grabbing Bane's arm to stop him outside Nadiya's cell door. Bane snarls, turning on him.

“Don't fight me, John,” he says. “Move.”

“You'll get sick,” John repeats. “Whatever she has, you'll get too. Nadiya and I have been out in the world, we've been exposed to sickness, but you and Talia never have. Your body doesn't know how to fight this stuff off.”

“I can fight anything,” Bane says, offended.

“You can't fight sickness.”

This, at last, is the right thing to say. Bane draws himself up, eyes narrowed, calculating. Finally, he seems to understand what John is saying, and it leaves him visibly torn.

“Heart is thumping. The thought of Bane weakened, vulnerable, is overwhelming. But he knows at once that he's made Bane angry. He hates being told what to do.

“Trust me,” John pleads, just as Bane raises an arm to push him aside.

Bane hesitates.
“You're sure of what you're saying?” he asks John. John nods. “And you—you are safe from this thing?”

“I think so,” John says. “I should be, yes.”

Bane drops the key into his hand. “Then go,” he says flatly.

John turns, almost trembling with relief, and slots the key into the lock. Bane retreats to a safe distance, and John slips inside.

The cheery lamplight, the curtains, are as familiar and comforting as he remembers them. Nadiya is sitting on the bed with Talia, stroking her head over and over, almost crooning with worry.

“Hi, John,” Talia croaks, her eyes unusually bright in a wan face. “My throat is hurty. Where's Bane?”

“Bane's sleeping,” John says. Nadiya looks at him with concern, but he shakes his head. If Talia thinks Bane is available, she'll demand to see him instead of John. “How do you feel? Aside from your throat.”

Talia coughs. “Cold,” she says.

It's warm in this cell. The curtains block a lot of the chill. John touches her forehead. Hot.

“I'll get the doctor,” he says to Nadiya.

He locks the door behind him when he leaves the cell. They have to be careful, so careful, when it comes to the lock. Leaving the door open for just thirty seconds could have fatal consequences. Bane is obsessive; locking the door and hiding the key have become almost the same action now.

“How is she?” Bane demands right away, standing in the doorway of his cell.

“Sick,” says John. “I think it could be the flu. In that case, you have to stay away from her. Understand? The flu spreads like crazy.” And it kills people, he doesn't add. The doctor has medicine, no one will die. Bane paces restlessly outside the cell like a caged tiger when John goes.

There's enough moonlight for John to sprint across the pit to the doctor's cell. Before he gets there, though, out of the shadows, a voice hails him softly. John jumps and swivels around, heart beating fast. It's the new guy, reclining against the wall as if he's been waiting there for John. He repeats himself, using some unfamiliar language. John says nothing.

They stand there and take the measure of each other. The man's eyes are blue and calculating. He lets his gaze travel over John slowly, making John's skin crawl. It doesn't feel like a lustful look—the most accurate comparison would be a full-body x-ray scan, like he can see right through John's skin to the bones underneath.

The next time he speaks, it's in English, in a curiously lilting drawl.

“You belong to the man they call Bane?”

“Yes,” says John, bristling.

That's all the man says. He blinks, and watches John go.

The doctor is unhappy about being woken in the middle of the night. He goes with John when he
understands the trouble, and touches Talia's forehead as well. He examines her perfunctorily and makes a blunt diagnosis. John goes to the bars where Bane is waiting anxiously, and Bane translates: “Just a chill.”

“No,” John says to the doctor. “Not a chill. She needs medicine.”

“She is young,” the doctor says in heavily accented English. “Strong. No medicine. Rest.”

He leaves the cell. He didn't even bring medicine with him, John notes.

Nadiya passes a hand over Talia's head again. Her lower lip trembles. She gets up and walks to the corner next to their cell, where Bane is standing, and sits down. He crouches next to her. She puts her head in her hands and starts weeping.

Talia can hear this. “Mama's sad,” she says in a dull whisper.

“Hey.” John takes Nadiya's place on the edge of the bed, and tucks the blankets around Talia and her stuffed doll a little more firmly. “It's going to be okay.”

Talia looks up at him. Sick as she is, she looks like a copy of her mother for a moment: her mouth quivers just the tiniest bit in her small, proud face.

“Am I bad?” she whispers.


“If I lived with you and Bane, she wouldn't cry,” Talia says.

John can't think what to say. He just presses a hand to her warm cheek, uses his thumb to smudge away the tear that rolls down her face.

“She's crying because she loves you so much,” John says finally. “She's so worried about you. But she doesn't really have to be, because you're going to be fine. Right?”

“I'm tired,” Talia says, a dejected version of her usual self. “I want to go back to sleep.”

“Okay,” John says. Despite the risk, he leans down and gives her a tight hug before he goes.

He locks the door and hides the key himself, because Bane is still crouched next to Nadiya. He's actually dozed off by the time Bane drops onto the cot, making it creak and sink under his weight.


“Nadiya feels terrible guilt for bringing Talia to this place,” he says quietly. “She regrets it every day of her life. You've never seen her weep, because she hides it, but this happens almost every night. I try to comfort her, but nothing I say helps. What is there to say? If she had known she was pregnant she wouldn't have come here. But she didn't know.”

“She didn't have a choice,” says John. “Did she?”

“She asked for this,” Bane says, “to spare her husband's life. Her father would have put him to death. She took his place.”

He falls silent, perhaps contemplating how anyone could love another person that much. Then he says, more troubled than John has ever seen him, “I don't know what she'll do if Talia dies.”

“Talia will get better,” John says. “The doctor said so.”
“Yes,” says Bane, with a distracted air.

“Just make sure you stay away from her. If you get sick too, it'll ...”

“I know,” Bane says. “I have seen plagues before.”

Plague. The word sends a chill down John's spine. He lies back down with Bane, and can't help but think: *What will any of us do if Talia dies?*

* 

Within a few days Bane is coughing. John holds out hope at first, thinking that the shroud which covers his mouth and nose must offer some protection; but his hopes are dashed.

His own throat feels scratchy, sore when he swallows for a couple of days, but it passes. His body has the resources to fight illness off. Bane has no such luck. He stubbornly tries to hide it, but living in such close quarters with John, it's impossible to hide a cough forever. He winces every time, touching a hand to his ribs, and John wishes he could somehow make it better.

The doctor has his hands full when the sickness spreads around the pit. He's careful about who he gives medication to: Bane receives several doses, but others are denied. The doctor is paid good money to keep men alive down here, but he only has so many supplies. He serves those who are young and strong, most likely to live—but he continues to pass over Talia, who is only getting worse. No one up above knows about Talia: he has no reason to waste medicine on her when it won't serve him.

“You can't give your drugs to Talia,” John tries to reason with Bane. “The dose could be too strong for her, she's little. And what if you die, Bane? What would the three of us do?”

Bane ignores him and tells Nadiya to halve the dose for Talia. John has no heart to continue arguing with him: every feeble cough from the next cell is a spike in his heart, and Bane isn't so bad yet, after all. John finds him standing in the doorway of the cell one morning, arms folded over his chest, glaring out.

“That man is hanging around,” he rumbles. John joins him, peers out. Light is trickling into the pit; it's only just starting to warm up. “The new one.”

“Yeah,” John mutters. “He asked me about you the other day.”

Bane bristles. “He did? What did he say?”

“He just wanted to know if I belong to you. I said yes.”

Bane growls lowly in his throat. “If he wants you, let him try to take you,” he says. “Let him try.”

John tugs at his arm. “Don't let him see you coughing.”

They retreat into the cell, and Bane puts his arms around John from behind, possessive.

“I will never let anyone take you from me again, do you know that?” he says.

“Yeah,” John sighs, leaning into him. “I know.”

Bane presses his face to John's nape. He shifts, and John feels Bane's arousal, hard against his thigh.
“I want to fuck you again,” Bane says. “Now. Is that—acceptable?”

John takes a deep breath. It's Bane. He feels ... relatively safe with Bane. He reminds himself of the promise he made when Bane got him back. He's not going to fight. He can go along with this mock concession to his nonexistent boundaries.

“Yeah,” he says.

Bane is slower to get going than usual; but once he presses his way into John, it's like nothing is wrong at all. It goes about as well as last time. He takes John from behind, like he used to, so John can spread his legs apart to try and make room for him; but it's still awkward. Bane is too impatient, doesn't understand why John is so tense when he, Bane, is trying so hard to be gentle with him, and John can't explain it himself. All he knows is that panic grips him and holds fast whenever Bane's hips stutter, whenever his grasp on John's hips turns a little bit tighter. He's afraid of being hurt again. He's afraid that Bane won't be strong enough to fight when the new guy comes around to take John away. He bites his arm to hide his fear, which burgeons so hotly in his chest that his eyes leak. He wishes he hadn't agreed to this.

And then Bane notices. He tips John's face away from his arm and stops moving.

“Am I ... hurting you?”

“No,” John gasps. “No. Doesn't hurt. I just—” Something's wrong, he can't say. The panic blots out everything. “Keep going,” he says, and Bane—

A powerful sense-memory rolls over John, wracking his body with shivers. It's the cushion-room in the tunnels, where Amir and his friends had lived and slept and fucked John, where they'd hit him and abused and choked him. He can't breathe, he's choking now. He can smell the place; he can feel himself being pressed down into the pillows, his ribcage crushed under their weight; can feel dirty hands on his thighs, on his cock. He doesn't even see Bane's cell for a minute: he's there. —Bane pulls out.

It's Bane who brings him back. John blinks and slowly comes to realize that he's grinding his teeth so hard that the tears are leaking down his face, and Bane is running a hand through his hair over and over, grounding him. John's pants have been pulled up to his hips. He takes deep breaths and concentrates on Bane's soothing hand. This has never happened in Bane's bed before. He breathes, until he feels safe again.

“You should have said no,” Bane growls, taking his hand away.

“I thought ...” John gulps, struggling to find the right words. “I thought ...”

“You think I'm like the animals who defiled you, just because I wish to take pleasure in your body?”

“No!” John protests. “Look, I'm not ... I know the difference between you and them. They were monsters. You're not.”

Bane blinks at him. Still annoyed, John thinks; and then Bane gathers John in his arms and holds him. Awkwardly, because he doesn't know how to give a hug, but he presses John to him and strokes his hair again.

“How you frustrate me, habibi,” he murmurs.
John buries his face in Bane's shirt and takes deep, gulping breaths, letting Bane's familiar scent wash away the stink of the tunnel in his nose. His heart slows from its galloping pace. He can't believe Bane stopped in the middle of fucking him. He wouldn't have thought it possible for anything to stop Bane, he's so single-minded in his pursuits. John knows he's dangerous, knows that Bane has committed countless crimes against him, but he clings to Bane like a child for a full minute and is reassured.

Bane only lets him go when he has to cough. It's a wracking fit that doesn't let him go until he's groaning, nursing his ribs weakly.

“Go,” he wheezes, pushing John away. “Find out how Talia is.”

John obeys. Nadiya is awake, of course; she's barely slept. She looks pale and drawn when John talks to her. She shrugs at his inquiry.

“No better,” she says dully. “No worse.”

“The drugs aren't helping?”

Nadiya is quiet, gazing into space. Then she says, “I made broth. There is some for Bane.”

“Thanks,” says John.

She fetches a bowl, pushes it under the bars. When John returns to Bane, though, he's fallen asleep, lying on his back. John sets the bowl down on the floor, then climbs into bed with him and settles himself between Bane's legs. When he rests his head on Bane's chest, he can hear the congested wheeze of each breath. He rubs Bane's chest wordlessly, knowing that it's going to get worse from here.

* 

Talia gets better. Bane gets worse.

For the first time in their relationship, John finds himself taking care of Bane. Like Talia, Bane is confined to bed when the exhaustion catches up with him. John spares precious water to soak cold cloths in an attempt to bring his fever down. Bane shivers constantly and complains of pains in his joints and his back. He wants to be out of bed, maddened at his own helplessness, but fatigue drags him back down every time. Out in the pit, the first men start dying.

But Talia is recovering. She goes for little shaky walks around the cell, and Nadiya laughs tearfully and sweeps her up in her arms. She sits in the corner with Talia cradled in her lap like an infant, so that Talia can see John.

“Tell me the fish story,” Talia croaks, reaching a little hand through. John catches and squeezes it, so relieved he could cry.

“Finding Nemo? You bet.”

She wants to see Bane, more than anything, but it's not possible. For one thing, the doctor has the keys to the cell, so that he can make checks on Talia now and then. For another, there's no way John would open that door without Bane at full strength, just in case. The only reason men don't hang around the cell is that Bane lives next-door. Now Bane is weak, and even though half the prison is too, John's not taking chances. He tells her Bane is tired.

“If I could, I would come and take care of him,” Nadiya says, when Talia has fallen asleep in her
lap. “Like he's taken care of my child.”

John wishes she could help, too.

Anxiety itches at him, making him uncomfortable in his own skin. He hates this feeling of aloneness. He needs to feel that Bane's got his back. No one has shown interest in him since Bane's public demonstration with Amir—but he can feel the watchful eyes of the newcomer on their cell. John hates him, wishes the plague would kill him. He's a much different person than he was when he arrived here.

He nurses Bane the best he can. He tips water down his throat, tries to bring his temperature down. All his efforts only seem to annoy Bane, who has always been self-sufficient, but he doesn't stop John. He knows he needs help. He sleeps constantly, and wakes constantly so he can cough.

He reaches the same grim plateau Talia did—no better, no worse. John sneaks out one night, heart pounding in his ears, and steals a bottle of alcohol from a sick man's cell. It's a desperate gamble—one of his foster fathers made him gargle vodka for a sore throat once, swearing that the booze would kill off the bacteria in his throat. John has severe doubts, but he'll try anything. Bane uses the drink to put himself to sleep, and lapses into deep unconsciousness, for once undisturbed by coughing.

It could be John's imagination, but he thinks Bane starts to turn the corner after that one good night's sleep. He waits with bated breath to see results before he gets his hopes up, but Bane seems a little less feverish, isn't shivering so much the next day. Maybe all he needed was a good solid rest, some time to let his unbreakable body devote itself to eradicating this illness. Soon he gets out of bed, pacing around restlessly. He has to sit down every few minutes, and his cough is as bad as ever, maybe even worse, but John is tentatively hopeful.

Nadiya is cheerful when he tells her this.

“Don't worry about your husband,” she says, utterly confident in Bane's strength. “Nothing will ever bring him down.”

“Yeah,” John says, plucking at his sleeve a bit, and the splint on his wrist. Soon he won't have to worry about other men coming in to steal him while Bane recovers. He'll just have to worry about Bane wanting to fuck him again, or his mouth. It puts a sour tinge on his mood. It'll never end for him down here.

He takes a deep breath, forcing himself to be positive. Bane healthy is so much more preferable to Bane sick, or to any other guy.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” he says.

“Yes?”

“This word... habibi. What does it mean?”

Nadiya raises her eyebrows. “It means 'beloved',” she says.

John looks up at her. Her dark eyes are glimmering with some playful secret. She smiles, and he can see just how easy it would be to fall in love with her.

“Now who's been calling you that, John?” she teases.

He starts to smile, and then his spine prickles. Living in the pit has sharpened his senses to danger.
He gets up. “I'll be right back.”

It's the new guy, standing patiently outside their cell. For one bizarre second John thinks he's like death, hovering ever closer and closer, finally here to take Bane away. In the end, this won't be an inaccurate comparison.

John rubs at his wrist, then summons up his nerve and demands, “What do you want?”

The man puts his head to one side. In the same gentle lilt, he says, “What is your name, boy?”

“No,” John says, heart thumping. “You're in our house. You tell me your name.”

If the man is surprised to find that John has claws, he doesn't show it. Men are hovering around in the fringes of John's vision, waiting anxiously to see what will happen.

“The police called me Deadshot for my crimes,” the man answers. “I've heard that your master Bane is twice as strong as any man, is that true?”

“And three times as fast,” John says recklessly. The other nods, satisfied.

“Then,” he says, “I wish to meet him.”

The whispering men, excited and fearful at the prospect of blood, fall suddenly silent. John turns to see Bane standing in the door of the cell: gaunt and weary, but on his feet, exuding quiet force.

“You don't know what it is you ask for,” Bane warns the other man, pushing John back a step with his arm as he comes forward.

“You've been unwell, brother,” the man observes, taking Bane in with those penetrating blue eyes. “We can do this another time, if you choose.”

“Now is good,” Bane growls.

He moves forward purposefully, not wasting any time. As soon as he's close he throws a vicious punch, one that would end a fight with any other man: but Deadshot is ready for him. He grabs Bane's arm and sends him stumbling past, something John has never seen happen. As soon as Bane turns, the man hits him and is gone.

Bane is fast, but this man is even faster. He's like smoke: constantly out of reach, there one moment and gone the next. Bane's shroud flutters in and out with his breath as he pursues his prey, growing visibly angrier. He's tired and stiff, and this frustration is not helping him. John's nails bite into his palms. He glances over his shoulder and meets Nadiya's eyes through the curtains for a fleeting second, long enough to see her bloodless face.

The man's not just fast, John sees when he lands a blow to the side of Bane's head. He puts all the strength in his body into his fist. Bane staggers, shakes his head muzzily. Blood spots appear on his hood.

“Have you had enough, brother?” the man called Deadshot inquires.

For answer Bane snarls and grabs him by the throat. The man hits him in the face, then ducks out of his grasp, twisting Bane's arm back in the process. He doesn't bother avoiding Bane anymore: he pursues him with the same focused rage that Bane has when he fights. Bane swings at him. Another time, his mind might be clear enough for him to revise his fighting technique; but now he's weary and slow, and he doesn't know how to adapt to an opponent like this when brute strength has served him so well for so long. Deadshot stops playing with him then. He grabs
Bane's arm again, throws him to the ground using his own momentum, and kicks him to roll him onto his back.

He hits the ribs that have already been fractured, by chance. At once Bane groans and curls up, and the stranger drops on him. With an inhuman surge of strength, Bane grabs him and rolls. He's bigger and heavier than the other man; he pins him, gasping in pain, and hits him several times in the face. The stranger scuffles under him, then goes limp. Bane starts to ease his grip. As soon as he does, Deadshot strikes at him, his fist connecting with Bane's side. Bane folds up helplessly around the blow.

The stranger shoves him over and gets up. He kicks Bane once more, in the same spot. The crack of Bane's ribs is crisp and sharp in the cool evening air. Deadshot kicks him again, for good measure. Another crack. Bane drops onto his stomach, heaving raggedly for breath. There's blood on his face, seeping through his clothes, flecking the floor as he gasps.

He's defeated. The men all around them are stunned.

Deadshot steps forward, and something in John snaps.

“Don't!” he begs. He scrambles frantically to Bane's side, wishing he had something, a knife, anything. “God, don't kill him, don't. Please!”

Deadshot looks at him, affecting polite surprise.

“I don't want to kill him,” he says.

“Then what do you want?” John demands, even though he thinks he knows the answer. He feels sick. He stares at the man who is no doubt about to claim him right here, in front of Bane and Nadiya and everyone, and Deadshot stares evenly back, his piercing eyes unlike anything John has ever experienced.

“This,” he says, and he steps very deliberately onto Bane's outstretched hand, breaking his little finger audibly. Bane groans again, pulling his hand to him, blinded by blood.

Deadshot turns and walks away.

In the hush that follows, John drops to his knees at Bane's side, too numb to be relieved. Bane's nose is broken, his ribs, his finger. He lies very still.

“Someone get the doctor,” John says to the crowd. No one budges. Angrily, he shouts, “Come on!”

But no one does. Bane's time as the top dog in the pit has ended. Deadshot's time has begun.
Chapter 3

In this chapter: offscreen character death/suicide, offscreen cannibalism.

* The days that follow are some of the most nervewracking of all John's time in the pit. Bane was defeated. He never thought it would happen again, but it has.

Last time, he'd been taken away and ravaged. This time he doesn't know what to expect. The doctor helps him drag Bane back to their cell and onto the bed, and then John just sits there and watches numbly while the doctor tends to Bane's injuries. He gives Bane a shot of morphine before he leaves, just so that Bane can breathe without crying out in pain.

“How could I lose?” Bane keeps wheezing out. His eyes are red-rimmed and glassy from the drug. “I am stronger than him. Why did I lose?”

It kills John to see him like this—helpless, in pain, and so doped up he can barely think straight. It makes him see Bane in a new light, which stirs up emotions he doesn't know what to do with. He takes Bane's hand and rubs it, trying to comfort him, avoiding his splinted finger. Bane slips into a restless sleep, but John is awake all night, waiting for something that never happens.

He doesn't understand. He doesn't know what Deadshot wanted. He didn't want John, or Bane's cell, or anything. It takes him a few days, during which he hides in the cell all day and stays awake all night, to figure it out.

Everyone is afraid now. That's what Deadshot wanted. It unsettles the entire pit: Bane has been deposed, and there's a new sheriff in town. Nobody knows him well enough to know how to behave under his law. Bane stayed out of prison business, mostly (wisely), only interfering when it concerned him. Deadshot is an unknown variable. He owns the pit now, there's no question. Bane may not have been at full strength, but their fight was more than enough opportunity for Deadshot to show off how fucking fast, how unnaturally savage he is. Men slink around outside his cell like stringy jackals, waiting for a lion to show them to a kill.

John hates him. He hates him more than he's hated anyone since Amir. It shocks him, how much hate is left in him. He's furious at the way Deadshot pounced just when Bane was starting to recover, maddened at the humiliated spectacle he reduced Bane to in front of everyone. This is Bane's prison, and Deadshot's nothing but a scavenger.

But he doesn't want John. That's one good thing. John is afraid to sleep at night—afraid someone will try to claim him, afraid someone will try to finish Bane off—but no one comes for him, at least at first. The strong men mostly have wives, and the weaker ones are too scared of Bane, even in his current state, to invade his cell. Both parties are afraid of Deadshot, and they still don't know if he intends to claim John. So they stay away.

And all day, Bane lies in bed, frozen with pain, hardly able to breathe, let alone cough. He gasps shallowly for breath and waits for his evening morphine shot, because he can do nothing else. He already wants to take Deadshot on again, but there's something there, along with his old ferocity, that John has never seen before: doubt. Bane doesn't know if he can take Deadshot. When he's...
drugged, he mumbles dazedly, “Why didn't he kill me?” And John doesn't know. He doesn't know what to say; and in his heart, he doesn't know if Bane can defeat Deadshot, either.

But he doesn't say so. He curls up on the bed and tucks himself right into Bane's side where it's safest, and he feels like all the knotted-up fear and anxiety and sympathy and worry inside him could crack his chest, too.

* 
At night he tells Talia stories. Nadiya sits nearby, her simple presence a comfort. The doctor comes with morphine in the evening, when he remembers, and that's when Bane sleeps, when he can breathe without pain. It makes Talia restless. She feels abandoned by her constant playmate, and though she'll settle for John, he has to deny her. He doesn't want to explain, but one night she says dully, “Bane doesn't want to play with me anymore.”

She's been quiet this evening, scratching a fingernail aimlessly over the floor while John repeats The Little Mermaid for the hundredth time. Nadiya casts him a meaningful look, and John realizes that maybe in protecting Talia, he's just left her to draw her own conclusions.

“Did I do something bad?” she asks.

“No ... no,” John says firmly. “Bane's ... hurt.” Talia gazes at him with wide, inquisitive eyes, and John swallows. “He got hurt, and it's not safe to play right now. But when he's better—”

“Is it your fault?” she cuts him off.


“Last time he got hurt it was your fault,” she says. She's not a dumb kid; regardless of what Bane and Nadiya told her, she must have made the connection between John being taken away and Bane getting injured. It still stings. She clasps the bars. “I want Bane!”

John glances at the cot. Bane is out to the world, a pathetic broken figure.

“It was no one's fault,” he says to Talia. “We just can't—”

“I wish you never came here,” she spits. She's starting to cry. “I wish it was just me and him, forever.”

“Talia ...”

She retreats back into the cell. She hates it when they see her cry. John feels a little like crying himself.

I want Bane, too.

The next night she wants another story, as if nothing had happened. She doesn't ask about Bane again.

* 
The doctor stops coming with morphine shots. Bane sits on the bed with his back against the wall, fighting his own body for breath.
“How’s it feel?” John asks tentatively, sitting next to him. He feels infinitely more confident when Bane is conscious, upright, talking. He feels safe again, even though it’s a false sense.

“How’s it feel?” John asks tentatively, sitting next to him. He feels infinitely more confident when Bane is conscious, upright, talking. He feels safe again, even though it’s a false sense.

“Like fire,” Bane says. He brings a hand to his mouth to stifle a cough, groaning.

“Nadiya says you have to cough, even though it hurts,” John says. “She said if you don't cough out all the sickness, it'll just stay in there and come back worse.”

“Perhaps I should break your ribs, and see if you feel fit enough to cough,” Bane snaps. Injury makes him petulant, John's learned.

“I'm just saying,” he says, staying passive. “She's a mom. She probably knows this stuff.”

Bane coughs. It makes his eyes water, almost buckles him over, but he does it. He's gasping when he recovers.

“See? Like that,” John says. He puts a hand on Bane's leg and rubs comfortingly. “It'll get easier.”

“You know nothing,” Bane says bitterly. But he doesn't push John's hand away.

He makes the short trip across the cell that evening to see Talia and Nadiya. Nadiya pulls his hand through the bars, clucking over his broken finger. Talia is bursting with joy to see him at last. She tells him everything, all about her sickness, in a stream of mixed Arabic and English, to which Bane listens attentively. John stands in the doorway of the cell, gazing out. Another man, a hulking bully whose wife is never allowed to leave his cell, is standing outside Deadshot's cell across the pit and taunting him. After so much abuse, Deadshot emerges suddenly and silently, like a serpent from its lair. It's the first time John has ever seen him annoyed, or close to it. The man puts up his fists confidently, but Deadshot gives him no chance. He strikes the man once in the face, again concentrating every fibre of strength in his body into his palm, so that the man may as well have been struck with a baseball bat or a crowbar. With a piercing scream, the man falls to the ground, his jaw completely dislocated. Deadshot stalks back into his cell.

The only man he respects down here is Bane. John sees it now. Bane was a worthy opponent: everyone else is a mere annoyance, to be shrugged off like a gnat.

He spends a lot of time watching Deadshot, after that. The man doesn't needlessly make enemies: he's amenable enough to those who are willing to be friendly. Mostly, he keeps to himself. He takes no wife, even though he could have his pick of anyone, including John. He's a puzzle.

Men begin to avoid Bane's cell altogether as he recovers. Bane makes a show of prowling around, joining John at the door to survey the prison with a lofty air, as though nothing happened to him at all. His reputation is so great that it surprises no one to see him up on his feet, as strong and fierce as ever. They don't see how painfully he moves around the cell at night, how much difficulty it gives him just to draw breath.

Deadshot comes to visit them while John is sitting in the doorway one morning, reading a book. John doesn't see or hear him coming. Deadshot addresses him from where he's leaning against the wall next to their cell.

“You've been watching me.”

John startles, and curses himself for it. Deadshot doesn't look annoyed, or amused, or anything. He just looks. In the cell, Bane is sleeping.

“How is your master?” Deadshot asks.
“Fuck you,” John snaps. “He's fine.”

“Tell me something,” Deadshot starts. He reconsiders and says, “What is your name?”

“You tell me yours,” John says boldly. “I'm not calling you Deadshot. I haven't seen you shoot.”

“Fair enough.” Deadshot's eyes flicker down to the book John's reading. *A Tale of Two Cities*, the first book he read when he got here. He barely remembers it; the plot's lost in a haze, wrapped up in his fear from those first days in Bane's cell. Deadshot looks John in the face, wearing a hint of a smile. “Barsad. That is my name.”

“Fine,” John says, not willing to argue it. “It's Blake.”

“Tell me something, Blake,” the other man says. “I know how this place works. I've been watching, too. I know how it is for men like you. It strikes me that another man in your position might use this as an opportunity to murder his master, make it look as though his injuries were the cause, and find himself a new bed to lie in. From what I've heard of Bane, you would do better to give yourself to anyone else. You could simply slip away from him right now, while he heals, and seek protection from a stronger man. But you haven't left his cell. Why?”

“I wouldn't go crawling to your bed if it meant getting a free pass out of here,” John spits out.

Deadshot—Barsad—looks mildly surprised. “I see.”

“No one is stronger than Bane,” John adds after a moment, with less venom. “Not even you. You just caught him on a bad day.”

“Perhaps I should meet him on a good day,” Barsad says unconcernedly. He's already getting up.

“Goodbye for now, Blake.”

John hopes that happens. He really, really does.

*Something funny happens. As Bane recovers, John gradually starts to feel better about life.*

The cold season is fading. His wrist is healing. Bane doesn't like to leave the cell—his pride is as injured as his body—but no one harasses him or John. The superstitions of the other men work to their advantage. They think Bane is invincible, unkillable. They're certain he would rise up to destroy them just like he did to Amir, if they dare to touch John. And—though John would hate to admit that Barsad's presence in the pit is a good thing—no one is certain how to act with Barsad ruling the roost. They can't figure out why he hasn't claimed John for himself yet, and some seem to suspect that even he's afraid of Bane, despite beating him, which increases their own fear.

The result is that the pit starts to become a tolerable hell. The only things that niggle at John are that Talia has to stay locked up in the next cell, and that Bane is subdued, not himself. John never thought he would miss the old Bane—possessive, always-wanting Bane—and it's nice to be curled up in bed with him at the end of the day and know he won't have to face the pressure of making Bane come (it's a small price, sure, but given the choice...). But there are things he misses, all the same. Things he didn't ever think he would miss.

He's dozing next to Bane one morning when a soft *tick, tick, tick* slowly breaks through his unconsciousness. He opens one eye. A rooster is strutting across the floor, exploring their cell, its claws clicking on the stone. It cocks its head and fixes John in a beady eye.
“Bane,” John whispers. No answer. He hates to wake Bane up, knowing it’s the only time he can breathe without pain, but he has to know he isn’t crazy. “Bane!”

Bane goes on sleeping. John gets out of bed and drags the top blanket off, wondering how best to corner the rooster.

“Bane,” he calls again. This time he gets a grunt. “There’s a chicken in our cell,” John whispers.

“That’s good,” Bane mumbles.

John carefully shepherds the rooster into a corner. Its claws scuffle a bit as it tries to find a way out, jerking its head around like a huge pigeon. John can hear other chickens around the pit, cackling as prisoners chase them. He pounces, and bundles the bird up in the blanket as fast as he can. It struggles mightily, with way more power than he expected.

When it goes still, making croaking sounds in the blanket, John informs Bane, “I caught it.”

Bane is asleep again. John hisses at him.

“Bane! I caught the chicken. Now what?”

Bane groans and drags the other blanket over his head. “Kill it.”

Kill it. Okay. John can kill a bird. He feels through the blanket, trying to remember how Bane had killed that last chicken. He’d made it look so simple. John finds the neck, gropes his way along it, using his elbows to keep the rooster tucked in when it starts struggling again.

He ends up laying the rooster’s neck over his leg, then pressing down on its head and body on either side of his knee. It struggles harder, and starts screeching. He leans down harder and harder, whispering “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry ...”

Finally there’s a crack. The rooster goes into convulsions. When it falls still, John cautiously lifts the blanket and looks at it. Its head dangles at the end of a long broken neck. He killed it. Joy rushes through him.

“We got chicken,” he says to Bane, starting to smile.

“Here, John.” Nadiya pushes a curtain aside in her cell, roused by the noise. “I’ll prepare it.”

He’s forgotten about chicken. He could cry from sheer happiness when the smell of roasting chicken starts to fill the pit. His mouth waters fiercely. Bane is tempted out by the smell, his eyes a little brighter. They split the chicken down the middle, but Bane only eats a leg before retreating to bed, leaving the breast and wing for John. The taste is incredible, every bit as good as John remembers. If he were superstitious he would call this a positive omen, a sign that things are turning around, that it’s possible for life down here to be good.

Bane watches him eat. John's surprised at how soon he feels full—this is hardly a feast. He finishes his portion, though, scraping every last bit of meat off the bones, and still wants more. He sits back against the wall, on the bed next to Bane.

“If we ever get to Gotham, we're getting chicken wings every other night,” he says.

What a strange thing to say, he thinks a second later. Even if John could get back to America, he wouldn’t— And he changes his mind mid-thought. He would take Bane with him. Bane and Talia and Nadiya. He’d take Talia to all kinds of parks to feed the ducks, take her to see kids' movies every weekend; dumb things he’s never wanted to do before, just imagining what she would think...
of it all. And Bane, he would learn how to live up above. He would adapt. That's what he's good at. It's in him to be a good, normal person, John knows it. He's the product of his upbringing; he's brutal and violent because he has to be, down here. But up there, he wouldn't have to be. He wouldn't have to defend himself and John with his life. John would teach him how to live.

“That sounds nice,” Bane says simply. To him, Gotham is as tangible as the fairy tales John tells to Talia: not real, but nice to hear about.

John sighs. What's the use in thinking about it? Next to him, Bane fiddles absently with the leg bone in his hands.

“John, I'm sorry,” he says suddenly. John's surprised.

“For what?”

“For—losing to him.” Bane's voice is rougher than usual, like it physically costs him to get the words out. “I've been ... afraid. I don't like it. I'm afraid he might take you away, and I wouldn't be able to ...”

“It's fine.” John stops him by putting a hand on his. “He didn't kill you, that's what's important.”

“Next time I will fight harder to defend you.” Bane clears his throat, starting to fiddle with the bone again. “I didn't think he would ...”

“Bane.” John stops him again, and Bane looks at him. The shroud isn't covering his face—he forgot to pull it back on after eating, maybe.

John leans over, taking Bane's face in both hands. He's not a monster. He's a man with a beating heart, apologizing to John for nearly getting killed. His mouth falls open slightly the moment before their lips connect, and John kisses him.

It takes Bane a second to react. He jerks back with a strangled sound. “John.”

John kisses him again. He wants this. He misses this, being close to another human, being held and wanted. Bane has never experienced that in his life and John wants him to have this. He wants to share in it, too. He tries to coax Bane's mouth open, thinking he'd taste like the chicken they just ate, but Bane doesn't know what to do. He's never been kissed. He pulls away again, and his gravelly voice almost breaks.

“John.”

“What?” John says. He's a little hurt in spite of himself. Bane won't look at him, fumbling to get the mask over his face.

“I don't need you to ... this isn't ...”

“You asked me, one time, what would make me feel good,” John says. “Why can't we try this?”

“I can't.” Bane has a hand pressed to the shroud, as though afraid John will try to tear it off his face. “I can't give you that. No.”

He hates the monster he thinks he is, without that mask. He hates being looked at, let alone touched. John wants to yell at him, shake him, tell him that a little fucking affection is the least he owes John. But forcing him would make him as bad as Bane. He won't put his hands on Bane without permission. He knows how that feels.
“Fine,” he says, stinging. “Whatever you want.”

Bane hesitates. At last, in one jerky movement, he puts his hand on top of John's, like John did to him. When John doesn't pull away, he slides their fingers together tentatively. John squeezes back, just a little, and it feels like they're speaking a whole new language.

* 

John wakes late that night to a cold bed and finds that Bane is sitting next to the other cell, talking quietly with Nadiya. He rolls over and goes back to sleep.

Bane wakes him soon after. It's almost pitch-dark in the cell. Moonlight beams down into the main part of the prison.

“Supplies are here,” Bane says. “I'll get some.”

“I'll come with you,” John says, starting to rise.

“No,” Bane growls, pushing him back down with one hand. “You stay here.”

John sighs. It's probably for the best, but it fills him with anxiety, watching Bane leave the cell by himself. He gets up when Bane is gone and walks over to the door. When Bane approaches the pile of crates, the few men who are there shift uneasily aside to make room for him. Barsad is there, stacking the things he wants into a crate. He looks up at Bane over the pile of crates, and everyone falls silent, watching them. John can't see Bane's face. Barsad just looks at him; then he smirks, picks up his crate, and walks away.

“You frightened your husband today.” Nadiya's voice is close to John's ear. He twists around. She's pushed the curtain aside, barely visible in the dark.

“What, because I tried to—” He flushes and breaks off. “He didn't have to tell you about it.”

“John,” Nadiya says, smiling. “It makes me so happy to see you making peace with him. But remember who he is. He has never been touched by a kind hand in his life.”

“I know. I figured maybe it was time.”

“He doesn't understand,” Nadiya says patiently. “He understands your hatred and your anger, these are things he deserves. Until you came here, he thought all men were like the men in this place. He loves your goodness. But he is afraid to let it touch him. He doesn't know what it means.”

John scuffs a foot over the floor and doesn't speak. What he won't say is that he doesn't know what it means, either. All he knows is that after a year and change in the pit, he's so desperate for a little familiar touching that he wants to scream. He's been sleeping next to Bane every night, and he still feels achingly lonely. There's a loneliness in Bane, too, that calls out to John's soul, makes him want to bridge that gap. But Bane won't let him.

“So I shouldn't do it,” he says finally.

“No, no,” Nadiya says with affectionate exasperation. “You are his beloved, John. You should return as much of his love as you feel like giving, be it all or nothing. I think he will learn from you to be a better man. He already has.”

Right. Bane used to fuck John every day, wake him up from a nap just because he was horny, not
caring that it was still light and men could look in and see how John squirmed in pain on his cock or gagged on it, kneeling between Bane's legs. He used to be a slave. Now he's—not an equal, not down here. Never an equal. But he's found a new place in Bane's regard. He wonders what their relationship would be like, if they got out of the pit.

“He reminds me of my husband,” Nadiya tells him fondly. “Proud and fierce, but he loved passionately.”

“Why do you think your husband hasn't come for you?” John can't help asking.

Nadiya's expression becomes sober, her gaze distant.

“I don't know,” she says. “I can think of only two things. Either he doesn't know I am here—because nothing would stop him from coming—or he is dead. I think he must be dead.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I've made peace with that. One day I will be with my husband again. Every day brings me closer to him. I only wish he had got to meet Talia. He could have taken such good care of her, so much more than I have done.”

“No one could have done better with her,” John says, shocked. “You take great care of her.”

Nadiya shakes her head, her mouth tightening in a frown. “Living in a filthy pit, never feeling sunshine on her bare skin. You know the above world. You know what she is missing. I curse myself every day for having brought her here.”

“It wasn't your fault.”

“I love her more than life itself,” Nadiya continues, “and still half my heart grieves every day for my husband. So you see, Talia would have done better to be with him, even if she had died with him. Better to have lived and died in the world, with a parent who could give her everything, than to suffer down here with me.”

The moonlight glances off her face, and the sorrow in her eyes takes John's breath away. Now he sees: Nadiya is already dead. She died the day she decided her husband was gone. She's just waiting for her body to join her, going through the motions for Talia's sake.

“When you love something, John, let nothing tear you away from it,” she finishes. “Love is the most important thing.”

He swallows thickly. “You mean Bane.”

“Anything,” she says.

“I have to sleep.”

She smiles, reaches through and touches his hand gently. “I know you think I don't understand, John, but I do. I wish I could help you, or make Bane understand you, but I can only tell him what I think. You need to tell him the rest.”

John's head is reeling. He goes back to bed.

*
Bane returns with a black eye.

“Who gave you that?” John asks, rolling over sleepily to face him while Bane stores their new supplies. Bane's lit a candle to see by.

He grunts. “It doesn't matter. He will not make the same mistake again.”

A coil of fear wraps itself around John's heart. He sits up. “You didn't pick a fight with Deadshot, did you?”

Bane snorts, muttering Deadshot under his breath with contempt. “Another man,” he says. Then he adds, “When I'm well, I will kill Deadshot.”

“You can't,” John says. “He's already made friends. There'd be trouble over it.”

Bane rears up, snarling. “You think I can't beat him?”

“No.” John stays calm. He's lived here for over a year; he knows how to handle Bane's moods. “I know you can. You're the strongest one down here. I think he caught you when you weren't ready, and that's why you lost. I know you can kill him, but it doesn't mean you should. Why didn't you kill Amir until you had to?”

Bane subsides. He knows a good point when it's shown to him. He thinks about it, then goes back to stocking supplies.

“Maybe we should get Talia out of her cell today,” John suggests, watching him for any lingering bad temper. “If you've healed enough to start taking on challengers. It's been a while.”

That would make them all feel better. Bane just grunts again.

After a minute, he stops what he's doing and looks at John.

“Did you mean it?” he asks. “Would—kissing make you feel good?”

“I don't know,” John says. “You never really let me get to that.”

“I... want for you to feel good.” Bane's voice has gone rough again, like the words have to be dragged over stone. “I was told there was a way of taking you that would be pleasurable for you, but I don't know how... You still don't like it.”

And I do, he doesn't say.

John hedges. “Yeah. I don't know about that.”

“But kissing. That is what you want.”

John shrugs and looks away, noncommittal.

“You want that, even though...” Bane puts a hand up to his shroud, uncertain.

“You shouldn't listen to what everyone else says about you,” John says, looking back at him. “They say a lot of stupid things.”

“You are beautiful, John,” Bane murmurs. “I can't—”

“Stop.” John takes him by the wrist and pulls his hand away from his face. Bane resists, then gives in. He doesn't budge when John brings his good hand up to the shroud and slowly peels it off
Bane's face.

Bane is still kneeling on the floor, next to the supplies which will go under the cot. It puts him below John, and in a compromising position when John shifts over to line up with him. But he still doesn't move, hardly breathes while John touches his mouth, covering the scar for a moment and thinking what an appealing mouth Bane would have, if not for that obvious mar. It's a thought that surprises even him. John's never paid attention to guys' mouths before. The curve of his lip is almost feminine, though, and John, with a pang of regret, can see why a man in his wrath would want to destroy that beautiful mouth for all others after being spurned.

He takes his hand away. Bane's face is a fixed grimace again. With his thumb he traces the scar's path, almost up to Bane's eye, and—Bane lowers his head, turning his face aside.

“No,” John says. “I want to see you.”

Bane looks up again, eyebrows furrowed, and this time John takes his face in both hands. He leans down, careful to avoid Bane's healing nose, and presses his mouth to Bane's, covering the scar where it twists Bane's lip brutally. He guides Bane closer to him, until Bane surges forward and is on the cot with John, and John feels the first sense of deep fulfillment—of somehow meeting each other halfway, being on the same wavelength for the first time ever.

“I don't know how,” Bane breathes, his voice slightly choked. He grips John's thigh to stabilize himself, and probably doesn't even realize he's leaving bruises. “I haven't—"

“Just open your mouth,” John prompts him. “Do what feels good.”

Bane bumps his face against John's clumsily, without force, just brushing. He finds John's mouth again and this time, when John coaxes, Bane parts his lips hesitantly and lets John's tongue meet his. It feels so strange to be guiding him through this. For once, Bane isn't just taking what he wants from John's body. He's wonderfully responsive and pliant, letting John lead him, soaking in John's affection like a dying plant in the sun. That he doesn't know what he's doing is endearing, and nice—this way he can't wrest control back from John.

When he pulls away to breathe—he can't quite figure out how to do both at the same time, John thinks—John says, “I wouldn't kiss a monster.”

“I—”

John kisses him again, before he can baulk. And Bane lets him.

* 

John spends most of the day dozing lazily. Whenever Bane can stand to be still, he joins John in bed. He wants to kiss again, John thinks, smiling drowsily into the pillow. They can't do it in the daylight, when anyone could see—men can fuck their wives' holes and mouths, but they can't kiss them or be a receptive partner in any way. Bane gets up, paces, sits down, ties a bunch of little knots, goes for a walk around the prison, goes back to bed with John, is up again in half an hour.

“You're gonna drive me crazy,” John tells him.

This doesn't stop Bane from being twitchy. It's like when his unerring sense for when the supply drops will happen is telling him that this month's is late. He's brimming with energy, restless, almost anxious. Maybe he thinks someone saw or heard them last night. *Barsad*, John thinks—but Bane would have known if someone was there in the dark, his element, and Barsad would have acted by now. No, it's something else bothering him. Bane sits on the edge of the cot, fingers
“You're right,” he says. “Maybe we should take Talia out. If you insist on lying there all day—”

“She's been bored,” John agrees without lifting his head. “The key's with the doctor.”

Bane pulls him up by the scruff. “Come.”

John sighs and tags along behind him. The doctor was by earlier with Nadiya's supplies: he may still have the key on him, and they can avoid his fumbling search for it. Bane growls when they get there: his job for the day done, the doctor is passed out.

Bane crouches down and gives him a shake. The man half opens his eyes, and even John can see that he's stoned to the nines. Bane snarls at him, scary enough to rouse the doctor into patting his pockets carefully for the key. Bane snorts with impatience, gets up and paces again.

“He says he doesn't have it,” he reports to John when the doctor speaks, spreading his hands helplessly.

“What does that mean?” John demands. “We haven't had it in weeks. How can he not have—”

And then—the worst sound in the world. A woman's scream.

Bane shoves past John, whirls around and slams the cell door in his face. It locks with a solid clang. John runs almost face-first into the bars, and grabs at them. He knows immediately where the key is: in its lock. Right where the doctor left it.

“Stay!” Bane orders, and he turns and runs.

It sounds like a tidal wave outside: a rumbling of male voices, building up to a crescendo of shouts and excitement as men pour from every corner of the pit into the cell, Nadiya's cell. Barsad appears for a fleeting second, sees what is happening, and almost at once vanishes back into his own cell. He's the only one not headed to where the noise is coming from, loud enough now to nearly drown out the screaming. Bane reaches the mob, starts fighting his way through.

“No!” John yells. He shakes the cell door uselessly, punches the bars and sends a jolt of pain up his arm. He's going to lose all of them, everyone he cares about down here, Bane and Talia and Nadiya—

He whirls around. He's never felt so sick and shaken with anger in his life. The doctor is staring past him, mouth hanging slightly open.

“You asshole!” John screams at him. The anger blots out his impotent terror. “How could you leave the key? How?”

The doctor starts to speak but John is already on him, hitting him harder than he's ever hit another person. He hits the doctor twice and then has to stop, trembling. There's so much noise outside. He wants to block it all out. He goes back to the bars, shakes them and kicks them and claws like a mouse in a trap, mindless. He doesn't even know what he'd do if he got out.

Behind him the doctor holds out a ring of keys, hand shaking. John hears them hit the floor and pounces, sorting through them. He reaches through the bars and tries one. Tries another. Drops them, and has to fumble, arm outstretched, eyes blurring from scalding tears—

He blinks, and Bane is there. He's staggering out of the cell, and he's got Talia.
He doesn't come for John. He sits against a rock, gasping for breath, and clasps Talia to him tightly. John slumps to the floor, crying out weakly, and Bane looks like he's just lost his whole world.

He left Nadiya.

She's still in there.

*

The three of them meet in Bane's cell when the last men have left the cell next-door. Talia crawls onto the cot, under the blankets, and falls asleep almost at once. Bane sits down on the edge of the bed.

John sits next to him. He doesn't know what to say. It seems there's nothing to say. They both just sit there.

When Talia wakes up, Bane takes her place on the bed. He lies on his back and stares up at the ceiling. John knows he should do something—he should distract Talia, he should figure out where Bane's head is at, he should try to make this somehow better—but he knows he can't do that. Nothing will make this better. He knows now why Nadiya never shielded Talia from the horrors of the pit. Perhaps, in a way, she was always preparing Talia for this day.

He wants to take Talia for a walk, but he knows what a bad idea that is when the rest of the pit starts to wake up. Men are still worked up, drunk on their conquest. They shout through the bars at Talia, no doubt throwing slurs about her mother at her. They're rowdy and randy, and Bane won't even react. He just lies there.

“You're next, whore!” one yells gleefully at John. And Bane doesn't move.

By noon they're getting dangerously close, lingering around Nadiya's cell. John sits on the bed again and gives Bane a little shake.

“You have to get these guys to back off,” he says.

He waits for a response. None comes.

“Bane, please.”

Bane just stares at the ceiling. John gets up again. Talia can't stay here.

“Come on, Talia,” he says quietly, taking her hand. She follows him, tame as a lamb.

Men call out to Talia as they cross the pit. “Your mother's cunt was sweet, boy,” one of them sneers. John scoops her up and presses her face to his shoulder, muttering, “Don't listen.”

Once he's outside Barsad's cell, he sets Talia down and kneels in front of her.

“Stay right here,” he says. “And if anyone comes near you, you shout for me. Okay?”

She nods. Her mouth trembles slightly. He leans forward, kisses her forehead.

“It's okay,” he says. “I promise. Just stay right here, close to the door.”

Barsad is on his bed, idly trimming his fingernails with a knife, when John enters the cell. He raises an eyebrow.
“Blake. What brings you here?”

“I need help,” John says. “I wanted to ask you something first, though.”

“Ask,” says Barsad, reclining comfortably against the wall, his eyes lazily hooded.

“You didn't join the other men yesterday,” says John. His heart is beating quick. He hopes to God his hunch is correct, that he isn't making a big mistake here. “You didn't touch Nadiya. You were the only one who didn't try. Why?”

“I could tell you,” Barsad says, picking at a speck of something under his nail with the tip of the knife. “But it seems I asked you a question first. Tell me truthfully why you remained with your master, and I will answer your question, Blake.”

“Fine,” John says. He takes a deep breath. “I stayed with Bane and took care of him because he treats me better than any other guy down here would. I stayed because he's a good man and I don't want any other master. So I'd never leave him. That good enough for you?”

Barsad nods. Putting the knife down, he leans forward and crosses his legs. His hands are folded in his lap.

“Very well. An honest answer deserves honesty in turn. I did not defile that woman because I know that she was someone's daughter. I have a daughter, too.” He twists the gold band on his finger; an absent-minded gesture. “I would not have her harmed for anything. Now: what are you asking me for?”

“Protection,” says John. “Bane is ... not doing well. You know; you're the one who injured him. Now the men are all worked up, and Bane hasn't moved or said anything for hours.”

“And what do you offer me?”

John takes another deep, fortifying breath. “My mouth,” he says. “I can suck you.”

“I have a perfectly good hand for that,” Barsad says, picking up the knife again. Bored. “What else?”

John feels as though the man has hit him in the face. That was his trump card. It was all he had to bargain with. He panics for a moment, groping.

“I could ...” He has to do this. For Talia. He swallows the sickly lump in his throat and forces the words out. “You can fuck me, then.”

Barsad drops the knife and looks at him with those canny blue eyes.

“I don't fuck anyone who doesn't come to my bed willingly,” he says.

John's stomach drops. He has nothing left to offer. Not unless he raids Nadiya's cell, picks through all her belongings and finds some bauble to appease Barsad with—and he can't do that. He has nothing. He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

There's a whisper near the door. “John, can I come in?”

He turns around. Talia is hovering there, scared.

“Yeah, of course,” he says quickly, and she comes up to his side, slipping her small hand into his.
He looks at Barsad, preparing to say goodbye and head back to Bane's cell, but Barsad's gaze has sharpened with keen interest, like a bird dog on point.

“This is the child?” he says. “The woman’s child? He lives?”

“Yeah,” John says. He squeezes Talia’s hand protectively when Barsad gets up. “I—I need protection for him. Not me. I should’ve said that. I have to take care of things with Bane, but he…”

Barsad kneels in front of Talia, searching her face intently.

“I have a little girl about your age,” he says. “What is your name?”

Talia leans into John's hip, shy and uncertain. John answers for her.

“His name’s Robin. He doesn't have anyone except me and Bane, now.”

“Robin,” Barsad says, tasting the name.

For a second John is certain he sees right through their ruse—he can see through anything, surely, he has the intense focus of a hawk—but finally he stands up and looks at John.

“I'll protect the boy,” he says. “In exchange, I want you to guarantee that I'll have no trouble from your master. I didn't let him live so I could sleep with one eye open. Give me immunity from him, and I will guard the child as long as you need me to.”

“Deal,” John says at once.

They shake hands. Talia watches this as if she's just been sold. With a pang of guilt, John kneels in front of her.

“Stay here for a bit, okay?” he says. “Not for long. This is Barsad—” he glances up just to check that this in, indeed, the name the man desires, and gets a nod “—he’s a friend. Bane and I will come get you soon.”

“Don't go,” Talia whispers.

John pulls her to him and hugs her. He can't do anything else. When he tries to pull back, she clings to him.

Barsad pulls her away gently. Talia sobs, and John's own eyes sting as he backs up a few paces.

“I promise it's not for long,” he says.

Talia whirls around, tries to hit Barsad furiously. He lifts her easily, restraining without hurting her. John leaves, not wanting to watch her struggle, and he can hear her screams almost all the way across the pit:

“Don't leave me! John, please, I'll be good! Don't leave me!”

John swipes a hand across his eyes and quickens his pace.

*

Bane is virtually catatonic for the rest of that day. At night John lies down next to him, but he doesn't sleep. He wishes he could know what Bane is thinking.
In the morning he gets up, bathes with a bit of water, changes his clothes. Normal things. He turns to Bane when he's ready.

“Bane, you have to get up,” he says quietly. “We have to ... we have to take care of Nadiya.”

Bane groans, sliding his hands up over his face as though he can't bear the thought. A reaction, though, that's good.

“We have to,” John says. “The doctor hasn't come for her. He's, uh, afraid you'll kill him, I guess... So we have to ...”

Bane lowers his hands. His voice is hollow. “Where's Talia?”

“She's safe,” John says. He puts his hand in Bane's, like Talia had done with him. “Will you help me?”

Bane lets John help him up very slowly. He looks like he's lost every reason to live. He's never grieved before: he doesn't know how to handle it. John forces himself to be patient.

Bane had grabbed the key; it's still in his pocket. John takes it to open the locked cell door. He's not sure he's ready.

Bane won't go in the cell. He doesn't want to see Nadiya. He's seen plenty of dead bodies, John thinks, puzzled; and then he realizes: he doesn't want to see Nadiya nude. He's almost boyishly shy about it. John promises to cover her up. Once the door's open he's not sure he can step inside; but then he thinks of how strong Nadiya always was for him, for all of them, and he pushes past the curtains and goes in. He has to locate a matchbox and light a few candles before he can see what he's doing.

She's on the floor. John looks carefully through her, not at her, as he pulls a quilt over her body. He sees the wound in her side, though, and the blood all over the floor, and when she's covered properly, he lifts the quilt just a bit to take a look. A stab wound. He looks around, and finds the weapon: a short, bloody knife. Nearby, Talia's doll.

He calls Bane in.

“She didn't ... suffer too long,” he explains raggedly while Bane looks around at the cell he'd never entered till the other day. “She stabbed herself. She ended it on her terms.”

Bane's eyes land on the quilt. Then on the knife John is holding out.

“Oh, Nadiya,” he murmurs.

“We should clean up in here, I think,” John says, knowing that Bane is in no state to take charge right now. Bane just keeps staring at the knife. “We can't all stay in your cell, you and me and Talia. The bed's too small. I know it's hard, but we should probably move in here. It's familiar for Talia and big enough for all three of us. We just have to sort through everything, figure out what we don't need ...”

“I gave her that knife,” Bane says hoarsely.

“Bane.” John grips his arm. “I know how shitty you feel right now, I know. But we have to clean this place up. For Talia. Okay?”

Bane nods dumbly.
“I will ... take her to the doctor,” he says.

“Good. Thank you,” John says.

Bane lifts the bundle in the quilt very gingerly and carries it away. For a minute, while he's gone, John holds his own head in his hands and breathes hard. Then he forces himself to push everything down, where the rest of his emotions live, to bubble up later when he's readier to handle it. Not now.

He starts sorting Nadiya's things. Bane returns, eventually, and joins him. They sift through everything in silence, determining what to keep and what they can trade or sell. Nadiya has squirreled away dozens of things. It takes them most of the morning to get through it—they keep stopping, just sitting there, just to take a break. At last, Bane breaks the silence, holding up a little package.

“What is this?”

John squints. “Looks like a pad.”

“A pad of what?”

“I dunno what they're made of. It's for when women are on their period.”

“I don't know what that is.”

John casts about tiredly. “It's ... like when the Bible talks about women being unclean. You've read the Bible?”

“And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days, and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even,” Bane says. “But I don't know what that means.”

John rubs his eyes. “Women bleed once a month. Not for seven days, not usually ... I had a girlfriend whose period only lasted three days, that was cool ... but I think five is normal. Anyway, the pad is for the blood. It goes in the girl's pants and soaks it up like a sponge or something so blood doesn't get everywhere.”

Bane is staring at him.

“What?” John says.

“That's—you're tricking me,” Bane says, still staring. “Nothing can bleed for five days and not die.”

“Women can.”


John shrugs helplessly. “You heard the Bible,” he says.

“But it's not possible,” Bane says, confounded. He studies the pad. Then, with incredulity, he says, “Talia, too?”

Unexpectedly, John laughs. It's a rough kind of laugh that hurts his chest.

“Thanks,” he says.
“For what?”

“I didn't think anything could make me laugh right now.”

Bane shoots him a bewildered look. John's smile fades.

“No,” he says. “Not Talia. They don't start till they're like ... fourteen? No, younger. Maybe twelve? Or younger than that, even. But not before they're ten, I'm pretty sure.”

“But why?”

John spreads his hands. “Congratulations,” he says. “You understand women as well as I do.”

Bane frowns down at the pad. “We should keep these, perhaps, then,” he says. “These pads.”

“Yeah, good idea,” John says. “Just make sure you hide them well.”

The pads get tucked away securely. Bane doesn't know how dangerous it will be when Talia hits puberty, and John doesn't want to think about it. So they don't discuss it.

“Where is Talia?” Bane asks suddenly a few minutes later, as though it's only just struck him that she's absent.

“Somewhere safe,” says John. “I told you that, remember?”

Bane faces him. His voice is flat. “Where.”

“She's ... she's in Barsad's cell,” John says carefully.

“I don't know a Barsad.”

“Deadshot.”

Bane snarls, on his feet immediately.

“Deadshot?” he grates out. “You handed her to Deadshot?”

“He's taking care of her!” John gets up, too, trying to stop Bane from just charging off. He grabs Bane's sleeve. “I made him a deal, he can protect her, all he wants is for you to not attack him—”

“You have no right to act for me,” Bane hisses. “If it weren't for Deadshot I could have saved Nadiya. He made me weak. I had to leave her!”

“You couldn't have saved her anyway!” John argues. “You've said it yourself, you can't take on a mob!”

Bane knocks John aside easily, spitting “Stay” over his shoulder. John jogs after him anyway.

“We'll be lucky if she's still alive!” Bane seethes, when John has caught up to him. “You fool!”

“We need him on our side!” John says pleadingly, struggling to match Bane's pace. “We can't protect her alone!”

“Deadshot is a criminal!”

Oh, yeah. John feels sickly misgiving start to wash over him. He doesn't even know what Barsad did up there to get tossed down here. He could have lied, he could be a rapist, a slave trader,
They stop short just inside Barsad’s cell. Barsad is sitting cross-legged on the floor across from Talia. He’s drawn a circle in chalk on the floor. They’re playing a game of marbles.

“Welcome,” Barsad says dryly to Bane. “Please, come in.”

Bane only hesitates for a second. Then he moves with a muffled roar, grabbing Barsad up by the front of his shirt, hauling him to his feet and slamming him into the wall.

“If you have harmed that child—”

“The child is fine,” Barsad spits, glaring up at him. “I keep my promises, even if your wife does not.”

John bundles Talia away swiftly as Bane snarls into his face, “Do not make deals with my wife, make them with me. I promised you nothing. I could kill you for this.”

“You're frightening the girl,” Barsad says, relaxing suddenly. His mouth twists in a mocking smile. “Or am I still to believe this child is a boy?”

He and Bane stare at each other for a minute. Then Bane releases him.

“Talia, are you well?”

Talia nods. She holds up a marble, a translucent red orb with a sliver of gold inside, like a little flame. “I get to keep this one.”

“And no one has bothered you? Harmed you?”

She shakes her head and points to Barsad. “He made them go away.”

Satisfied, Bane picks her up. She wraps the marble tightly in her fist.

“You held up your end,” Bane says to Barsad, “so I will not hurt you today. Our next meeting may be less favourable for you. Never approach my wife or this child again, do you understand?”

Barsad just looks at him, eyes smoldering with dislike. Bane leaves, with a curt “Come, John.”

“Thank you,” John says to Barsad before he follows Bane out. Barsad just gives him a narrow, inscrutable look.

Bane takes Talia back to Nadiya's cell, where the candles are still flickering dimly. He puts her down on the bed gently and crouches, running his hands over her to make sure she's all right.


She knows her mother is gone. She wants them to lie to her, to treat her like the child she is and comfort her. John sits on the bed next to her and puts an arm around her wordlessly.

“Your mother's gone,” Bane says. “Are you hungry?”

Talia looks at the floor, swinging her legs back and forth slowly.

“I ate already,” she whispers. Then, even softer, she says, “I want Mama.”

“Come here,” John says. She turns, and he pulls her into his lap, hugging her tightly. She's an
orphan now, like him. Still, he can't imagine how it must feel for her to lose her mother, the only person she had to care for her for so long—like losing the sun out of the sky. "I'm sorry for leaving you," he says.

"Don't put your faith in Deadshot," Bane says to John. "He is living on borrowed time here. I know his type, and he won't last much longer." He stands up, putting a hand to his ribs gingerly. "I'm the only one who can protect you both. And I won't make the same mistake again."

He glances over his shoulder at the door, open just a crack. The curtains hide them from sight. Turning back to John, Bane cups his cheek, then pulls the shroud down just a bit and leans down to kiss him. It's more comforting than anything he could have said, and it unlocks something in John's heart, easing the pain just a little bit.

"They took her, but they will never take you from me," Bane murmurs.

Talia watches them, silent. It seems to John that while he knows he and Bane can recover from this, given time, her pain is only going to grow.

Parenting is something that neither Bane nor John takes to readily. Talia doesn't make it a whole lot easier on them.

In the week after Nadiya's death, all Talia really wants to do is lie down or sit on the bed holding her doll. They both hover around her, trying to meet her needs without her communicating with them. At the same time, John knows that Bane's finding it hard to be in Nadiya's cell, around her things, taking care of her daughter in her place. Where he used to talk to her every night, he now wanders around her cell, looking lost. He slips back into his own cell and fiddles with Nadiya's yarn for hours, pulling his creations apart and starting over when some unseen thing upsets him. Unlike John, he can't bring himself to sleep in her bed: once Talia is asleep, Bane retreats to the cell next-door and goes to sleep in his cot.

Gradually Talia comes out of her reticence, to John and Bane's relief; but then they have new difficulties with her. It's no longer enough that one of them always be with her—if Bane is taking a walk, or hiding out in his cell, Talia wants only him and rejects all of John's attempts to engage her. If John is trying to sleep—and napping has pretty much taken over all the space where TV and studying formerly filled his schedule—then Talia pushes Bane away and only wants to play with John. John starts to notice that every time he and Bane touch—mostly gentle little brushes of their hands on Bane's part—Talia is watching them; and more and more she starts to put herself in between them.

Also frustrating for John is the realization that Bane, ironically, is no disciplinarian. He has no knowledge of children and no idea of their needs, so he lets Talia dictate what she wants. John remembers the rigid routine Nadiya kept in this cell, and he knows structure and routine are what Talia needs, but he doesn't know how to implement this without coming across as the bad guy. When he talks about it with Bane, Bane tends to agree with his assessment; but as soon as he starts to take a firmer line, Talia has only to dig in her heels and Bane is too overwhelmed to argue with her.

He's tired. He misses Nadiya and doesn't know how to handle that. He knows that touching John makes him feel better, if temporarily, but if John's not in the mood to play at cuddling, and Talia isn't pulling him away, then it's light out and there are too many men around to risk it anyway. So he just slips away, leaving John to babysit Talia alone for hours at a time. They're all lost without Nadiya; but Bane is the worst at hiding it.
The night after John's splint is removed, he's woken by Bane scooping him effortlessly out of the bed he shares with Talia. He squirms, starting to protest, and Bane hushes him. He carries John to the cell next door, their cell, and places him on the cot.

“What'd you do that for?” John grumbles, propping himself up on one elbow. There's a candle flickering on the ledge next to the cot, so he can see Bane's face, or at least his eyes.

“I wanted to be alone with you.”

They haven't been alone for a week at least. John grunts. “You could have asked.”

In answer Bane joins him on the bed, flattening himself to John's body and sliding his arms under John's. No doubt he wants to be blown, or jerked off or—something—but Bane surprises him, yet again.

“Tell me about Gotham.”

John thinks. He finds himself wanting to talk, now that he's awake. How does one describe a city to someone who's never even seen a house?

“It's big,” he starts. “Huge. This prison would fill up just a tiny part of it. It's so big it would take you half a day to walk from one side to the other. And there's buildings everywhere. Really tall ones, places for people to work or live in, taller than the pit is deep. And there's little buildings, too, places where you can buy food and clothes and coffee ...”

He has to stop when his voice turns momentarily choked. Bane traces a finger over his cheekbone.

“You miss it.”

“It's my home,” John manages to say.

“Did you have a job?” Bane understands a little of commerce from his books. “What did you do?”

“I was ... in training for a job, sort of,” John says. He knows Bane will want to know what kind of job, and he also knows Bane will laugh. He braces himself. “I was, uh, gonna be a police officer.”

“Police?” Predictably, Bane's eyes crease at the corners with amusement. “You would fight criminals, would you?”

“Yeah, actually, I was good at it.” Good at his classes, anyway. It's different in Gotham, where John is considered a physically fit guy, where a gun and a badge are pretty much all it takes to command respect.

“You are too small.”

“Not in Gotham.”

“People in Gotham are small?”

John glares at him. “You think it's funny, but out in the real world there are rules. Cops generally win, even the skinny ones. And I'm not that small.”

Bane ruffles his hair. “You are ferocious, habibi. I have no doubt that all the murderers of Gotham
would be afraid of you.”

“Yeah, ha ha,” John replies, deadpan. He pauses, thoughtful again. “You know, in Gotham you'd be free. We don't lock up babies for what their parents did, that's fucked up.”

Bane, on top of him, is silent, surprised. It hits John uncomfortably that he's probably never thought of himself as not being free before.

When the silence starts to turn awkward, John breaks it. “In America, women are police officers too. Yeah, now me being one doesn't seem so far-fetched, huh?”

“But surely that's dangerous.” Bane is flabbergasted, as John knew he would be. “What man would let his wife do that kind of work, with other men?”

“Women can do anything they want to do, pretty much,” John says, relishing his disbelief. “They don't even have to have husbands. They can live alone and have dangerous jobs and do them as well as the guys, and no one will stop them.”

“Perhaps Talia belongs in Gotham,” Bane says. Now John laughs.

“She'd be tougher than any guy at her job, whatever she wanted to do.”

Bane smiles. After a moment it fades, and John knows from the silence that follows that he's thinking about Nadiya, and that it's making him sad.

“Hey.” John touches his face, pulls the shroud down. Obediently, Bane leans down to kiss him. John sighs into his mouth, relaxing.

They've been doing more and more of this. He's created an addict, and he can't say it really bothers him. Kisses don't mean passion and romance down here, with Bane: they mean trust, affection, things they both need. And Bane needs it more than ever. He's still so broken-up about Nadiya, it pains John just to look at him. John can hardly go a minute without Bane touching him in some way, as if reassuring himself that John is still there.

As a distraction it works well. Bane shifts against him, rolling his hips against John while he kisses his mouth, his jaw, his throat. Bane's desires are simple; he doesn't care if he just dry-humps John's leg like a dog as long as it leads to orgasm. His leg is slotted between John's, and the friction does something to John's groin that he hasn't felt for a while. Bane feels it, too.

“Your body responds to me. Look,” he says, so pleased that John doesn't want to tell him that it doesn't mean anything. He's gotten partial erections from getting fucked; that doesn't mean he likes it. It's just a reaction to stimulation.

“Yeah, I know,” he says.

“Can I see?”

John's breath huffs out of him, surprised. “I guess.”

Bane sits back and peels his pants down, just to John's thighs. John flits his gaze away. He can already feel his erection starting to wilt. Bane notices, and wraps a warm, dry hand around him.

John jumps like he's been shocked. “Don't.”

Bane snatches his hand away. He looks startled.
“I want to touch you.”

“I know, but don't,” John says. “Just don't. Okay?”

Bane frowns. He's still not used to this, being told what to do and not do. He's used to doing what he wants, and for some reason now he wants to pleasure John. Realizing this, John scrubs a hand over his face wearily.

“Look—thank you. I know you want to make me feel good. Maybe Aisha got off on you fucking him, but I just don't think I can.”

“But I never took Aisha,” Bane says, baffled.

“What?”

“I've only ever used his mouth. I wouldn't share his body with the rest of the prison. You're the only man I've ever had like that.”

This sinks in, and John presses a hand against his face again until his eyes start to sting. Fuck. No wonder Bane likes fucking him so much. If he could he would fuck John all the time, every day, and who could blame him? The pit is boring. All he had was books and lace and sometimes blowjobs until John came along.

Keeping his hand over his eyes, John asks, “Do you want to fuck me?”

Bane is silent. Then his mouth is pressed to John's, and John sighs again, letting his hand slide away. His heart is already starting to beat harder and faster, the way it always does when he senses sex is imminent. He thinks of the last thing Nadiya told him, and he's pretty sure he knows what she meant. He needs to talk to Bane if they're going to get anywhere together.

“Will you get upset this time?” Bane growls, pulling back, and John shakes his head.

“I'll tell you what doesn't feel good.”

Satisfied, Bane goes rummaging for the grease. John crawls under the covers—it's too cold not to—and kicks his pants off the rest of the way. Bane joins him, pulling the shroud up to cover his face again. He seems disappointed to find John completely soft again.

“I can prepare you?” he asks. John nods, and he says, “Like this? On your back?”

“Yeah. Go slow.”

With a rumble of assent, Bane slicks his fingers and slides the middle one in. John's thighs tense. He breathes through it.

“Ready?” Bane asks after thirty seconds or so, withdrawing his finger. John shakes his head.

“No, I'm not—Jesus.” Even his voice is tight. “I thought this was supposed to be a build-up to the sex—you know, one finger, then another, then another, and then your dick doesn't seem so big and painful ...”

Bane huffs softly, impatient, but he presses his finger back in. Then a second. He never seems to know what he's doing beyond spreading the grease around, slicking John's inner passage to make it easier for Bane to fuck him. He presses his fingers in deep, twists them, and John feels a familiar hot throb at the base of his stomach. His back arches slightly and his dick stirs. Bane stops.
“Painful?”

“No ... just kind of ... weird.”

Bane does the same again. Another throb in the pit of John's stomach. Bane catalogues the minute reactions in his face. Then he twists his fingers and presses hard—

John cries out; he can't help it. He flinches away from Bane, who removes his fingers hastily.

“I hurt you,” he says, searching John's face.


“Too much what?”

“I don't know. It's just—I can't. Be gentler.”

Bane is crestfallen. “I thought it would feel nice,” he says. “I was told I only had to find the right place to touch you ...”

“Yeah, well,” John says, still catching his breath, “you asked Aisha, and he's been touched by everyone and their grandmother. I haven't. There's a thing called sensitivity, you know.”

“I see,” Bane says, after a moment. “You're sensitive.”

“Yes.”

“Where I touched you, that's where you're sensitive?”

“Yes, Bane.” Now it's John who's impatient. Bane seems pleased again.

“I see.” He slides both fingers back in, careful. When he twists his fingers, the way he had before, they just graze the right spot. The sudden warm clench of his stomach makes John's breath catch. Bane's eyes glitter. “You're responding again.”

“Just fucking—fuck me, okay?” John's teeth are gritted. “I don't want to experiment, I just want you to fuck me.”

“So stubborn, John,” Bane says with utter fondness. “I could teach you to like it.”

“That's fine, I'm good.”

Bane presses a third finger in. John clenches—it's been a while since they did this—then fights to relax. When Bane's fingers skim that spot again, it gets easier. He wonders what would happen if he stopped resisting. If he let himself enjoy it. What would that make him? He's not gay. He's just trying to survive.

Bane takes his hand away and coats his cock in grease. John's eyes water just looking at his prick. He forgets, every time, just how big it is.

“Don't go fast,” he blurts out when Bane starts to move over him. “Or tell me when you're going to. I get tense when I think you're going to go fast.”

“All right,” Bane says. “You're ready?”

“Yeah, I'm ready now.”
Bane shifts, lines himself up, presses the head in. John tightens again, his body instinctively fighting the strangeness of something going in, but Bane keeps moving and John takes a deep breath and unclenches. Bane rocks in slowly, his breath warm against John's face. Then he puts his head down, presses against John and pushes all the way in. John makes a strangled noise.

“I love that sound,” Bane murmurs. He pets his dry hand through John's hair. “I won't hurt you.”

“I know.”

He picks up a steady rhythm, not too fast. Not the quick, aggressive fucks of before. Now and then he rolls his hips a bit, bringing back that warm pulse. It's enough to sustain John's erection, however weak. He shuts his eyes and tries to forget where he is, forget everything, everything except that throb at the base of his stomach that goes right to his dick. The next time it happens, his mouth falls open in a soft moan. He clings to that single sensation, and can almost forget the strain of taking Bane's cock. He's not so tense this time. Bane isn't as unpredictable. He's being as gentle as he can be.

“Am I hurting you?” Bane asks.

“No,” John lies. It'll always hurt. It'll never not hurt. He wasn't built for this. But he's holding onto that one good sensation, and it's building and building. He feels warm and flushed.

He reaches for Bane's face. Bane moves his head aside at once, his hips faltering.

“I want to kiss you,” John says. He pulls the shroud away, and Bane tentatively starts to move again. He keeps his head turned aside, until John takes his face in both hands and pulls him down into a kiss. Bane makes a weak sound, melting into it, and that's a whole new sensation in itself.

It's weird bringing the two things together, Bane kissing him and Bane fucking him, because down here they mean such different things. But it helps, too, because it reminds him that he's doing this with Bane and not someone else—someone who would purposefully hurt and abuse him. Bane continues to pump in and out of him at the same pace, enjoying John's mouth, growling softly when John bites at his lip, and John could almost swear this is like—sex, between two partners. Equals. It could never be that, but—

“Can I move faster?” Bane asks.

“Yeah.”

He does. He snaps his hips harder and John clings to the warmth in his stomach, pain and pleasure fighting for dominance. Pain is winning, and then Bane kisses him again—

John pants breathlessly when he hears the building growl that means Bane is coming. He stays where he is for a minute while Bane spends himself deep inside John and then recovers, panting against John's face.

When he moves aside, John rolls onto his side and slips a hand between his legs. It's been ages since he touched himself. He jerks himself swiftly and gracelessly, struggling to keep his hard-on, and brings his other hand up to his mouth so he can bite his wrist to muffle any sounds he might make. The pleasure blossoms, unfurls itself, and his eyes water when he knows he's going to come. His heartbeat pounds in his ears, he gasps around his wrist, and he shoots all over the sheets, partly on his own clothing. He keeps moving his hand, weakly milking the last drops of come out onto his fingers. His head is fuzzy; he feels like he's drifting through a cloud. A cloud of endorphins. He can't remember the last time he came.

Bane rolls him over, holding John's pants in one hand. He drops them when he sees John's face.
“You—” His gaze falls to the sheets. John feels strangely guilty. Bane looks at him, and the shroud is back on, but John can tell he isn't happy.

“Sorry,” he says. “I'll clean it up.”

Bane hands him a cloth. Then he says, “You didn't let me see.”

John bites his lip, wiping away the traces of his orgasm. “You wanted to watch me come?”

“Yes.” Bane seems offended, almost. Stung. John's starting to smile, despite his best efforts. He's sore and wet but this seems unusually funny, in the lingering glow of his first orgasm in over a year—regardless of the circumstances under which he came.

“I'm sorry,” he says seriously. “Next time you can watch.”

“Next time,” Bane says, barely mollified. Then he corrects: “Next time, I will make you come, habibi.”

*

John comes across a fix for Bane's melancholy quite by accident. He's still finding things tucked away in the big cell. One morning, while Talia's still sleeping, it's a stack of little knitted creations. Among them is a pair of knitted socks, one of them only partly complete.

He calls Bane over to look at them.

“Look,” he says. “She was making these for you.”

He's not sure what to expect, whether this will make Bane feel worse or what. He just knows that Bane will appreciate the intricacy of the design.

Bane lifts the sock reverently. “She made this out of yarn.”

“Yeah,” John says, gently promptly an interest. “You like things made out of yarn.”

Bane turns his attention to the other creations. For once he isn't saddened: he's fascinated. He picks up a couple of knitted squares, like little homemade napkins, made with different coloured yarns and complicated patterns.

“How did she do this with two sticks?” Bane says, mesmerized.

John smiles. “Knitting is pretty cool.”

“Teach me.” Bane looks at him intently, and John has to laugh. Of course Bane doesn't know knitting is really a women's thing; and of course he assumes John can do it just because John comes from the civilized world up above. Bane seems slightly offended at his laughter.

“Sorry—it's just that I can't,” John explains. “I've never knitted in my life. Ask Talia, though, maybe Nadiya taught her.”

Bane is in luck: Nadiya did teach Talia some simple stitches. Once Talia has shown him how to do it, Bane takes to the thing very quickly. It's fortunate, because as John well knows, when Bane gets restless he likes to have something for his hands to do. This keeps him from just wandering out of the cell instead.
It does more than give him something to occupy himself with, John soon realizes. It's almost a meditative exercise for him. When Bane knits, he's calm; and amazingly, that calms John and Talia, too. Talia is content just to know that Bane is in the corner while John plays with her; and John's just glad to have Bane in the cell, instead of someplace they can't find him.

Bane is recovering. Once John's wrist splint is off, Bane really starts to bounce back to his normal vigorous, aggressive self. He drags John out of bed early one morning for more self-defense lessons.

“No way.” John backs away from him, sits back down on the bed and digs his fingers into the sheets to anchor himself. “You'll break my hand again.”

“I didn't mean to do that.” Bane drags John off the bed by his shirt, as inexorable as ever. He rumbles. “Come. I'll be gentle this time.”

“No!” John sits again, stubborn. “I'm serious. You're doing a lot better, you can protect me and Talia just fine—and you suck at teaching, Bane. I'm sorry, but you do.”

Bane's brow furrows. “What does that... You think I'm a bad teacher?”

“I'm just saying, good teachers don't break their students' wrists.”

He can practically see Bane's patience unspooling rapidly.

“That wouldn't have happened if you had bothered to listen to me,” Bane snaps.

“It happened because you're bigger and stronger and faster than me,” John snaps back, “like almost everyone else down here!”

“Don't fight.” That's Talia, rubbing sleep from her eyes and looking at them unhappily. “Why are you fighting?”

Bane just growls something indistinct. “We're not fighting,” John says. And that's how he avoids self-defense lessons from Bane.

They don't talk again that day, and by that night John just wants to be on good terms again, which is a mark of how far they've come. He senses he's somehow hurt Bane's feelings; and when he goes to bed, he finds that more than ever he misses sleeping with Bane. Being in bed with Bane makes him feel safe. With Talia he feels like he's supposed to be protecting her, and though he doesn't doubt that Bane would hear any intruder trying to slip into the cell, he still feels much too exposed. It's interfering with his sleep now.

He goes to Bane in the middle of the night when he can't take it anymore. He locks the cell door behind him to keep Talia safe.

Bane grunts awake when John slips under the sheets with him. “You're cold.”

“Warm me up,” John grumbles.

Bane immediately wraps John up in his arms, and John feels every muscle in his body relax. Now he's safe.

“Sorry I said you're a bad teacher,” he says.

“You're a stubborn child sometimes.”
“You're supposed to say you're sorry, too.”

“For what?” says Bane. “I apologized for your wrist.”

John sighs, and starts pushing him around. He gets Bane on his back, and settles between his legs, so he can rest his head on Bane's torso. Bane's ribs have healed enough for them to lie like this again. Bane wraps his arms loosely around John's upper back.

“You should sleep in the other cell with us,” John says.

“I won't take her bed.”

“Then don't. Bring the cot in. I miss sleeping with you.”

It sort of slips out, and he's afraid Bane will take it in a way that John doesn't mean. Bane is quiet, thoughtful.

“I will find another bed,” he says.

And he does. An older man passes away in his sleep one night: Bane swoops on his cell faster than anyone and takes the bedroll, which he brings back to Nadiya's cell with a triumphant air.

“Just tell me the guy didn't die on this,” John says.

“Then I won't tell you,” Bane says.

At night John lies in bed with Talia until she's asleep; then he slips out from under the blankets and joins Bane on the bedroll. They keep the cot in the cell next-door—Bane doesn't want anyone claiming a living space so close to them—thus he is free to wrap John up in his arms, stroke his hair, kiss his forehead, his eyelids, his neck, as though he hasn't seen John for a month, rather than the hour or so that it's actually been. Sometimes there's a quiet, muffled tryst under the blankets—John strokes him or sucks him—but with Talia sleeping so close by, Bane doesn't dare fuck him. And though he tries, he doesn't know how else to get John off. John's apathy is overtaking his libido again. He likes Bane, treasures his affection; but the truth is he is not attracted to Bane, not now, nor will he ever be. So his attitude remains the same: he's just trying to survive.

* 

After the initial rocky adjustment, John is able to wrestle some control over the situation in the shared cell. He remembers Nadiya's routine and tries to recreate it the best he can. In the morning he gives Talia little lessons in math and English; in the afternoon he plays with her, encourages her to run and jump around. After that she gives him a lesson in Arabic, which he's learning slowly. Bane watches from the corner, where he's knitting, and snorts softly at John's terrible accent. Sometimes he joins in, and that's when Talia is happiest, when she has both their attentions on her.

The first time John sees Bane put his foot down with Talia is during a period of high stress in the prison. John doesn't know the cause; only that tempers are high and fights are breaking out daily. The three of them are eating at the table, a plain dinner of seasoned rice, when Talia finishes hers and announces, “I'm still hungry.”

Without thinking John starts to push his plate over to her. Bane catches it and pushes it back, giving John a hard look.

“Finish your meal.”
“I’m fine,” John says. “I’m not that hungry.”

“Eat,” Bane growls.

Talia stares at her empty plate. “Mama gave me extras when I was hungry,” she tells the table softly.

John gives her his plate. This time Bane just glares at him without intervening.

John thinks the tension outside is getting to Bane—it must be, because he's never refused Talia anything before. When they're lying on the bedroll that night, Bane explains himself quietly: they only have a little food to last them the month before the next supply drop. The last load was a bad one: food is spoiling faster than the men can eat it, and a good deal of it was already rotten. It's a good thing Nadiya stashed many of her things away, because when the men were in her cell they took any food that was left out in the open. The famine won't hit Bane and John and Talia as hard as others, but that doesn't mean they don't have to ration.

“I don't care,” John says. “She's a kid, she needs food more than I do. If she's still hungry and I have extra food, she can have it.”

“That's not how it works down here,” Bane says impatiently.

“That's how it works where I come from.”

Bane just scoffs. He must think Gotham is the softest place in the universe. Compared to this place, maybe it is.

*

A fight breaks out right outside their cell. The combatants don't stop until Bane snarls at them to take it elsewhere.

They're afraid of him again. John spends a lot of time listening, and Bane is a frequent topic of discussion. Some of the men swear they saw him die when Deadshot defeated him---there are rumours about a knife plunged into Bane's ribs---and now the monster has managed to shake off death itself, unscathed to their eyes. Some of them start saying darkly that they should never have touched Nadiya, because Bane is making them suffer for it now. They pillage each other's food stores, but nobody tries to steal from Bane.

“Do you hear what they're saying about you?” John asks him, incredulous. Bane merely shrugs.

“They always turn to superstition during hard times.”

“They think you caused the famine.”

“They think this is hell,” Bane corrects, “and I am the devil.”

John used to think that Bane just couldn't be bothered making friends, the way Barsad and Amir did, but now he sees. Bane could never have made friends down here with anyone but the old men who knew him as a child. He'll always be removed from everyone else.

Before the famine has even hit its peak, a commotion wakes John early one morning. He slips out of bed, leaving Bane, and goes to the door to see what's happening.

The men are piling aggressively on another man, beating him savagely with fists and feet. A
strangling noose around his neck keeps the man from struggling too much. When they drag him into the pre-dawn light, John sees with a shock that it's Barsad, bruised and bloodied almost beyond recognition. When he goes limp, the mob starts dragging him to the centre of the prison, raising an ominous chant.

Bane appears at John's side silently to watch. Barsad is hauled to the pit where the pool of murky water at the bottom is starting to dry up. There's a path that goes to the water, but the men don't bother with that; they pitch Barsad over the side. He half falls, half tumbles down the rocky side, and lands partly submerged in the water. He lies there, face-down in the mud, and doesn't move. The men continue chanting.

"You see?" Bane says quietly to John. "Where are his friends, now that he can't provide for them?"

"What does it mean?" John asks uneasily. "That chanting."

"It means *feed the rats*," Bane says. "It's a traditional execution down here. They will guard him to ensure the doctor doesn't reach him, and he will die a slow death. If not from his injuries, then from thirst and hunger."

"Fuck." John feels sick. "Why'd they do it?"

"I told you he wouldn't last," Bane says matter-of-factly. He points. "Do you see that man leading the rest? Deadshot broke his jaw. He is strong and fast, but he doesn't know this place like I do, or he would have known that that man has many allies. Now the famine has given them a reason to act."

He turns to John. "This place relies on a very fine balance. It can't survive when a man like him is on top. One way or another, balance must be restored. They have made a sacrifice of him to the pit, to bring better times."

"That's fucked up," John says.

"That is the law," Bane says simply. "Now come away, John, and don't trouble yourself with this. There's nothing you can do for Deadshot now. He's already dead."

* During playtime that day John gets roped into playing the role of Simba to Talia's Scar. He "dangles" precariously off the edge of Pride Rock (played in this evening's performance by the bed), only to rally, to leap back onto the mattress and fight valiantly against Scar for the throne. He bundles Talia up and deposits her—gently—at the base of Pride Rock, where he changes his role to the hyenas, who pounce on Talia and tickle her viciously.

"Look." Bane interrupts their game to show John what he's doing, amazed at his own knitting prowess. "You see? When I change the stitches I can make patterns."

"Cool," John says, out of breath.

"And look." Bane shows him what looks like a lace doily. "At first I was making holes by accident, but I can do it on purpose now to make these."

"Very cool."

Bane retreats to his chair, satisfied that John is impressed. Leaving Talia in a breathless heap on
the floor, John gets up and goes over to the door. Men are still sitting around the pit, some of them playing cards now. He wonders if Barsad's dead yet, and decides they wouldn't be guarding him if they thought he was.

Talia joins him. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing.” John scoops her into his arms, making her giggle. “You want to nap?”

“No! I want to play.”

“Well, I want to nap.” He dumps her on the bed. “So you better play with Bane.”

“What is this?” Bane interjects. He's pawing through a box of yarn and other things Nadiya had set aside, and he holds up two needles attached by a thin cable. “A garrote?”

“Knitting needles, you freak,” John tells him.

Bane studies them, then seems to get it. He places them tenderly with his other knitting things.

Talia tugs John's hand. “What's a garrote?”

“It's an orange vegetable that grows in the ground.”

“Yuck! It's all dirty?”

He tickles her again. “No, silly, you wash it before you eat it.”

She shrieks, kicking him to make him stop. “Bane!”

Bane leaves his knitting and joins them. She immediately holds her arms up to be lifted, so he picks her up. She scrambles around onto his shoulders, making him wince until she's settled. Distracted, John goes back over to the door. It's easy to play at being a happy family in the safety of the cell, but out there the mood is very grim—and the ache in his empty stomach reminds him that not all is well in here, either.

“Leave it.” Bane follows him, with Talia still perched on his shoulders. “There's nothing you can do.”

“He has a daughter,” John says. “That's why he watched Talia for us. You remember Barsad?” he asks her.

Talia nods. She reaches into her pocket and takes out a red marble that glimmers in the light.

“What could you do, John?” Bane says impatiently. “Nothing. You expect me to act—on behalf of a man who nearly killed me, and left you without protection.”

“You told me you don't forget when you owe a man something.”

“He and I are even.” Bane turns and goes back into the cell. John lingers a little longer before giving in.

Talia is pulling off Bane's hood. “Let's have garrote for dinner.”

“Rice for dinner,” Bane says.

She tugs on his hair, annoyed. “We always eat rice. I hate rice.”
“It's all we have,” Bane tells her. Talia sulks.

She complains that night that she can't sleep because she's hungry, but within an hour of John rubbing her back she's dozed off, and he's free to slip out of bed and into the bedroll with Bane. Bane pins him with one arm and starts stroking his hair.

“Are you hungry?”

“I've been hungrier,” John says, thinking of Amir and the tunnel. He knows his body can stand a lot worse than this. Bane makes a satisfied sound and goes on petting him. He's probably been through much worse, too.

John is dozing lightly when a sound outside rouses him. Soft thuds of repeated impact, the hoarse grunts of a man in pain, and within a minute or so, that damn chanting.

“Your friend must have tried to move,” Bane says, looking over at the door. “Unwise.”

The sounds are painful to hear. “Why don't they just kill him and get it over with?”

“Death would be a kindness which he has not earned.”

There's a little whimper from the bed. “John?”

John gets up and is on the bed in a flash. “Hey,” he says, rubbing Talia's back again. “Sorry. I was just talking to Bane.”

“You're always talking to Bane,” she says, rubbing her eyes. “You're never here when I wake up. I don't like sleeping alone.”

“I'm sorry,” John says again. He lies back down with her. What else can he do? She settles, if sullenly, and lets him go on rubbing her back. “I'm here. I'm here now.”

On the floor, Bane sighs.

* 

John sleeps late the next morning, unsettled after the night's disturbance. Distantly he hears Bane and Talia moving around, speaking in low voices.

He's jarred abruptly from slumber when Bane pounces on him.

“What do you mean by it?” Bane snarls in his face, John's shirt collar bunched in his fist. John struggles instinctively, but it's easy for Bane to hold him down and give him a little shake of reproof, like a dog with a helpless puppy. “Well?”

John gasps. “I don't know what you're—”

Bane shakes him again, cutting the words off. “You are smarter than this, John. Did you intend to rescue that man out there, after everything he's done? Or did you think you could attack me?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about!” John blurts out.

“My knife!” Bane roars. “My best knife! Where is it?”

“I don't have it!” John wraps a hand around Bane's wrist, trying to pull him away. His fingers and thumb don't even meet. He hasn't been this afraid of Bane in months. “I don't have your knife!
“Bane!”

“Talia saw you take it,” Bane snarls.

Almost as soon as he says it, John sees the same look in Bane's eyes that he knows must be in his own.

Bane releases him. He takes John's hand briefly and squeezes it: an apology. Then he sits back.

“Well?” he says gruffly.

“I don't have it,” John says, massaging his throat and trying to bring his heart rate back to normal. “Maybe, uh, we could look for it together?”

They do, while Talia sits at the table and blithely draws pictures. It's Bane who finds the knife: under a stack of John's clothing. He shows it to John without saying anything. John moves close to him.

“You know I didn't take it,” he says quietly, pushing down his panic. Bane grunts.

“You'd have hidden it better. Why did she do this?”

“I don't know,” John says. But—maybe he does know. He recalls last night, how petulantly Talia had summoned him back to her bed from Bane's. Could she actually be trying to put a wedge between them? Would she?

She's just a child, John reminds himself. She's lost her mother, and she thinks her only two caretakers like each other more than her. He takes a deep breath.

“Let's just ignore it,” he says. “Don't say anything to her.” The last thing she needs is to get in trouble with Bane over this. “Keep your knives out of reach,” he adds, then pauses. “Did you really think I'd attack you?”

Bane just grunts again, which John takes to mean stop talking already.

John spends the rest of the day with Talia, careful to reassure her of his priorities. She doesn't act any differently with him than usual. Just ignore it, he repeats to himself. He's been in her place, after all. He knows how it is to feel unwanted and unloved.

*

The pit goes quiet over the next couple days. John's sleeps in Talia's bed with her, that next night, and goes to bed with her the night after; but he's woken around midnight by Bane, who summons him quietly.

“What?” John whispers, figuring he wants a blowjob or something. Instead, Bane says, “Dress warm.”

John obeys. Bane leads him outside the cell, shutting the door and locking it behind him.

“Your wrist feels better?” he asks while he leads John across the pit. “Not sore?”

“A little, sometimes, but it works okay.” John is mystified. “Where are we going?”

He thinks, briefly, that Bane might be staging a rescue for Barsad. There's only one guard left above the water hole, currently snoring. Then Bane walks straight past the man, and John realizes:
above the water hole, currently snoring. Then Bane walks straight past the man, and John realizes:

one guard because Barsad is dead or extremely close to it. It's been almost three days.

Instead, Bane takes him to the wall where the climbing rope is.

“What is this?” John asks, shifting nervously. In the moonlight Bane's gaze is very serious.

“I want Talia to live in Gotham,” he says.

He may as well have said he wants her to live on the moon. John is startled out of a yawn.

“What?”

“I want you to take her home with you to Gotham,” Bane says, “where she can live as a girl and become whatever she wants to be. I want her to have clean water and food and warmth all the time. She cannot die down here.”

“Bane, what you're saying, it's ... crazy,” John says weakly. Bane's grey eyes are fierce and hard.

“You lived there. You can take her back.”

“We live in a fucking pit!” John reminds him in a hiss. “There is no way out of here, Bane.”

“You almost made it.”

“Yeah, almost,” John says. “I broke my arm on the way down, remember?”

“You got close, as close as anyone's gotten. You could climb out and—with the rope, you could lift her—”

“Think about what you're saying,” John implores him. “Think of how crazy this sounds.”

“We are running out of food,” Bane says flatly. “If this famine doesn't kill her, there will be more. There will be plagues, worse than the last one. And there will always be men. I can't protect her forever. I could die, and then what?” He shakes his head bitterly. “I won't let her end up like her mother. She has to leave this place, and the only person who can make that happen is you.”

John knows that what he's saying is true. Bane can't make the climb—a fall could kill him, and then John and Talia would be as good as dead. It has to be John. He feels queasy.

“You can practise,” Bane says. He holds up some object, flicks a switch, smacks it a few times, and a beam of light slices through the dark. Bane swivels the flashlight toward the wall. “I'll help you.”

“This is crazy,” John says weakly, but he's already reaching for the rope harness with a sense of resignation. He finds the first hold and starts climbing.

Bane paces under him, guiding him to each hold on the wall with the flashlight. Doing this in the dark is terrifying. The edges of John's own shadow look sharp enough to cut himself on. He keeps thinking he hears rustling movement, and freezes; and then Bane urges him on from below.

But John's not the same guy he was a year ago. He's tired and hungry. He's been beaten by the pit in every sense of the word since the last time he tried to escape. His arms refuse to work after so long, and he has to just cling there, trying to rest even while his muscles burn from the strain of holding himself up. When he looks up and sees how much further he has to go, he almost accepts defeat right there. He thinks of Talia, and keeps pushing himself—
With a shrill squeak, a small furry body explodes from under his right hand when he goes to put it down, writhing and flapping. John yells and loses his grip at once. The bat bursts past him, and he feels it just graze his face before he falls.

He scrapes his leg badly on the rock and the rope almost dislocates his shoulder when he reaches the end of it. Bane lowers him slowly, and shines the light on his leg. His pant leg is slick with blood.

“You can try again,” Bane starts to say, but John shakes his head.

“No tonight,” he croaks.

Bane sighs. He helps to gather John up and supports him as he limps back toward their cell.

When they pass the water hole, John takes the flashlight and shines it down toward the bottom. Barsad is still there, half in the water, lying deathly still. John shudders and nearly drops the flashlight when he sees the black forms crawling over Barsad's body. Rats. He presses mutely into Bane, who pulls him on without a word.

*

There are more guards out the next morning, so John supposes that by some miracle, Barsad continues to cling on to life.

He's watching them when Bane pushes casually past him and walks right up to the men who ring the water hole. He approaches the leader and starts speaking in a language John can't decipher. Whatever he says, it causes excitement among the men. More of them appear to watch. The leader beckons two of his men over, and points to the bottom of the pit. They trek down, and appear a few minutes later dragging Barsad between them. Bane accepts Barsad's limp body graciously, as if he's doing them a favour.

He hauls Barsad into the cell, past a gaping John and a curious Talia, and shuts the door, pulling the curtains closed.

“Light some candles, John,” he says.

John hastens to obey. “What are you gonna do with him?”

“They asked the same thing,” Bane says. He dumps Barsad on the floor, putting a bunched-up blanket under his head. “I said I intended to make a lesson of him, to teach my wife and the rest of the pit to show proper respect.”

He sounds much too pleased with himself. “You were right about this man, John—he is strong. Three days with the rats, and he's still alive. They're afraid of him. They were glad to give him to me. Bring me water.”

However short they are in food, Nadiya stocked plenty of water in her many hiding places. John brings Bane a water skin, wordlessly. Talia watches from her perch on the bed as Bane trickles a little of it past Barsad's lips. His face is a mess of cuts and bruises and mud; his lip is split. But a little water trickles in, and he swallows.

Bane rolls him over just before he starts to vomit. Nothing comes up but foul muck and dirty, brackish water. Barsad heaves, gasping, and takes a look at his saviour.

John saw an opossum once that had been hit by a car and survived; it wandered, dazed, back onto
the road, and was promptly hit by a second vehicle. He'd watched it drag its immobile rear end onto the sidewalk, where it laid down and hissed any time somebody approached it. It couldn't move, but it had hissed and hacked angrily, as if it could take on any one of them.

That's what Barsad reminds him of now. He draws back into himself and spits at Bane in some Russian-sounding language, no doubt a threat. Bane laughs in response, and answers in the same tongue.

“What did he say?” John asks.

Bane glances at Talia, and lowers his voice. “He said if I try to put my prick in him, he will kill me in my sleep.”

He turns back to Barsad and, placing a hand on his arm, which is bent awkwardly, presses down. “Big words, little brother.”

Barsad screams, writhing. John goes to snatch at Bane angrily, but he hears the excited murmur of voices outside and understands that Bane is playing to an audience. He subsides, bristling. Bane pats Barsad's arm, and under the filth and blood on his face, Barsad is sheet-white.

“He is barely alive,” Bane observes. He trickles some more water onto Barsad's lips. Stubbornly Barsad closes his mouth, but Bane has only to squeeze his arm slightly to make him cry out and relent. Once he's had a taste of the clean water, he takes as much as Bane gives him, desperately.

He seems to waver in and out, and can't focus on anything. When Bane takes the water away, he lies there with his eyes closed, breathing shallowly.

“Thank you,” he says finally, in a weak rasp. He pauses. “You mean to torture me.”

“No,” Bane says.

“Then what?” Barsad asks, with the resignation of a man who knows he's dead.

“I mean to use you, brother,” Bane answers, magnanimous. He pats Barsad's chest, smiling with his eyes. “But first, I need to save you.”

*  
John dreams that Bane has no use for him anymore, now he's got Barsad, so he sells John back to Amir. He drags John back to the tunnel where Amir and his friends are waiting, lurking just out of sight, and John struggles, thrashes, drags his heels, tries to become dead weight, but it's no use, because he will never be stronger than Bane, he'll never be strong enough, and Bane's grip is so tight—

He wakes up pinned to the bed. Bane peers at him curiously.

“You are a wild animal this morning,” he says.

“Sorry,” John says, panting. Bane releases him, and John passes a shaky hand over his forehead.

“Just dreaming.”

“What about?”

“I don't remember,” John lies.
Talia is still asleep next to him. She's been sleeping more in the week since Bane brought Barsad to their cell. John probably has, too. Sleeping is better than thinking about how hungry he is. The famine persists, and they're down to their last small bag of rice. Funny thing is, John doesn't feel as hungry as he did yesterday. Just tired.

He purposefully doesn't look at the corner as he gets up, because he knows Barsad will be watching them. Barsad watches everything; he misses nothing. It makes John nervous, because Bane doesn't always catch himself in time when he wants to show John some scrap of affection, and John has to push him away. He can tell it's starting to annoy Bane.

Barsad seems depressed. At first John thought this was due to his fall from grace, but he soon realized that that's nothing compared to the shame of being under Bane's protection. Barsad hasn't moved from his corner since he got here. Bane gave the doctor his last hidden bottle of spirits in exchange for his dressing Barsad's wounds and administering an antibiotic shot, and Barsad seems out of danger from infection now, but it's impossible to tell how he's recovering when he won't move and barely speaks to them. John had been tasked with cleaning him up and giving him new clothes the day after Bane rescued him—a task he was more uncomfortable with than Barsad was—and didn't even receive a thank-you.

John forces himself to get up—his head spins—and starts going through his normal morning routine, stretching and washing and changing. He scowls when he notices how many men keep surreptitiously passing by their cell, trying to peek in.

“What are they all doing?”

“They want to know what I've done to your friend.” Bane's eyes crinkle amusedly. “The popular theory is that I have cut off his genitals.”

Barsad makes a spitting sound in the corner. Bane throws a water bottle at him.

“Drink, you ungrateful jackal, or I may consider it.”

At least they've got water. When it's early in the morning, and the water is still ice-cold from the night, John gulps it and can almost trick his stomach into thinking it's full. It's a dirty trick to play, and it leaves his gut cramping, but it works. They don't eat breakfast anymore.

Bane is restless. All that day, he keeps leaving the cell, roving from one side of the prison to the other. When Talia wakes up, she gives John a lesson in Arabic. Neither of them really feel like playing. After that, they read a book together, something that doesn't require them to leave the bed. Bane grows more and more anxious as the day goes on, until John wants to tie him to his chair and make him knit.

“What's the matter with you?” John finally asks, when Talia is lying down for a nap. Bane stops.

“The supply drop is supposed to happen today.”

John doesn't ask how he knows. He stopped keeping up with his tally-marks on the wall a long time ago. Bane just knows. It always unsettles him when a drop is late, but this time the situation is much graver than usual.

“It'll come tomorrow,” John says, hoping to convince himself too. “Sit down.”

He himself is sitting at the table, idly doodling a picture for Talia when she wakes up. Bane sits down across from him, fidgeting. John does, too, squirming around in his chair until Bane eyes him.
“What are you doing?”

“I have an itch I can't reach,” John says. It's been bugging him for hours now, off and on. To his surprise, Bane gets up and rounds the table. He rests a hand on John's back.

“Here?”

“Lower.” Bane obeys. John arches into his touch. “Yeah, right there.”

Bane starts scratching. John sighs, finally finding relief. It feels so good that he lets Bane go on scratching his back for the sheer pleasure of it. Bane relishes his little noises of satisfaction. He brings his other hand to John's waist, curling around his side just below his ribs.

His voice is a soft growl. “I find you irresistible, do you know that?”

John comes back to himself suddenly, and jerks away from his touch. There's still daylight outside.

“Not now,” he blurs out.

Bane moves away with a growl of displeasure. John almost winces—there was a time, not so long ago, when he could never have said not now and gotten away with it. He opens his mouth to try and rectify the situation, but Bane just turns away and leaves before John can think of anything. He sighs again.

The drawling voice from the corner startles the crap out of him, because he'd almost forgotten Barsad was there.

“If you were any other man's wife, you would have been beaten severely for that.”

“I know,” John says, turning to face him. Barsad still looks like shit, but he somehow manages to assume an air of self-possession in spite of that.

“I think I may see why you are so loyal to him,” he says.

“I told you,” John says, guarded. “Bane is a good guy.”

Barsad shrugs, stiff from his injuries. “Perhaps,” he says. “If you like cock.”

“What—” John can't even rally a clever response for that. “I don't like ... you think I'm gay?”

“Out there they say he has a horse's prick, engorged and disfigured,” Barsad says with malice. “They say he makes you scream for it and chokes you on it every night. They think you have no power to leave him, that you are cursed and any man who tried to take you would be struck dead. But I know that Bane is a mortal man like the rest of us, and that you could have left his cell easily.”

“Out there, they say he cut your dick off,” John points out. “And what has he done? Cleaned you up, fixed you—fed you, when we barely have enough to feed ourselves?”

Barsad slumps back against the wall, unusually dull-eyed. “I have no illusions about my purpose here.”

“Then you know something I don't.” John goes back to doodling. “They say a lot of things about Bane.”

“You went to your knees happily enough for him last night.”
John’s ears burn. Bane had taken him aside into their old cell; Barsad must have seen or heard something. “I’m not gay,” he says, a little louder than he means to.

“I suppose one can get used to anything in order to survive,” Barsad says.

“See, now you get it.”

Barsad falls silent. Depressed again. John gets up, goes to the crate where Bane’s books are stacked up, and pulls out a Russian copy of *War and Peace*. He takes it to Barsad and holds it out.

“If you don’t think I’m cursed, why didn’t you take me from Bane after you beat him?” John asks, when Barsad reaches to take the book. Barsad blinks.

“I have a wife,” he says simply.

John gives him the book.

*

Weeks pass.

Every day that the supply drop doesn't come, the prison grows quieter and quieter.

Night and day start to blur together. John notices one day just how frail Talia is looking. She's stopped complaining about being hungry. Her cheeks are gaunt; there are dark shadows under her eyes. She barely leaves the bed. John lies on the bedroll, holding his head, which aches all the time. He doesn't feel hungry anymore.

“Drink.” Bane wavers into view, holding a water bottle. John shakes his head: not thirsty. Bane presses it into his hands. “You haven't drank since yesterday. You should keep drinking during times of famine. I learned that as a boy.”

John forces himself to drink a few mouthfuls. Even this small action is tiring. Outside the cell, the prison is silent. They might be the only ones living here, the four of them.

He keeps forgetting Barsad is there, still quietly, tenaciously clinging to life. Bane spares little time for him now: all his concern is for John and Talia.

In Amir’s tunnel, John had been hungry and thirsty all the time, conscious of nothing else but that and the pain. Now his body numbs itself to his needs. His muscles hurt, so he stops moving. He loses interest in everything, gradually. They're out of food. Some days Bane can scrounge together a tiny meal, and sometimes John can convince him to give the biggest portion (another mouthful is all it amounts to) to Talia, knowing that she’s weaker than he is. The thing is, John's will to live is at a very low ebb; it has been for some time now. Another place, another time, he might have been better equipped to survive this. But he has no strength left to fight the crushing exhaustion.

At the end of the month he hears Bane and Barsad conversing very quietly in the corner.

“Time that we talked,” Bane starts.

“Yes.”

“You can stand? You are well now?”
Barsad’s voice becomes slightly hoarse. “Not well enough for what you have in mind, I think.”

“What do I have in mind?”

No answer. Bane growls suddenly.

“I have a wife,” he says.

“You …” Barsad trails off.

“I want you to leave,” Bane says. “Find your own food. You are strong; you can manage. Be cunning. Don't let them catch you again.”

“You told me …”

“That I would have a use for you? I will. But not now.”

“Anything, brother,” Barsad says hoarsely. “Anything. I didn't know. I thought …”

“I know what you thought,” Bane says. “You thought the same as the rest of them. Well, I am not ruled by carnal desires. I have John and I need no one else. I must take care of him and Talia, and you will take care of yourself.”

“You are a good match,” Barsad says quietly.

Bane just rumbles. “Leave now.”

Barsad says something in his own tongue. Bane answers with a similar phrase.

Barsad leaves.

He’s back again in a day. John is sitting up, trying to read, unable to focus his eyes, and he doesn’t see Barsad at first. Barsad places a few biscuits on the bedroll at his side: long stale, with weevils crawling through them; but it’s food, and some of the best to be found in the pit at the moment. He leaves without another word. Bane has secured them a valuable ally.

*

The supply drop is two months late now, according to Bane. That means a second drop has also been missed. Sooner or later there simply won’t be any food left at all in the pit. John wonders if they’ve all been left down here to die. An unnecessary drain on resources, cut off like a weed.

Talia sleeps all the time, breathing shallowly. John lies in bed with her, holds her at night and tries to warm her frail body with his. Every time he wakes up he checks to make sure she’s still breathing. He can feel himself slipping into the same stupour. He’s afraid—afraid that if Talia dies, the last clinging shred of strength in John will die too. He lies down all day on the bed with his head in Bane's lap, and from far away he can feel Bane stroking his hair. If he and Talia die, Bane will be alone again, and John’s afraid of that, too.

He pushes Bane away, tries to make him tend to Talia, but Bane determinedly divides his time between the two of them. Although John has little will to hang on, Bane perseveres ferociously. He stays on his feet, raids dead men's cells every day, brings whatever he can back to them.

“I will not let you die,” he says fiercely one night. Barsad had brought a few uncooked beans that day: John gave his to Talia. Half-conscious, he finds himself in Bane's arms, sprawled on his lap.
Bane holds him tightly. “I will not lose you, John. I swear I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you both alive. Don’t die.”

Early the next morning, the smell of cooking meat makes John’s mouth start to water. He groans softly and buries his head in the blankets, knowing that it’s a dream, and wanting to fool himself a little longer.

It’s not a dream. The strong smells of smoke and meat persist. Outside, he can hear men breaking furniture apart. One of their chairs is gone.

He’s struggling to sit upright when Bane returns with a pail of strong-smelling stew. It looks delicious. Steam is still wafting off it. John’s mouth is watering like a tap; he wipes his sleeve over his face repeatedly.

“Food,” he croaks when Bane sits down next to him.

“Yes.” Bane sounds immensely relieved at his interest. “Eat slowly. There will be more.”

“Where’d it come from?” John asks, reaching to scoop a handful, table manners be damned.

Bane doesn’t answer. John stops with his hand frozen halfway to the stew, so close he can feel the delicious heat coming off it.

“Oh, no,” he moans. “No, Bane, please.”

“Eat,” Bane says. “You’ll feel better once you do.”

John starts crying. He can’t help it. It makes his whole body ache and his eyes feel hot and sore, but no tears come. He’s never felt so let-down in his life. It’s worse than no food at all, to have this sitting right in front of him, looking so harmless. He puts his head in his hands, curling away from Bane.

“You have to eat, John. It's no different from chicken. Please.”

“I'll know it's different,” John croaks. “I'll know, Bane.”

“Just a taste,” Bane pleads with him.

“Give it to Talia.” John curls up tighter, hating himself, hating Bane, hating the pit most of all. “I can't do this. I can't.”

Bane wakes Talia. John rolls onto his side, listens to Bane feeding her and her small, feeble voice: “That tastes good.”

“You can have as much as you like,” Bane says gently. “Just eat slowly.”

She does, and though it might be John's imagination, he thinks there's already a little colour in her cheeks when she goes back to sleep. Bane turns back to John.

A small fight ensues, but John wins: he's weaker, but when Bane tries to force-feed him, John starts retching and Bane, alarmed, stops immediately. He puts the stew down and gathers John into his arms.

“What am I to do?” he asks bleakly. “You have to eat, John. What am I supposed to do?”

John doesn't know. He just knows that he can't eat that stew, even to save his own life. Bane doesn't understand; he's seen famines this bad before, he thinks this is a reasonable measure to
reach. Men are dying anyway. No one was killed. But John can't eat it, and Bane doesn't understand. He holds John, rocking him mindlessly, then gets up and paces.

There's noise in the pit again. Men are emerging from their burrows, sharing in the small feast. Crates and furniture fuel a fire to cook the meat over. Bane surrenders all their crates and the table in order to feed himself and Talia: but John won't eat.

He wakes, at last, to Bane hovering over him. He's holding a bowl of cooked rice.

He watches John eat every morsel, then cooks another bowl. John knows he shouldn't fill his stomach too quickly, but he can't stop. It feels good. He doesn't even care that some kind of tiny larvae is mixed in with the rice grains; it's protein, at least, he figures. There's a whole bag of it, but Bane stops him after two bowls. “Rest,” he says.

Supplies are lowered into the pit after another week, more than usual. A full third of the prison population is dead. Bodies are dragged onto a pyre to be burned, now that the men have no more use for them. One of the bodies is Aisha. Bane brings stacks of food back to the cell; the doctor brings extra crates from Nadiya's father. The famine is over.

John never asks what Bane traded for the rice, and Bane doesn't tell him; but John knows. The men were running out of kindling. As John recovers, one of the first things he notices is the absence of Bane's books. His entire collection, painstakingly gathered over the years, is gone.

John returns to health gradually. Bane feeds him, slowly building his portions up. He never mentions the books, and John feels sick every time he looks at the space where they used to be. Those books were Bane's only escape, his only friends, for most of his life. And he burned them all for the sake of a bag of rice, all because John wouldn't bring himself to eat the same thing he and Talia did. He wishes Bane had just let him die. Anything but to sacrifice those precious books.

Bane doesn't hold it against him, though. He nurses John tenderly, with no less attention than he gives to Talia. He's so quietly, stubbornly devoted that it shames John, who thought he knew the meaning of good and bad when he got here.

Barsad slips in and out of their cell, often with little gifts. He's become a ghost, vanishing for days and reappearing soundlessly. John doesn't know where he sleeps at night, if he does sleep. He's shed the persona of Deadshot, the invincible: the other men know now that his bones break as easily as anyone else's, so Barsad has become a lurking shadow. He melts into the dark as easily as Bane does; as if he, too, were born here. And he looks to Bane constantly—wondering, no doubt, when he's to fulfill the purpose for which Bane saved him.

Bane ends his wondering the day Barsad sheds the sling for his arm. He's mobile enough to go without it now.

“You're not strong enough for what I want yet,” Bane is saying when John wakes up. He opens one eye and listens. “But I have another task for you in the meantime.”

“Tell me,” Barsad says, leaning forward on the crate where he's perched.

“What I want is for you to leave this place.”

Whatever Barsad was expecting, it wasn't that. He sits back, silent.
“When you are strong again, you will climb the wall,” Bane says, confident and calm. “And you will find a way to take John and Talia with you.”

“You saved my life ... so you could help me escape?”

“I saved your life so that you would save theirs,” Bane says. “Talia won't survive much more hardship. And John is dying down here. I've seen it happen to other men, like little flames with nothing to feed them. He needs to go home, or he will die.”

“And you?” Barsad says. “Where is your home?”

“Here,” Bane answers.

Barsad is silent again for a few moments. At last he says, “Whatever your wish, I will do everything in my power to make it happen. I only assumed from watching the other men that escape was impossible.”

“Then make it possible,” Bane says simply. “If any man can do it, I believe you can.”

“What is your other task for me?”

“Teach John to fight. He needs to learn. If he leaves this place, I won't be there to protect him.”

“You could be,” Barsad offers.

“No,” Bane says, “I won't be.”

Another pause. “Then I will teach him.”

Bane glances over, and John shuts both eyes again, heart hammering. He almost can't believe what he's hearing. He’d thought, when Bane first presented this crazy plan to him, that Bane intended for John to somehow get them all out, him and Talia and Bane together. It makes no sense that Bane would stay. He can't figure it out.

Bane omits this part of the plan when explaining to John later that he's hired Barsad on as self-defense instructor. John scratches at his nape, uncertain that Barsad will be any gentler than Bane. His eyes flit to Bane's little finger, still crooked from Barsad breaking it.

“Why him?” he asks.

“Because he's had training.” Bane looks to Barsad for confirmation, though he seems perfectly assured of this. Barsad nods. Satisfied, Bane says, “He will be a good teacher. Even by your standards.”

“I want to learn, too!” Talia's sitting up on the bed, watching them. “I want him to teach me.”

Barsad tugs her hood over her head fondly. “You will be a killer when I'm done with you.”


“Such a complainer, habibi,” Bane says, pressing his thumb to John's lips: a gesture that doubles as both his version of a kiss when there are other people around, and a gentle way of telling him to shut up. John doesn't know which it is right now, but he bites anyway, making Bane smile with his eyes.

“Good start,” Barsad says approvingly. “Don't be afraid to use your teeth.”
The first thing John learns is that Barsad is as good a teacher as Bane isn't. He's patient, clear in his instructions, and he knows how to pull his punches. He's full of helpful tips, unlike Bane, who operates almost fully by instinct and doesn't know how to articulate the things he does in the heat of battle. It's a struggle to keep up with him—John's disappointed at how quickly he wears out, when he used to run laps and lift weights for hours back in Gotham. But it's been a long time, and he's still recovering from starvation. Barsad lets him rest when he needs to, and shows Talia some self-defense maneuvers until John's ready to keep going.

The only problem is Bane. He can't stand to watch another man leave bruises on John or hurt him. He watches all of these lessons at first, though there's barely enough space in the cell for him to hover protectively. When he keeps interrupting to question Barsad's techniques, John banishes him to the corner, where he knits and sulks. He's left Barsad and Talia alone in the cell together before, but seems afraid to leave Barsad with John.

Finally he's convinced to go away when Talia wants to go for a walk and demands that Bane take her. She's tired of sharing his attention. She tolerates Barsad when he's focused on her—teaching her playfully to fight, or a few phrases in his language—but when Barsad is instructing John, or talking to Bane, Talia turns resentful. Since losing her mother she's become desperately possessive of them both; but especially Bane. So he takes her, though reluctantly. This turns out to be a good thing, because when he's gone, Barsad finally seems to relax.

“You're a fighter,” he says when John takes his next breather. “I can tell.”

“Yeah?” John says, catching his breath. He opens a water skin and takes a gulp. Barsad nods.

“Some things you can only learn through experience. The way you drop your chin and raise your arms... You've been in fights before.”

“As a kid,” John admits.

Barsad smiles and inclines his head. “One could read a hundred books on how to handle a gun, but they still wouldn't be prepared for the weight of a rifle in their hands, or the feeling of pulling a trigger.”

John thinks of the name Deadshot, and says, “You like guns, huh?’

“Guns are how I make my living,” Barsad says, his smile fading. “That doesn't mean I like them.”

“Speaking of books,” John says, after an awkward pause. “Do you still have the Russian book I gave you?”

“Yes.”

“Could you bring it back, some time when Bane isn't here?” John asks. “I'd kinda like to surprise him with it. He lost the others...”

“Thoughtful of you,” Barsad comments when John trails off.

“He traded the books for food,” John says. His throat is constricted. “For me.”

“I see,” Barsad says. His eyes are as piercing as ever, fixed on John. “He cares very deeply for you. Why is that?”


Barsad shakes his head. Love is important to him, John thinks. Why else would he guard his
wedding band so possessively? He's still committed to his wife, even though his chances of ever seeing her again are next to none. There's something about John and Bane's relationship that seems to fascinate him, a light in the bleakness of the pit.

“They told me how he claimed you when you came here,” Barsad says. “I assume that wasn't a lie. He took you forcibly to his bed and raped you for many months. They think he still does; but I can see that you've tamed him.”

John just shrugs, his mouth dry.

“I don't want to know about the monster they all talk about out there,” Barsad continues. “I want to know about the man who would treat his wife with respect and take a little girl into his care at the risk of his own life.”

“Then you have to tell me some stuff, too,” says John. “I'll tell you about Bane if you can be honest about yourself.”

Barsad smiles, and seems ready to accept. Then his gaze flickers to the door, and he gets back to his feet just as Bane pushes through the curtains with Talia behind him. Bane is eyeing them suspiciously. John goes to his side to reassure him without thinking. Storytime can wait.

The next time Talia commandeers Bane's attention and orders him to play with her outside in the light, John and Barsad start talking. Barsad loosens up a lot more when Bane isn't there. John wants to know about his wife, the woman who can keep Barsad faithful from miles away, and the way Barsad's eyes soften suddenly speaks volumes.

“Ana,” he says. “The first time I asked her to marry me, I was eleven years old. She was nine. She said no then, but ten years later, she was ready.”

John can't help smiling. “Do you think she'll remarry?”

Barsad shrugs and smiles, spreading his hands. “She's a stubborn woman. I told her to lie, to tell everyone I had died, and find another man who would take good care of her and our daughter, but she said she would rather wait. She thinks I'll come strolling through the door one day, that I'll escape or my name will be cleared.”

John perks up with interest. “You were framed? Like me?”

“Not framed, no. Double-crossed.”

The whole story comes out in bits and pieces, a new installment every time Bane leaves the cell. Barsad is a trained marksman whose skills caught the attention of an organization (he won't name names; he says he keeps his word even if they don't) who wanted to put him to other uses. Knowing a little about their purpose, he refused them; but his hand was forced when they tracked down his family. He was put to work as an assassin. Mainly he was a sniper, but when the situation called for it, he could slit throats, strangle, or kill a man with his bare hands. (He won't say where he acquired any of these skills to begin with, even when John asks.)

Some of his targets were high-profile figures. Ultimately Barsad and his employers were backed into a corner. What he didn't realize was that they had been compiling evidence against him all along, enough to make him take the fall for everything. And he did. He was taken out of the police's hands as soon as the verdict was in, and brought here, to the pit.

His original plan had been to keep his head down and hope that everyone else might just ignore him. He's had enough of killing. Then he'd been accosted for his wedding band, his last link to his wife, and he'd struck without thinking, attracting everyone's attention. He'd then revised his plan
and decided to track down the most powerful man in the prison—Bane—thinking desperately that if he could defeat Bane, nobody else would dare to bother him. He'd been wrong.

John tells him about Bane in return, that he knows no other place and nothing of the above world except what books and other prisoners have told him. He committed no heinous crime, but has been outcaste by the rest of the prison population for most of his life. He tells Barsad about Nadiya, how Bane loved her and could never have her, and how he refused to waste any love on John when he knew John would only ever despise him. He talks about Amir, the constant challenge to Bane's authority and possession of John, and how everything changed when John was taken away from Bane. How Bane's treatment of him was never the same after that, because he couldn't bear to be compared to those men. Barsad just listens with quiet interest.

“I know he wants you to leave here, and somehow take me and Talia along,” John says. “And I know he wants to be left behind for some reason, but that can't happen. If you get out, you can't leave him. Okay?”

Barsad raises an eyebrow. “I wouldn't have left him behind anyway. I owe him my life.”


“I'll do my best to make the climb, but I expect my chances are very slim.” Barsad gets back to his feet briskly. “Enough talk. Don't forget to clench your jaw. And be certain when you aim for the nose. My skull is harder than your knuckles; don't cripple yourself before the fight's even begun.”

Just as Bane said, there's a fire in John that flickered down to a tiny ember a long time ago. Being forced to get out of bed and be physical, learning to defend himself, rebuilding muscle where it was wasting, is kindling that ember back into a little flame. Bane is right: Talia won't survive another famine. She's got to get out of here, and John has to be there to take care of her. He has to get out of here, too. And he knows he shouldn't get his hopes up, but Bane is right. If anyone can get them all out of this place, it's Barsad.

*B*

Barsad stays one night, and Bane takes the opportunity to take John to the old cell. He peels John's pants off, under the covers because it's cold, and warms the grease before he uses it to slick his fingers. Now that he knows the sensitivities of John's body, he's more careful, more purposeful when he fingers him open. John's sleepy, able to tune this out a little; but there's no ignoring it when Bane decides he's ready and starts to press his cock inside. Suddenly John's wide awake.

“Relax,” Bane growls, stopping with just the head inside.

John lets out a pained, breathless laugh, his eyes watering. As if he isn't trying with all his might. “You always say that.”

“Because you're always so tight.” Bane glares at him, light from their one candle flickering off his eye. “Do you think I want to hurt you?”

“Do you think I want that either? Relaxing is easier said than done. If you weren't so big—”

Bane pulls out. He's still brutally hard against John's thigh before he moves away altogether. John catches the blankets before they can slide off him.

“Where you going?”

“You wanted me to stop,” Bane snaps.
“I didn't say that.”

“You didn't have to.” Bane is bristling, but it's too hard to read him in the dark to tell why. Then he continues. “I still repulse you, after all this time. You think you can fool me with—kisses, and kindness, but I know—you still think of me as an animal—”

John’s mouth falls open, then he shuts it. Bane is breathing hard, upset. His eyes flick away, back up to John's face, away again, and John has seen him like this before.

He beckons wordlessly for Bane to move closer. Bane hesitates, then goes. Slowly and cautiously, John puts a hand on his shoulder and guides him down onto the bed, rolling him onto his back. He slides his hand into Bane's pants and wraps it around Bane's cock.

“This doesn't make you an animal,” he says, pumping his hand slowly. Bane groans, rolling his hips up into John's hand helplessly.

“I know what they say about me.”

“You know,” John says, going on a hunch, “in America, having a big dick is considered desirable.”

“You lie,” Bane says, but he's relaxing now, lazily amused by what John is saying.

“No. I'm serious. Guys would pay money to be as big as you. It's an insult to say a guy has a small dick. Supposedly women like it big.”

Bane is quiet, each breath a little raspy. “Truly?”

“Yep.”

“And you?” Bane says. He arches a bit, pushing himself up into John's fist. His cock is straining.

“You don't like it big.”

“No,” John concedes. “I like it gentle.”

Quiet again, for another moment. Then Bane says, “I can be gentle.”

“I know you can.”

Bane pulls at him, dragging John on top of himself. John relaxes into his warmth, rests his head against Bane's chest and goes on stroking him for a few minutes. When John is certain that Bane's temper has faded, he brings both hands up to Bane's face and pushes back his hood, then peels down his shroud. Under his scars, and despite the way his nose healed crookedly after Barsad broke it, Bane really is a good-looking guy, and John hates that the men down here have ruined his self-image just because they're afraid of him. He drags his fingers through Bane's hair as he leans down for a kiss, a gesture Bane copies. He's a better kisser now—less bitey—and one by one John's muscles start to unlock.

When they break the kiss to breathe, Bane says, “I won't take you tonight.”

“I'm already ...” John gestures between his legs. He wonders fleetingly if sex would feel better if they had real lube, instead of sticky grease. Bane just blinks, and John gives him a last brief kiss.

“Just let me take the reins at first, okay, and we'll see if I can relax.”

“Okay,” Bane says, docile and agreeable underneath him.
John has to shimmy down the bed, stroke Bane and lick at him until he's hard enough again. Then he straddles Bane, relatively certain that he's relaxed enough for this now. If they did this more frequently, a little voice reminds him, he wouldn't be so tight every time, and it wouldn't be so difficult to take Bane's cock. He shelves that thought for later, and presses himself down onto Bane until the head of his cock pops inside.

Bane is antsy, clearly, while John slowly pushes himself down onto the shaft. His fingers clench repeatedly on John's hips, and John can tell that he wants nothing more than to drag John down onto his cock, or shove him over and start fucking. But he's forcing himself to let John set the pace. Relieved, John tries to move a little faster, force his body to accept the intrusion. And it's working: he's relaxing. He doesn't push down all the way, doesn't take more than he can handle, and it's actually helping. He's really doing this, not in pain.

“Okay,” he says on a sigh, rocking himself up and down. Now that he's adjusted, he tries a more sensual roll of his hips, squeezing down like he's trying to milk Bane's climax from him. Bane growls—he likes that—and squeezes John's hips even more tightly, guiding him to do the same again.

John opens his eyes after a minute. He hadn't even realized they were closed. He looks down at Bane, and the candlelight means he gets to see how Bane's lips are parted, his eyes half shut, lashes casting a shadow over his cheeks. John still hasn't found a word for how he looks when Bane catches him watching. He takes a hand away from John's side and fumbles to readjust the shroud. He hates John looking at him during sex.

“Hey,” John says, reaching to put his hand over Bane's. “Leave it.”

He can feel Bane's sudden tension between his knees, the building rumble inside him. “Don't tell me what to do.”

Suddenly angry with him, John drags the shroud off and leans down for a hard, bruising kiss. At once Bane's arms are around his shoulders, fingers digging into him, and he starts thrusting up into John.

Everything changes in that second. John feels the difference as soon as it happens. Maybe it's the way he's leaning forward, or the angle from which Bane is fucking into him, but his body's reaction is electric. It seizes every muscle and sends sparks through his nerves, leaving him tingling and flushed. Bane notices and falters, breaking the kiss.

“Don't stop,” John gasps into Bane's mouth, barely hearing himself. “Right there. Keep going.”

Bane obeys. It's the weirdest adrenaline rush of John's life; it makes him feel like he's being turned inside out and scraped raw in the most pleasurable ways, like some great internal itch is being scratched at long last. It throbs hotly in the base of his stomach, like before; it makes his pulse thud loudly in his ears, makes him forget how to keep moving up and down on Bane's cock. Bane's got him, though, and it's no difficulty for him to hold John in place and drive his hips up to meet him.

Instinctively John works a hand between them and wraps it around himself, jerking quickly. He's hard, of course. He never knew anything in his body could produce sensations like this. Every thrust sends another electric jolt up his spine.

He can't last. He comes hard, shaking, dizzy, gasping, his eyes clenched shut. His release pours out of him like it's been pent-up for days, spilling over his hand and onto Bane's clothes. He falls forward weakly, and for a minute he's gone, unable to see or hear beyond a dull ringing in his right ear, just gasping into Bane's chest. He feels Bane's thighs tremble under him; that's the only indication he gets that Bane has come, too, leaving his mark inside John.
For a while John just lies on top of him, limp, and rides his breathing. He doesn't want to move. He doesn't want to face the fact that they just had sex, actual sex that they both got off on, that he was a totally willing participant in. He's always held up this barrier in his mind that he didn't even know about; resenting sex with Bane just came so unconsciously to him. But in the wake of his orgasm, that barrier has been washed away, and it opens him up to a host of uncertain feelings. For a moment, he's not quite sure who he is or how he let this happen.

Tentatively, Bane wraps both arms around him again. John pushes away, an instinctive reaction. He eases off of Bane's cock and rolls to the side, pulling his pants up in spite of the stickiness. He's never been a cuddler after sex and he sure as shit doesn't want to cuddle now. Bane tries to hold him again, and John moves further away—not easy, given the size of the cot.

“I was gentle,” Bane offers into the silence, which is growing more and more uncomfortable.

“I know.”

Bane pauses. “I thought you enjoyed it.”

“No. I don't know.” John's tired. He always is—or used to be—after climax. “Can we sleep?”

Bane is quiet again. He keeps a space between him and John.

Finally, he says, “I don't know what I did wrong.”

John thaws. He rolls over to face Bane, who still has the shroud pulled down around his neck and is watching John warily.

Wordlessly, John shifts closer to him. Bane wraps him up in his arms, squeezing tighter when John doesn't push away this time. He kisses John's forehead.

“I'll be gentler next time,” he says, and at those words something in John's chest crumbles away and leaves him raw. He burrows into Bane's chest, as if he can hide from himself, and feels Bane's hand stroking through his hair.

* 

The next morning Barsad brings back War and Peace from whatever ether he vanishes off to when he's not in their cell. He takes Talia out for a walk so that John can give it to Bane.

“Here. It's yours,” John says, showing it to him. “I lent it to Barsad before... Well, it's from your collection. So.”

Bane takes it from him slowly, opens it and examines each creased page, the little tear on the back cover. He's silent.

“Sorry for giving it to him without your permission,” John says, needing to break the silence. “But—well—it's good, right? Not all your books are ...”

Bane turns away, shuts the cell door and pulls the curtains over it to hide them. John has just a second to be alarmed before Bane turns back to him and gathers him into a tight embrace.

His voice is quiet and hoarse. “Thank you.”

John hugs him back, relieved, and warmed by Bane's sincerity. He wants to say, You didn't do anything wrong last night. You were perfect, and you made me feel good. But he can't manage to
spit the words out. Maybe because he knows Bane would never accept so overt a compliment.

So he says, “Next time they send books down, we'll steal the whole crate, okay? Those guys can use something else for kindling. I'll help you.”

Bane lets him go, and brings his thumb to John's mouth wonderingly. John raises a hand to clasp Bane's, sensing he's about to pull away. He always does when John's too forward.

(No, not forward. Too kind.)

He grips Bane's hand to keep him there. “I know you want Barsad to get us out of here.”

“I couldn't risk you getting injured again,” Bane says, trying to sound dismissive. “He is stronger than you.”

“I know, I think it's a good plan too. But why'd you tell him to leave you behind?”

He can tell he's surprised Bane, and that Bane doesn't want him to see it. He doesn't want John to know about this part of his plan. John feels a flicker of anger. When were he and Talia supposed to find out, when they were all standing outside the pit except for Bane?

“I belong here,” Bane says finally.

“No, you don't. Everyone else down here is here for some terrible reason. Even Barsad's a murderer. You didn't do anything, you deserve to be free.”

“I was raised here,” Bane says. “I don't know any other life.”

“What about going to Gotham?” John demands. “What about chicken wings every other night? Huh?”

Bane pulls his hand away from John's. “That's your life. Not mine.”

“It can be yours!”

Bane is just staring at him unreadably. Another prickle of anger runs down John's spine.

“Do you seriously think I'd leave you?” he says in a low voice.

“I have nowhere to go,” Bane says, way too accepting of this. “I don't know how to live up there. And nothing binds you to me if we leave this place. You wouldn't need my protection. You could leave at any time. And why wouldn't you? What I've done to you ...”

“You saved me from a guy who once beat me with a chain because I asked him for some water,” John spits out. “I still have the scars, you wanna see?”

Bane shakes his head, his eyes a little wider. John never talks about what happened in the tunnel. It feels like releasing some small part of himself with the words, and not in a good way; like part of his gut has been carved out and coughed up. It makes him angry, that this still has the power to hurt him.

“Forget it,” he says, turning back to the bed. “You're coming, end of story.”

Bane's hand shoots out to grab his arm; but before he can speak, Barsad and Talia return. Bane lets him go.

“I need to take a closer look at that wall,” Barsad says, glancing between them.
“I’ll go with you,” Bane says. He exits without waiting for Barsad, who just looks at John and then follows.

John sits on the bed and grips the covers until his knuckles turn white, while Talia quietly puts a sheet of paper on a crate and sits down to start drawing. The thing is, John's actually starting to get a little hopeful about this plan, even though Barsad cautioned him not to. He's starting to think they could actually find a way out of here. What he hates is that Bane is right. John tries to imagine him walking down a street in Gotham, eating at a restaurant, interviewing for a job, and can't. He can't imagine Bane anywhere but here, where he knows the rules and speaks the language and navigates so fluidly. Anywhere else, he'd be a fish out of water. Helpless.

And what's to say that John's even going to Gotham, anyway? He was set up. Presumably, his name is still mud back home. He probably can't even board a plane to America without Interpol crashing down on his head. He sits rigidly, unable to believe he didn't think of this before. He has to get out, he knows that, but where the hell is he going to go?

He looks at Talia and knows, suddenly: his place is with her, same as Bane's is. If he can't get her to Gotham, where would Nadiya want her to be? The answer comes easily: with her father. Nadiya thought he was dead, but what if she was wrong? What if he's out there, still missing his wife, with no knowledge of the pit?

He looks down at Talia, who's still drawing.

“Did you have a nice walk?”

“It was boring,” she says.

“Oh,” says John. “You want to play The Lion King?”

She wrinkles her nose, her voice low. “That's for babies, John.”

“Oh,” he says again. He didn't know. Wrongfooted, he falters. “Um, what are you drawing?”

“Me.”

He leans over to take a look. She's drawn a little Talia with a hood and noodly limbs. At the end of one noodle arm is a long, pointed triangle. There's a second figure next to the first, wearing a sad face; the tip of the triangle is touching this figure's side, and all around it Talia is scribbling dark, hard, angry charcoal lines.

John points, his throat dry. “What's that?”

“Blood,” says Talia. “I'm killing one of the men who hurt Mama.” She pauses in her scribbling to study the drawing. “Bane would have killed them. But he was hurt.”

What the fuck does John even say to that? He slithers off the bed and ends up in an uncomfortable crouch at her side.

“Killing people isn't really nice.” Good one, Blake. That'll teach her.

“They deserve it,” Talia says simply.

It's hard to forget, sometimes, how old Talia really is. She's stunted in so many ways that sometimes she seems older than she is, sometimes younger. Although she's about the size of a four-year-old, she's probably closer to seven or eight by now, for all that she still sucks her thumb.
to go to sleep. She's smarter than John probably gives her credit for, and she's learning what kind of world she lives in.

She's going to end up like Bane. It's a scary thought.

“No one deserves to die,” John says. “Taking away someone's life is the meanest thing you can ever do to them.”

She turns her wide blue eyes on him. “They took Mama's life.”

“Well, yeah, but ...”

She starts scribbling again. Game, set, match.

Later that night, she's curled up in Bane's lap, fast asleep and utterly innocent. John shows him the drawing and tells him, quietly, about his brief conversation with Talia.

“That's just a drawing,” Bane says dismissively. “She probably heard me talk about killing them. She's a child, John. She doesn't mean these things.”

John takes a deep breath and a gamble. “When those men held you down and choked you and cut your face open, you knew you wanted them to die. You were a child.”

“I was different,” Bane rumbles, his eyes going cold and remote. “I grew up surrounded by these things. Talia is sheltered, she is innocent. If it bothers you, we will be more careful when we talk around her.”

John relaxes. That, at least, is true. Bane was raised by prisoners, but Talia had Nadiya, the most compassionate person John can think of. Kids draw weird things all the time. Seven or eight; that’s probably not even old enough to understand murder.

“Okay. You're right,” he says, backing off. Bane relaxes, too, and strokes Talia's head. She snuggles into him more firmly.

Watching them, and noting the quiet love that radiates from Bane as he watches Talia sleep, John thinks that maybe there's no place in the world for them. They'll have to carve out their own place, just the three of them. Right now, they're all the family each other has got.

*  
Escaping takes a surprisingly long time. John somehow expected that Barsad would just take a good look at the wall, psych himself up, and then go for it, and repeat as needed until he succeeded.

Not so. In fact, all Barsad does for several weeks is climb. He climbs the wall every day, adjusting the rope harness to his liking so that the risk of injuring himself when he falls is decreased. Within a few days of this, he can make it up to the ledge where the climb ends and the leap begins. He sits there. He examines the wall. He examines the rope, which is affixed to a bolt in the wall. When it starts to go dark, he uses the rope to rappel back down. If he gets out, he can tie the harness to something up there so that John and Bane and Talia can climb out.

He spends so much time up there, just sitting on that ledge, that the men largely stop calling him a devil and start calling him a loony. John is pleased that he's learned enough Arabic to know this.

For a while he wonders if Barsad is being avoidant, trying to look busy, putting off that jump
more and more. Soon, however, John realizes just how seriously he is taking this task. He doesn’t look at the wall the way the other men do, with hunger and desperation: he regards it with respect, as an opponent. By climbing up and down, he's toning his body, making it easier and easier each time.

When he finally leaps, his fingertips just brush the ledge. It's not enough. He plummets, and untangles himself from the harness philosophically. Then he goes back to considering the wall. He does this over and over as the weeks wear on, a little more bruised but readier each time.

John starts thinking that it's just a matter of time now. Nobody could be more prepared to make that jump. Bane gets nervous when Barsad is up on that ledge, like he thinks Barsad is going to go for it when no one is watching and take off without a backward glance, but John knows he won’t do that. At the end of the day, Barsad often joins them in their cell. He scavenges a pack of playing cards and teaches them all a game he likes, a friendly way to pass time. He gives self-defense lessons to John and Talia. He's warmed to Bane exponentially; sometimes at night John hears the two of them still talking quietly, finding a kindred spirit in one another. They're both fighters.

They're gonna get out of here. John knows it. He wakes one morning and as soon as he shifts the blankets he feels a scrabble of little claws through the covers and a weight sliding off his leg. Rat. It hits the floor and patters away, and John shudders. Talia should not be growing up in a place where there are fucking rats in the bed. (They freak Barsad out, too, not that anyone blames him.)

So they're going to leave, they're going to look for Talia's father, Barsad will see his family again, John and Bane will take care of each other somehow... He holds this vision so clearly in his mind that he can practically see and smell and taste the outside world. He aches for it. That guttering fire in him is starting to burn bright again. He is not going to die down here.

Barsad could have made it; John truly believes this. But it doesn't ever happen. Just when the nights are starting to get colder again, and John is hungering more than ever for home, unable to bear the thought of one more winter here, Barsad gets up on the ledge and leaps. Bane is watching: he beckons John hurriedly, but he doesn't need to. There’s an excited roar from all the watching men. Barsad has his hand on the high ledge. He scrabbles, groping, straining, hooks one arm over it—

And the rock crumbles. He falls. John's heart falls with him.

“No,” he says softly. Bane turns, moving to usher him back into the cell and away from the sight of another failure, when escape had been just in their reach; but there's a second rumble of noise from the watching men. The rope supposed to catch Barsad strains taut for a second and then snaps. He drops, and the sound of his impact on the rock carries back to them.

Bane and John both leave the cell, breaking into a run. They hurtle up the steps to the stone dais where the wall is and find Barsad crumpled at the base, curled up in pain. He's surrounded by a crowd of jeering onlookers. John takes a second to glance at the place where the rope is secured, and isn't that convenient—it's frayed right near the bottom, easy for a man with a knife to reach. His anger scorches him, but he has no time to look for the culprit. Bane reaches Barsad first, scattering the other prisoners like the vultures they are. He turns Barsad over carefully.

He's still alive—grinding his jaw, gasping harshly, bleeding from the head—and he cries out when Bane moves him.

“He’s leg,” Bane says flatly, standing up. John looks closer, and he can see the displacement of it even through Barsad's pants, bending in a way legs aren't supposed to bend. Bane grabs one of Barsad's arms and hauls him pragmatically to his feet. “John.”
John quickly slides in to support Barsad's other arm, and between them they carry him off the dais. Barsad groans every time they accidentally jostle him.

“I tried,” he pants out in a forced, ragged whisper. His face is white; he looks ready to pass out. “I'm sorry. I tried—”

“We know,” John says when Bane doesn't say anything, even though he feels sick. “It's okay. Don't worry about it, man.”

They take him to the doctor, who, in a stroke of luck, is sober for once. He bids them to lie Barsad down, his expression grim. He cuts Barsad's pant leg off, and John's stomach flips at the sight of the dislocation. The thigh and shin aren't even lined up anymore—like they both just slid in opposite directions. It's awful.

The doctor conveys his instructions to Bane. Bane looks at John.

“No anesthetic,” he says. “No morphine.”

“He must have some!” John argues, half rising.

Bane repeats this to the doctor, getting aggressive when he's met with a shake of the head. He gets up to search the place—but the doctor has a dozen locked chests, and over a hundred keys in his possession. Bane whirls back to him, angry, but John sees then how shaken the doctor is, how bloodshot his eyes are from lack of sleep.

“He had some,” John says, disgusted. “He used it all.”

“Just do it,” Barsad interjects weakly, because Bane looks ready to hit the man.

The doctor gives Barsad a stick to bite down on. That's all he gets. Bane and John have to hold him down while the doctor tries, fumblingly, to convince the bones to line up again. John knows that Barsad is pretty tough—so when he screams, curses, struggles, John knows he must be in agony. No morphine. He hates the doctor more than ever.

Finally Barsad lapses, pale and sweating, into a stupour, and there's a dull click as the doctor realigns the bones at the knee. He lays a splint as long as Barsad's leg against him and starts wrapping it, explaining to Bane as he does.

“Torn ligaments, probably nerve damage,” Bane translates to John. “He thinks if this doesn't work the leg may require surgery or amputation.”

There's resignation in his eyes. John knows that the man lying on the floor—their ally, their friend—is in unimaginable pain; but for a moment, all he can think of, selfishly, is the freedom sliding out of his fingertips, their chance at escape gone forever.

“He's not going to be able to do it,” he says.

“No,” Bane says, quietly accepting of this fact while John is screaming inside. “He is never going to climb that wall.”

* Bane and John don't talk about it. They just haul Barsad up as soon as the doctor is done with him and carry him back to the cell. Barsad slumps between them, virtually insensate with pain, his leg wrapped up from ankle to hip. Months of immobility, the doctor said. Months. And it'll still never
work properly again.

“We have to take care of him,” John says to Bane, afraid that Bane will just dump Barsad on the floor outside the cell and walk away. Bane doesn't answer.

They haul him back to the cell, and almost at once are barred access by Talia.

“No,” she says loudly. She points at Barsad. “Make him go away.”

“Move, Talia,” John says tiredly.

“No!” she repeats shrilly. “I don't want him!”

“He's hurt,” John says. “He has to lie down.”

“This is mine and Bane's house and he's not invited!” she shouts. “Only you!”

Bane snorts softly from Barsad's other side. John doesn't see the funny side in all this. But he does kind of see where Talia's coming from. He reins in his impatience.

“You're right,” he says. “This is your house, and we should've asked you before we brought him. But he needs a place to stay, Talia. If we make him stay outside he could get hurt even worse by the other guys.”

“So what!” she yells.

“They could kill him.”

She sticks out her lower lip stubbornly and glares at him, arms folded. He can see right then that she doesn't care. Barsad is not part of her family. It doesn't matter what happens to him.

Wearily he shifts Barsad's weight. His arm is starting to go numb.

“Sometimes we do nice things for people because we hope they'll do nice things back,” he starts.

“I don't want anything from him.”

“If you let him stay, I'll tell you any story you want. With pictures.”

Talia's eyes light up. She rocks onto the balls of her feet. “Shrek?”

Bane goes from amused to annoyed, stiffening at Barsad's side. He hates that story, ever since Talia told him he's just like the titular character—“Princess Fiona didn't know he was an ogre at first because he's wearing a thing on his face.” John feels for him, really, but desperate times. Bane can stand to hear the ogre story again.

“Sure,” he says.

She lets them settle Barsad in his old corner on top of a blanket, with a rolled-up blanket under his head for a pillow. Barsad recovers momentarily, his eyes flickering open, with a weak, forced chuckle.

“Going to ... feed me to the rats, brother?”

“We'll see,” Bane says, inscrutable.

Talia gets comfy in bed. A deal's a deal. John tells her the whole story start to finish, sketching the
characters as he goes. Bane knits at first, then gets up and paces, and finally leaves the cell. He has little to do since his books were destroyed. John's voice is hoarse by the time he's done and his hand is cramping; he shakes it out a bit to loosen it. Talia's migrated into his lap over the course of the tale.

“That's my favourite story,” she says.

“I'm glad,” says John.

He's gone numb inside, blunted the pain. They're never going to get out. One day, he'll learn to accept that truth again, like he did before. At least he has Talia. At least he has Bane.

Bane returns shortly after Talia has fallen asleep, curled up under the blankets. He jerks his head toward the door, and John slides out of bed carefully and follows him.

They only go as far as the old cell. Bane wanders around the perimeter with a distracted air, touching the walls, and John wonders if he's about to break some bad news. As if this night could get worse.

“Bane, we can't just leave him,” he blurts out desperately when he can't stand Bane's silence any longer. “The other guys will kill him—they've almost managed it twice, now—”

“What?” Bane says, startled. He turns. “I won't—”

His eyes harden, and his tone becomes loftier. “He was injured in my service. He did his best, and I respect that.”

John takes a seat on the edge of the cot. Bane pauses.

“I only ... I thought he could help me to protect you and Talia, until he made it out,” he says at last. “And now he can't do anything.”

That's true enough. John stays miserably silent. Barsad, their friend, the lurking shadow, stunningly fast and strong, now crippled. It doesn't seem fair.

Bane suddenly gathers himself up, shaking his head. “I will make the climb myself,” he says firmly.

“What? No!” John's up off the bed and on his feet in a flash. “You can't. No way.”

Growling, Bane pushes him back down. “You don't tell me what to do.”

“I tell you what to do when it comes to risking your neck! There's no rope up there till someone climbs up to that ledge and puts in a new one. If you fall, you die, Bane! And then what are me and Talia supposed to do!”

Bane snorts and wheels away, shaking his head angrily.

“You have to leave,” he says, seemingly to himself, pacing up and down the cell. “You must. I won't let Talia grow up here. I won't let you die.”

“We'll think of something else,” John says. “Sit. Sit down with me.”

Bane stops pacing and hesitates. Then, with all the awkwardness of a fourteen-year-old on his first date, he lowers himself onto the cot at John's side. He glances down at their hands, which are resting close together, and twitches his closer to John's. It's John who slides his fingers over Bane's
“Before you came here,” Bane says quietly, “I had only ever felt afraid once in my life. When I was a child, everything seemed so simple ... harsh, but simple. But then there was Cyrus and his companions, and when he put his hands around my neck, and held that knife up to my face, I was afraid. I hated that feeling. I mastered it as fast as I could, and I thought I would never be afraid again.

“And then you came here, and I knew fear again. When Amir surprised me, and I could hear you crying out from his lair for days. When Talia was sick. When Barsad defeated me, and I thought he would take you away. When the famine came and I watched you and Talia slowly dying in front of me. Now it never goes away. I'm afraid all the time, John. I'm afraid I'll lose the two of you, or that you'll die and I won't be able to stop it. This plan was the only thing I could think of. And now it's failed. And there's nothing I can do.”

John slips his hand into Bane's and squeezes hard.

“We'll think of something else,” he says again, even though they both know the truth: there's nothing else they can do. They sit together in silence.

“Talia doesn't like Barsad,” Bane says suddenly, as if he'd never noticed that before today. He looks around the cell, calculating. “We could keep him here, perhaps ... when he's a little better ...”

John huffs, unthinking. “Where're we supposed to do it, then?”

There's a beat as Bane struggles to get his meaning, and then he does. He laughs out loud. It startles the hell out of John. He can count the number of times he's heard Bane laugh like that on one hand. It's a rich, husky sound.

“I hadn't thought of that,” Bane says.

John taps his temple. “Good thing you've got me. See, I don't think Barsad would like it much if we fucked on top of him.”

“With that leg, there's very little he can do about it.”

It's John's turn to laugh. Bane looks startled at the sound, too; then his eyes glimmer with fondness. When did they get this close? John tries to think back to a single event, and can't. He smiles when Bane leans over to kiss him: through the shroud, like he's forgotten it's there. He pulls back, and John tugs it down for him.

“There you go, stud.”

Bane smiles back—almost shyly—and cups John's face as he leans over for another kiss.

It's John who lies down first. Bane follows him, chasing his mouth, then stops, concerned.

“That last time we fucked,” John says, his heart jumping nervously, “you didn't do anything wrong, you know.”

Bane is doubtful. “You were upset, after.”

“Yeah. I was, a little. See, the thing is ...” He laughs, roughly, putting a hand over his eyes. He can't believe he's about to say this out loud. “I don't think I've ever had an orgasm that intense in my life. I just couldn't believe ... well, maybe I didn't want to believe that sex with you could possibly feel that good when I'm not even ... when I don't like guys.”
Bane rumbles softly and nuzzles his face to John's, obviously pleased by the knowledge that he'd finally made John feel good.

"Don't look so smug," John warns. "You used to really hurt me. I couldn't reconcile the good with the bad."

"Of course not," Bane says. But his shyness is gone; he practically radiates desire. He nuzzles again. "I can find other ways of pleasing you," he says, but he doesn't sound terribly hopeful that John will take him up.

"Thanks," John says, smiling. "But no. I think we're okay now."

Bane had been crushed at the start of the night, but his eyes are gleaming now. "Give me the grease, habibi."

And John does.

* 
Within a month Barsad can hobble, a very little, if supported by John and Bane. Mostly, he stays in their old cell, wracked with pain.

As soon as supplies were lowered, along with a box of medical things, the doctor showed up with some precious morphine and tablets of ibuprofen, and he didn't even demand payment. In fact, except for the bottle of liquor during the famine, he hasn't asked them for anything. He even brings the extra supplies from Nadiya's father free of charge. He seems afraid that Bane is still angry about Nadiya's death. Or perhaps the man has a conscience. Either way, John's grateful. There's a chance Barsad will heal enough to walk unsupported—not that the leg will ever be as strong as it once was.

Not strong enough to climb.

This knowledge seems to weigh on Barsad very heavily. He owes Bane his life twice over now and has nothing to show for it. He can barely look Bane in the face. He sits alone all day, no doubt bored and in pain, and wallows in his misery. John sits with him, sometimes, and tries to coax a word or two out of him, but Bane doesn't like it much when John spends time with him. Bane is easily made jealous, and John knows he's got to keep up appearances to the rest of the prison. So he lets himself be possessively guarded by his husband.

Often they'll help Barsad relocate to their cell, to watch over Talia, and then they take Bane's bedroll into the old cell (they're thoughtful enough not to use the cot Barsad now sleeps in—or at least John is) and Bane stakes a proper claim on John. He lets John decide what they do—whether John sucks or strokes him, or lets Bane fuck him. John has to be in the right mood for fucking. Bane may be gentler now, try harder to make John enjoy it, but that doesn't mean John seeks it out or desires it. He has some blindingly intense orgasms, but when all's said and done he's still John Blake—not Bane's wife.

This distinction is important to him.

The amount of time they spend alone together doesn't get past Talia.

She's growing up much faster than John would like. Jealous of the time he spends with Bane, Talia does her best to command Bane's attention when they're all together in the cell. It hurts, but only because John knows why she's doing it—because she's terrified of losing her beloved
companion. Her mother is gone; Bane could be taken away at any moment just the same. So John
doesn't complain when she spurns him, and only wants bedtime stories from Bane.

He does mind when he wakes up from an afternoon nap with Bane and finds Talia missing,
though. Bane searches the prison for her, and finds her playing cards with a small group of older
men. He carries her, complaining all the way, back to the cell.

“I hate it here!” she tells them loudly when they want an explanation. “It's boring! There's nothing
to do here! I want to be out there!”

“It's dangerous out there,” John says.

“Dangerous for you!” she yells.

How can they possibly explain the threat to her? John certainly doesn't know. Bane looks over to
him, the disciplinarian, but John shakes his head. Talia won't take any form of punishment from
him: it has to come from Bane.

“I want you here where I can see you,” Bane tells her. “If you want to leave the cell, you are
welcome to join me.”

Talia sits on the bed and seethes. “You're just mad because you caught me this time.”

“This time?” John echoes. Talia doesn't look at him. “Talia, how many times have you gone out
alone?”

“Lots,” she says dismissively.

She's lucky the whole prison doesn't know her secret. John feels ill. If she's this adept at sneaking
out without them noticing, how are they supposed to stop her now, short of locking the door all
the time?

That night, when Bane steals him away to the old cell, John doesn't want to fuck. He wants to
talk. Unusually, Bane feels the same way.

“She's bored,” he says. “I don't know what to do, John.”

John is lying on top of him, for warmth. “Take her out more,” he suggests.

“I've been trying to think of a way to make her life here safer, and I can't. Even being locked up
didn't save Nadiya in the end. There is nothing here for a child to do. Of course she's going to
want to go out, and talk, and play; but what do we do when she's a little older? My thoughts go in
circles and they all come to the same place. I want her to leave the pit.”

“There's no way,” John says.

“We just have to keep thinking,” Bane says, but even he sounds desperate. He wraps his arms
around John. “There must be another way out.”

But John can't afford to think like that. There's no hope for them. All he can do is live one day at a
time, and refuse to think about the future.

*

At first, Talia does as Bane says and stays in the cell. She sits on the floor and watches him knit.
He's trying to finish the pair of socks that Nadiya started.

“I'm bored,” Talia says.

“Then you should find something safe to do,” Bane replies mildly. He adds, “Perhaps when I'm done I'll take you out.”

John hides a grin. Bane's doing a pretty good job of staying firm. It's because he knows the danger, of course, but it's rare for him to stand up to Talia so consistently.

John sympathizes, though. The cell is boring. He used to read when he wasn't napping, but they still don't have any books except for War and Peace, which only Barsad and Bane understand. It's too cold to do much else than lie in bed all day. He won't go out without Bane. The famine killed off most of the weaker men in the prison, and that means nearly all the wives and the communally-shared women are gone. He sees the way men look askance at him through jealous, narrowed eyes; and he sees how Bane bristles in response. They've left John alone for a long time, but now he's a commodity in high demand.

So he stays in the cell as much as he can, with nothing to do. The boredom must be getting to him, because right now what he really wants, more than anything, is to drag Bane next-door in broad daylight and kiss him until his lips are bruised and jerk off in his lap or something.

Maybe that's why he feels a bizarre twinge of envy when Talia crawls up into Bane's lap and kisses his cheek. Petulance isn't working for her; now she's using affection.

“I love you,” she says.

Bane stops knitting and holds her. “And I love you,” he says softly. “And I will protect you until my last breath. That's why I'm keeping you here with me. I am always going to keep you safe.”

Talia hums, evidently satisfied with this answer once she's thought about it for a moment. “Make John go away?”

John's already getting up. “I was gonna visit Barsad anyway,” he says.

In the next cell Barsad is sitting up, staring at the wall. Sitting up and lying down are pretty much all he can do on his own. He's worse off than John, which is why John brings the pack of playing cards with him. Barsad says nothing, but he brightens a very little when John sits on the cot with him and starts shuffling cards.

“I can hear Bane and Talia,” Barsad says quietly after a few silent minutes have passed. “Not so nice to be kicked out of your cell, is it?”

“This was our cell first,” John reminds him. “We could take it back any time we wanted. Make you sleep in the corner again.”

“The little one would not be happy.”

“No,” John agrees. “I guess you're stuck sharing this place with us.”

“Better than sleeping with the rats,” Barsad says agreeably.

John feels a little prickle of apprehension, suddenly. What if Talia no longer wants him in what she considers her cell and Bane's, either? He has a mental image of him and Barsad sharing the cot, shivering away under the blankets. But of course that won't happen. Barsad is here because it's more comfortable for him, not because Talia kicked him out. Besides, John is part of her little
family. He loves Talia like a sister, and she loves him too.

“I worry about that little girl,” Barsad says without looking up from his hand. John is startled from his thoughts.

“What?” Barsad is silent. With another uneasy prickling down his spine, John says, “What do you mean?”


He's worried they'll let her get hurt. John relaxes. “We take care of her,” he says. “Don’t worry.”

Bane takes Talia for a walk later, and John has returned to their cell by the time they get back. Bane slips away to talk briefly to Barsad, and John convinces Talia to sit down and draw pictures with him. Soon she gets distracted, though, and sits twirling her knife around in the air.

“You should visit Barsad with us sometimes,” John says. “He's a nice guy.”

Her face darkens visibly. “He should have stayed up there.”

“Up where?”

She points out of the cell toward the climbing wall, where the rope still hasn't been replaced.

All at once John feels a little sickly knot settle in his gut.

Maybe the person who cut the rope didn't mean for Barsad to fall. Maybe they meant to try and pull the rope down and trap him up there. And maybe he even suspects it, just a little...

John shakes his head. Ridiculous.

“He's nice,” he repeats. “He's a friend.” And you need all the friends you can get down here, if we're going to keep you safe.

“He's not my friend,” Talia spits. “He wants to take me away from Bane.”

“What—?” John stutters. “He—no, no way, Talia. No one would ever do that.”

“He would!” She's yelling now. “I heard him say so! I wish he was dead!”

John shushes her quickly, but Bane is in the doorway in another moment, attracted by the sound of her voice.

“What's wrong?”

Talia goes to him at once, and he lifts her up.

“No one can take me away from you or John,” she says fiercely, burying her face in his shoulder.

“No, of course not,” Bane says, bewildered.

“Promise me. You have to promise!”

“Yes,” Bane says, relaxing now, just holding her. “I promise.”

John doesn't say anything.
He waits until that night, when Barsad is watching over a sleeping Talia. Bane's too impatient to wait, so John lets himself be pushed onto his back and manhandled. He hates how cold the grease and his own fingers are, but when Bane's blunt cock replaces them, it chases all the ice out of his body and leaves him trembling and flushed. Bane's chief pleasure is to watch John ride him, but it's too cold tonight to put much space between their bodies. He can at least roll John on top of him, kiss him thoroughly while John works his hips as smoothly as he can. He's so glad no one can see them like this in the dark. For John to be on top, kissing his master—they'd both be killed.

Bane's hands rove all over his body, touching and petting, finally sliding down to his ass and squeezing. He helps to lift John on every upstroke and drags him back down. And he doesn't finish until John has, finally forcing a hand between them and stroking himself gracelessly until he comes with a strangled gasp. Then, rumbling with satisfaction, Bane rolls John's limp body over again and thrusts in until he spends himself.

He clasps John in his massive arms afterward, making a sound on every exhale like a purring tiger. Bane's a cuddler. John still isn't, but he can bear it when it's this cold outside the cot. And they kiss, lazily. The first few times this happened, John reached a point where the afterglow of climax faded to be replaced by self-righteous anger, because how dare Bane pretend that they're—like they're lovers? After everything that brought them to this point? But he's tired and so lonely inside that he can admit now how much he enjoys being held like this, let go of his reservations and focus on the here and now.

He runs a hand up and down Bane's chest, to get his attention. “I think Talia cut the climbing rope.”

Bane is still and quiet for a minute.

“She couldn't have,” he says at last, in a tone that suggests he's only humouring John. “She would have had to leave the cell without us.”

“And she couldn't have done that.”

“She's a child,” Bane growls. “She would never hurt anyone.”

“I'm not saying she wanted to hurt anyone,” John says. “I just think she cut the rope. I think she wanted to make Barsad go away somehow.”

“Why?”

“Because she heard you and him talking about him climbing out of here and taking us with him. And leaving you behind. There's no way she'd let anyone take her away from you, Bane.”

“She would never,” Bane says stoutly.

“Just talk to her,” John says. “That's all I'm asking. Tell her you're not going anywhere.”

“Oh,” Bane says, relaxing. “I can do that.”

He does, the next day. John's not sure what he says, but the effect is noticeable. Talia becomes much brighter and less sullen. She sits in John's lap and lets him tell her bedtime stories again. She plays with him. She's her normal, little-girl self again, happy and secure in the knowledge that no one can ever take Bane from her. She even visits Barsad with them, and warms to him considerably when he plays little games with her and tells her stories of his own, tales she's never
heard before. Barsad is tirelessly patient with her—he has a little girl of his own, of course—and within a week he and Talia are friends. It lifts Barsad's mood a little, too, which is good. John knows he misses his family—and of course, now he'll never see them again.

Just like John will never see Gotham or his friends ever again.

It's hard to be optimistic even with this peace between the four of them. They're still stuck here. The men are still hungry for sex, just waiting for John to leave the safety of the cell and stumble into the shadows. Weirdly enough, it's when he's with Bane in the old cell that he feels happiest.

At least he has that.

*

It's not quite so cold the night Bane wakes John from a light doze for a late-night tryst. He's already brought Barsad over to watch Talia. John follows him silently.

On the bedroll, they do nothing more than kiss for a while, touching indiscriminately like a couple of teenagers. Bane unfastens John's pants, pushes them down a little, rests his hand near John's crotch.

“Can I touch?” he asks.

John falters. “I don't ...”

“All of you belongs to me,” Bane leans down, putting their faces closer together. His eyes crinkle at the corners. “But this belongs to you first.”

John laughs weakly, a nervous, jolting huff of breath. His eyes sting. He never knows how to react to stuff like that. It's good, it's kind. But they're playing with fire, acting at this kind of relationship. “Thanks.”

He doesn't let Bane touch him. He doesn't want to think about his pleasure; it makes this too complicated. So he strokes Bane, who squeezes and clutches his hands in the blankets at John's sides, and comes against John's leg with a gasping growl. He lies on top of John after, holding himself up just enough that he doesn't crush all the breath out of John's lungs.

When a few minutes have passed, Bane brings his hand lower and just grazes it past John's groin again.

“You ever think about ... me putting my mouth on you,” he says slowly, cautiously, “... here?”

John never has, honestly. He does now, and he can't even imagine a circumstance in which Bane would debase himself like that. But the mental image is ... huh.

“No,” he says honestly, and smiles. “But I might now.”

Bane growls, less sleepy all of a sudden, and jerks his head away.

“I would never—” he says. “You are mine, it's not—I could never.”

“Okay,” says John, easily letting this go. Bane rearranges the shroud over his face, touching it compulsively.

“My mouth ... it's ...”
“For God’s sake,” John says, with an uncharacteristic flush of anger. “Don’t give me any crap about how you think my mouth must look so much prettier sucking cock than yours ever could because you think you’re this hideous monster. Well, you don’t look at you every day. I do, and I think you’re really handsome, actually. Not ugly. You need to get past this hang-up, all right, because you are way better-looking than most of the guys down here, and if I was brought down here again and I didn’t know anyone, I’d still want you to pick me. I’d only want you.”

Bane’s eyes are wider in the dark. He doesn’t seem to know what to say.

“What?” John demands.

“It would ... hurt,” Bane says finally. “My mouth. That is what I meant.”

John’s ears burn. Of course, stretching his lips for that long would hurt Bane’s torn mouth. He struggles for an answer and comes up with “Oh.”

“Habibi.” The word is laden with fondness. Bane wraps John up in his arms and holds him. “I would want you too. I will want you in any lifetime.”

That’s probably the closest Bane will ever come to saying I love you to John, and it sucks that John can never reciprocate. He’s still thinking about this when Bane rolls them both over onto their sides. Conversation over.

And that’s the thing about Bane, of course: he’ll never expect reciprocation. John nestles into him, relieved, and goes to sleep.

*

In the morning, when there’s light outside the cell, they’re woken by Barsad’s voice calling to Bane through the curtains, low and urgent.

They both go, as quickly as they can. “What’s wrong?” Bane asks.

“Talia just went out,” Barsad says, trying hard to stand. His face is drawn and white with pain. “I told her not to—”

“Sit,” Bane says. “I’ll find her.”

“I’ll help look,” John says, thinking queasily of the men who lurk in the shadows. Bane squeezes his shoulder.

“Stay out of the tunnels.”

They split up.

This time, it’s John who finds her. She’s sitting with a cluster of men who are passing around a bottle, laughing amiably.

“Hey,” John says, stopping awkwardly at the edge of their circle. “Uh, thanks for watching him. Time to go, though.”

Talia scowls but gets up. One of the men waves the bottle.

“Ey, was almost the little boy’s turn to drink.”
Talia bristles. John puts a hand on her shoulder and squeezes.

“He doesn't drink. Sorry.”

“Don't listen to this khaneeth, boy,” one of the other men slurs. He hiccups. “Cocksucker. Don't go with him, boy.”

“I'm not a boy,” Talia says.


“Come on, buddy,” John says quickly, pulling her away.

He and Talia are about five yards away when another man calls out, with far too much awareness for a drunkard, “Hey! Bring that child back over here.”

John quickens his pace. Bane sees them and meets them at the cell. Talia's quivering, looking up from one of them to the other. She can feel John's panic and anger and she's starting to sense that she's done something very wrong. Barsad half rises to meet them.

Turning, John yanks the curtains over the door.

“They know,” John says quietly. “About Talia.”

Barsad sinks back down into his chair. Bane just stares at John.

“I didn't mean to.” Talia's voice is small. “What did I do?”

“It's okay,” John starts to say, needing helplessly to comfort her; but just then, from outside, a man calls out curiously:

“Hey, Bane, where's that boy of yours? Bring him out here.”

John takes a glance through the curtains. Men are wandering around, talking, like on any morning in the pit; but some seem to have more purpose to their stride than others, and more than a couple of them are glancing over at the cell.

Heart sinking, John pulls back. “What now?”

Bane is still staring at him. Then, abruptly, he snaps out of it. He walks over to the bed, pulls a faded sack out from under it, and starts grabbing clothes.

“You still have the key to the cell?” Barsad says. “You can lock the door now, wait for this to blow over—”

“It won't blow over.” Bane turns, starts stuffing bottles of water into the sack. “If they know, they won't stop until they have Talia.”

He grabs some food, throws that in too. “Barsad, stay here. John and Talia, come with me. Walk quickly—don't run.”

They obey. Talia slips her hand into John's, her grip tight and scared. Bane walks briskly beside them, tying the ends of the sack in a knot. He loops this over John's shoulder.

“You know what you have to do,” he says in a low, steady voice.

John's voice is slightly choked in comparison. “No, I don't.”
Another man shouts Bane's name. Bane breaks into a run.

They hurtle up the steps to the dais under the climbing wall. There, Bane lifts Talia up in his arms. He pauses to give her a tight hug, and she clings to him, wordless and afraid. Bane pushes her up onto the lowest ledge before she can think to tighten her grip on him.

“Start climbing, Talia,” he says. “Don't look down.”

She turns away, pale-faced, and obeys.

“No,” John says, definitely choked now.

“Yes. Climb, John. You nearly did it before. You came closer than anyone but Barsad. Get her out of this place.”

“This is your great plan?” John would be yelling if his throat weren't so constricted, strangling his voice into a whisper. “You think I can do this?”

“No. I know you can do this,” Bane says steadily.

There's a roar from the men clustered together. They've noticed Talia. They shout for their companions, starting to advance. Men are appearing from almost every cell and tunnel. John is shaking.

“I'm not leaving you.”

“I'll be right behind you. I just need to slow them down.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise,” Bane says. “Go.”

Individual voices start to become distinguishable through the general clamour.

“Bane, you son of a bitch!”

“Give us that child!”

“They're coming, John. Please,” Bane begs, his fear starting to show in his eyes.

“Barsad—”

“We'll come back for him.”

“But—” John's whole body is seized up by some nameless dread. He can't move.

Bane tears the shroud off his face, grabs John and crushes their mouths together. It's a desperate, longing kiss, and John grabs onto him. Then Bane is gently, firmly pushing John's hands away, turning him, and John scrambles to step onto his interlaced hands without thinking. Bane hoists him up onto the ledge.

“Go,” he shouts.

The first man reaches Bane, below the ledge. Bane turns, snarling, and knocks him down with one punch. Two more are right behind the first. John starts climbing.
He can't think. If he thinks about what he's doing, he'll fall. The sack looped over his shoulder weighs him down on one side. He doesn't mean to drop it—the knots just come untied and it falls away. He doesn't think about it. Doesn't listen to the roars and shouts below, the sounds of fighting. He concentrates on his own ragged breathing. Climb. Climb. Don't think. Just climb.

It seems like an age has passed when he suddenly feels small hands plucking at him. Talia, trying to pull him onto the ledge. John scrambles up and falls flat on his chest, gasping. His arms are aching, his stomach muscles burning. His wrist feels ready to snap in two.

“Where's Bane?” Talia asks querulously.

“Coming.” John picks himself up, gasping.

The light almost blinds him. He hadn't realized they were this close to the top. He'd just been focused on the rock face in front of him. The breath wheezes out of his lungs, and back in. Shakily, he stands up.

The sunlight bathes his whole upper body.

He turns around slowly. There, above and ahead of him, is the last rock ledge.

He could stop now. He could wait for Bane. But something is pushing him: now, now, now. It has to be now or it will be never. Now, while his heart is surging in his chest and he feels alive in a way he hasn't since he got here. His limbs tingle. The sunlight beckons to him.

So he doesn't think about it.

He just jumps.

Jumps, and is amazed when his fingers graze and then snag on firm rock.

He swings, pushed by the momentum of his leap, but nothing in the world is more important than hanging on. He does.

Arms quivering, he pulls himself up, inch by inch. He gets one arm onto the ledge. Then the other. He scrambles, kicking at empty space, then finds purchase and hauls himself up onto the rock surface.

He's not done yet. Mouth dry, he turns and lies flat on his stomach. He gropes around until he finds a nook to wedge one foot into, to anchor himself. He braces his leg, shimmies out over the edge of the ledge, and drops both arms.

“Okay,” he says, shaky. “Jump, Talia, and grab my hands. I'll catch you.”

She nods, scared, but every bit as fierce as her mother. She jumps.

Her little hands clutch at his arms, and they find a grip on each other. His whole body quakes, his abdomen cramps and burns from the effort, but John locks his foot into that cranny and pulls. He pulls her onto that ledge with all his remaining strength, and collapses when she's made it.

The climb is simple from here. Rocks jut out from the walls. Talia starts climbing without even waiting for him. John follows more slowly. His body is taxed, down to its very last reserves. Nothing about this feels real until, abruptly, he touches warm stone.

Warm?
The rim of the pit.

Talia tugs at his shirt, helps to drag him up the last few feet, because he doesn't have the strength left to do it by himself. He's terrified he'll slip, at this crucial point; that he'll pass out from exhaustion and plummet back into hell. But Talia pulls on him with all her might and then he tumbles out. He's out, lying on dirt and sand and heaving for breath.

When he thinks he's ready—when the world stops spinning around him—he sits up a little bit and turns to look at the prison.

So small. How could that hole, that circle of light, so tempting from below, be so small up here?

He drags himself to the edge and looks down. Faint noises reach him: shouts and bellows and words, too faint to make out. No one is following them up the wall.

He lies down and shuts his eyes. Maybe he even goes to sleep for a little while. All he knows is that every time he opens his eyes, that wall is bare. His head swims and his eyes water. The sun climbs higher in the sky, then lower. Noises in the pit grow fainter.

No one is coming.

"You promised," John says into the hole. Then he yells it, voice cracking: "You promised!"

He backs away from the pit. He has to. He'll be sick if he looks into it any longer. Vaguely, he hears a soft *flump* nearby.

He turns around. Talia is on her feet, reaching up to the sky, twirling dizzily around until she falls into the sand. *Flump.*

"What're you doing?" John asks hoarsely.

"It's so bright." She gets up again and reaches, enchanted. "I can almost touch it."

Bane is not coming. Part of John knew it the moment Bane kissed him, in view of all those men. It was too desperate a kiss; too much emotion. It was goodbye.

And realizing this, John's brain clicks feebly back online. It'll be night, soon enough. Cold. They have no supplies. There are buildings in the distance.

They are *free.*

And Bane is not coming.

"Come on," he says. Talia turns to him, a tiny sun reflected in each of her bright blue eyes. He takes her hand. "Let's go see the world."

* * *

**epilogue**

John has that dream again.

He has it twice a week at least. He's right there, standing at the bottom of the wall. And there's Bane, promising to follow him. But he doesn't. He's swallowed up in a mob of furious, cheated
men. They tear him apart with their bare hands. John's looking down at him, and he meets Bane's agonized grey eyes, and he doesn't do a thing to help. It's not what Bane would want. But that doesn't make it any easier to watch.

“John,” Talia whispers.

His eyes fly open. The lamp next to their bed is on, reminding him that he's not there. He takes a few deep breaths.

There's a second little whisper at his side. “John.”

“Hey,” he says belatedly, rolling over to face her. “What's wrong?”

But he already knows as soon as he rolls over. He pulls back the cover. Right where Talia was lying—where his knee is resting now—there's a wet patch on the sheets.

“All better,” he says. Talia just crawls back under the covers.

Were you dreaming?” she asks when he joins her.

“Yeah,” he says.

“Me too.”

They go back to sleep.

* 

John's first time soaking in a hot bath after leaving the pit, he'd almost cried with relief. Sure, they bathed down there. Bane was more particular about hygiene than most of the other men. But cold water, threadbare cloths, and hard, gritty little chunks of soap that barely produced a lather are not equal to steaming hot water and towels. Not even close. He washed his hair over and over, and tried not to think about someone else's fingers trailing through each strand.

Talia did cry. She thought the water would burn all her skin off. She struggled and cried until John thought their hosts would come barging in to see what was going on. The world was an overwhelming place to her, and he had to remind himself that this was all new. So he wrapped her up in a towel, held her and rocked her until the water cooled enough not to be so scary.

Things seemed new to him, too. He was in a foreign land, and he'd been cut off from the world for almost two years. He wanted to find the closest US embassy and just go home, but he couldn't; not with Talia in tow, not knowing if he was still wanted or not. So he had to adapt.

The first time he stole something, it was so that Talia could eat. It got easier, over time. Now
almost all their money is ill-gotten. They hustle cards, mostly. Barsad taught them how to cheat. John never thought he'd come to rely on these little parlour tricks in deadly earnest. On the rare occasion that they're caught, John is fit enough now to put all those fighting lessons to good use.

Bane kept them alive inside the prison. But it's Barsad who keeps them alive on the outside.

John wonders about Barsad, sometimes. If the men killed him, too.

But he won't let himself think about—

No.

He just can't.

Not in the daylight, anyway.

*

That one about their escape isn't the only nightmare John has. It's a different one almost every night, but he often goes back to the same setting—the tunnel where Amir lived—and the same disjointed fragments of feelings and sensations. The humiliation of being dragged around on a leash. Having the last shreds of his masculinity stripped away from him. Lying in the dark and waiting for the next rape to begin. It lasted only seventeen days; but it's left a scar on the surface of his mind that won't go away.

He always keeps a light on, so he knows where he is when he wakes up. Otherwise he's back there, in the pit, in danger every second, until he can convince his fevered mind otherwise.

He's not sure what Talia has nightmares about. He never asks.

They keep traveling, never staying in one place for long. Talia is fluent in English and Arabic and she knows snatches of other languages, too, enough for them to get by. They're searching for her father. It's what Nadiya would want, and, John thinks, what—Bane would want, too. Since they can't go to Gotham. It's hard—all they have to go on is a name that Talia might not even remember correctly. So they keep moving, asking everyone they meet. Keep searching for a ghost.

They're free as birds. And still, there's a weight inside John, like a block of ice in his stomach that keeps him from ever getting too happy about it. It's a heavy weight, a gaping hole. He's incomplete.

Talia, too. Nothing was supposed to tear her away from Bane's arms. Without him, they're both drifting, homeless, helium balloons without a string—but Talia's the only one who can admit it.

*

The day after Talia wets the bed, they sneak into a real hotel, a nice one, a familiar American chain in the middle of Alexandria. It's right near the coast, nothing too fancy, but nice. No rats or roaches, not like what they're used to. Too much for them to actually stay; but they only need an hour or two. Just long enough for John to access the Internet.

It's a risk, he's sure of it, searching himself like this. But he's waited long enough. He has to know for sure. It's been a year now, and no one they've encountered has heard of Talia's father. Either they keep doing this indefinitely, or they try to go home to Gotham. John knows which he'd
A nice hotel provides a pretty good return. Talia slips away, light-fingered and inconspicuous, to mingle with American tourists. The sound of their boisterous, English-speaking, familiarly-accented voices carry back to John from where he claims a computer in the lobby. Heart in his throat, he opens a web browser. He's not sure where to start.

He types in his own name, Robin Blake, and waits.

The results are instantaneous. He doesn't even have to click any of the blue links: the blurbs beneath them tell him everything.

He's dead, for a start. Wrongly accused—so someone did clear his name. Two years ago, in fact. And instead of admitting their mistake and pulling him out of the pit, the government had washed their hands of him and said he died while being detained. This is not a big deal to the people of the Internet. It's only a few paltry articles, a couple blogs with an interest in government screw-ups. People are wrongly accused all the time; John's only notable because he was supposedly taken off US soil to be tortured.

So what does all this mean if he shows up at a US embassy? Would they take him out back and quietly shoot him, eliminating any risk of him talking? No. He has more faith in his home country than that. Even if they did pretty much throw him to the dogs.

He logs off numbly.

He just wants to go home.

What now?

* 

When John tells Talia later, she doesn't react right away.

“You remember all the things I told you about Gotham,” he says. “We could live there, together ... I'll adopt you officially, you could go to school, make friends with other kids ...”

He's not sure how much of a draw that will be. Talia regards other children as a curious, often irritating novelty, the way some people look at cats. Her expression doesn't flicker.

“We're supposed to go back for Bane,” she says.

John sighs. He sits down on the edge of the bed and pats the cover at his side. She doesn't move to join him.

“I just can't see how to do that,” he admits. His chest clenches tightly. “But if we go to Gotham, we could get help. We could look for some humanitarian group and tell them about the pit. We need help.”

“No one's going to help him,” Talia says.

Outside the pit, she's maturing faster than John could have anticipated. She knows exactly how the outside world regards her birthplace and the kind of men who inhabit it. She's bristling, staring at John, and he doesn't know what to do.

“I really think ...”
“You're just scared to go back,” Talia says, piercing him right in the heart. She's right, of course. John shuts his mouth, and Talia glares. “I'm not stupid. I know what happened to you.”

“Then you know why it's such a bad idea to go back alone,” he says. “Bane might have died so you'd never have to see that place again. That's what he wanted!”

“If you're such a coward, I'll go back by myself.”

“Think of your mom,” John appeals to her. “Think of what she'd want. She would want you to grow up far away from that place . . .”

“She wouldn't care,” Talia says. The words are slightly strangled.

John stares. Talia recovers and says coolly, “Mama never cared what happened to me.”

“How can you even say that?” John demands. “She loved you more than anything—”

“She cried every day because I made her sad, even when I tried to be good. She gave all her love to my father and had nothing left for me. Mama hated me.”

John's on his feet again. “Don't ever say that.”

“I'm glad she died,” Talia says, her eyes blazing up at John. “Bane loved me. Not her.”

He takes a deep breath. She's trying to provoke him now. She wants to needle him into action, but it's not going to happen. Maybe it's because she's right, and he's terrified of going back there. Maybe it's as simple as him having no idea how to get back to the pit. He swore to himself he'd go back one day, if there was even the remotest chance of Bane being alive—but not alone. It's too dangerous.

“Either we go to Gotham or we keep looking for your father,” he says. “Those are the options.”

She clenches her jaw, looking astonishingly like Nadiya for a moment. “Then I want to keep looking.”

“Fine,” John says. That's the option that will keep her closer to Bane. It might impede them in the long run, but... “For one more month, Talia. And then we leave. Deal?”

“Fine,” she echoes.

He has the dream again that night. This time, just before Bane is dragged down by the raging mob, he says I love you, desperately; and John opens his mouth, but no words come out. And then Bane is gone.

* Fate is a fickle bitch.

He wakes up just a couple nights later with the cold muzzle of a gun pressed to the back of his neck.

“Don't move,” a low voice says.

John stays very still. He wills Talia, lying under the covers next to him, to do the same, and he wonders if he can somehow shield her with his body without moving too much. She's close
enough that he can lunge over her, if he has to. Whatever it takes, he's going to protect her.

The low voice behind him says, “Why are you searching for Ra's al Ghul?”

He can't place that accent. Or the name. He licks his lips. “I don't know who that is.”

“The man you are seeking goes by Ra's al Ghul now. You've been looking for him for several months. Why?”

John’s brain goes fuzzy. The combination of just having woken up and having a gun pressed to his head leaves little room for rational thought.

“His daughter ...”

“Ra's al Ghul has no children.”

“I knew his wife,” John blurts out.

“He has no wife.”

Panic starts to creep in. “I ... I think this is a mistake, then.”

“There is no mistake,” The voice is cold. “Answer my questions, and you may live.”

“The guy I'm looking for—I got his name from a woman named Nadiya, she called him her husband. I knew her ...”

He registers, belatedly, that the gun is gone. The silence in the room is like a heavy, muffling blanket.

John twists onto his back, wanting to face his assailant. There are four of them, all dressed in black and nearly indistinguishable from the dark, all wearing face masks. The one closest to him is holding a semi-automatic rifle. He can't see their expressions. Talia, awake at his side now, is sensibly quiet.

“How do you know that name?” the man asks softly.

“I was her friend,” John says, equally soft.

The man pulls off his mask. He's bearded and disarmingly handsome. When another man turns on the light, John can see that the first man's eyes are the same colour blue as Talia's.

“I haven't seen Nadiya in nearly ten years,” he says. His tone betrays no emotion. “They told me my prison sentence had been lifted. That she had intervened. And if I were to return, that there would be consequences for us both.”

“She did intervene,” John says. “She went to prison in your place.”

Ra's al Ghul bows his head.

“I met her there. She was kind.”

“Yes,” Ra's al Ghul murmurs. “She was always kind.”

“She was pregnant when she arrived,” John goes on. “She had a daughter there. Talia.”

For the first time, the man looks at Talia.
“That's why we've been looking for you,” John says. “We escaped from the pit.”

“Nadiya is dead,” Ra's al Ghul says, transferring his gaze back to John. There's no sadness there: only resignation.

“Yeah,” John says quietly. “The men down there killed her.”

Ra's al Ghul drops his gun on the bed and bows his head once more, now in grief. The three men behind him stand as still as statues.

Talia slips out from under the covers. She approaches the man without fear and gazes up at him. He lifts his head a little to look at her with interest.

“You have your mother's face,” he says.

“You're my father?” Talia says. He nods, and she says, “She told me you would come for us. But you never did.”

“Talia, is it?” It's Talia's turn to nod. Ra's al Ghul sits on the edge of the bed, and says with enough sorrow to break John's heart, “I am deeply sorry, Talia.”

She moves close enough that he can wrap his arms around her. They hold each other for a minute. There's a sense of closure, of reunion.

And John wants that. He wants it, too.

It's incredible how much it hurts.

*  

The next time he dreams, there's no one there but him and Bane. No angry mob, no Talia climbing to freedom. Just them.

Bane's more handsome than he remembers. Maybe because he's wearing no hood, no shroud; maybe because he's smiling. His fair hair is windswept and his soft lips unmarred.

There are days when John can't remember Bane's voice. He can remember Nadiya's soft, husky pitch, but some days Bane's voice eludes him. He hears it now, though. It's clear as anything.  

_Habibi._

He wakes up with tears on his face.

*  

“We are close to the pit now,” Ra's al Ghul says. “I avoided the place in my travels. But we have the coordinates.”

John knows they're close. He can feel it, right down to his bones: a deep, instinctive terror.

He and Talia are with Ra's and his men now—followers, Ra's calls them, brothers in a cause. They've been making their way across the desert, sleeping in tents at night, just like traders crossing the desert on camelback in the old days. Except instead of camels, they're traveling by Jeep.
They've been with Ra's for a couple weeks now, and up until now, John had only guessed at the plan. He'd gone along mostly because Ra's seemed to expect him to, and to make sure Talia was okay, which she is. In fact, he's starting to feel a little ... unnecessary. Talia may not be too sure about her father, but she gets along real well with his men. They're probably off teaching her how to throw knives right now. Barsad would approve.

John spends the days by himself, lonely and tired and homesick, not even sure what home is. But at night, Talia comes back to him and it's like old times, except she reads stories to him now. They go to bed together, close in the dark, and the ache in John's heart eases just a little.

“What happens when we get there?” John asks.

Ra's is sitting in John's tent—John's and Talia's. He respects their closeness, at least. Maybe he just doesn't see John as a threat.

“I understand that you and Talia have your own reasons for wanting to return to the prison,” Ra's says.

“If there's any chance our friend's alive, we have to go get him,” John says. The other man's wording makes him curious. “Do you have other reasons?”

Ra's just studies him. “How do you feel about justice, John?”

“I like justice,” John replies. He can't think what else to say.

“I'm glad to know that,” Ra's says. “In another day or two, I intend to bring justice to the pit.”

On that note, he gets up and leaves.

*

John dreams again that night, and the next. This time, Bane isn't there. John can't find him. He's lost somewhere in the pit, trying to find Bane, trying to avoid the dark tunnels; and then he sees it: their old cell. He goes to it, heart pounding.

It's empty. Bane is gone.

*

When they reach the pit, John has to sit down.

“Are you okay?” one of Talia's father's men inquires politely. John just nods.

The men start unraveling long ropes, checking their weapons. Talia is champing at the bit. She wants to go down. Ra's catches her gently before she can try to climb over the edge and lower herself on a rope.

“Stay up here, Talia,” he says. “It won't be safe for you.”

Talia makes a sour face. She circles the hole, then goes up to John and pushes him.

“You go,” she says. “You have to.”

“Talia ...”
“You have to go get Bane! They don't know what he looks like.”

She's so convinced that Bane is down there waiting for her. John's dream keeps repeating itself in his mind. He's always wanted to know, to just be certain so that he can move on with his life and maybe put an end to all the nightmares; but he never envisioned a future where Bane is still alive. He hardly dares to.

Ra's fastens a rope to the ground and flings it over the stone rim of the pit. He gives it a sharp tug, then looks at his men and nods. Almost eagerly, the first follower grabs the rope and lowers himself over the side, then starts to shimmy down, hand over hand. He vanishes quickly. More men follow, fastening their own ropes, tugging them, then scrambling into the hole. Ra's goes with them. Only a few stay up above, keeping a watchful eye on Talia.

“You have to go,” Talia says, almost begging now, pushing at John. “You have to. You have to see him.”

Maybe this is what he needs. Maybe he has to go back, face the place of his nightmares, and finally exorcise it from his dreams.

The first yells float faintly up to them.

“You have to go,” John says weakly, getting to his feet. He picks up one of the ropes, tests it carefully, then steps onto the stone rim. “Okay,” he says again.

He starts to climb down. It's more taxing than it seems. He braces against the wall with his legs, but the rope soon starts to abrade his hands, and he's afraid of losing his grip and falling. He goes slowly, slowly, and after an age his feet touch solid ground. He lets go of the rope reluctantly and looks around.

He's back.

The place hasn't changed much. It's still dark and dank—and then the smell hits him, and he almost drops to his knees. He's paralyzed by it. He'd forgotten the smell of the place, but now it brings back a hundred memories in a flood.

He breathes through his mouth and shuffles forward numbly. All around them, Ra's al Ghul's men are exacting justice on the prisoners, who outnumber the men but are overwhelmed by their strength and weapons. He moves past them all dazedly. His feet are taking him on the right path without his brain's permission.

Their cell. He can see it from here.

His heart throbs so thickly in his ears he feels like his head is full of cotton. He can barely breathe. He's so afraid of this place; but more than that, so afraid of what he might find...

He's in front of the cell. He pushes open the door, but he can already see through the bars.

It's empty.

Nothing remains except for the old cot, stripped of its sheets. The chair and table have been gone for a while, sacrificed to the bonfire during the famine before Bane was forced to surrender his books. The cell seems even more bare, hollowed out. Even the little wooden stool that used to sit over the latrine hole in the corner is gone.

No one has lived here in a long time.
He backs out. He looks in Nadiya's cell. It's even emptier. The curtains are gone.

Starting to panic, John goes back into Bane's cell and bounds up onto the cot, groping frantically for the hidden shelf where they used to keep the key to Nadiya's cell. He doesn't know what he expects to find there. Some explanation, perhaps, some kind of message—his hands close around something soft and yielding. His heart surges. He yanks it out.

Talia's feather-stuffed doll. The knife is still tucked into its back.

John stares at it, disbelievingly. There's a faint rushing in his ears. He has to sit down on the edge of the cot.

This is all that remains.

Now he knows.

Bane is dead.

* 

It would be hard for John to pick the worst day of his life. There are a lot to choose from. Like the day after Nadiya died. Or any one of the seventeen days he spent in Amir's lair—those are all strong contenders, but especially those first days when he thought they'd killed Bane.

This day is up there with those.

After some time has passed, he comes back to himself curled up in a ball on the cot, clutching the doll to him tightly. How long has he been lying here? He blinks, gets up stiffly. He leaves the doll behind and goes to the doorway. The men are still there, grimly doing their duty for Ra's and for Nadiya's memory. John can't even be upset by the slaughter. He can't feel anything.

He steps out of the cell. It's not difficult to leave it behind. Without Bane, it's just a cage. Just a place.

Apart from all the other men, toward the other end of the pit where the doctor's cell is—or at least used to be—there's a misshapen figure hunched on the floor. A rock, John thinks dully; but he keeps walking, and it keeps drawing his gaze. He turns around.

It is a rock, but there's a man hunched against it. John edges warily closer, his curiosity ensnared. One of the older men, perhaps, too jaded to care about the slaughter going on around him. He's easy to overlook, sitting with his back against the rock, his clothing the same dirty-brown colour as the floor. His hood is pulled up. Then John gets even closer, and notices the bloodstained bandages wrapped around the man's lower face. He sees a fleck of light glance off a hunted, glassy blue-grey eye.

"Bane?" he breathes.

He doesn't get any closer than that. Without warning, a solid weight hits him from the side and sends him sprawling. It's another man, snarling, pinning John to the ground.

"Are you such a coward," Barsad spits, "that you stand back while your friends massacre these men, and only attack a man who cannot fight back?"
“Barsad!” John says, stunned. His head aches where it cracked against the rock when Barsad tackled him, but he barely feels it. Barsad's brow furrows and he falters before hitting John. “It's me—it's John!”

Barsad frowns and studies him more closely. Then he grunts and sits back.

“So it is,” he says without emotion.

He moves aside. Gratefully, John stands and stares at him.

“You made it,” he says. He clutches this little piece of good news to him fiercely.

“Where's the girl?”

“Right outside. She's okay. We're both okay.”

“Good,” Barsad says. He limps a couple of stiff strides away, and John's gaze flits past him to the man on the floor.

He bounds forward. Barsad catches him around the waist and shoves him back with startling strength. He's bristling.

“I did not say you could go nearer,” he says.

“But—” John gapes, trying to parse how this diminished figure could be his protector. It is ... isn't it? “What happened to him?”

Barsad turns to face him again, his face still wiped of emotion.

“They were angry,” he says. “He deprived them of a girl and of his wife. They weren't afraid of him once they all banded together.”

John stares, sickly fascinated, at the crumpled figure. Bane. He takes in the bloodstained rags around Bane's face.

“His face ...”

“They saw him kiss you,” Barsad says simply. “They destroyed him for it.”

John can't bear it. He has to see Bane, touch him, know that he's really there. He lurches forward. Barsad tries to grab him and stumbles on his bad leg, cursing.

“He's drugged,” he calls after John. “He won't even know you.”

John hits the ground on his knees at Bane's side. He touches Bane's knee—solid and warm, the material raspy under his palm—and squeezes instinctively.

“Bane,” he says. “Bane? Bane, hey—”

The other man moans very softly, drawing one arm up as if to shield his broken face. His glazed eyes pass unseeing over John.

“It's me.” Tears spill onto John's face when he blinks. He didn't even know he was crying. “Bane, please. Don't you know me? It's John.”

Barsad has moved next to John. He's there to see it when Bane stirs unexpectedly, eyes still hazy, unfocused, before they start to clear. Just a little, but John notices. Bane's sharpening gaze wavers
and then lands on John.

“John.” The word fizzles out on a weak expulsion of breath, slightly garbled, because Bane can barely move his jaw.

“Yeah.” John leans forward, grabbing Bane’s hands. The depth of his relief leaves him lighthearted. “It's me.”

Bane gazes at him with sheer wonder, like he's just laid eyes on a dream. His hand twitches—he wants to touch John—but he can't move it.

“You ... came back,” he manages to breathe out.

John gives a weak, sobbing laugh. The tears slide off his cheeks and land on their joined hands. Bane is broken, but John feels complete again. Whole, at long last.

“I was always going to come back for you,” he says. “Always.”