**Dawn of Justice: The Unofficial Novelization**

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/10646850](http://archiveofourown.org/works/10646850).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M, Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Clark Kent &amp; Bruce Wayne, Diana (Wonder Woman)/Bruce Wayne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Bruce Wayne, Diana Prince, Clark Kent, Barry Allen, Arthur Curry, Victor Stone, Lex Luthor Jr., Mercy Graves, Lois Lane, Alfred Pennyworth, And Several More Than That Really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Mystery, Action/Adventure, Retelling, Canon Divergence, Introspection, Slow Burn, Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Mental Health Issues, World's Finest, Ensemble Cast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of <a href="http://archiveofourown.org">When The Night Falls</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-04-16 Completed: 2017-07-06 Chapters: 17/17 Words: 95648</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Dawn of Justice: The Unofficial Novelization**

by [KDtheGhostwriter](http://archiveofourown.org)

**Summary**

What it says on the Tin. With a twist. After the Senate Bombing, Bruce Wayne takes a different path. Rather than trying to destroy Superman, he puts his skills as the World's Greatest Detective to use. Working, instead, to capture the perp as the mysterious Diana Prince helps him track down the meta-humans on Lex Luthor's watchlist.
PREFACE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I should precede this by saying I’ve always been more of a Marvel Comics guy. Emphasis on ‘Comics.’ The stories of Marvel comics are usually more connected to their superhero origins. There’s a bit more Fun n’ Fancy Free which suits my style a bit more. However, there’s always been a soft spot present for DC because of the characters they have crafted and the worlds they inhabit. I think they all have so much depth. There doesn’t seem to be any end to the stories you could tell. So putting the two greatest heroes of all time on the same screen seems like a no-brainer.

Dawn of Justice was…not a good movie. It was an entertaining movie in spots. It was a LOUD movie throughout. But it was not a good movie.

Many factors contributed to this unfortunate turn of events. For one, Zack Snyder isn’t the best storyteller. That doesn’t mean he’s not good. He just isn’t good at directing. His true talent to me has always been in the producer’s chair and never in the director’s chair. As a producer, the way he frames shots, especially in terms of action is incredible. So, it’s no surprise that this was an incredible movie to see, visually.

Like most of you (or some of you, I can’t assume) I have been following these stories for much of my life and as silly as it may seem to an outsider – or movie producer – there are very real emotions associated with and summoned by these otherwise fictional characters. It’s an investment. As such, I can’t let the screenwriters off the hook, here. David S. Goyer and Chris Terrio wrote an okay story, but when it came time to fill in the blanks with a good screenplay, the struggles were apparent. Writing isn’t easy, and it’s easy to tell when someone hasn’t connected with the source material.

So, what brings us here?

Of the many things my mom taught me - and there were many – the one I found the most valuable was the art of being proactive. “If you don’t like something, think about what you can do to improve the situation. It doesn’t make sense to do nothing.” I paraphrase but just know for the record my mother didn’t suffer complainers lightly in her household.

That’s why, just a month removed from seeing the movie in theaters, news of the Ultimate Edition on the horizon, my proclamation of rewriting the movie to my friend and co-worker was met with the predictable delayed wutface.

What do you mean you’re going to rewrite the whole movie?

I mean I’m going to rewrite the whole goddamn movie. More accurately write the movie I’d thought I might see. Because you see when I pay for my ticket stub and it says…

DAWN OF JUSTICE

I expect to have an action-packed, drama-filled, SOOPER LOUD thrill ride of a movie that possibly has Supes and Bats fighting but ends with them as bros AND with the rest of the Justice League standing tall atop a sun-crested hill.

The DAWN of Justice

Instead… Superman is dead, Batman runs off to find Barry and Wonder Woman runs off…
Dead bodies are full of hope, right? Death is a good allegory for Dawn, yes? It’s like playing through a Castlevania and you finally beat it but you took too long so you get the Bad Ending.

Where the hell is everyone going? We’ve gotta do some shit! Oh, what’s that? Clark is alive actually? Well, good thing we didn’t just sit through two-and-a-half hours of movie or this might have been a complete waste of time!

Anyway!

Back to near present day: I explain to my friend that my vision for this story is to have it focus mostly on Bruce and Diana as they meet during their separate spying of LexCorp and work together to find the other members of the not-yet-named JL before Lex Luthor does. This is for a few reasons. Well more than a few but, in order first.
~One of the good points of the movie for me was the (far too) brief cat-and-mouse game Bruce and Diana found themselves in during the first act. Bruce was caught between being equally attracted to and unnerved by this woman who seemed to always be a step ahead. She gave an air of knowing something he didn’t which got under his skin since he is so used to being the smartest person in any given room. Diana on the other hand was intrigued by this wolf in sheep’s clothing who obviously didn’t belong with this group of people and looked so ready to rip the head off the first person to give him reason. I wanted to explore their back and forth while also giving more of a Leading Lady type role to Diana as opposed to Snyder’s Hot Lady Stares At Dagger role.

~If Batman is in the movie, I feel like it should always be more about him. A lot of DCEU stories – animated or otherwise – already do this. Batman is practically the only human hero in this whole Universe. It’s far easier for us to relate to his perspective in any one arc because none of us have x-ray vision or super speed and neither does he. We feel a sort of emotion and anxiety for him that we don’t for others because, unless someone zaps Kal with that funky green rock, he’ll probably be okay. Bruce, on the other hand, could get squashed at any point. Which reminds me…

~Writing Superman is HARD. Writing him well is harder because of every reason I’ve stated above. Now, I’ve read GREAT Superman stories. I’ve read great Batman stories that had Superman in them. Superman is a great character and has so much rich history behind him. But the nature of his character is tough to navigate if you don’t have it mapped. He’s simply too powerful. It’s not his fault. He’s Born Like This.

Wonder why Hulk and Thor weren’t involved in Captain America: Civil War? Because suspension of disbelief, even in a comic book movie, can only get you so far before you stand in your chair and ask, “Why doesn’t Hulk Smash EVERYTHING?” Why indeed. If you’ve read the comic version of Civil War, you know: it was a race to find the Hulk. Like picking the tall kid for basketball, or the fast one for kickball. If Hulk is on your team you win the Superhero Contest! Simple as that. He’s The Strongest There Is. Just like Kal-El. We know Clark is really a good guy. Probably a God-fearing guy, given his childhood on a Kansas farm. But it’s hard at times to feel bad for the guy who could probably delete your planet. Or resolve the plot in 2 minutes or less. Again, storytelling.

~I am a longtime fan of professional wrestling. It’s an interesting niche to be involved with because as a form of entertainment, it’s like everything else, but there is nothing else like it. On top of the amazing displays of literal death-defying athleticism that I no doubt respect and enjoy, the true enjoyment for me comes from the storylines and characters that are crafted in this pseudo-athletic world of pantomime competition. A very pretty way of saying: wrestling is fake. Just like Dawn of Justice is fake. This is no secret but watching wrestling for so long has me looking at other forms of prose and fiction to see how I would “book” similar conflicts that run parallel in the other story. In the story of Batman v Superman, this match would not be happening on my watch. Not yet.

Can you fucking imagine if Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant instead of having their Sport-Defining Most Important Match of All Time at WrestleMania III in front of 100,000 people had it on Main Event in front of 15,000? Vinny Mac wouldn’t be the magnate he is now. This is practically the first film of DC’s next phase. It’s like a basketball team that gets down by ten points and then tries to make it all back on one play instead of getting a stop then a score then a stop then a score… Guys. Patience! I want Bruce to beat the shit out this guy, too. But let’s maybe get the gang together first before we blow our wad through 50 years of combined history here. Who gives a shit what Marvel is doing [making another Ant-Man movie!] you have a great catalogue and unlimited resources! Take the time to make it right.

Easier said than done, I know. The idea is to pull the most profit right now and given that they started behind the blocks WB isn’t exactly in a waiting mood. This isn’t an easy job. BUT! When I am in the theater watching DoJ and the Big Blue Boy Scout is on the screen my preceding thought
shouldn’t be, Oh, just die already! I should cheer for him! I should want him to win! I should want all of them to win! Hence, the DAWN of- Nope. I’ve made that point already. I’ll tell you what I’ll do.

As the summary suggested, this will be a canon divergence of sorts but it will be canon compliant. To a point. I’ve always believed in doing the best with what you’ve got, so as much as I would love to dig around for countless hours in the endless meta and rogues’ gallery of both Batman and Superman I’ll be sticking to the canon presented or influenced by the movie itself. Which means, sadly, my favorite and yours Dick Grayson will not be making an appearance. There will be other winks and nods peppered throughout and maybe even some cameos as I see fit. This is a work of fiction. I am not pulling profit from it and even if I was, Zack Snyder doesn’t sign my checks.

The story will involve a different version of a still angry Bruce Wayne who makes a different decision after the Capitol Hill Bombing. Instead of vowing revenge on Superman, he works to discover who is responsible for the attack while Wonder Woman helps him track down the Metahumans on LexCorp’s watchlist. It will still be an action movie but with much more emphasis on Bruce as the World’s Greatest Detective which is an important part of the character. Because isn’t he a bit too smart to be jerked around by a low rent Heath Ledger costume?

This will also be a Mature fic. You would think that after the smashing success of Deadpool that studios would have ditched the myth that PG-13 ratings equaled the most ticket sales. If there ever was a DC movie to get the R that wasn’t Suicide Squad, it had to be this one. Obviously they had no problem killing scores of people, but the thematic elements weren’t there. That, and Bruce should be cussing waaaay more in this (I will happily acquiesce). Because realistically, Kal-El has already saved the entire world from certain doom whereas Batman has been beating up gang members and thugs in the gutter of Gotham for two decades. An endless slog with no end in sight. How bitter and jaded would you be of such an existence? So if your Bats isn’t the kind that doesn’t care what happens to Thug No. 2 as he flies out the 3rd story window hop off now.

Arthur, Vic and Barry will all be in this, obviously. My plans for Flash are what you’d expect, but the other two are examples of where some divergence might take place from a characterization standpoint.

I’m a big fan of Jason Mamo as Aquaman. I think he’s got a great look and it’s a good way to legitimize a character that, unfairly or otherwise, has been the butt of so many jokes. Not only that, but Aquaman has always been a hero – like Wonder Woman – who I’ve always felt (forgive me here) was a bit too American. Remember the animated movie Atlantis: The Lost Empire? It isn’t by accident that the only Caucasian people in that movie are from the surface world. With that being said, I know DC’s Cinematic style and I can see from the first Justice League trailer that this Arthur is going to be big and growly. That’s fine, because Mamo is big and growly, too, but the Aquaman I know best does stuff like this.
Yes, that is Aquaman riding a silverfish. And if your first thought was, “Hi-yo Silverfish!” get yourself a cookie because that was the exact line from the show. I may have stopped laughing in time to see the end of the episode. I won’t make him do something as ridiculous but I’ll do my best to make him an affable fish man with a fiery temper.

Cyborg is another case altogether. The original Teen Titans animated series was never underrated at any juncture from what I remember, but I do very much remember – even as a teen myself watching – that the show was much darker than was given credit for. Nevermind the Slade/Robin “I own you” storyline: there were serval episodes dealing with identity issues and finding purpose. It makes sense because they’re teenagers but especially in Vic’s case because other than Beast Boy (it’s not easy being green) he can’t hide who he is.

It’s implied that he’s come to terms with the fact that he will never be fully human, but it’s never really that easy. In the episode where he goes undercover as the villain STONE, he looks at the projected image of himself in his old body and wonders what life would be like if he had only ever been Vic. Would he still be in school? Would he still be playing football? Would his mother still be alive? Victor Stone’s story is a tragic one, really. Even his origin is one that has subversive themes of dehumanization and overt body horror that a Mad Max dream sequence just couldn’t do justice. I believe the best way to go about writing Vic is with a simmering aggression. He’s accepting of his situation and doesn’t like it, but he’s learning to appreciate being alive with every experience he has.

While on the topic, Gal Gadot is perfect for this role. I had her in mind as I wrote for Wonder Woman which is incredibly fun, for the record. I feel the same way about Ben Affleck. His portrayal of Batman was the best I’ve seen on screen. The same goes for Jeremy Irons as Alfred. Exceptional casting in both cases. Without their performances, I would have likely walked out of the theater that night.

Something else that bugged me about the movie: how little dialogue was spent pondering the murky grays of Batman, Superman and vigilantism in general. (Not to say there’s no dialogue at all, but most of it was ancillary. I like talking head segments as much as the next person, but the only main character who said anything of note was Lex Luthor.) I plan to explore this theme early and often because like Assassin’s Creed I feel like sometimes these stories tend to portray the protagonists too much like The Good Guys - in particular Bruce Wayne. And he is a Good Guy, technically, but he is also famous for using very aggressive and ethically challenged manors of achieving his goals. That, and I don’t plan to shy away from Bruce’s almost-certainly-untreated PTSD, nor the fact that underneath his charm he is at times a very unstable man capable of extreme acts of violence. Per the movie.

I’ve gone back and forth on whether to do it all as an actual screenplay or write it as prose and I
chose the latter option just because it’s what I know best. I’m comfortable with it and it will help me paint the picture better. Show don’t tell, etc. etc.

Another order of business: DC – unlike Marvel – bases most of their story arcs in fictional places, separate from or alongside real cities. Although it isn’t always made clear which city is where geographically, the consensus is that most of them are on the East Coast or in the Midwest. As such, I’ve taken some creative liberties so that our story won’t only take place in cold and/or grey places. Ah, the power of fiction.

**GOTHAM/METROPOLIS** – As presented in the movie, Gotham City is in New Jersey and Metropolis is its New York counterpart across the water.

**CENTRAL CITY** – Ordinarily is depicted as part of Kansas City, Missouri’s Metro area. For the purposes of this story, it will be at or around the real-life location of Flagstaff, Arizona; due West of the Hopi Reservation.

**JUMP CITY** – Hometown of the Teen Titans in the animated series. Titans Tower is perched on a seaside cliff where it never rains, so in honor of one of my best friends who relocated and beta’d my early drafts, Jump City is our Orange County/SoCal stand-in. (Right up the road from Los Santos.)

**STAR CITY** – Again, depicted as sorta East Coast and vaguely Midwest. For Barry’s sake, we’re sticking to the Left Coast. Pacific Northwest to be exact.

**THEMYSCIRA** – Legend puts the Home of the Amazons on the banks of the Thermodon River. Themyscira was an ancient Greek town near the mouth of this river which is now known as the Terme in modern-day Turkey. In DC Land, Themyscira is an island so that island will be somewhere due North in the Black Sea.

This is part of a process for me. Things are going okay for me right now, but I know I’m not as happy as I should be. My personal life has stagnated while my professional life has plateaued. I’ve got many friends I’d like to spend time with but simply can’t because of time, distance, obligations, etc and I’m afraid they think I’ve forgotten them. In truth, all I forgot was how important writing was to me.

It always helped center me, when my thoughts and emotions began to spiral but I didn’t write anything for the longest time because of the feeling of futility that overcame me. Like I let everyone down. Hopefully, by writing this story and following through on my plan to challenge myself creatively I can find a bit of energy by writing of the exploits of these madmen while sprinkling in some of my own madness.

Thank you for your time. Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoy your stay. And if you ever decide to leave, I thank you for coming in the first place. Ladies and Gentlemen this is…

**DAWN OF JUSTICE**

Chapter End Notes
This story will be updated every Saturday until its completion. Thanks again for reading!
When his corporate mentor and business partner Jack O’Dwyer had suggested moving the financial branch of Wayne Enterprises to the City of Metropolis, Bruce Wayne had been hesitant. Not because it wasn’t a good idea. It had been brilliant, really. Diversifying assets earned by expanding their area of operations only made sense at this stage of his career. The problem was, as a Gotham boy born-and-raised, Bruce hated Metropolis.

He hated going there. He hated staying there. He hated that it was in such close proximity to his city. It was almost mocking with its sprawling modern landscape and its gleaming ivory towers. Bruce could see it all from the helicopter he was taking across the bay. The door was open before the descent began. The warm spring air carried along by the brisk Atlantic breeze. Bruce looked out to those ivory towers with a look of utter shock.

Because those towers were being knocked down by two indestructible aliens from Parts Unknown flying through them.

After what felt like years suspended the copter finally touched down and Bruce all but lept off the skid and ran to the Utility Vehicle waiting for him. It took him a moment to gather himself as he looked up and saw the aliens’ massive weapon tearing into the Upper Crust, sending shockwaves he could feel in his bones. Soon enough he was in the car where he turned on the emergency light system – more for civilian warning than his own convenience – and sped off toward where he knew his building was.

Per his judgement, Wayne Financial was about 1.5 miles due South of the weapon. Everyone would be pulverized. He knew there was no stopping the weapon, but he could still get everyone clear of the blast zone. He hoped. He narrowly avoided a chunk of falling rubble and furiously dug out his phone to speed dial his partner at the building. He answered after three rings.

“Bruce.”

“Jack, listen to me. I want you to get everyone out of the building. You understand? Jack? Jack!”

The call had dropped and Bruce cursed loudly as he tossed the phone. The whole city would be out of service, surely. He had to hurry. It would be a straight shot if he kept on this road and with most of the city evacuated it should have only taken a minute. Plans changed as a flaming piece of wreckage collided with the street, forcing him to turn into an alley to avoid the wall of flames coming toward him.

He retrieved his phone and tried calling Jack again. The same message as before. No service. He came out onto the main road and accelerated further. In his peripheral he noticed shards of glass and concrete falling like rain. Looking up he saw the cause: a ship similar to the one that crashed a street over, this one massive, was coming down and crashing into every building in its path. Turning right, he righted his course and avoided getting buried until he arrived at the block that his building was on.

There was a mass of people (his employees, most of them) standing awe struck at the fight being carried out above them. They turned when they heard the vehicle idling behind them and made a path when they saw it was Bruce Wayne, of all people, driving it. Eventually, he parked the car and climbed out.

The huge drill-like weapon had stopped completely. For an agonizing minute, it did nothing until bits and pieces of the fallen ships and suspended debris began flying towards it. Then, the collider itself
began to withdraw into itself; crushed into a sort of singularity. Bruce covered his eyes as the drill disappeared in a flash.

Bruce turned to a woman he recognized as the building’s desk clerk. “Where’s Jack?”

She shook her head. “He helped us evacuate but…I didn’t see him, sir.”

Not good. He took out his phone to try him one more time as a giant laser beam exploded from inside the skyscraper and bisected it. The line actually rang, but only for a moment as the Wayne Financial began to crumble and collapse.

“Jack!” He ran forward as his building turned into dust.

His ears were ringing. May have been shell shocked but was likely just in a daze as the reality of what just happened set in. Two flying men – no, monsters – just took down half of Metropolis, a city of 11 million, with their bare hands. A horse without its rider wandered past. He could rebuild the tower. But without his friend, it would hardly seem worth it.

“Mr. Wayne! Mr. Wayne!” He knew that voice. It was coming from his right and he ran to find it. Not much farther and he found one of the building’s employees struggling from underneath a steel girder. His skin was pale even underneath the soot he was covered with, and was slick with cold sweat.

“I can’t feel my legs. I can’t feel my legs!” He was going into shock, so Bruce patted his cheek to grab his attention.

“Look at me, okay? You gotta stay with me.” Bruce turned and shouted for help as he attempted to comfort the man who was still wearing his name tag. “You’ll be okay, just stay awake. Wallace, right? Do they call you Wally?”

“Yeah, Wally Keefe.” The man forced his lips into a grimace of a smile, as if the action itself was that of pure exertion. “You’re the boss, Boss.”

Bruce shook his head at that. “I’m not your boss right now, Wally. Just here to help.”

The help arrived shortly after that. Two men to one side, Bruce to the other, lifted the heavy beam and tossed it to one side. Bruce froze and failed to hide his look of hurt. Wally’s legs had been crushed. Mangled below the knees. It wasn’t pain that made Wally cry. Bruce knew an amputee when he saw one. There would be no saving what was left.

That thought was interrupted by a single creak of metal. Anyone else might have heard it too late, but Bruce’s senses had been honed to near perfection. There was no mistake. He whipped his head around and saw a young girl, no more than seven-years-old, standing terror stricken underneath an archway. He took off, pushing himself harder than he had in days as he dove through the opening, saving the girl from being crushed underneath the falling rubble.

This only made her cry harder, of course, so Bruce began to stroke her hair in an attempt to calm her. Once he got a better look at her, he realized he knew her, too. She was the daughter of another woman he employed. He had met her before, as she often visited Metropolis in the summer.

“Sage, it’s okay. I’ve got ya. Where’s your mom, huh?”

The little girl wiped her face on her sleeve and pointed back towards where he had run from. His face fell as he realized she was pointing to the rubble of what was once a 50-story spire. Where the first responders would surely find her mother and others buried alive in a shallow grave. The girl
caught him again in a tight hug and he returned it. Not knowing what else he could do.

There was no worse feeling, Bruce thought, than that of helplessness. It was the perfect word, though, to describe what he felt as he looked up to the sky and saw those two flying freaks tearing each other apart. In a just world, they would both be destroyed by their battle, but he knew there was no such thing as justice. Not in this world. Not in his lifetime. He hated Metropolis, but even this city didn’t deserve such a fate.

Bruce kept looking up, going blind with rage as the one they called Superman continued his warpath – tearing through the lives he could never see.

------------------------------------------

18 MONTHS LATER

It had taken countless days but he had finally tracked him down. Cesar Santos: ruthless criminal, gang member, sex trafficker and the vigilante known by many as the Bat of Gotham had followed him back to his safe house – a dilapidated Victorian home in the suburbs of Gotham City.

The first thing that hit when he opened the door was the smell. Human blood and excrement thick in the air. The Batman knew how Santos operated. There would be a holding cell somewhere in the house. His experience dealing with scum like this told him it would likely be in the basement. Just like Plato’s Cave: remove all knowledge of the outside world and you remove the hope that comes with it.

The Batman slowly creaked the door open and descended the stairs. Santos didn’t know he had been followed. It was an amateur mistake, but this man’s specialty was the slave trade not strategic analysis.

He turned on the night vision inside his Tech Cowl and saw Santos almost immediately. He was in front of the makeshift cell, prodding at his prisoners with some sort of poker. Batman could make them out in the darkness. They were of East Asian origin and many of them looked incredibly young. He had planned to subdue the man and question him elsewhere but anger overwhelmed him and any pretense of stealth went out the window.

He bounded in one go to the base of the stairs and planted his foot into Santos’ chest as he turned toward him, sending him five feet back into a table. Desperate to escape the creature that had invaded his home, he threw the cloth covering the table towards his attacker and scrambled up the stairs. Batman didn’t give chase. He had disabled his vehicle and absconded with his stash. There would be no escape this time.

He turned off his night vision when he found the light switch. He could see the women, clearly now. They would have huddled back against the wall if they could (terrified at the sight of him) but there were too many of them, and the cell was too small.

He struck the cell door and knocked the lock to the floor - the prisoners reeling in shock. He opened the door ever-so-slightly to show them they were free and stepped back to show that he meant no harm. A young girl inched forward before being snagged back by a woman he assumed was her mother. Still, the girl broke the silence.
[Are you here to kill us, demon?]

Batman grimaced at that, before he realized that he had understood her. Mostly. She was speaking some form of Mandarin. He couldn’t quite place the dialect, but hopefully the version he knew would be enough to communicate with them.

[No. I’m here to catch the man who did this to you. It’s not safe. Stay here until he’s gone.]

They had understood him, it seemed, because they slowly withdrew from the back wall and edged toward the front of the cell. They would be safer there, and there was still the matter of finding the man of the hour.

He ran up the steps and stopped as he heard the suspect rummaging through a bag, cursing under his breath. “Where the fuck is it? Shit!” Batman waited in a crouch until the man made his way back towards the stairway. When he appeared around the corner he drove his shoulder hard into Santos, sending him flying perpendicular into a nearby grandfather clock.

Nearly unconscious, he slumped out of the splintered structure where The Bat picked him up into a fireman’s carry and began to walk up to the next level. Introductions were in order.

Once Santos was handcuffed to the radiator upstairs, the vigilante pulled out a stick of smelling salt to rouse his captive audience. Cesar Santos woke with a jolt and then shuddered as the realization of what was transpiring came down upon him.

“Looking for this, Santos?” Batman pulled out bag of an unmistakable white powder. A hostile takeover of the drug lord’s revenue.

“Shit…”

“Yeah. Shit.” The bag was tossed onto the nearby desk, piled high with unmarked bills. Batman cracked his knuckles for unnecessary effect.

“I’m only going to ask you once and I won’t ask nicely. Who is the White Portuguese?”

“Wha-? I don’t know noth-” His answer was interrupted by a swift kick to the jaw. A bloodied lip, but nothing more. This human stain deserved far worse than what he would get, but Batman needed his teeth intact for information.

“The first words I hear from you are a lie. Not a good first impression. No more asking. You will tell me, who the White Portuguese is! I know you know him!”

Santos attempted to cover his face but was constricted by the cuffs. In a sigh of frustration he relented, “Okay, I know him. Know of him. But I never seen him, I swear!”

“That, is the wrong answer.” He kicked him again but flush in the stomach. Santos began to dry heave. If he had eaten anything it would have been all over Batman’s boots. Moments later and he hears the sirens. Typical of suburbia that someone had been watching in the dead of night.

“ETA: One Minute. We don’t have much time left together. I’d suggest making yourself useful.”

“Haaa… I told you all I know, man. I’m just a supplier.”

“And what are you supplying besides the obvious?”

“No-nothing. You gotta believe me.”
Batman did believe him. He was clearly a grunt. He would give him nothing of substance, but that didn’t mean he was finished with him. Thirty seconds, now, as he ripped the shirt off of him.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” Batman was turned away towards the door fishing something from his utility belt. “Give up any pretense of freedom. You’ll either be leaving in a squad car or on a gurney. Your exit depends on how quickly the cops get here.”

He turned and saw the slaver’s eyes go wide with shock as he saw the white-hot brand covering his gloved fist: formed in the shape of his namesake. Santos thrashed against his bindings in a fruitless attempt to break free. Giving up his effort, he attempted to reason with the masked man who seemed in this light every bit the predator he was named for.

“I told you, I don’t know him!” His plea was disregarded as his head was shoved backwards into the radiator. The officers had broken down the front door. The door to the basement had been left open, so they would likely clear that area first. It gave him just enough time. He grabbed Santos by the face and turned his eyes forward. A man as foul as him deserved a slow end. But this would have to do.

Cesar Santos screamed as the brand was brought down onto his chest. His skin bubbled and cooked underneath as the sound of sizzling flesh was drowned out by his yelp of pain. He stored the brand and leaped into the corner just as the officer appeared in the doorway. He was suspended on the opposite end, looking down at the young cop. He was a rookie, and skittish, and was holding a shotgun which was probably a mistake given his state. His nerves were absolutely shot and Batman stayed utterly still as the flashlight swept the room. It fell on Santos, then on his desk, and then, as if feeling a dark presence, the officer turns around and sees a sight he must have never thought he’d see.

It’s no surprise when he starts shooting. He can’t blame the kid. Try to make a name for yourself by taking down the Bat. Everyone had failed in the attempt. It had gone bad for some; terribly for others. He used the sharp edges of his gloves to swing out of the corner and claw his way up through the ruined ceiling, avoiding every shot. As he gathered himself on the uppermost floor he heard another round discharge.

“Christ!”

“I’d never seen him before. I didn’t know…”

“You almost took my face off!”

Next time leave the safety on, Rookie.

Early on a gray Gotham morning, CEO Bruce Wayne was ready for another day of work. His work today had nothing to do with business, at least, not official business. He entered a hidden elevator in his lakeside estate and was taken down into a Cave (fit for a Bat) where he looked to continue his work tracking down the White Portuguese but instead came upon his longtime butler hunched over a work table with The Batman’s armor splayed out underneath him.

“Still working?” Bruce asked teasingly. “You’re getting slow in your old age, Alfred.”
The older man didn’t look up from his work as he answered. “It comes to us all, Master Wayne. Even you have gotten too old to die young.” He added as an aside, “And not for lack of trying.”

Continuing his work, he took a small rectangular gadget and placed it on his throat. “Funnel, fairy, bubble bath. Funnel, fairy, bubble bath. There’s nothing wrong with the microphone. It’s this…new layer of armor. You’ll have to get Mr. Fox to rewire.”

Lucius Fox was the COO of Wayne Enterprises, running day-to-day operations for the often-occupied Owner, CEO and moonlighted as the quartermaster for The Dark Knight. It had been his idea to further conceal his identity with a voice-changing microphone. He would know how to fix the issue, but probably not in person.

“Lucius is a busy man, Alfred. With the recent acquisition of that tech startup in Silicon Valley and the ongoing reconstruction of Wayne Financial, I’ll have to conference with him later and do it myself.”

Alfred nodded in understanding. “As you wish, sir. So…last night was productive?”

Bruce shook his head as he walked towards the main computer console. “Nope. He was too low level. He knew nothing. This, is a man who knows things.” A picture of the man in question showed up on the large screen: a man with shoulder length hair and covered in tattoos. “Anatoli Knyazev. He’s Russian. Contracts all over the globe but he’s based out of the port of Gotham. Weapons and human trafficking. He’s known in the underground as KGBeast.”

“So, the ‘White Portuguese’ is a Russian? That’s the theory?”

“No, the theory is that the Russian will lead me to the man himself.”

Alfred scoffs at this. “If he is indeed a him. You don’t even know if he exists. He could be a phantasm.”

“One that wants to bring a dirty bomb into Gotham?”

Alfred turned back towards his work as Bruce switched his console to the TV function. Before he could scan the airwaves a stack of paper landed in his lap.

“No new rules, eh?”

It was a copy of the Gotham Free Press. On the cover was the bloodshot visage of Cesar Santos being led away into custody by the GCPD. The Bat brand was visible just below his collar bone.

Bruce tossed the paper dismissively onto a neighboring chair. “We’re criminals, Alfred. We’ve always been criminals. Nothing’s changed.”

“Oh, yes it has, sir. Everything’s changed.” Alfred walked to retrieve the paper, holding it up for effect. “Men fall from the sky, and gods hurl thunderbolts. Innocents die. That’s how it starts. The fever, the rage, the feeling of…powerlessness that turns good men…cruel.”

They both looked up as they heard a cacophony of flash bulbs from what appeared to be a Senate hearing room in Washington. A woman from Nairobi identified as Kahini Ziri was at the stand testifying to what she saw the day that the Flying Man in question invaded her home.

“The women in the village heard a noise, like the sky cracked open. He came down…so
many dead. It was even worse after, when the government attacked. Picking the bones. No mercy in the villages. My parents tried to run…”

The next person to speak was Senator June Finch, the moderator:

“The world has been so caught up with what Superman can do, no one has asked what he should do. Let the record show that this committee holds him responsible.”

Kahini found her voice again.

“He’ll never answer to you. He answers to no one. Not even, I think, to God. If he was here in front of me, I would ask him simply: How do you decide which lives matter and which ones do not?”

Bruce threw a scowling, accusatory glance toward Alfred who relented with a shrug and returned to his breakfast.

“Begin scan.” Bruce didn’t watch much TV these days but momentary distractions were always helpful. At this point in the day there would only be cartoons, local news and daytime talk shows but he at least found the news casts helpful in plotting out his nighttime schedule if nothing else. He starts in his seat as something catches his eye.

“Stop scan.”

“Emergency responders quickly set up a precautionary perimeter around Heroes Park while they brought the man down from this beloved monument after spray-painting the statue of Superman with the words FALSE GOD, emblazoned in red on the chest. The suspect has been identified as Wallace Vernon Keefe.”

“I work for Bruce Wayne! I work for Bruce Wayne!”

“He will be arraigned on misdemeanor charges of vandalism and resisting arrest and a felony charge of making terroristic threats that carries a term of up to 40 years in prison.”

Bruce’s stomach felt like lead. Alfred had returned and was rubbing circles into his shoulder blades to calm him. Bruce relieved him with a wave of his hand and sat up straight in his chair. “Call Lucius Fox.”

Lucius was in Metropolis more these days overseeing the reconstruction of the building that the ‘FALSE GOD’ had toppled to the ground. It would be hard to get a hold of him but Bruce had hope he would be quick to answer once he saw it was him. Moments passed and his friend’s voice rang out from the console.

“Mr. Wayne! Sorry for the delay. Lots of hammers out there. Much quieter in the office. I trust you are recovering well from your…excursion last night.”

“I am Lucius, thanks. Are you near a TV?”

“Yes, sir, but it must be urgent if you’re calling at 9 AM on a weekday.”
“It is. Turn to Metropolis News 8 and tell me what you see.”

“I see… one Wallace Keefe being carted away like a common thug.”

“Exactly. What’s wrong with this picture, Lucius?”

“Besides everything?”

“I gave a blank check to the hospital that performed his double amputation. Then we budgeted checks to be sent out every month after he was released so that he could live a comfortable life. You helped set that up, right?”

“Yes, Mr. Wayne, we carved out a severance package from the surplus we received from last year’s fundraising events.”

“Then why does he look like that?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“Lucius, I know you’re swamped right now, but when you can, find out what’s going on with Wally. I want a report on where those funds have been going. If they haven’t been received by him I need to know why!”

“I’ll get accounting to look into it immediately, Mr. Wayne. Anything else?”

“That’s all for now. Call me when you have something. Thanks, Lucius.”

The transmission ended and Bruce slumped back in his chair, pinching his sinus as if to will the pressure away.

“Master Bruce, it’s possible that Mr. Keefe has indeed been receiving the checks but has no interest in accepting help. You can’t save everyone.”

Bruce looked tiredly toward him. “Alfred, the man lost his legs under my employment. On my watch. If there’s a problem I owe it to him to try and solve it. Here is a chance to directly impact a human life in a substantial, positive way. Something a flying alien could never hope to do.”

Bruce’s phone buzzed on a nearby table to alert him to a message. He picked it up and unlocked his device, scanning over the words on the screen. He perked up and skipped up from his seat.

“Speaking of which, I must be going. I’ve received some timely information.”

“Ah. Another update of Gotham University’s attempted late-game heroics.”

“No. Knyazev has been spotted in Gotham City.”

“Surely you aren’t going after him now?”

“Of course not. I’m no greenhorn. First, it’s off to Wayne Tower to tend to some business. Then, it’s off to a night of fun in the Port of Gotham. Take the day off, Alfred. When I see you this time tomorrow, I may just be one step closer to finding the White Portuguese.”

Alfred waited until he was halfway to the elevator to mutter, “Hopefully you’ll find some civil company for once.”
It wasn’t exactly civil, but it was homey nonetheless.

The Silver Grampus was a dive bar located in the Southern section of the Port of Gotham. Small accommodations, shitty beer and dirty floors. None of that mattered, because most people were here to watch and participate in the underground fighting circuit.

One such man was having a rough go. Both men in the makeshift ring were of equal size and strength – and from what Bruce could gather experience – but he could always tell when a fighter was moving with the tides and when they were waiting for the script to turn their way. Sadly, for him, this was no movie, and a follow up punch sent the man with a shaved head and ripped jeans crashing into Bruce’s side of the ring.

“Show ‘em what ya got!”

“Dude let’s go!”

“Nut up, bitch!”

Bruce had no real interest in who would win. That is, of course, until he saw Anatoli Knyazev shouting exuberantly at the expense of the bald man next to him. Well then…

Bruce leaned in close to the young man who had gone wide-eyed at his predicament. “Move your head. Slide your feet. Make sure you hit his left.”

The man, understandably, was aghast at this: receiving advice from a total stranger in the middle of an unsanctioned street fight. But he realized quickly that his outlook otherwise wasn’t great and he made his way back to the center of the ring. The man opposite him, clad in a mohawk and beard, swung wildly at the younger man who ducked out of the way, his confidence renewed. Another swing led to another duck which made the attacker angry and reckless.

“Stop movin’! We ain’t dancin’, boy!”

This time when he swung, his step faltered and the kid used his chance to drive his elbow into the man’s left ear. The strike threw off his equilibrium and thankfully the kid didn’t stay shocked long enough to forget to follow up. He drove his knee hard into the man’s solar plexus, driving the air from his body and promptly took a step back and came down with a punch that slumped the man into the opposite wall. A glass jaw. Just as Bruce suspected.

The young man looked back to where Bruce was, who simply shrugged and turned away, but not before catching Knyazev cursing as he handed over the wad of bills in his fist. Bruce made his way toward the bar. Here’s to new friends.

Knyazev had just sat down and ordered a Vodka when Bruce put his hand up and put his own bills on the counter. He was in a light disguise: wearing a sweatshirt and casual pants, his eyes shielded by a pair of GUNNARS. Going by the look on Knyazev’s face, he wouldn’t have recognized him either way.

“This one’s on me. He’s had a rough night.”

“And what will you have, sir?”
“Rum and Coke. On the rocks.”

“Right away.”

Knyazev nodded to him with gratitude. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it. The house treats luck like an insult.”

“Oh, that! Ha! Well, good luck for one always gives misfortune to others. But, eventually, all accounts will be settled.”

“Hmm, was that Marx or Engels?”

“Oh, neither. Three nights with a Bolshoi ballerina and that line was all she gave me.”

“No, I’m sure. Have a good night.”

Bruce had left his drink unfinished. Whatever they had put in there, it was not Rum. But it had only been for appearances anyway. He only needed to get close enough to the man to do some data mining. He pulled out his phone to see if the task had been finished.

**DEVICE CLONING SUCCESSFUL**

So, the night hadn’t been a waste. Good. Time to make his way back towards the friendlier side of Gotham.

Bruce stopped in the doorway and looked back. Admittedly, he was feeling the beginnings of a buzz but his senses weren’t yet completely shot and he knew it wasn’t his imagination that he saw a dark-haired woman in his peripheral. She was tall and elegant and dressed way too nicely for a dive bar in Gotham, or for Gotham City in general. She had soft features and olive skin and Bruce knew he would recognize her immediately if he saw her… But she was nowhere to be seen.

He wasn’t disappointed. Not really. His feeling at that moment was more akin to confusion. Maybe he had imagined the woman, and if so it truly had been a longer day than he realized.

He took the glasses off and climbed into the waiting car, instructing the on-board navigation to make a course toward Downtown Gotham.
There were a lot of misconceptions people had about living a double life. For one thing, the frequency with which it happened. Most people didn’t even know they did it. They would call it being *cordial* or *professional* or putting on a brave face. It had nothing to do with bravery, though, and everything to do with survival.

The Japanese (unsurprisingly) had a term for it. There was *Honne*, a person’s true feelings and desires, and *tatemae*, the behavior one presents in the public eye — literally their “façade.” There was a certain level of social interaction necessary for any species to survive. It was what made the bartering of basic goods and services possible and it all depended on how one could manage their presentation.

It was remarkably easy for a billionaire business magnate. Owning a conglomerate meant you set your own hours. You didn’t have to be at work every day. Hell, you didn’t ever have to be at work if you were fine with your business doing *just okay.* After some time, your name becomes your brand. No one would know what you really did in the dead of night, and seven-figure checks would ensure that they’d never care to ask.

As he awoke on the outer edges of a hangover, Bruce could feel his head splitting. It was being torn between *Honne* and *tatemae* and he couldn’t yet find it in him to care.

*What time is it?* 10 AM. Not too becoming of a CEO.

Bruce had made his way to the well-to-do district of Downtown Gotham to find himself a proper drink. He didn’t drink much, especially as he got older, because a side gig like he had really put emphasis on sobriety. When he wasn’t working; when his mind wasn’t occupied and the shadows of his unconscious threatened to creep to the surface, he indulged in the dampening of his super sharp senses. Drinking until vodka tasted like water and wine tasted like grape juice.

He vaguely remembered taking someone home. Bruce had never – even as a young man – been too engaged in a promiscuous lifestyle. But a few drinks and a moment of weakness was all it took. He remembered she had an ‘A’ name, but too many of the night’s details escaped him. He looked back from his side of the mattress and, sure enough, a small, feminine shape was protruding from his sheets.

What was her name? Ashley? Amber? Aubrey?

He honestly felt bad about it, but realized absently that she probably didn’t care if he remembered or not. Still, he could at least make sure she was accommodated.

He padded in his bare feet towards the kitchen area to get breakfast started and clean up the discarded bottles he was only now noticing. He would have to get cleaned up, too. Alfred would arrive in a couple of hours. The man would have been awake for hours, of course. His cottage was only a dozen yards or so away from the Glasshouse but he would take his time getting there so that Bruce could make things presentable.

It was more than he deserved, but the man did it anyway. Bruce didn’t know if he believed in luck but he couldn’t deny the good fortune he had of his parents having hired Alfred in the first damn
place. He made a mental note to ask Anais where it was exactly she stayed so that she could get back to the city in a timely manner.

Thank the stars for self-driving cars.

-------------------------------

He had never more felt like the shitty host he was than when his butler opened the door to his house and sent an empty liquor bottle clattering away into the corner. Alfred Pennyworth sighed – one part exhaustion, one part exasperation – and crossed the threshold to hang his jacket.

“You know, I do hope the next generation of Waynes won’t inherit an empty wine cellar. Although…it seems unlikely there will be a next generation.”

Bruce didn’t look up from his laptop. He sipped on his coffee and gulped it slowly, thankful that, for once, Alfred had cut his grilling short. On his more…curt days, the British man had gone on for a full half-an-hour on the brash irresponsibility of a billionaire vigilante. Today didn’t seem like one of those days.

“I was able to clone Knyazev’s device and copy the data to this computer. What you’re seeing now is every call made from the Russian’s phone as well as text messages. Two mentions of the White Portuguese but it was continuously sending blacked-out data to a place called Thunder Corp.”

“The name sounds familiar, sir.”

“It does. I’ve been trying to figure it out all morning.” He was cut off by an icy glare from Alfred. “Well, most of the morning.”

“Right. And what have you gathered?”

“Nothing yet. But I found the number.”

Bruce punched the digits into his device and placed it into a speaker stand so they both could hear. It was a business hours’ corporate line, and he fully expected to be answered by a desk clerk who would ask him some bullshit about an appointment. Instead…

“Hello, this is Lucius D. Tommytown, CEO and Chairman of Thunder Corp. Can I help you today?”

“No, you can’t. Goodbye.” Bruce disconnected the call and rubbed his eyes with the base of his palms. “What the hell, Alfred? It’s too early for this.”

“Master Wayne,” Alfred deadpanned, “It is very nearly one in the afternoon.”

Bruce removed his hands and shook his head. “Like I said, too early.” He paused and chewed on a thumbnail. “Alfred, have I ever answered the phone at Wayne Tower?”

“Never if you can help it, sir.”

“Hmm. Let me check something.”

It was moments like this that Bruce applauded himself for keeping such thorough records. Every
acquisition, every transaction – failed or not – was archived and backed up. Server after server filled, cleaned or relocated depending on the need. For Thunder Corp, he need only go back three years.

“There! You see?” Alfred leaned close to see what he was pointing to. “Thunder Corp is a real estate firm in Metropolis. Alexander Luthor was trying to liquidate those assets but before we could close the deal, all the stock was bought up by an anonymous third party.”

Bruce opened a Web browser on his computer and surfed to the Thunder Corp website and clicked on the FAQ tab. There, he clicked a hyperlink in the phrase ‘friends of ours’ and was taken to a page of donors and boosters. Among the names, he saw Alberto and Mario Falcone (unsurprising) and Oswald C. Cobblepot (predictable). Sandwiched in the middle of the small, non-serif text he found, by far, the most interesting name.

“Alexander Joseph ‘Lex’ Luthor, Jr.”

“You think Lex Luthor is the White Portuguese?”

“Not likely. But he’s a person of interest. It’s no secret that not every magnate shares my stance on refusing military-industrial contracts.”

Alfred scratched his chin at this. “Very true, sir, but LexCorp Industries is already a massive conglomerate on its own. Doubt that Mr. Luthor would need the income from imported arms.”

Bruce closed his laptop and stood from his chair. “Regardless, I’ll have to put a leech in his house. I’ll need the suit.”

Alfred made to follow, chiding him with his eyes the whole way. “The Bat interrogated 6 people and came away with nothing. It was Bruce Wayne that got the information.”

“Bruce Wayne,” the other man drawled, “can’t break into Lex Luthor’s house.”

“Bruce Wayne won’t have to. He’s been invited.” Alfred handed over a pamphlet. An invite for a charity event at the Luthor Estate in suburban Metropolis.

“You’ll be in your favorite city, Master Wayne, on your favorite night.”

“Can’t wait.” He pocketed the paper and turned towards the elevator.

“Shall I fetch the Lamborghini, sir?”

“It’s a charity event, Alfred. My ride should be understated.”

“Ah. The Aston Martin, then.”

Bruce pointed towards Alfred in mock salute and descended to the Cave, leaving Alfred to roll his eyes.

“About as subtle as the Queen’s motorcade.”

-----------------------------

“There he is!”
“Get a shot!”

“Bruce! This way!”

Bruce pulled up to the red carpet splayed out in front of Lex Luthor’s huge villa in his DB Mark III and looked out to the wave of correspondents that had been awaiting his arrival.

In this, a supposed digital frontier, he pondered in irritation why the need for flash photography persisted. He paused briefly for the obligatory photos (he could practically draft the think pieces himself) and continued without stopping into the main area.

He tossed his keys to the valet and was greeted by Lex’s assistant, an Asian woman who introduced herself as Mercy Graves, and was lead to the rear of Lex’s large living area where he saw the man of the night.

“Mr. Wayne! Welcome to the abode!”

“We’re not working right now, Lex. Call me Bruce.”

“Oh, we’re always working, friend. But if you like Bruce, then I like it, too!”

A blonde woman Bruce didn’t recognize appeared seemingly from nowhere and fixed him with a questioning look. “Lex, who is this?”

Lex fixed her with a look of his own before his eyes softened in recognition. “You must be new to this beat, babe. This is Bruce Wayne. Philanthropist. Bibliophile. True friend of the Library of Metropolis.”

“I am. And I’d like to thank you, Lex, for being such a big part of the rebuilding effort. I know how much it meant to your dad.”

“Yes. He was a tireless pursuer of knowledge, rest his soul. Not unlike yourself, Bruce.” Mercy leaned in to whisper something to Lex who made to shake Bruce’s hand. “I’m afraid I must be going. Time to see if my speech writer has earned this year’s bonus. Don’t act like such a stranger, huh? Mi casa es su casa.”

Bruce nodded as Lex, Mercy and the blonde woman made their way toward the raised stage and podium near the center of the main area. Interesting choice of words, young man, Bruce thought, as he opened the channel in his ear piece.

“Okay, Alfred, where am I going?”

“Approach the elevator to your left. Your target is in the service corridor in the basement.”

Bruce had been given a crash course in espionage during his travels abroad in university. Lie with the truth, move with purpose and go with the assumptions people make about you. That, coupled with his years of training Ninjitsu meant he could gain access to just about every area of interest he wanted.

“Scratch that – the stairs, take the stairs.” Of course, it never hurt to have the help of friends.

Bruce descended the flight of stairs, two-at-a-time, into the basement, all too aware of the presence creeping up behind him. Not much time then.

“See the kitchen on your right? To the left.” Bruce obeyed. “That’s where you want to be.”
There were rows and rows of servers not unlike those he had back in Gotham. That made it easy to find the main tower to connect his ‘leech’ to. He found the appropriate wire and armed the device. The small screen read **7:00**. Seven minutes to copy over the data, but not nearly enough time until –

“May I help you, Mr. Wayne?”

Bruce turned around with an oft-rehearsed feckless smile. It had been Mercy Graves following him and not some security guard, which he was silently thankful for as he had been preparing for an altercation the whole way down. Given the current scenario…

“Ah! Sorry, I thought the bathroom was down here. I think… Think that last Martini was… two too many, ya know?”

She smiled at this. His reputation had preceded him for some time now and the likelihood of Tipsy Billionaire Bruce Wayne stumbling downstairs into the service area was far greater than Covert Billionaire Bruce Wayne blatantly data-mining a direct competitor.

“Men’s Room is upstairs.”

“Great. I’m okay. I like those shoes!” Mercy threw him one more look as she was pulled away by a staff member to discuss something that was evidently more important than her boss’ very rich and possibly drunk booster. His smile morphed into a contemplative frown.

“I can’t stay down here.” Just saying it aloud felt like defeat to him.

“Go upstairs and socialize, Master Wayne. Some young girl from Metropolis will make you honest.”

Leave it to the old man. Bruce laughed as he walked towards the stairs. “In your dreams, Alfred.”

Walking back onto the main floor he began to look for Lex. He had heard the end of his speech and wanted to speak to him about official business. Business that may or may not have included certain subsidiaries in contact with Russian arms dealers.

He was going to look for Lex until he saw the woman from the night before in the Port of Gotham. She was in a backless dress – as red as the wine she was holding – and her hair was done up in the same professional bun. And she was looking right at him with the kind of cold recognition that made his insides clench. He didn’t know why, or how, she was there but she was going back towards the direction he had just left. Which meant –

“Mr. Wayne! Mr. Wayne?” He stops in his tracks. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet.” The man is strapping, somewhere in his early to mid-30s and his hand is extended to shake. Bruce takes a good look at him and, he could never say why but, he gets a funny idea. He shakes Clark’s hand and squeezes hard and, wow, he was pretty solid for a beat reporter. Bruce gets the funny feeling he may be giving something away by engaging this man but he quickly dismisses the notion.

“My foundation has already issued a statement in support of the…cause.” Clark seems confused by Bruce’s stream of conscious until he tracks his eyes because Bruce just got a close-up look at the woman following him for the first time and, “Wow. Pretty girl. Bad habit. Don’t quote me.”

“What’s your position on the Bat vigilante in Gotham?”

Oh. So it was gonna be one of those talks, then? Excellent. He had already worked out what he was going to say to Ms. Emissary but clearly there was no getting out of this conversation. Time for a pop quiz.
“Daily Planet,” he snaps his fingers as he struggles for information he already knows. “Wait, do I own this one? Or is that the other guy?”

“Civil liberties have been trampled on in your city. Good people living in fear.”

Well, this guy was no fun at all. Which meant Bruce no longer had to pretend he was having fun. “Don’t believe everything you hear, son.”

Clark sets his mouth in a firm line. The clear sign of a man not changing his mind. “I’ve seen it, Mr. Wayne. He thinks he’s above the law. It’s like a one-man reign of terror. The Bat has been consistently targeting the port and the adjacent projects and tenements. And as far as I can tell the cops are actually helping him.”

Bruce had to chuckle. Maybe it was the too-deep, ‘Big Boy’ voice or the way his face was contorted in genuine horror describing the plight of the city. But the fact that this guy could not for anything see the irony in supporting Superman at a charity event to help rebuild the library that he fucking obliterated in his fight with Zod had stunned him into silence. But not too much silence.

“The Daily Planet,” he said the word like he wasn’t sure it existed, “criticizing those who think they’re above the law is…a little hypocritical don’t ya think? Considering everytime your hero saves a cat from a tree you write a puff piece editorial about an Alien who, if he wanted to, could burn the whole place down. And there wouldn’t be a damn thing we could do to stop him.”

That last bit cut deep, he could tell. He was too green to hide his feelings, but still too professional to let those feelings get the better of him. “Most of the world doesn’t share your opinion, Mr. Wayne.”

Another chuckle. Dark and disconnected. “Maybe it’s the Gotham City in me. We just…have a bad history with freaks dressed like clowns.” This line earned a frown, deep and distressed. So much for the right foot.

“Boys! Bruce Wayne meets Clark Kent, I love it!” Lex had caught up with Bruce this time and shook his hand in greeting. He was a young man in his late-20s with stringy shoulder-length hair and looked out of place next to the taller, well-built men he walked up to. He shook Clark’s hand and noted, as Bruce had, “Wow, that is a good grip! You should not pick a fight with this person.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” he shot a glance toward Clark before facing Lex. “Junior – mind if I call you Junior – there was some business I wanted to discuss with you but I’m afraid it might have to wait.”

“Oh, sure, sure! It’s quite busy tonight and I’m set to meet with the Governor soon, but you should hop the hub more often, Bruce. I’d love to show you my labs. Maybe we could partner on something. My R&D is up to all sorts of no good.”

Bruce mulled over his offer until he looked up and saw Tall, Dark, and Shifty making her way towards the staircase leading to the service area.

“That’s seven minutes. Looks like the transfer’s complete.”

Bruce couldn’t help his grin. “They aren’t the only ones, Lex.”

He clapped the younger man on the shoulder and made for the stairs. Once again, he felt he was being followed; but not by any lovely personal assistants, just by an over-eager Sports & Lifestyle reporter. Alfred could no longer dispute it. The Universe positively hated Bruce Wayne. As he began brainstorming excuses for retrieving his fancy flash drive, he stopped to look at the food staff gathered around a Spanish news broadcast.
[A deadly factory fire has interrupted the Day of the Dead celebration in Juárez.]

Your favorite day.

Clark stopped alongside him and spared a glance as he took in the situation. A small girl was trapped high in the building. Leaning out the window, surrounded by smoke, waving two white sheets as flags to signal for someone to help.

[I can’t believe they’re going to let that poor girl die], a waiter said in a hushed tone.

“Excuse me, Mr. Wayne.” Clark Kent brushed past Bruce in a way that made it clear that he was in a hurry and wasn’t coming back. He had no time to think of it, though. He had to get down the hallway into the server room where he’d find the computer that had his drive that would give him the information he—

It was gone.

It was impossible is what it was. There was no way the drive could just fall off. It was too lightweight. And there were no plants or furniture down here that it could fall behind. Which meant someone had taken it. Mercy Graves was a possibility but he had seen her join Lex elsewhere when he left. Kent was out-of-service and the only other person who knew he had come down here…

Sure as shit. There she was at the top of the landing looking down. One eyebrow perched high to accompany the slightest of smiles. No doubt amused at the utter look of confusion that Bruce knew was on his face. He would have found it attractive if he weren’t so flabbergasted. Before he could finish the thought, she was already out of his sight.

He bounded up the stairs, cursing his luck the whole way, and reached the top without seeing her. As he wondered how women could move so quickly in heels, he saw her again, this time near the front door making her way out.

It was far more of a hassle than it should have been navigating his way through the room. But there were a lot of people and he couldn’t exactly break out in a dead sprint, could he? Appearances. They mattered. Especially when handling sensitive information.

By the time he got to the entrance, he could see her across the front lawn. She was looking back at him in barely-contained delight as she made off with his drive in her Audi coup, peeling out of Lex’s driveway.

“Did you get it?”

“No. She did.”

“She, sir?”

“One of those young Metropolis girls you were talking about. But I don’t think she’s gonna make me honest.”

“Well, there was never any danger of that, was there?”

“I’ll see you in a bit, Alfred.” Bruce closed the channel and ran his hand through his hair. Alfred would never let him live this down. Bruce shoved his hands in his pockets and trudged back inside. Annoyance was not nearly strong enough a word to describe what he was feeling.

Walking towards a less-crowded section of the party to try and think, he came across another group
gathered around another TV. They too were watching the factory fire in Juárez, only this newscast was in English. He didn’t know what he expected to see, but he was shockingly unsurprised to see Superman descending from the flaming building that was now collapsing. Superman smiled as he carried the soot-covered girl to her mother’s waiting arms and as the mob around him extended their hands outward toward him, his smile only seemed to grow. They loved him. Worshipped him. And he knew it.

*You smug son of a bitch.*

“What a show!” Lex Jr. had appeared behind him, making a show of applauding the heroics captured on screen. “He never ceases to amaze does he? Always arriving at just the right moment. Some guy, huh?”

Bruce let that marinate as he watched Superman take off into the night sky. “Yeah, Lex. Some guy.”

Chapter End Notes

Since transcribing the first third of this movie line for line would have been a slog, I took some liberties and punched up the dialogue a bit. Interested to see how it works.
It was a Christmas Fucking Miracle. And it was more than a month early.

He saw the man walking out of one of Gotham’s nicer department stores. Two bags in tow, he was dressed in an overcoat and wide-brimmed hat to protect himself from the biting cold of the November evening. He was a dapper man, to be sure, but perhaps he should be considering the hefty purse he carries. One would never know what he actually does in his spare time. And as Billionaire Bruce Wayne is perched on top of a building across the way dressed as a giant Bat, he figures maybe that’s the idea.

The target in question was one Floyd Lawton. Alias: Deadshot. Now that Slade had been retired he was the World’s Deadliest Assassin. Over 200 confirmed kills; which isn’t counting the Who-Else-Could-It-Be disappearances of the Tri-State Area’s heavy hitters.

When he got the tip from Waller, he had been hesitant. He had been keying in on Deadshot for some time now. No doubt he would have found him eventually, but it was impossibly timely to catch him unaware in his own stomping grounds. It was so good that he almost didn’t take it, because it was Amanda Waller - notorious Ice Queen, ruthless negotiator – and she had no reason to help The Dark Knight of Gotham catch the Bad Guy. He knew she wanted something. On average, she did nothing for free.

Regardless of the eventual cost, though, Batman couldn’t really justify letting a man as dangerous as Lawton go free. So here he was, coiled and ready to swoop down not unlike his namesake.

“You ready to go?”

“Yeah, daddy!”

Until that happened. He inwardly cursed his luck as soon as his directional microphone picked up the sound of a young girl running to catch up to her father. Christmas gifts, he realized offhandedly.

“I want you to come live with me. I came into…some resources, I’m gonna get us a spot. It’s gonna be nice. Alright?”

“Momma says I can’t live with you, because you kill people.”

“That’s not true, that’s a lie! She’s lyin’ to you!”

“Daddy… I know you do bad things. Don’t worry. I still love you.”

What an awful job this was, sometimes. Batman didn’t particularly feel bad about detaining Deadshot. It was breaking his daughter’s heart that would keep him up tonight. That and the knowledge that Waller most likely had someone shadow the girl to find out when her dad would be present.

Deciding that he should do this now before he lost the nerve, he stepped off the roof and descended into a soundless glide into the alley.

“…I’m gonna figure this out.”
Batman touches down and reaches for Lawton’s shoulder who, on instinct, whirls around to free himself. His reflexes are good, but Batman still shoves his arm downward and then parries his follow-up punch. Deadshot’s eyes go wide at the action. Whether he’s surprised to finally see The Bat in person, or if he’s shocked by how strong he is – still – it’s hard to tell. Batman knows he’s armed, though, and he has to finish this quickly.

“It’s over Deadshot.” He spares a glance to the girl. “I don’t want to do this in front of your daughter.”

Deadshot retaliates, obviously, as viciously as one would whose freedom and family were on the line. He reaches for his side arm but is stunned by a right cross. Batman makes to bring him back to eye-level but is met by the handgun, which he tries to wrestle away. The gun discharges into the jugular of his cowl, but he is wearing Kevlar Everything and bullets don’t hurt Batman.

He disarms him, discombobulates him with a left hand and – while his equilibrium is rebooting – brings him to one knee with a well-placed kick. He does just enough to keep him out of the hospital; acutely aware of the ten-year-old that was watching this occur. Time was short and this had already gone on too long.

He attempts to come down with the knock-out blow but Deadshot rolls backward and, from his knees, recovers and aims his handgun.

“Daddy…” His daughter is in tears by now. She is also in-between them. Batman and Deadshot both freeze in place because this whole incident from the start is an unwinnable situation and, naturally, the first to figure it out is the child.

“Zoe, move!”

“Please, Daddy, don’t do it. Please…”

Batman sees the fight leave Lawton’s eyes. He begins to see it from Zoe’s perspective. She wants her dad to be there for her, but she wants him to redeem himself, too. She still loves him and she knows that this is a fight he can’t win. If he turns himself in, she thinks, there’s a chance I could still see him, but I can’t do that if he gets himself killed fighting The Batman or the police that are now 60 seconds away.

He tosses the gun and motions her out of the way. With only the slightest grimace of apology, Batman takes out his cuffs and arrests Deadshot. He then uses his grapple to ascend the building to give the parent and child their privacy. He hears the sirens loudly now: ETA 30 seconds. Plenty of time for Batman to escape. Not nearly enough time for Zoe to say goodbye.

“The objective is complete, Alfred.”

“Excellent work, sir. Gotham sleeps safer tonight with that man off the street.”

It wasn’t often that Alfred dispensed compliments with no trace of snark, but when he did Batman could always tell it was genuine. Another one of the unspoken truths between them.

“Thanks, Alfred, but the night’s not done.”

“Of course. What is our next course of action?”

“Send the Volvo and a change of clothes to the coordinates you’re receiving.”

“Oh. Keeping a date like a normal person?”
“Hardly. I’m having a meeting with Amanda Waller.”

“And why, dare I ask, are you doing that?”

“That tip wasn’t anonymous. I need to find out what she knows and what she wants.”

“Sir, aren’t you forgetting something?”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“Mr. Keefe, of course. Shouldn’t you be working on ending his confinement?”

Batman released a noise of frustration from the back of his throat. “Wally Keefe’s bail was posted earlier today. Not by us.”

“Bollocks! Who could have paid such a hefty sum so quickly?”

“I’m not for sure, but hopefully my acquaintance will have some good news. I’ll keep you posted, Alfred.”

It was, at best, an unadvised decision. At worst, it was terribly idiotic. Often when one attempted to match wits with Amanda Waller they usually left having been painted into a corner and then dumping the paint on themselves. She was a master manipulator. It was one of many traits that made her perfect for her job at A.R.G.U.S. It also made her incredibly dangerous.

But if there were a short list made of people who could enter a debate with Waller and come out on the upper hand, Bruce Wayne would have to be one for consideration. As he exited his autonomous vehicle and walked into the restaurant, he figured he’d have to be.

It was totally empty, of course. Waller hated crowds as much as he did and it wasn’t like their conversation would be ‘On the Record’ in any situation. A member of her security detail approached him as if he intended to search him but was disarmed by what Bruce hoped was his most withering glare. He was new and Bruce received a look of apology from the other man who knew him and made for a table in the center of the foyer.

The food was already on the table. Fresh fish from the Port of Gotham, a side of leafy greens and a sort of soupy dish that people expected rich bastards like him to dip his entrée into. A younger version of himself might have appreciated starting the game so early. As it were, it only aggravated Bruce that he couldn’t even sit down before she began lobbing her bullshit at him.

“Bruce Wayne. Thank you for coming.”

He didn’t look up from his plate as he answered, “Thank you for having me.”

He could feel her stare boring into his forehead as he took a bite out of his meal. He was trying and failing to conceal his mounting anxiety. God, when had he gotten so bad at this one-on-one thing?

“Pretty chilly out there, tonight. A man could catch cold if he’s not careful.” This caused Bruce to toss his silverware onto the plate, causing a bigger clatter than he had intended but he was too angry to care.
“Okay. Enough. Cut the crap, Waller.”

She placed her hand on her chest in mock offense. Her smile gave away her pleasure in having gotten his goat. “Come now, you’re being unfair, Mr. Wayne.”

His eyes narrowed the slightest bit – half concentration, half antagonism. “You and I both know that’s bullshit.”

“Care to expand on that?”

“For one thing, you never come to Gotham City unless it’s to strong-arm some grunt into doing your dirty work.”

“Check.”

Bruce counted back from three as he continued: “Secondly. Do you actually expect me to believe that you just happened upon the location of the world’s deadliest assassin? Here? In my town?”

In that moment, the air around Waller soured. Her body language that of someone who was caught in a place they didn’t want to be, with information they would not talk about. Checkmate.

“What do you want?” she asked, all friendliness gone from her voice.

“Information, if you have it.” Bruce pulled out his device and found the picture of Knyazev. “I’m looking for any intel you or your agency might have on this man.”

“The former GRU? Well, looks like our President-Elect isn’t the only billionaire hob-knobbing with the Russians.”

“You can add Lex Luthor to that list.”

“Lex Luthor? As in Lex Jr? What business does he have with a Russian mercenary?”

“The same business that leads to the White Portuguese.”

Waller sat back in her chair, surprised the man across from her even knew of that name. “Just how deep into this are you, Mr. Wayne?”

“Not deep enough, or else I wouldn’t be here.”

She gave a shrug and returned to her own plate. “As it turns out my office has found something interesting brewing in the Port of Gotham. You know of the White Portuguese so you know of their plan to bring a dirty bomb into your city. But intelligence seems to suggest that it isn’t a bomb at all, but something else entirely. We don’t know what it is but we know there are no shortage of characters in your town who would want a piece.”

Bruce nodded. “I could name a few.”

“Answer me this, then. What makes you think Lex Luthor is one of those people?”

Bruce rolled his eyes at the obtuseness of the question. “Why does any billionaire do anything? It’s no secret why LexCorp is the largest conglomerate in the world. They accept contracts from people like you who like making people who disagree with them go boom.”

“Even you aren’t dumb enough to think I could possibly be involved in this.”
“I only know what I see in front of me.”

“Tch. Even now you think I’m hiding something.”

“We’re all hiding something, Waller. Some of us just fly too high for others to see.”

“Oh, there it is!”

Had he actually said that out loud? This night was impossible.

“Don’t clam up now. This conversation has finally gotten interesting.”

Bruce shook his head and made to stand. “My opinion is of no interest to you.”

“I disagree, Mr. Wayne. This is the least you can do for me. Tell me what you think about Superman.”

When this meeting turned into an interview, he wasn’t exactly sure. But as he thought about it, he realized no one had ever really asked him before. In fact, his butler was the only one who knew what his true feelings on the matter were. There were better people to confide in than Amanda Waller, but Bruce wasn’t feeling particularly picky that evening. So he leaned in.

“Really want to know?” An odd flash of paranoia had him glancing over his shoulder even though she had rented out this entire restaurant. Her security geeks were hardly cause for his concern.

“Fine. I think it is absolute bullshit! That the Batman tries to clean up my city, do the jobs the authorities won’t and he is vilified! But sure as shit here comes this pretty boy from space destroying everything in his path – literally everything! He knocked down an entire goddamn city and no one batted an eye!”

“He saved that city from a galactic terrorist threat.”

“That threat was a Kryptonian that followed him here.”

“Surely you aren’t suggesting he should have done nothing?”

Head in hands. “Why do I even try talking to you?”

“Hmph. Wanna know what I think?”

Head snaps to attention. “What?”

“I think Gotham’s Most Eligible Bachelor might actually be jealous. Or maybe you’re still upset that your little building got knocked down?”

It wasn’t a laugh or even a scoff so much as a bitter exhalation of air. Hopefully it got his point across. “Tell me. Truthfully for once. Why give Superman the Hall Pass, huh? Why no calls to turn himself in every time he walks out the door? Is it because he shows his face? Smiles for the camera? Kissing babies and hugging fat chicks, right?”

“As long as Batman wears that mask, there will always be questions.”

“That’s fine! The problem is that the only question asked of Superman is what color his throw rugs are.”

“I saw that interview. I’m pretty sure they asked him about his drapes.” She smirks as the tension sets
“You are an intelligent woman. Don’t tell me you don’t see the implications here?”

“I’ve got all night.”

“Well, I don’t. It’s pretty simple. We’ve known all along there was a chance life existed outside our galaxy. Given the sheer number of stars in our sky it seemed to be a mathematical certainty. Now, we have in front of us proof fucking positive! Not one but two impervious flying aliens come down to our planet and, as an added bonus, level an entire metro area. The only question left that’s worth asking is when the next hit comes and how many people die.”

She raises an eyebrow in question, deciding how seriously to take him. “You seem pretty certain about all of this. Care to make a wager on the contact date?”

“So you can give Superman enough time to get ready? To hell with that. I’m not a damn fortune-teller. If a ‘Galactic Terrorist Threat’ were to touch down tomorrow, I’d be none the wiser and neither would you and that’s a problem!”

“What would you suggest, then?”

“I would suggest you stop dicking around and do something about it,” he sneered at her as he stood to leave. “This guy – this thing – from parts unknown thinks it’s okay to fly into active conflict zones and take out whomever he pleases regardless of how it affects this country he claims to love so much. Maybe someone should explain to him why that isn’t the case.”

The two bodyguards watching the door part to either side as he makes his way towards them. He nods his acknowledgment as they stand at attention. Before he crosses the threshold, he stops and turns back to see Waller deep in thought. He doesn’t like it.

“What’s gonna happen to the little girl?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. She has a mother in Star City. She will be permanently relocated there.” She says this a little too sweetly. He continues.

“And what about Lawton?”

“Deadshot will be taken to a maximum-security detention center where he will await his sentencing and be dealt with to the fullest extent of the law. Much like Ms. Quinzel and the others the Batman has helped bring in.”

What a terrible goddamn liar. He would be offended if it were anyone else. But it was Waller. He felt bad for the poor toadie that would get roped into this.

“Waller. I know I can’t stop you. But whatever scheme you’re planning right now? Don’t.”

“A threat?”

“Advice.”

“I see. Have a good evening, Bruce. Make sure you bundle up.”

He didn’t look back as he stepped out into the cool Gotham night and entered his waiting car. He closed the door and opened the channel to Alfred as he released a breath he had been holding since he stood up from the table.
“Alfred, I’m done here.”

“I do hope your dinner date proved productive.”

“As much as it could be, but I can’t do anything substantial without that drive.”

“Well it’s a good thing you called, sir, because about five minutes ago, I began receiving a signal from your drive. Sending coordinates now.”

Bruce pulled out his device and made note of his position and the waypoint on the small map. It was somewhere in the Financial District, not far from where he was in Downtown Gotham.

“This is close by.”

“Indeed. What’s more, that beacon was activated locally and that means…”

“Whoever has it wants me to find them.” Bruce felt his pulse quicken at the implications of that.

“Surely this is a trap?”

“Not so fast, Alfred. If my guess is right, I may still have a chance to keep my date.”

Punching the coordinates into the car’s navigation system led him to the Gotham City Museum of Antiquities. He could see from the people entering the building that they were having some kind of black tie affair and he silently cursed his luck until he found the bowtie and cummerbund stowed away in the glove compartment. Alfred again. Whatever he paid him, it wasn’t enough.

Bruce knew it would be easy enough to spot the woman, even in this crowd, but also knew that he couldn’t just go looking for her. The last time he tried ended in no small amount of embarrassment and if she was really trying to find him, she’d know he was here somehow.

Ten minutes after arriving he was nearly ready to go. Nevermind running into Cobblepot (who thankfully refrained from talking as he was avoiding the curator), there was no shortage of people nipping at his heels. They were looking to invest, wanted him to invest, wanted him to “Show my son, Connor the ropes, Mr. Wayne!” and really, business was the last thing on his mind.

That’s why when he saw her he had to stop himself from cutting off Stan from the law practice down the road. She was in a white dress that had its fabric bisected down the torso and was talking to the curator about one of the exhibits. Bruce had to wonder how a person with such an furtive nature could wear such pronounced clothing.

But why wonder when he could ask the question himself?

He waited for the older man to walk away and then started in her direction, making his footsteps heavier to announce his presence. He could see by her reflection that she was regarding the exhibit with a frown, and he had a guess why.

“Found me,” he says in greeting.

She turns, only slightly, and gives him a once over. “It appears that you have found me, Bruce
Wayne.”

“Hmm. You know me.”

“I would be surprised if anyone here did not know you.”

Not an unfair assumption. This wasn’t the kind of get-together that attracted many members of the public, and he had made himself as visible as he could on purpose. He knew people. He also knew cat burglars and mad scientists and serial killers and clowns. But he knew people.

No need for her to know that, though.

“I don’t know you.” He heard how dumb it was as soon as it left his mouth. Fortunately, she didn’t seem to mind.

“Diana. Diana Prince.” She made a point to not extend her hand to shake his. She took another sip of her wine instead. Bruce had a feeling she was hiding a smirk behind her glass. He didn’t mind, either.

“Diana. I like it.”

“Where I’m from, it means ‘royalty’.”

“Israel?”

“Not quite. Why do you ask?”

He shrugs at her question. “Just a guess.”

She arches her eyebrow in response. “You like to make guesses?”

“Inferences, actually. Small deductions based upon the things I can observe.”

“I thought that only works in stories?”

“Not exactly.”

“Okay, then, tell me what you can deduce about this.”

She was motioning to the blade on display in the case in front of her. Most people would have seen what Bruce saw - The Sword of Alexander. Famously, the blade that cut the Gordian Knot. A few seconds more and he saw what he needed to see.

“It’s nice – and expensive – but it’s a fake.”

She nodded. “Correct. How could you tell?”

“He was pointing to the hilt of the blade, dragging his finger down the handle without disturbing the glass casing. “The hilt looks old and worn, but its age is affected. You can see the true texture underneath the ‘weathering’ they’ve added. And here: the stitching has been handled the same way. Doubt the curator would let anyone ‘remaster’ a centuries-old weapon. Anyway, the real one was sold in ’98 on the black market. Now it hangs-”

“Over the bed of the Sultan of Hajar,” she finishes for him. He noticed the glint in her eye; the look one gets when they find a kindred spirit with whom they can broach a familiar topic. Bruce was just relieved he had found someone in the room that didn’t make him want to turn his ears inside out.
He noted this. “Too true. You know a lot about your ancient warlord artifacts.”

Another nod as she took another sip of her drink. “It is my job, Mr. Wayne, to know of these things.”

“Like an Antiques Roadshow deal?”

“A what?”

“Sorry. Dating myself with that one.”

“Well, you are not incorrect. I deal primarily with antiquities: I am responsible for collecting, repurposing and – ‘remastering’ as you say – Old World objects that have been long forgotten.”

Bruce didn’t miss the sigh that came after that statement. “Hopefully not objects like this,” he gestures to the phony relic and the corner of her mouth quirks up.

“No, of course not. They are, how would you say, ‘legit’?”

“You really aren’t from around here, are you?”

“Perhaps another thing we have in common.”

“What do you mean?”

“I must admit I was surprised to see that you came here. These…do not seem like your kind of people.”

Bruce quickly swallowed down the nervousness that had worked its way up from his chest and coolly addressed the woman in front of him.

“There are only four kinds of people, Diana: the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired.”

“So, what does that make you?”

“All of the above.”

“Seems as if it would be a stressful life.”

Bruce removes his hand from his right pocket and extends it outward in her direction, where he flips it so the palm is facing up. He glances up at her – he is feeling bold, but something about Diana makes him feel like permission is required regardless – and she slowly places her left hand in his. She looks up at him.

“As you can see, my hands do not shake.”

“Then it seems I have the right person after all. Follow me.”

She places her now empty glass unceremoniously on top of the dagger’s case – she’s tall, so it doesn’t take much effort – and leads Bruce, still holding his hand, to a quiet corner of the party.

Bruce Wayne is a character, above all else. There had been many incarnations over his life in the public eye, but Socialite Bruce Wayne had come and gone many years ago. Still, he was familiar enough that he could recall the rules of the game. Walking with Diana, he had an inkling as to how this interaction might end.

“So, do you consult the GCPD?”
Then again, maybe he had no goddamn idea. It had been a long time.

“Uh, no, actually. What makes you ask?”

She taps the side of her head. “Billionaires don’t normally require earpieces, Bruce.”

“It would appear your goose is cooked, sir.”

At that moment, it was impossible for Bruce to decide what would be more embarrassing: reaching up to close the channel and acknowledge that he had been caught, or leaving it untouched, ignoring her claim and letting Alfred hear the rest of this conversation in barely-contained glee. In a lose-lose scenario, he took the median.

“Very…perceptive. You’ve got a good eye.”

“My line of work requires it.”

“And who are you working for?”

“Not for. I am here of my own accord, but I thought maybe someone of your skill set might be able to assist me.”

Diana was attentive, and smart, and on the scent of something that made his guts curl. He made to play dumb. “Only so many skills a guy like me has.”

Diana averts her gaze. “I see.”

Bruce saw this break in conversation as an opportunity to do some questioning of his own, so he leaned in the slightest bit closer: “Excuse me, miss? The other night you took something that doesn’t belong to you. Stealing isn’t polite.”

She perked back up at this. “Is it stealing if you steal from another thief?”

Bruce pointedly ignored that comment and continued. “Who are you?”

“Someone interested in the same man you are.”

“Is that right?”

“I believe Mr. Luthor has a photograph that belongs to me.”

His expression became one of confusion at hearing that. He was looking for a weapons trafficker. She was looking for a photo?

“Did you get it?”

A shake of the head. “The data you copied has military-grade encryption.”

He shrugged at the suggestion: “That’s it? No follow up? I figured you more persistent.”

She smiled at this – fully this time. “It’s true what they say about little boys. Born with no natural inclination to share.”

Bruce felt himself grinning as she leaned in close and fixed his bowtie. “I didn’t take your drive, Bruce, I borrowed it. You’ll find it in the glove compartment of your car.”
The grin disappears. “How did-”

“Please. I like you so much more when you don’t ask questions. Goodnight, Detective.”

There are some things in the world you don’t need a genius-level intellect to deduce. As Diana Prince walked past him toward the front of the room, Bruce could deduce that he wasn’t supposed to follow. Instead, he walked back to the sword and pondered what the woman had said.

“Should I begin preparing the system for decryption, sir?”

“If you would. And re-heat the food from yesterday. It’ll be a late night.”

“Of course, sir.”

Bruce closed the channel and released a sigh he didn’t know he was holding. Alfred had kindly let him change the subject, which meant he would be grilled incessantly into the wee hours once he returned to the Cave. Again, he thought he might have rather taken his chances with Diana and stepped out into the damp, Gotham night.

He saw her, and she made a show of looking back at him as she entered her own car and sped away. He didn’t know how this would end, and for the first time in a long time, he felt that was fine.

“---”

“And you didn’t get her information? Honestly, Master Wayne, must I do everything?”

If Bruce could find the deepest, darkest corner of the Cave to hide from his butler’s wrath it wouldn’t be enough. It was, of course, a thinly-veiled attempt from the Brit to settle him down against his will, but he also knew that Alfred was right. Even though it could hardly be called a coincidence that they had encountered each other that many times, he had no way to contact her if he found her picture like she thought he might.

“I told you, she just…left. I wasn’t able to pursue the matter.”

“Like that’s stopped you.”

Bruce shook his head as he monitored the device’s decryption. “She’s a ghost, Alfred. There was nothing for me to find, past what she told me. Couldn’t tell you why but, talking to her made me feel unlike myself. She’s not from here. That much is certain.”

“A mystery within a mystery. Your favorite pastime.”

Alfred walked away from the console back towards the Batmobile for its regular maintenance. Bruce, who was now in casual clothes, watched as the process continued slowly.

How good someone was at hacking often depended on how good their technology was. Being a billionaire, Bruce had the cutting edge in technology almost as it was available. This made him a
really damn good hacker, but there was only so much one could do in the face of military-grade encryption, so he did the first thing that came to mind to pass the time.

He trained.

Basic calisthenics and then trapping exercises on the mudjong. Cart pushes and rope pulls. Bench pressing two times his weight. Squatting three times his weight. Being a vigilante was dangerous no matter how you sliced it, but being at the peak of human physical form helped make it a little less so.

There had long since been rumors that the Batman wasn’t even human. Even that he was supernatural. Some demon in the night. The way his armored suit shrugged off bullets helped with that. Add to the equation his massive strength, the cover of night and the average criminal’s superstition and the conditions became perfect for a larger-than-life urban folktale. Unfortunately, none of that helped with decrypting sensitive extra-legal information but what else was a supercomputer for?

DECRIPTION 100%
DECRIPTION COMPLETE

A short shower to wash the day off and he was back at the console with the decryption mercifully done.

The first few moments of navigation revealed to him a number that he saved in his personal device, because there was at least an 80% chance it belonged to Diana. Not only did Alfred owe him an apology, but it gave an indication of how far into the process she had gotten herself. She was good. A few more days of work and she might have debugged the data herself.

But he had and so far, there was nothing of terrible consequence: receipts, transcripts, contracts, blueprints, budget plans – nothing that wasn’t already widespread knowledge in the business community. Then he came upon a folder labeled Meta-Human Thesis. Waller had offhandedly mentioned this before. The idea that, scattered across the globe, there were a number of powerful individuals of indeterminate origin that made use of special abilities. Like Superman except local, there had only been reports and sightings. Rumors mostly.

Before he knew it, he double-clicked the folder emblazoned with two W’s and opened the first file to see Diana Prince staring back at him, leaving a taxi in what the picture had labeled as 22 JUNE 2015 Paris, France.

It was a surprise, of course. For one, she had her hair down in this photo and he was honestly starting to wonder if she owned any clothing other than cocktail dresses, but more importantly this picture was in the Meta-Human Thesis folder.

He backed out and opened the next file and saw video of Diana – in Paris again – withdrawing money from an ATM. When she looked up into the camera her faced was scanned, as if by some facial-recognition software. He paused the video and put his chin in his hand. He was so deep in thought that he didn’t hear Alfred walk up behind him.

“Is this Diana, then?”

“It is.”

“My word. She’s gorgeous, sir.”
Bruce moved the paused video to the side on the screen and opened the third file in the folder’s list. Another picture of Diana appeared. This one wasn’t from Paris or Metropolis or even the UK. The photo was in sepia tone and she was flanked on either side by four men. Three of them were oddly dressed; one of them appeared to be US military. Diana herself was wearing some sort of ancestral garb: a large breastplate and armored boots with a skirt that had to be more about functionality than practicality. She was wearing a large military jacket that swathed her lithe form. Most curious to Bruce was the tiara holding back her long, dark hair.

The photo was labeled: **BELGIUM, NOVEMBER 1918.**

“Correction, Alfred. She’s still gorgeous.”

Alfred removed his glasses to clean them and pushed them back up his nose, his mouth agape, as he confirmed that, indeed, the picture from 2015 and the one from 1918 had the same woman in them.

“Bloody hell. Hasn’t aged a day. You know what this means, sir.”

“I do, and it’s impossible.”

“Oh, but sir, once you have eliminated all possibilities, whatever is left – no matter the improbability – must be the truth.”

Bruce turned fully in his chair to face the man. “I’m sorry, all these years I thought your name was Pennyworth, not Alfred Conan Doyle.”

He turned up his nose at that. “That’s Sir Alfred Conan Doyle to you. I was merely communicating my point in terms you would understand.”

Bruce probably deserved that, but it didn’t quell his aggravation as Alfred walked away and he closed the pictures and continued scouring the contents of the drive. Worried he would have to go through all the folders one by one, he came upon one marked with a lowercase t. Inside was what he had been looking for the past four months.

**WHITE PORTUGUESE – harbored in Gotham**

It had been under his nose the whole time. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or infuriated. It was a boat. A goddamn shipping vessel. And for once, Waller had told him the truth. It wasn’t carrying a bomb at all.

Bruce crossed to the far end of the lair where Alfred was working on the Batmobile. He paused his work and lifted his safety goggles. “Some good news, sir?”

“The White Portuguese. It isn’t a man. It’s a ship.”

Bruce had steeled himself for an onslaught of Alfred’s typical ‘I told you so’ bravado but the look he gave him as he removed his work gloves was something entirely different. It was disappointment and hurt and anger. Alfred was often cross with Bruce, but never angry.

“Master Wayne. Since the age of seven, you have been to the art of deception what Mozart is to the harpsichord. But you’ve never been too hot of lying to me.” Bruce looked away. It was like being caught by his own father. “The White Portuguese isn’t carrying a bomb. What is it carrying?”

“It’s a weapon, Alfred. A rock. A mineral, actually, capable of weakening Kryptonian cells. The first sample big enough to mean anything turned up three months ago in the Indian Ocean. It is now aboard the White Portuguese where it will be delivered to Thunder Corp who I am going to steal it
Alfred paced around the vehicle, thinking over what he’d heard. After several moments, he inquired the man’s intentions. “You’re going to destroy it?”

“No.”

Alfred threw his hands up in exasperation. So much for passing the test.

“What business have you stealing another company’s shipment?”

“That company is a smokescreen. They aren’t up to any good, otherwise why employ a Russian mercenary and his goons to smuggle it out of Gotham in the dead of night?”

“Really, what do you think is to come of this? You’ve never once gave an aft’s end about which of your competitors got what. Why can’t Lex Luthor and his mate have a dollop of Kryptonite?”

“It’s not just him. The Falcone Brothers are looking to score anything substantial now that daddy is locked away for good. Cobblepot is a failure and a laughing stock, and a sniveler to anyone who will give him the time of day. Any resource is wasted on him. Lex Jr. can’t have it because he’s short-sighted. He’s a brilliant man, but is young and too focused on his bottom line. He would take the Kryptonite and weaponize it before selling to the highest bidder where it would collect dust as some warlord’s shiny toy, or worse, some government crony’s bargaining tool.”

“So, that’s why you want it. You want a war.”

Bruce surprised Alfred and himself with the speed in which he rounded back into the butler’s face. “Alfred, that son of a bitch brought the war to us! Jesus, count the dead! Thousands! What’s next? Millions? He has the power to wipe out the entire human race and if we think there is even a one percent chance we have to take it as an absolute certainty! And we have to destroy him.”

Alfred was stunned into silence, at hearing such bloodlust from a man he had raised as a son. Bruce heard his voice tremble as he said, “He is not our enemy.”

Bruce’s face, which was already twisted in anger, morphed into a mocking scowl at the words. “Not today. 20 years in Gotham, Alfred. We’ve seen what promises are worth. How many good guys are left? How many stay that way?”

Alfred threw his gloves down to the ground, his fury returning anew. “Very well, Master Wayne. If that is how you feel I would suggest thinking twice before putting on that suit.” He jabbed his index finger toward the suit of armor hanging across the way and then walked up to Bruce with a tool in his hands.

“And thinking an extra time before asking me to fix your fucking car!”

Alfred placed the tool roughly into Bruce’s stomach and stormed off towards the elevator, leaving Bruce alone in the silence of the Cave with his own rapidly darkening thoughts. He wasn’t sure how or when, but he had made his decision absolute.

If it was his last act on Earth, The Last Son of Krypton had to see a slow and painful end. By his own mortal hand.
One of the reasons I liked Jeremy Irons' portrayal of Alfred as much as I did was how much authority he showed. Never once backing down from Bruce's bullshit (of which there was lots). I also toyed with the continuity just a bit. We know that Suicide Squad takes place after BvS. What we aren't told specifically is when Deadshot, Harley, etc are all captured, so I used that vagueness to my advantage here. Cameos can be cool.
Dissociative amnesia occurs when a person blocks out certain information, usually associated with a stressful or traumatic event. It was no surprise that Bruce couldn’t remember exactly why Wayne Manor was in the state of disrepair it was in. The mansion itself was burnt out and had been gutted years ago. All of his worldly possessions had been moved to his lakeside estate, which left him alone in the ruins of his ancestral home, staring blankly into the barren fireplace.

The old man didn’t bother to hide his presence as he opened the large, oaken door. Where else would his boss have been on this day? Bruce didn’t turn to face Alfred. They had been through this enough times.

“I visited them today. I’d like to think they’d be proud of the man you became, but I can’t say you’ve given that much thought.”

“Alfred…”

“This isn’t healthy, you know?”

“I’ve had this place fumigated. All the black mold is gone. I wash it down every year-”

“That’s not what meant, Bruce, and you know it!”

Wow. He really was mad. It was clear when he used his first name. Alfred never used his first name unless he was extra intent on getting his point across. Bruce relented, turning back to the mantle in silence as Alfred continued.

“Some two decades ago, you came to me with a ludicrous idea – and I told you it was a ludicrous idea – to clean up this city. This city you love that was overrun with corruption and crime and filth. You said you needed me. ‘Can’t do it without you, Alfred.’ Remember that?”

Silence as the old house creaks and settles.

“Yet still, here we are! You’re going to strange places; won’t talk to me about that. You’re stealing sensitive information from your competitors; won’t ask me how I feel about that. You’re torturing people with no absence of malice; won’t hear of my objections to that. And now you want a showdown with Superman. Tell me, Master Wayne, how am I to help a man so intent on his own destruction?”

Bruce stayed in silence for a long while before he left the fireplace and made to sit in a large chair near the adjacent window. It was the only piece of furniture in the room. He took the seat heavily – tiredly.
“This may be the only thing I do that matters.” His voice sounded far off and away, even to him.

“20 years of fighting criminals amount to nothing?”

“Criminals are like weeds, Alfred. Pull one up, another grows in its place. This is about the future of the world. My legacy. I’m older now than my father ever was, you know? He sat me down right here and told me what Wayne Manor was built of. Railways, real estates and oil. The first generation made their fortune trading pelts and skins with the French. They were hunters.”

He stops and looks past Alfred out the front window and stands to walk to the open front entrance. Alfred joined him and saw what had caught his attention. A beacon in the shape of a bat, shining dimly in the dusk sky. Alfred looked sidelong at Bruce, whose gaze was cast downward.

“You know you can’t win. It’s suicide.”

“Then tell me! Tell me what I should do, Alfred!” His voice wavered but he didn’t feel the prick of tears behind his eyes. Bruce hadn’t felt anything for a long time.

“I’ll tell you what you do, sir. You turn back. You let this go. You leave it be. Because if you pursue this, you will do so alone. I won’t be the one who buries you.”

“Whether I die tonight or in 50 years is of no consequence to me.”

“Not to you! And what of Mr. Fox or Master Timothy? Or the people you employ? There are people who rely on you, Master Wayne and, believe or not, some of those people would actually prefer to see you standing!”

“Hmm. Then be sure to send them my regards, Alfred.”

Bruce made his way back to his lakeside estate where his armor and his vehicle were waiting, prepared to take him towards a battle neither man was expecting him to come back from. Alfred tearfully watched his charge walk away from him.

“As you wish, sir.”

---------------------------------

There was a sort of sick irony directly related to his current position. As dusk fell on the City of Gotham – the deep reds and dark oranges giving way to endless black; the lights down below flicking on one by one – he stood perched on the top spire of Wayne Tower.

He had been up to this point numerous times, with and without the suit. He had imagined launching himself off more times than he’d ever admit. Never with his grapple or his cape. A euphoric, soaring feeling. The sense of freedom that only 50 stories could afford.

He was never one to seek out help of any sort but for this goal – this mission – he wouldn’t be picky.

He picked up the sniper rifle at his feet and looked down the sights. It didn’t have any live rounds. He had no use for such things. He needed the Russian in his crosshairs alive for just a bit longer. After that, it would be no matter. He fired and the tracker embedded itself silently onto the top of the trailer that would almost certainly be picking up the illegal shipment.
Not that stealing the shipment was any less illegal. That’s what Alfred would have said. He was right but that hardly mattered, either. He was duty-bound. Not just to the City but to the World. It would be his greatest task. It would also be his last.

Alfred had been right about that, too. He wasn’t fool enough to see it any other way. He couldn’t take Superman in any semblance of a fair fight. But he didn’t need to be fair. Shit, he didn’t even need to fight. Even taking down Croc in Arkham hadn’t been this simple.

Get the Kryptonite.

Get close.

Kill him.

He didn’t even have to plan for locating him. Whether he stayed in Gotham or actually had the gall to plant his flag in Metropolis, he knew if he made enough noise the Big Boy Scout would come looking.

Given his state of mind, the simplicity was a blessing. The key to success, however, was also a fatal flaw. Getting close to the alien as a mortal combatant was certain doom. He had accepted that before he made the trek to the top of the tower. On the other hand, if by some goddamn miracle he survived the encounter, watching the light leave his eyes might very well be worth the trouble.

He fired his grapple gun into the air. He waited for the hook to catch its hold, tested it, and leaped off the building with his eyes closed – letting his senses awash in the sounds below. He used these moments to clear his mind; center himself before a mission.

Instead, he thought of her. Briefly, of course. He thought of the second time he saw her: white dress, wine in hand, ever-so amused by his own ignorance. Except that wasn’t the second time, was it? Quickly he thought back to the dive bar in the Port. It had been her. She had tracked him down somehow but let him go which meant she was following him and he lead her right to what she wanted.

Unacceptable. Ra’s would have strung him up for such sloppiness. The line grew taught and he swung down between two smaller buildings before releasing the line and gliding through the air where he shot off another rope.

He considered absently that, in another life, he and Diana might have a chance for something more.

---------------------------------------------

The shipment was indeed in the Port of Gotham. It was ordinarily at least moderately patrolled, but the Commissioner had called back all cars on this night. It was unspoken, really – no one got in the way of the Bat’s workflow. Anyone that did was in for a nasty surprise.

Knyazev and his men were also in for a nasty surprise as Batman lay in wait, concealed in the loading bay of a nearby warehouse. His mind was always more tranquil on a job like this. The laser focus it required never gave it an opportunity to stray. Or to slip into a darkness that felt too much like home.

He could hear the voices of the men, and soon, the noise of the truck that would deliver the
shipment. It took some time until it was moved from the ship but the vigilante didn’t mind. He had waited months for this, after all. Five more minutes wouldn’t hurt.

Five more minutes and the armored car revved to life.

The shooting started almost immediately after he exited the building. Clueless thugs who never noticed – or cared – that the prototype was armored and impervious to bullets. The Batmobile charged into a vacant car and sent it flying into a nearby trailer. That’s when Batman noticed that between him and the tractor-trailer was muscle car after muscle car. It was terribly cliché and, given that they were being led by a Russian, a bit of an irony.

Batman activated a grapple that released from behind his vehicle and grabbed the downed Charger behind him, towing it along full speed. The car ahead of him skidded to a halt and the windows rolled down to reveal two more men wielding semi-automatic weapons. Their bullets were wasted and Batman had no time to deal with them, so he disconnected the rear grapple and swerved hard to the left. As he rounded the corner to catch up to the lead cars, he glanced in the rear view to see the men’s car get flattened by the one he had been towing.

The chase continued into a clearing, flanked on either side by large silos and containment tanks. Directly behind the lead truck was some sort of utility vehicle that promptly shed its roof to reveal a man with a Gatling gun who opened fire on the battle tank. A more powerful weapon, but just as ineffective. The Batmobile had rounds of its own. Rounds that were meant to disable vehicles, which it did, as the truck was sent spinning end over end – bursting into flames as the armored vehicle sped through unimpeded.

He followed the trailer underneath a bridge and felt the end was in sight until he heard more shots to his left and turned to see the final truck cutting off his angle. He pushed the attack vehicle into a drift and rounded the corner where the hatch of the trailer opened to reveal three men. Knyazev and two friends. Two semis and an RPG.

The third Charger narrowly avoided being squashed by an oncoming gas carrier as the lead trucks continued their path. They sped past another gas truck and this time the smaller car wasn’t so fortunate. It rammed full speed into the truck; the whole thing going up in bright orange flames. Batman could feel the heat from the blaze as his own vehicle avoided the wreck and broke through the wall of the adjacent warehouse.

He had seen the path that Knyazev’s truck was taking. He could intercept them but he would have to hurry. With an extra burst of speed, the Batmobile barreled through the building and went flying through a window. It soared through the top half of the trailer – and the top half of one of the gunners – and crashed into the last bodyguard truck where it went flying into a pile of empty hulls. The Batmobile was temporarily halted as well, as the momentum of the jump sent it sliding into another abandoned ship. The respite was only temporary though, as a volley of rounds opened up the bow so that the pursuit could continue.

No friends left to protect him also meant that Knyazev had a clear shot with his RPG. It took him a few moments to line up because of the truck’s speed but when he did, he pulled the trigger and lobbed a missile back towards the pursuit vehicle. That would do some damage, so Batman flipped a switch near his dashboard and sent back a wave of anti-ballistic shells to intercept it.

When the missile exploded, Batman sent the vehicle forward even faster than before, knowing that Knyazev would be out of ammo. There would be nothing to keep him from catching the truck and completing his objective.

Except for the coifed man in a red cape standing in the road.
Batman’s eyes went wide in shock as he slammed on the brakes. He barely had time to register what he saw as his car bounced off the man and went crashing into a canister of gas.

Superman turned to walk toward the downed vehicle and Batman’s mind scrambled as the cockpit filled with numerous claxons and warnings protocol in a crash. Superman was here in Gotham, of all places, and this was what he wanted but he hadn’t got the equalizer and he wasn’t prepared and… This was it, wasn’t it? No. No, if he wanted it, the Batmobile would be in the bottom of the bay right now. What this, thing, wanted was to talk.

At least that’s what he hoped as the alien ripped off the canopy of his vehicle with his bare hands. As Batman stood in his cockpit to meet him, he realized that he was about three inches taller than his counterpart and even though he knew it was in vain, he strained for every centimeter. Superman was unimpressed and clicked his tongue at the mess he was now standing on.

“Any idea how fast you were going back there?”

“Not fast enough.”

Superman shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. A silent judgment of the man before him. It all felt too familiar for a first meeting.

“Honestly, what is wrong with you?”

“You are interfering with a time-sensitive operation!”

“Looks to me like a crime in progress.”

“Yes, and the criminals are getting away!”

“Not from where I stand.”

“What you’re standing on is my vehicle. The man I was after is a notorious Russian mercenary hired to deliver an illegal shipment to some very bad people.”

“You want to know what I saw? From up there? I saw a group of men being chased through a hell hole by some madman dressed like a bat.”

“Did you miss the part where they were shooting at me?”

“Nope. I also caught the part where you destroyed every one of their cars. Wasn’t very neighborly of you.”

“The stuff that’s in that truck is no laughing matter.”

“The stuff that’s in that truck is none of your concern. It’s not yours to take. That is, unless, you have something devious planned for that shipment.”

“Why don’t you take your flying pony show back across the water and out of my city?”

“I’ve got a better idea. Next time they shine your light in the sky, don’t go to it. It’s for your own good, really. The world doesn’t need vigilantes. It needs soldiers.”

Superman had hopped off the hood of the car and was floating aloft as if to depart. Before he could leave though, something had caught his eye and he gave a smirk as he lowered himself back down to the ground.
“Reinforcing the suspension was really smart. Same with the Kevlar on the tires and the anti-roll system. Any other vehicle would’ve been totaled by a collision like that. But the grating here up front underneath the turrets offers no tactical advantage whatsoever. It’s just weighing you down.”

Superman once again took a step back and looked behind him to take in some of the carnage Batman had left in his wake. He gestured to it and turned to face Batman again.

“That was some fancy shooting back there, though. You’re pretty good.”

This time he did take off, and Batman felt the force of his body leaving the ground behind as he shot up into the night sky. He kept staring after him, long after his form disappeared into the clouds, and then eyed the wounded vehicle beneath him.

“Hm. Pretty good…”

There was still some lingering soreness from the earlier crash, but all that Bruce could feel now as he maneuvered into the Cave was a potent mix of anger and embarrassment. He had failed his mission and had been foiled (and patronized) by his enemy. What’s worse, there was a chance the bastard didn’t even realize they were supposed to be enemies!

He jumped out of the cockpit and pulled off his cowl, letting the mask hang on his shoulder blades as he stalked up the stairs. He tossed the mask into an empty chair before he sat down at the main console. He briefly thought about using the computer to locate the tracker he had planted on the transport vehicle before he recalled that such an action would be useless. He had shot the tracker onto the top of the trailer, which had been destroyed, so any search now would be of little use to him.

Bruce brought his fist down onto the counter top. He was out of leads, it seemed, and even though Alfred was nowhere to be seen, he knew he would be happy to see him alive and happier that his ‘fool’s errand’ had been thwarted.

That thought made him put his head in his hand until a nearby buzzing distracted him. His phone was indicating a message received and he picked up the device to read the notification. The message was from Diana and his mood flipped at the sight. Maybe the night wasn’t a total loss.

Bruce pulled off a glove with his teeth and swiped across the device to read the woman’s message.

Find anything interesting, Detective?

Sitting back in his chair, he looked up to the large screen, which had the visage of Diana from 1918 displayed upon it. What Alfred said was true, but there were still doubts in his mind. He didn’t know if he could trust her or the true nature of her person. But she had gotten him the drive and trusted him with this knowledge of her. That was something worth noting.

He texted back: I think I just did.

He began peeling off the rest of his suit and doing mental calculations in his head of just how much Superman’s interference would cost him in repairs. Then, another message.

Perhaps you could show me some time? Bruce let his head fall back. There were so many reasons
he shouldn’t respond to this strange woman he met in Lex Luthor’s basement. Delete the number and keep the drive along with all its information. Given his recent track record with decision-making, though…

Of course. Boys can share, too.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to give Bruce his Walter White "Whoops, I'm the Bad Guy!" moment which is what I think the movie had in mind except there was really no one (besides Alfred) willing to oppose him and call him out. Which is fine for someone like Heisenberg, destined to become the Villain Protagonist, but not so much for one of the World's Finest.

That is where Clark comes in, to give Bats the superhero equivalent of the "Bro, chill" talk, but we haven't seen the last of him. Thanks again for reading!
"Exactly what were you thinking, Mr. Wayne?"

Funny. If he had wanted a lecture on his exploits in the Port of Gotham from the previous night, Bruce was sure he could have stayed home from work that day. But here he was in Wayne Financials' temporary Gotham office and his COO was dressing him down like he hadn't just dismissed Alfred to his cottage for his day off two hours ago.

"Lucius," he says, with the conviction of man who knew he had already lost. "My plan was to keep that shipment out of the wrong hands."

"All due respect, your plan was dumb as hell." Lucius, on the other hand, spoke with the conviction of a man who knew he had won before he walked into the room.

"My ‘dumb plan’ would have worked if it weren’t for Superman!"

"Way I see it, Mr. Wayne, Superman did you a favor."

"How do you figure that?"

"Grand Larceny and Digital Espionage aren’t the marks that a hero strives for."

"Tch. I did nothing different than what I’ve always done."

"Ah. But not for the same reasons." Bruce shot a glance of confusion which prompted Lucius to continue. "When I cleared you to use the prototype, Mr. Wayne, it was with the understanding that it would be used to make this city a safer place for everyone. For our partners. For our neighbors. For our families."

Bruce cast his glance downward. The sign of a man who had lost twice. Lucius did not relent. "What you have been using it for is making your world more comfortable. I have been more than accepting of your…methods for years now. But as aggressive and ferocious as you’ve been at times, I’ve never known Bruce Wayne to be selfish."

The latter man leaned back far in his chair and drummed his fingertips on the top of the long table before him. He didn’t interact with many people outside of work, so the only indication he had of how the outside world viewed him was taken from newsstand rags and online puff pieces. Had he really been that consumed with his goal? And worse: how long had Alfred been trying to tell him the same damn thing? He had been a terrible friend, and it hurt how unsurprising that revelation was. He would have to be depressed about that later, though. There was still business to conduct.
“Understood, Lucius.”

“I hope so, Mr. Wayne. You’ve confided in me recently about leaving your legacy, but never forget; there is no legacy as rich as honesty.”

As Bruce considered the words he turned to see activity coming from the large TV at the head of the room. Cable News had been covering the event all day. Superman had been summoned to a hearing in Washington by Senator June Finch. The hearing was being held in regard to The Battle of Metropolis nearly two years ago in addition to the Nairobi Incident just last month. Superman had been invited to defend his actions or stand against the court of public opinion. The hearing would occur regardless.

It was in part because Wally Keefe had made the trip to Capitol Hill. He was set to testify against the man that took his legs and he wasn’t alone. Walking beside him was Mercy Graves and her boss, Lex Luthor, Jr.

“Mr. Keefe. Mr. Keefe. Soledad O’Brien, In The Moment. Quick question for you. You’re heading in to meet the Senators. What will you tell them?”

“I’ve come here to tell them to wake up. This is flesh and blood. He’s delivered a war here. And this…”

Wally motioned to the stubs where his limbs used to be.

“This is what war looks like.”

“There are plenty of people, sir, who would say he’s their hero.”

“He is not a hero! What hero would do this?”

Bruce reached for the phone near the center of the table and paged down to the receptionist. “Grace, can you get Greg in here, please?” He ended the call and turned back to the TV.

“And what about you, Mr. Luthor? What brings you to the hearing today?”

Lex faced the reporter with a practiced and affected charisma. One that Bruce was very familiar with.

“I’m just here to tell my story. That I was willing to finance a Kryptonian deterrent, but a certain Junior Senator from Kentucky decided to block it. It’s true – the Chair of the Committee on Superman is soft on security.”

Well, that was interesting. Who knew his thoughts had aligned so closely with Lex Luthor’s? He pulled out his phone as the coverage continued and typed out a message: Are you watching?

The message was sent to Diana, of course. He had only a few select numbers saved to his device and he knew how Alfred felt about these ‘Empty displays of human grandeur.’ Soon enough he received a response.

I am.

Do you think he’ll show?

Before he could get an answer, his attention was again pulled back to the news network’s on-going coverage. This time it was a panel of four guests arguing more than debating about the Man in the Sky. More accurately, three guests had been arguing. The astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson was
waiting patiently as his counterparts expended the rest of their air. When he had a chance to cut in, he made the most of what was sure to be the last of their air time before the hearing began.

“We’re talking about a being whose very existence challenges our own sense of priority in the Universe. If you go back to Copernicus - where he restored the sun and the center of the known Universe, displacing Earth – and then you get to Darwinian Evolution you find out that we’re not special on this Earth; we’re just one among other life forms. And now we’ve learned that we’re not even special in the entire Universe, because there is Superman. There he is. An alien among us. We are not alone.”

Bruce looked to the opening door and made to round the table and confer with Greg, who stood just beyond Lucius with several papers clutched nervously in his hand.

“Afternoon, sir.”

“Afternoon. I just saw Wally Keefe wheel himself into the Senate Chambers to testify against Superman. Greg, why hasn’t he been getting our checks?”

Greg set his mouth in a firm line, like he was about to tell his boss something he really wouldn’t like. “He has been getting them, sir. He…returns them.”

Greg hands over the papers he’s been holding. One is an article about Wally’s injuries that is marked over in angry, red ink. It read: BRUCE WAYNE, OPEN YOUR EYES. The other pieces of paper were the checks themselves. All of them had a different message scribbled in.

**BRUCE, NO TRUCE**

**B WAYNE, I HAUNT YOU**

**BRUCE WAYNE = BLIND**

Each note had hurt on some level, but that last one cut especially deep. Some boss he was. Blindness was the only explanation. How could he let this happen?

“Why haven’t I seen this?” So many questions Bruce had, but that was the most pertinent in that moment. Greg could only shake his head, reflecting Bruce’s sadness.

“I’m sorry but, I don’t know. I’ll get to the bottom of it, sir.” Greg gave a polite nod to his superiors before leaving with the door still open. Bruce put his back to the TV and ran his hand down his face in exasperation.

“Lucius, how could this happen?”

The other man put a comforting hand on Bruce’s shoulder and answered his question. “This isn’t your fault.”

“I’m the head of the company, Lucius. Everything is my fault.”

“Maybe to them out there. In here? It’s been documented and seen. You did everything you could for that man. You can predict the rise and fall of the markets, but you can’t predict the sway of a man’s heart.”

Bruce looked down to his phone and saw that Diana had responded at some point. He sighed and shrugged off Lucius’ arm. He knew he meant well, but he would need some time to absorb what he had just seen. Lucius understood and took his seat across the table. The hearing was moments from
starting.

“This hearing is now called into session. Senator June Finch of Kentucky residing.”

“Thank you all for coming today. How do we determine what’s good? In a democracy, good is a conversation, not a unilateral decision. So, I urge Superman to come to this hearth of the people. To see those who have suffered. The world needs to know what happened in that desert, and to know what he stands for. How far will he take his power? Does he act by our will, or his own?”

Bruce remembered the waiting message and unlocked his device.

He will be there.

Bruce bit his lip in thought. He didn’t know much about Diana, but it seemed she wasn’t as cynical as he was. It was the goddamn Superman, after all. There was no one on the planet who could make him show up to this hearing. To think he would come of his own free will?

What makes you so sure?

Bruce took in the hearing room. It was full of reporters and civilians who had come to witness the proceedings. Only a few officials were in the room. Conspicuous by his absence was Lex Luthor, whose seat was marked next to Mercy Graves. It wasn’t a minute later that he received a text from Diana.

Superman is a fearless warrior who has faced far greater dangers than these suits and their questions. He wants the people’s trust.

“And there he is! Superman is here. He’s actually at the United States Capitol. This is truly a historic moment.”

Indeed, he was there. Floating above the dome like the benevolent icon he had come to be. The guy actually showed up and no matter his reasoning, his presence was undeniable. Bruce could feel it from 185 miles away; just as strongly as he did when he was 5 feet in front of him. It was maddening and predictable to see him greeting the crowds with a smile. Even as they shouted and chanted and waved their signs. It was as Diana had said.

I guess you showed me.

No, Bruce. He did.

Bruce set his phone down and glanced over at Lucius as well as Greg, who had wandered back into the room with a new sheet of paper under his arm. Not looking forward to more bad news, he delayed it by inviting Greg to sit down as Superman was shown walking into the courtroom.

“Superman, thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for having me, Senator.”

“This is what democracy looks like. We talk to each other. We act by the consent of the governed. Shadowed interventions will not be tolerated by this Committee and neither will lies, because this is a day for truth. Superman, are you prepared to tell the truth? So help you, God?”

“So help me, God.”
“Very well. Let me say at the outset that I’m thankful to our witness for coming today as well. Before we get his opening statement, I’ll ask our defendant if there is something he’d like to say before we start?”

“No, ma’am. If it’s all the same to you, I’d like to hear what this man has to say.”

“As you wish. Mr. Keefe?”

“Yes, Senator?”

“The floor is yours.”

“Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen – of America and Planet Earth – my name is Wallace Vernon Keefe. My friends call me Wally. One of those friends is Bruce Wayne. You might all know him as a white-collar guy, but two years ago, he pulled me out of the rubble of Black Zero with his bare hands. That rubble was all that was left of a building that Superman destroyed, taking my legs with it. I’m not so vain to think that my life is over because of it, but it still hurts. I can feel my legs in my dreams, and when I wake up to reach for them I come away with fistfuls of sheets. I want to know directly from the man that caused this: why? Have you ever once considered the lives that were affected on that day? Or after your actions in the desert?”

“Wally… May I call you Wally?”

“Sure.”

“I’m so so sorry.”

“Heh. Sorry doesn’t make legs reappear, you know?”

“I know. I just didn’t-”

“Didn’t think you’d have to face the consequences of your actions?”

“No. I didn’t know of your condition.”

“I’ll be in this chair for the rest of my life! Is that all it is to you? A condition? What about all the people that died in Metropolis two years ago? Is that a condition?”

“Wally. Please, if you let me I can explain everything that happened that day.”

“Fine. Go ahead.”

“Okay. Firstly, it’s a lie to suggest I don’t think of the lives lost that day. Not just in Metropolis. There were attacks in Smallville, Kansas that were no less important to me. The attacks were coordinated by a General from my home world of Krypton and two of his lieutenants. His name was Zod and his plan was to make a new world hospitable by our kind.”

“And so to stop him, you tear through an entire city with no regard to loss of life and collateral damage?”

“You don’t understand, Senator. Zod had plans to terraform the entire planet. He brought with him a weapon that would have morphed the planet’s crust and atmosphere to mirror that of Krypton. All life on Earth would have been wiped out. 7 Billion souls
gone. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“I…understand. It’s good that you stopped Zod, but there just hasn’t been much talk from you about the aftermath. You didn’t even help rebuild.”

“Well, I don’t know about rebuilding, but I can tell you about the aftermath. You know about the scout ship that’s sitting inactive near the harbors of Metropolis? The one that houses Zod’s body? Want to know how that ship got there? Zod was on his way to this very spot in Washington D.C. to begin constructing a castle for his new kingdom. I commandeered the ship and downed it in Metropolis and he and I fought back towards downtown. He had told me when the Battle began that only one of us would leave it alive. I figured he was being dramatic. Kryptonians don’t die easily and I was determined to subdue him alive.

“Well… As it turns out, Zod was a madman and he was serious. He was enraged by my love for the human race. ‘Choose,’ he said, ‘Me or them!’ Well, I did choose, Senator. I chose you and Wally and everyone else and I snapped Zod’s neck with my own two hands. I’ve never cried more before or since because for the first time it hit me: not only could I not save everyone, but not everyone wanted to be saved. And worst of all, I realized that I was all alone. Zod was evil and selfish but he was all that I had left to connect to my home world. Now he’s gone just like Krypton is gone and…I’m the only one left. Senator. How can a man find his way in the world…if he was never supposed to be there?”

“That is what we are here to find out, Superman. Who you are and what you’ve done. The witness Wallace Keefe may return to his seat. This hearing will now transition to the Nairobi Incident. You will give us your exact account of what happened that day from start to finish. If this Committee finds you liable for the damages on that day you may be arraigned on a later date. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Bailiff, go and find the witness, Ms. Ziri, so that we may begin with her testimony.”

Bruce could hardly believe all that he’d heard. Nevermind what he saw: the man who had just days before nearly bent his car in half by just standing there was almost reduced to tears by the cross-examination. It hadn’t started out that way, but mention of his home world and alien brethren had struck a chord, it seemed. Such emotion from someone who had been born of another planet.

Bruce got Greg’s attention and motioned for him to pass him the piece of paper he had brought with him. Greg obliged and explained, “This one came in this morning, sir.”

It was another article; this one about the former building. WAYNE FINANCIAL DEVASTATED. But it wasn’t the article or the headline that caught his eye. It was another note, streaked in red, mocking him with its disparagement. YOU LET YOUR FAMILY DIE.

Before Bruce could register the dissonance of what he’d read, he heard screams coming from the TV and a gasp coming from Lucius. He looked up and froze in his seat. The Senate wing had gone up in flames. The black smoke telling of an explosion curling up towards the overcast D.C. sky. Everyone – the Senators, the media, Mercy, Wally – all of them had been ripped apart and charred to bits by the blast.

Except for Superman, who flew out of the burning building to quell the blaze with one, mighty breath. He then shot up into the sky without saying a word, letting the sonic boom speak for him as
he left the chaotic scene behind.

The conference room had grown silent. More silent than it was already until Greg finally spoke.

“Tha-that’s not supposed to happen.”
Bruce Wayne shouldn’t have this number.

It would have been easy to look up *Daily Planet* reporter Clark Kent’s number the old-fashioned way – yellow pages, online listings, calling his office directly – but when the man had brushed by him at Lex’s house, Bruce made sure to swipe one of his business cards and, sure enough, he had his cell phone number printed in black-and-white.

Alfred wouldn’t have approved, naturally, but what he would have approved of is Bruce putting his assumptions on hold, for once. He was a detective, after all, and if there was a chance to glean the situation from the source he figured he should try.

Bruce made Greg leave but Lucius stay. If transparency would be his legacy, he figured at least one person he trusted should be witness to what was about to happen.

He placed his device upright in the stand near the middle of the table and turned the speakers on.

Lucius eyed him warily from the other side as it rang. “Just what are you aiming at, Mr. Wayne?”

“An educated guess.”

Three rings pass. Then a fifth. Then eight. He was about to hang up and try again when on the tenth ring…

“Oh, who is this?”

Bruce didn’t bother stopping the guffaw that left him. “Unbelievable! Of course you’d still have your phone.”

A beat passed on the other end as recognition hit. “How do you have this number?”

“Not exactly in a position to ask questions, are ya?”

“So, what? You called to rub the salt in?”

“No. I called to find out what the hell just happened!”

“Bruce, not now.”

“I know you haven’t been with us for long but, it’s usually not okay to leave the scene of an accident.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“Clark, wait! I need your statement so I can get to the bottom of this!”

“… You don’t think I did it?”

“I don’t know that you did it.”
“Funny. A few weeks ago, you looked like you wanted to rip my head off.”

“I did.”

“Well I’m sure you’ll be a great help, then.”

“Right now, I’m your only help.” There was silence from the other end, but Bruce knew the line was still connected. “Clark, Capitol Hill is in chaos right now. Dozens of civilians and elected officials. Every one of them disintegrated. Except for you. I don’t think I need to tell you of the implications of being the sole survivor of a bombing.”

He hears a deep sigh from the other end. And then an answer. “Okay. But if we’re going to do this, please call me Kal.”

“Kal?”

“Kal-El. It was the name given to me before I was sent away from Krypton. It’s the one piece of home I have left.”

An odd request, but if it kept him talking, Bruce would have called him Nosferatu. “Kal it is.”

“Good. Now, were you watching the hearing?”

“I was.”

“Right. Everyone was. Stupid question. So then you know about when the bomb detonated?”

“They were about to bring in another witness, right?”

“Yes. The woman from Nairobi. She was set to testify against me.”

“What did happen that day, Kal?”

“Nothing. My only goal was to save Lois.”

“Lois Lane. What was she doing in the desert?”

“Being a reporter. Doing her job. She wasn’t after anything.”

“Some people might beg to differ. What about the bomb?”

“It happened so fast… I think it came from my right. It might have been in Wally Keefe’s chair.”

There were unconfirmed reports from the Capitol Police that Wally was the suspected bomber. Hearing this from Superman, though, had caught just the right string.

“What? You can hear your girlfriend in Africa but you can’t sniff out a bomb ten feet away? How fucking dumb do you think I am?”

“Bruce, you promised you wouldn’t do this!”

“I promised to call you by your cute little alien name. I didn’t promise to play nice.”

“I was under stress-”

“No! Shut up! Not another goddamn word! This is ridiculous. You were handed the chance to save the day! No one would have ever said a bad word about you again. How bad at this are you?”
“Fine! Since you have it all figured out! Tell me what I should do, Bruce!”

This was a bit familiar. Not just because Kal-El was close to breaking down again, but Bruce had been in this exact scenario not long ago. Mind reeling, pride wounded, spirit hurt. Except this time, he was on the opposite end. He didn’t have to imagine what the other man felt like. He knew. And it seemed the Universe was giving him a chance to be proactive for once. Alright then.

“I’ll tell you what you do, Kal. You have to get out in front of this. If you really feel like someone set you up, you need to hold a press conference and say so.”

“What do you mean, ‘If you feel’? Do you really think this was some random attack?”

“All logic points to the contrary, but until I find out for sure you’re still a suspect.”

“Then how is talking to the media supposed to prove my innocence?”

“It’s not, but every second you spend in hiding is another second for the Fear Machine to get whipped up. It’s better to be an incompetent hero than an exceptional terrorist.”

“Thanks. I think.”

“After you’ve done that, then you can lay low.”

“What? You don’t want me to help you investigate?”

“No, I don’t. You are too close to this, and the world needs as few distractions as possible right now.”

“Give me one reason why I can’t.”

“I’ll give ya two. Number One: you’ve already proven that your attention to detail is lacking. Number Two: in the chance that you are even partly behind this, I don’t want you anywhere that you can cause more damage. You’ve done quite enough.”

That earned a scoff from Kal. “You’re the last person who should be talking about damages.”

“My math is rusty, but if you were to add up our separate bills, I think you’d find that the billionaire’s price tag is much smaller.”

“Even if I planned to cause more damage, you’d have no way to find me.”

“I’ve got your number, Kal.”

“I could toss this phone at any time.”

“You could. But you won’t.”

A sigh this time. “Confrontation really is unavoidable with you, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry. Once you pull your cape out of your ass, I’ll have a gift bag waiting for you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Oh, and Bruce? Say hi to your girlfriend for me.”

The call was disconnected and Bruce fell back in his chair, aware for the first time how draining the day had been. He also became aware that Lucius was still in the room, pinning him down with a look of incredulity.
“A gift bag, Mr. Wayne?”

“That’s all for today, Lucius,” Bruce said, in a tone that didn’t give room for further inquiry. The former left the conference room with a lilt in his mouth that one might have confused with a smirk.

Bruce picked up his phone and saw a flood of messages. Numbers he had memorized and associated after the fact with this CEO and that Fortune 500 member. In that flood, he discerned a single name and cleared the screen to make one more call.

-------------------------------

Bruce Wayne should have this number. At least that’s what he told himself.

He and Diana had been talking via text message since that night he was able to hack into Luthor’s database. There had been remarkably few conversations between them about the drive or her picture, considering they were the only reason the two had met. The text threads had always flowed rather easily: from forensics to swordplay and travel to armaments.

They never talked about work and rarely talked about Superman. As he fidgeted with the drive in his pocket, walking out to the lobby, he figured they’d have to talk about both today.

He rounded the corner and saw her near the front desk, dressed in an untucked blouse and straight-leg pants. Her hair was in a high ponytail and he figured – noticing her heels – that this was as casual as a person like her would get in public. As he got closer, he caught sight of who she was talking to. A shorter teenaged boy balancing on a cane.

“Tim! Why are you bothering our guest?”

“Bruce, baby! Were you really gonna let this lovely lady breeze through without introducing us?”

“Yes. I was.”

“See what I mean, D? The man has no manners.”

“Yes, I have discovered this for myself.” In a different context, it could be taken as a cold comment, but she had been smiling the whole time and something in the look she gave him made Bruce reconsider.

“Fine. I know when I’m beat. Diana Prince, Tim Drake. He’s an orphan. Found him outside Wayne Tower trying to make off with some copper from the paneling. Fast forward 6 years and he’s bunked up with Lucius and his wife learning the ropes. If I’m not careful, he’ll own the joint one day.”

“Ha! That’ll be the day, Brucey Boy! Hey, D. Don’t tell him, but I’m really just in it for the free snacks.”

“Only a secret if I don’t know it. Go on. You’ve got lessons today.” The younger man waved his farewell and made his way over to Lucius Fox, who was waiting with two books in hand. Diana moved next to Bruce and watched the boy leave.

“I would not have figured you to be paternal.”

“That’s ‘cause I’m not.”
Diana gave a low, throaty hum that made it hard for him to think. “I talked with young Tim for several minutes. He told me of all the things he gets to do now that he didn’t before. One thing you can always count on from children, Bruce, is the truth.”

Bruce thumbed the drive in his pocket again. He wasn’t sure what to say to that, and decided that he probably shouldn’t say anything. Conversations with Diana often left him scrambling to reclaim the supremacy of diction he had grown so used to. He’s vaguely aware of a nagging in the base of his skull; telling him that he might be starting something he can’t finish.

“Shall we?”

“Lead the way.”

That should have been the tell right there. Diana wasn’t led anywhere, so she fell into step with him and lightly grabbed hold of his elbow. It was then that he became acutely aware of the looks they were receiving: the accusatory one from Grace, the puzzled one from Tim, the knowing one from Lucius. The inference was almost too scary to face, but Bruce couldn’t really see it any other way.

They looked good together.

Bruce had formed his suspicion after two steps, so he looked to his left and…yes, she was smiling. Never sparing him a glance. Unbelievable. She knew what she was doing and Bruce couldn’t get out of that lobby soon enough.

As soon as they were in the room he gave her his best accusatory look which, judging by her reaction, did not have its desired effect.

“Well. That was fun,” he deadpanned.

“And what would you know of fun? You are always wound so tight.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s not the most attractive city-”

“Or the cleanest.”

“Still. Thank you for meeting me here. News of Gotham’s demise has been greatly exaggerated.”

“And I suppose you have something to do with that, Mr. Wayne?”

“All we can do is try, Ms. Prince,” he said with a shrug. Bruce kept leaning back against the door and looked over his guest in silence. Diana looked back at him but said nothing, so he took a single, tentative step forward.

“I know this probably doesn’t matter given the current state of affairs but, I like your hair done that way.”

She leaned back against the table and crossed her arms, smiling in what Bruce hoped wasn’t condescension. “You are right, it doesn’t matter. But I thank you for saying so. Now, are you going to show me what you found or just flirt with me?”

“Who’s to say I can’t do both?” Diana left her perch at the table and closed the distance between them. She got close to Bruce like she did that night at the museum and fixed his tie, this time less gently.

“I am to say.” With that, she walked back towards the large table and pulled a spare laptop from
underneath the counter.

“Right.”

Bruce sat down beside her and inserted the drive into the computer, waiting for the device to synch to the machine. Diana turned to him again.

“You were watching, yes?”

“Yes.”

Diana eyed him warily. “Do you think it was him?”

Bruce kept his eyes on the drive’s progress but answered her question. “…I’m not so sure.”

“No?” She seemed surprised by that.

“I mean this is from his own admission but, based on what we know Kryptonians to be capable of, I don’t think spontaneous combustion is in their M.O.”

“And what of the man in the wheelchair? Reports suggest that the bomb was underneath him. That this was his plan.”

Bruce felt his temper flare at that. He knew Diana wasn’t suggesting it; she was repeating what she’d heard. He clenched his fist underneath the table and hoped she wouldn’t notice.

“Wally Keefe was his name. He was an employee of mine. He was obviously in pain, but he wasn’t a terrorist.”

“What happened, then?”

“I don’t know. But the Wally Keefe I saw speaking today isn’t the same one who sent me these.”

Bruce reached under his chair and passed the papers to the woman on his left. It was the pile of checks that had been marked over and returned to Wayne Enterprises, as well as the article of the building that was destroyed some 19 months ago. She read each message and then looked at Bruce, who had his arms crossed looking at the computer screen – silently seething.

“Bruce, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

The room fell into an uneasy silence, then, as the drive fully synched to the laptop and Bruce navigated to its menu without saying a word. Diana spoke up.

“Did you find my picture?”

“Uh…”

Diana was alarmed by this. “Is there a problem? Is it missing?”

“No, no. I found your picture but…it doesn’t belong to you.” She was genuinely confused until Bruce clicked the file to open up the picture from 1918. “It is you.”

She looked as if she was ready to deny it, but saw Bruce’s expression and thought better of it. She had the look of someone caught and appeared about as uncomfortable as Bruce had felt. He tapped
the top of her knuckles to get her attention and then gestured between them.

“Look, I don’t know what...this is between us, but I know it’s gonna be DOA unless you clue me in. Who are you, Diana? Where have you been?”

Diana sighed ruefully and ran a hand through her ponytail, her accent becoming more pronounced in her distress. “Forgive me. The last time I had to do this I was in my homeland. It was easier to show who I was.”

“I’ve lived in Gotham my whole life and I’ve seen a lot of weird shit. Not much you could say that would phase me.”

“Very well. When I told you my name was Diana, I was being truthful. And when I told you it signaled royalty, that was also true. This photo was taken at the end of The War to End All Wars. The man you see to my right is Steven Trevor. He was paramilitary. He crashed-landed on my island and requested my aid in battle. I returned to the mainland with him and he showed me Man’s World. He was my partner and my best friend.”

Bruce quickly and savagely beat back the single pang of jealously that had crept up unwelcomed inside him. He got the feeling that wasn’t the important part of her story.

“I lived in France for many years, but my original home is Paradise Island. It is hidden from modern eyes in what you know as the Black Sea. I, and my sisters, were created by our mother, Hippolyta – molded from the clay cliffs of Themyscira many millennia ago – after which we were given life by Zeus, the King of Gods. I am their youngest: Diana of Themyscira, Princess of the Amazons; known in your world as Wonder Woman.”

Oh.

“Oh.”

“Indeed. This is why I’m here. I was, until recently, living in happy seclusion. But it seems as if someone wanted an audience with me.”

Bruce looked to her photo and back to her. He wasn’t positive about where this was going. “Why was Lex looking for you?”

“I don’t know. I left Man’s World behind a long time ago.”

It was tough deciding what was more unnerving at that moment. Bruce had had gone toe-to-toe with many formidable figures. Many of them were bigger; a few had even been stronger, but he had never been in arm’s reach of a demigod before. Didn’t even know they existed. Alfred had given a passing moment of time to the Amazons during his early studies. Western Culture was terribly interested in philosophers like Socrates and leaders like Alexander the Great. Even soldiers of fortune like Leonidas got more mention than the Amazons did and he could only imagine how Diana felt about that. They had only been spoken of in legend, but here it was – the legend made flesh. And it was a legend that looked like Diana. Who looked like Diana.

And that was the second thing: what was a guy like Lex doing spying on a girl like her? How did he discover her identity and where had he obtained her picture? Had he known before he found it? What was his angle and where was the pretense? That single pang of jealousy crept back unwarranted and it was much harder to ignore.

He started in his seat as she began snapping her fingers. He had been lost in thought as the rational part of his brain worked extra time to work out this recent development. He already knew it was her.
Hearing it in her own words had been more affecting than it should have.

Diana’s eyes were alight with a sort of realization as she said, “You don’t believe me.”

“I only believe what’s in front of me.” He was talking more to the antique photo than to her. “It’s a lot to consider, but there’s only so many ways a girl can be both here and there.”

He pointed back to the screen. The photo of (a younger?) Diana staring at them with unwavering intensity. In the present, “Diana Prince” appraised him with a light chuckle.

“You really are a Detective, aren’t you?”

Bruce shrugged. “Only part-time.”

She leered at that and turned to look, once again, at her photo. She quickly became taken by her thoughts as Bruce had and he let her, opting to observe in silence. For the first time since the start of the month, he got a really good look at her. Her attractiveness was objective but from this angle it seemed ethereal. It made it a touch easier to believe that the woman had witnessed the rise and fall of several civilizations.

“Diana, how did you find me?”

She turned her head towards him gave him a once over. “For someone who thinks himself a spy, you are not the most covert.”

“Getting sloppy in my old age, no doubt.”

“In that case my timing was perfect. Without your aid, I would not have recovered my photo.”

Speaking of. “I found that photo in a folder labeled Meta-Human Thesis. My guess is, it’s a watch list.”

“Lex Luthor wants to assemble a team?”

“More like a focus group.”

“I do not understand. Why me?”

“At least he made you a logo.” Bruce had meant to lighten the air between them, but the look Diana gave him revealed it to have the opposite effect. He quickly looked back to the laptop and clicked on the folder marked with a lightning bolt.

“Let’s see who else the kid was after,” he said and Diana nodded as the first file was opened.

It was a video this time. Surveillance video of a convenience store with three occupants. There was a cashier, a gunman, and a customer. A young man barely out of his teens of what looked like Latino descent taking a bottle of milk out of the refrigerated section near the back. He glanced over his shoulder towards the front and not a second later every light began to flicker and the assailant was seen flying into a nearby display of cheese snacks. When Bruce looked back to the other side of the clip, all he saw was the kid walking to the cashier to check out. Bruce had good eyesight, but the footage was choppy and had low resolution. Luckily, Diana had been paying attention.

“I believe he vanished.”

Bruce had his own theory as he restarted the video. This time, before starting it, he right-clicked and changed the playback speed. They both took to watching one side of the screen and Bruce saw, as
she had said, the boy seemingly disappeared from where he was standing. But his bottle of milk was left suspended in the air.

“No, he didn’t. He moved. Really, really fast.”

He minimized that window and opened the next folder, marked with a stylized A. The video showed a deep-water excursion in the midst of a ship graveyard. When one of the cameras got close to an open doorway, there appeared a bearded man with long, dark hair holding a trident and looking very much trespassed upon. The man destroyed the camera which prompted a different camera further from the wreckage to capture him swimming away in rapid fashion; a trail of bubbles following as if propelled by jets. In his peripheral, Bruce saw the recognition on Diana’s face.

“You know him?”

“His name is Arthur Curry. He is King of the Atlanteans: Descendants of Poseidon.”

“He’s family, then?”

“Such as it were.”

That definitely was a cold comment. Whether she was estranged from Arthur and his people or didn’t hold Poseidon in the same regard as Zeus, he couldn’t be sure, but curiosity got the better of him. And so long as they were discussing Gods and Ancient Sunken Cities, he figured he should get some clarification.

“What about the rest? Is Zeus still…out there?”

If Diana was bothered by the question, it didn’t show. “The Amazons still reside in Themyscira. Zeus, his wife and his brethren were all destroyed many years ago by an angry, vengeful Spirit.”

And didn’t he know how that shit went? He didn’t bother with any platitudes and moved on to the last folder: marked with a robotic C.

When Bruce opened the first video he regretted it almost instantly. There was an African-American man sitting in a lab coat, room swathed in red light, with a human torso – missing from the chest down – hanging from the far wall. Bruce got a sick sort of feeling as the concurrent clips played, the man looking more disheveled as they went on.

LABORATORY 3 – PROPERTY OF S.T.A.R.

“2400 hours and 2 minutes. Subject declining rapidly. All procedural interventions have failed. Outcome… will be death.”

“Dr. Silas Stone suspending all clinical protocol. US Government object 6-19-82 is successfully activated.”

Object 6-19-82 was a black cube, clearly not of this world, levitating in the good doctor’s hands. Eventually it began to break apart; grafting itself to the young man’s mutilated body, much to his distress, as Dr. Stone quickly ended the recording.

Bruce clicked on the next file without thinking and it showed Dr. Stone working with the man to gain control of his new prosthetics. It appeared to be a very frustrating process. Frustrating and painful. Two clips later:

“Victor, please, you have to understa-”
“Shut up, old man! I understand plenty! All my life you’ve used me; forced me to be what you wanted me to be. And all my life I’ve fought you. But you finally won, didn’t you?”

“Victor… I already lost Ellinor. I couldn’t lose you, too. Not my only son.”

“Damn you! This is your idea of saving me? Turning me into a freak? I’ll never see the light of day again, and it’s all your fault! Goddammit, old man, I hate you! Why didn’t you just let me die? Why couldn’t you let me die??”

Bruce closed the laptop a bit too quickly, and harshly, then necessary and Diana was about to ask him what he was doing, until she saw how rigid his body became. The color drained from his cheeks and he was gripping the edge of the table as if it were the only thing keeping him from falling off the face of the Earth.

Bruce felt the beginnings of hyperventilation. His eyes hadn’t moved from the table, as his vision began tunneling toward the laptop. He knew this, obviously, and took two deep breaths to try and calm himself but he just. Couldn’t. Get. Air. He was a longways off from a full-blown attack but he had to get himself under control. No one needed to see him this way.

“Bruce. Breathe.”

Alfred? That would make sense but…he wasn’t in the Cave, nor was he at home. Not even Lucius knew of these episodes so that meant-

It was Diana. Running her hand up the length of his spinal column trying to work the good air into his lungs. After a minute or so, he calmed himself and reclined in his chair. He didn’t know what about the video had triggered his reaction, but it was fortunate Diana had been there.

“Better?”

“Yeah, thanks. I’m sorry I-.”

“I am familiar with the condition. It is common in the military, although, they did not have a name for it back then.”

She winced as she said the words. A sort of silent apology for witnessing something he took great care to make sure no one had knowledge of. She had no need to apologize but the fact that she’d had the thought stirred something inside of him Bruce had long thought dead.

It gave him a thought that he wasn’t sure how to approach with her. Rather than think about it, he just asked, “Will you help me find them? The people like you?”

Diana shifted uncomfortably at this. “Perhaps they do not want to be found.”

“They’ve already been found. We need to keep them from being collected. Or worse.”

“Worse?”

“I did business with and against Lex Luthor, Sr. for years. I watched him slowly facilitate the liquidation of every Mom & Pop franchise in the Metropolis area and when he died last year, I watched his son continue down that path two-fold.”

“A hostile takeover, then?”
“Hostile being the operative word.”

Diana turned back toward the laptop and opened it, so that she could find the picture of her from The Great War. It was why she came, after all. Before she moved the file to her own flash drive, she took a long pause to stare at the picture and let out a sad sigh.

“I look so strong here. So full of life. I couldn’t have imagined the world I would find once I finally left home. But I still have duties to be mindful of, and I have meddled in mortal affairs long enough. Now, I must leave.”

Bruce was aware of the dull panic rising within him but ignored it.

“Leave? You’re Wonder Woman.”

“I was Wonder Woman. I don’t know what else you found on this device, but I am no longer the person these records say I am. I left Man’s World a century ago after witnessing a lifetime of atrocities. I understand now why my sisters have stayed on the island: your media, your politicians, your endless petty feuds. Man has made a world where standing together is impossible. I’m glad that our paths have crossed but, I cannot be the one that helps you.”

“I don’t want someone else to help me.” That comment stopped her in her tracks and had Bruce feeling like he’d shown a bit too much, so he amended himself. “That is, no one else can help me. This information is too sensitive and there’d be too many questions. In order to protect these people, I need someone who identifies with them directly.”

“Who is making the focus group, again?”

Bruce couldn’t stop the eye roll. “You know what I mean.”

“I do. But I want to hear you say it.” Diana waggled her eyebrows. It was like she was in on a fix that he wasn’t and in less than a month of knowing her, Bruce had gotten used to feeling that way around her.

“Princess Diana of Themyscira: I ask of you one last favor to mankind. I want to find the person behind the bombing at Capitol Hill and bring them to Justice and I want to find the other Meta-Humans and protect them from the people who would do them harm. Once this is over, you can return home with your secret guarded and you’ll never have to deal with the bullshit of Man’s World again.”

Diana for a moment looked to be seriously considering this plan with her cheek resting in her hand. Fixing Bruce with a look he couldn’t quite read but could have easily mistaken for admiration. She then whipped her head toward the door and stood to move toward it. His unspoken question was answered as she opened the door, letting the young man on the other side spill out onto the floor. Diana, to her credit seemed amused by this. Bruce kept his deadpan firmly in place.

“Heh. Uh…surprise?”

“Not when she’s around.” Diana gave a cute wave to Tim as if to reinforce that end.

“No kidding,” he said, impressed. “Got a keeper, Brucey Boy. Don’t screw it up.” He picked up his cane and worked his way back down the hall with Diana looking after him.

“Remind you of anyone?”

Bruce didn’t reward that quip with an answer.
“I will consider your offer, Mr. Wayne. The Amazons were created by Zeus to aid humanity in times of crisis, and now humanity stands on the edge of chaos and destruction. Perhaps the World is ready to receive some guidance. And perhaps…I have been traveling alone for long enough.”

She looks directly into his eyes when she says this and Bruce returns the gaze, for the first time, with no hesitation. “Yeah. Me too.”

“Mm. Take care.” Diana left in the same direction Tim had, back toward the lobby, and Bruce watched after her, long after she was gone. He wasn’t quite sure when it hit – the reality, the scale, of what he had just proposed – but he knew he’d be a lot more confident if Diana was alongside.

And when she texted him later that night saying that she would join him, the feeling he got was as close to excitement as he would let himself feel.

Chapter End Notes

You probably guessed, but this is where the movie's story tapers off into my own. However, the Cyborg dialogue is based upon actual panels from his comic debut. Also, those who know Tim Drake are no doubt aware that his cane (or canes depending) is a clever affectation to conceal his identity as Red Robin. Here, he's still just Tim.
“Okay! I’m gonna push off on three! One! Two! Three!”

He had lifted heavier things than a whale before. Much heavier, in fact. But lifting a whale was much different than lifting, say, a space capsule. A capsule was man-made – neat edges and segments of cold un-yielding steel. A whale was an animal. An aquatic mammal, to be precise, that had the unfortunate tendency to drift off course and strand itself out of the water.

That’s why when Superman saw a livestream of a group of beachgoers dumping water onto a helpless Gray Whale, he had no choice really but to fly post haste to Washington State and assist them. There were complications, though. The whale’s enormous size and oblong shape made it difficult for Kal-El to find a base and lift the animal without harming it. Eventually, the sheer media blitz of Superman aiding a beached whale attracted Oliver Queen, who donated the use of an industrial crane to lift the tail off the ground.

That’s what it was doing now, as Superman held the poor creature aloft and shimmied underneath its weight to center mass so he could transport it to sea.

“Okay, Queen! Let it go!”

The young billionaire did as he was told and the cable holding up the tail fell free. Superman adjusted to the added weight and began slowly flying out to sea. Gray Whales were native to the Northern Pacific, so he figured 300 hundred yards off shore would be a good enough buffer.

He spotted an especially deep part of the ocean and gently eased the whale into the water, snout first. He hovered in the air as it tread water and then sighed in relief as it released a tall spray of salty water into the air. A few more moments to make sure the whale was still swimming in the right direction and he turned to fly back towards the beach.

He could hear the cheers go up before he was halfway there and saw Oliver Queen standing barefoot in the sand with his slacks rolled up. Things were so much different on this coast.

“You did it, man!”

“We did it, Mr. Queen.” Kal shook the shorter man’s hand for effect.

“I don’t know about all that. Seems to me you coulda handled this yourself.”

“Yes, but I may have harmed the whale. Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.”

Queen thumbed at his blonde goatee. “I gotcha. An animal lover, huh?”

Kal agreed wordlessly as he waved to the many cameras now around them. “Animals aren’t like anything else on Earth. No false truths. No hidden agendas. They just go about their day. I think they’re good, Mr. Queen.”
“For what it’s worth, man, we think you’re good, too.”

The gathered crowd echoed that statement, as numerous people put away their cameras and phones long enough to begin applauding. It didn’t make him feel like Superman again, but it made him feel better at least.

“It’s worth a lot. Thank you. All of you.”

“So, what’s next for you, Supes?”

“Honestly, Mr. Queen, I think I need some time off to reevaluate my place here.”

“Well, if you run into some mess, just remember you’ve got a friend out West. And next time you’re here, please call me Ollie. That ‘Mr. Queen’ shit is for the old folks, man!”

Kal actually laughed at that as he stepped back and darted into the air. He flew up through a tuft of cumulus clouds – at or around the bottom edge of the Troposphere – and wiped the moisture from his face, eying the position of the Sun in the sky. Time zones notwithstanding, he could just make it if he hurried.

Ever since he had first been able to fly, he loved the feeling of it. It was the feeling of the world passing underneath and it made him feel powerful, admittedly. Once he broke the sound barrier, it felt more like he was suspended in place as someone spun the globe below him. Gravity simply didn’t have the same effect on him.

It was a few minutes of that: keeping count and watching the different formations fly by. Travelling east was easy because he knew he was just waiting for the first flat state to come up. Once it did, he dove sharply towards the center of it and navigated without thinking to a yard that anyone would have found uneventful.

“Told ya I’d make it. Mm! Do I smell pie?”

The older woman swatted him on the arm. “Dinner first, boy. Then pie.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The man Martha Kent led indoors to the dining room was no longer Superman of Krypton. Only Clark Kent of Smallville – much to his relief. He thought about dropping his cape on the floor. Thought better of it; folded it up on the sofa instead and joined his mother at the table. Three courses on his side, just a single plate on the other.

“Saw you on the news tonight.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Your dad always wanted to see a whale one day.”

“You think he would’ve been proud, Ma?”

“Clark! He was already proud of you. Before…all this.”

He looked down and saw he had already cleaned his first plate. A good indication of his recent stress. His mother frowned and pushed away her chair from the table.

“Follow me, son.”
Kal left his remaining food untouched and joined Martha on her back porch and watched the sun dip below the horizon.

“We never wanted this for you. Either of us. You don’t owe this world a damn thing. Never did.”

“I know Ma but, why doesn’t that make me feel better?”

“Ever since you were a boy, you wanted to be a helper. Even total strangers. That’s who you are.”

“But what’s the point if I can’t help when it matters? Why can’t it ever be easy?”

“Darlin’ if it were easy, everyone would be Superman. But they’re not. You are.”

“So what, then?”

“I saw those people on the news, Clark. They look up to you. They believe in you. You need to believe in yourself. You made the choice to wear this symbol. Now you need to be the symbol for them. There’s so much darkness in this world. It needs some more light.”

Clark embraced his mother and placed a kiss to her temple. It was the most contentment he had felt in more than a week. He had never known Krypton, but Smallville – and Earth for that matter – would always be home.

“Love you, Ma.”

“Love you, too, kiddo.”

“Can we eat that pie, now?”

“Clean your room first. Then pie.”

-----------------------------------------------

“Any developments on the incident in the Port, Lieutenant?”

“Nothing new, sir. We know that Russians were involved and they looked to export the shipment out of Gotham, but the Bat scared ‘em off before they could.”

“‘Course he did. Any idea on what they were smuggling or where they are?”

“Afraid not, sir.”

“Hmm. Any leads?”

“Just one. Word from our contact underground is that there have been meetings held between the Falcons and Cobblepot about a recent transaction. Could be unrelated, but we know their history.”

“That we do. Keep me posted, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir, Commissioner.”

James Gordon was the Commissioner of the Gotham City Police Department and he was also incredibly frazzled. The 24 hours that followed after the incident in the Port of Gotham had been
pure chaos, punctuated by mountains of paperwork. The press conference had been a fresh hell, as well. It was easy enough to deflect the usual questions about the Bat and his involvement. What he hadn’t expected was any questions about why Superman was seen flying away from the scene of the operation.

“Goddamn aliens,” he sighed as he closed his door and lit up a cigarette. The last month of work had done nothing to help his habit: Russians, meta-humans, smuggling rings – he needed much more than a smoke, but it would have to do for now.

Gordon fell more than sat down in his cushioned chair and felt his nerves uncoil as the nicotine hit the back of his throat and rushed through his nostrils. He gave a glance down toward the day’s paperwork and took a deep breath preparing himself for the continuing logistics nightmare.

And then the phone rang.

Thank God. “This is Commissioner Gordon.”

“Yes, hello. This is Lois Lane from The Daily Planet.”

“Please hold.” Gordon set down his phone and opened his door to call to his receptionist. “Sherri! Cancel my afternoon meetings and tell anyone who calls to piss off!”

“Of course, Mr. Gordon.”

He closes his door and stalks back to his chair, where he pushes a button to put his phone on speaker. “How the hell do you have this number?”

“I’m doing well, Commissioner, thanks for asking.”

“I gave a full press conference the other day. If you want any new info you’ll have to wait like everyone else.”

“This isn’t about that. I’m calling about The Batman.”

Silence as Gordon chewed on his half-spent cigarette.

“You don’t have to lie to me, Gordon. I know he’s real.”

“Then you know the drill. Our policy is not to field questions about the Bat.”

“I don’t want an interview with you.”

“What?”

“I want to speak with Batman.”

Gordon mulled over the reporter’s request as he stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on his desk. “Off the record?”

“Of course.”

“You’ll be searched upon arrival.”

“Fine by me.”

“Fine. Come to the station at 5:30. You’ll receive instruction, there.”
She always thought that the TSA’s brand of “security theater” was humiliating – and it was – but she would gladly take a full hour of that nonsense over what she was being subjected to right now.

Clark, keen as ever, had offered to fly her out of D.C. that same day. Nevermind that he had just flown out of an exploding building. Oh, and also disregard that the building had been the Capitol of the United States of America. Didn’t matter to him which is why she had to remind him, gently, that a premier journalist taking off in the arms of the man who just let the Senate explode probably wasn’t the best idea. He relented, and flew off to what she had to assume was Smallville, where Ma Kent would be waiting with a hug and a pie.

That left her stranded for 3 days in Washington as all air traffic had been temporarily suspended and countless flights had been rebooked, cancelled and rescheduled to handle the load of travelers entering and leaving the city.

Lois Lane had arrived at the precinct in Gotham City’s Central West End five minutes earlier than the time she agreed to, and she was paying for it. After searching her twice for the wire that wasn’t there, the female officer was now on pat down number three as two of her burly male colleagues looked on and snickered between themselves. Lois released a huff and looked forward to the officer who was bent over her shoes.

“At the risk of failing the Bechdel test, mind telling me what you think you’ll find that wasn’t there 5 minutes ago?”

“Just following procedure, miss.”

“Afraid I’m gonna take out your boss with my deadly pinky toe?”

“You’re a Metropolis girl. Sure you could think of something.”

That jibe had the two men across the way openly laughing, no longer hiding their intentions. It echoed through the mostly empty precinct and the officer in front of Lois stood up with a ghost of a smile playing on her lips.

“You’re clear. Wait over there, please.”

“Officer Hernandez. Badge Numbrerrrr… 2746. I’ll remember that.”

“And I’ll remember you Miss Lane,” the officer said, undeterred. “Gotham Central is never too far away. Sir!”

“At ease, Hernandez.” She had turned to acknowledge the entrance of a tall, older man in a wide-brimmed hat and overcoat who, judging by the sudden silence from the goons behind her, Lois could guess was Commissioner Jim Gordon.

Officer Hernandez nodded curtly and made her leave with the two males following behind. Lois crossed her arms. Annoyed that her decision to be timely had resulted in state-sponsored hazing. Gordon kept his hands stuffed in his overcoat – unamused.

“Welp. Let’s get this over with, huh?”
“Let’s.”

With as much disinterest as he could muster, Gordon lead Lois to a door which took them to an alley on the side of the building. They were a good way down the path headed towards the back of the precinct when Gordon made an aside.

“Oh, I guess I should tell you, he might not come.”

Lois was silently gobsmacked at that. “The hell?” Well, not too silent.

Gordon shrugged at the outburst and kept walking. “I mean, all we do is send out a message. He operates on his own schedule. Usually only shows up for the big stuff these days.”

Lois was shaking her head to try and understand. “You give every media member the runaround for years about this…Bat Thing and deny it even exists. Then, you invite me here with no protest to meet him and you’re telling me he might not show up?”

Gordon stops at the padlocked door of the brick building behind HQ and considers this. ”Yup. I’d say that covers it.”

Lois continues as he fishes his keys from his coat pocket. “Gordon. I was stuck in D.C. for three days. I haven’t even been home yet.”

He looked back as the lock opened and said, “Yeah, well, poor you.”

He pushed the double doors open and flicked on the single row of fluorescent lights. As Lois entered and the doors were closed, she felt more and more like the joke was on her.

“I’m serious! I didn’t come to Gotham for nothing!”

“Haha, there it is.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do know Miss Lane. Whether you know it is a different story.”

She huffed. “What I mean is I’m a reporter. I’m not leaving empty-handed.”

Gordon chuckled as he pressed a button to access the lift.

“If you’ll remember, this meeting today is off the record so you will be leaving empty-handed no matter what.”

He paused at the open door and eyed his guest, who was standing pensive two feet away.

“Is that OK?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

They rode the lift in silence. It was a short ride as the building was only five stories, but inside the box it felt so much longer. She could feel the chill outside when they reached the top and before the doors opened to the roof, Lois made her grievance known.

“So what’s the gag here, Gordon?”
“You think I’m doing this for shits and grins right now?” He stepped out into the dusk air with Lois beside him.

“Must be. Up on a rooftop in Gotham freezing my ass off waiting for a boogeyman that might not show. Hi-larious.”

Gordon shrugged again and said, “I told you already. He comes when he comes. I’m not his manager.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell me, then. These ‘big jobs’ you mentioned. What are they, usually?”

She turned down the pack of cigarettes that was extended towards her and watched as he pocketed that and fished for a lighter to ignite the one hanging from his mouth.

“Eh… Now that the White Portuguese plot has been uncovered, he’s probably working full time on bringing in the Clown.” He took a drag of the newly lit cigarette and spoke again before exhaling. “Then again, The Penguin has been making some noise lately. Huh. Never did like that son of a bitch.”

Lois had to take a moment to properly grasp what she’d heard; the utter insanity that was the Gotham underworld.

“Is this what he does for you? Beat up clowns and animal-themed criminals?”

“Not for me, Lane. Just last month he broke up a sex trafficking ring, including stringing up the guy behind it, who we’d been chasing for months.”

“So. He does the work you aren’t able to?”

That got no answer from Gordon. Just a glare as he expelled another trail of smoke.

“Or maybe just the work you aren’t willing to. Is that why you look the other way when a human being gets branded like livestock?”

Gordon leaned back and took another long drag. He tapped off the ash near the tarp that was covering a rather large object. He stepped toward it, as if to pull off the sheet but he stopped and turned back her way. He gestured with his smoke as he spoke.

“Let me tell you a story, Reporter Bitch Lady.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sorry. Miss Reporter Bitch Lady. If you haven’t figured out by now, I brought you up here because I’m a fan.”

“You’re – what?”

“Mhm. Been following your work at The Planet for some time. Every goddamn photog and reporter who thinks they’ve got a scoop on The Bat who calls my precinct always asks the same stupid question. Who is it? What is it? How can we find him? As if any of us have the time or the want to tell them. But you. You call my private line and straight up ask for a one-on-one sit down with the goddamn Batman? Only a few people have the guts to do that.”
“But why him? You’re abetting a criminal vigilante.”

“That’s the way we saw it, too. At first.”

“What happened?”

“Freeze.”

“Freeze?”

“Victor Fries. A brilliant scientist whose wife became terminally ill. Rather than lose her, he placed her in suspended animation; freezing her until he could work out a cure. But tests cost money and soon he ran out. That eventually led to him barricading himself into some poor bastard’s house, taking my men out one by one with his fucking freeze ray.”

Gordon, who had finished his smoke threw the filter to the ground and stamped it into the roof with a bit more force than necessary. He took a whiff of hard Gotham air to calm himself and continued his story.

“Three cops went in after him. Waited 30 minutes. Radio silence. Before I could call again, I heard a window being smashed out. Out of that third story window comes what looks like an ice sculpture but was actually a human. I know that, because when the ice hit the pavement it shattered – not even exploded into a million tiny, bloody pieces. We found the other two bodies in the same state. Imagine walking up to the families’ door with that picture. ‘We’re sorry, ma’am. You won’t be able to bury your son because some blue asshole smashed him like a stack of Legos!’”

Gordon paused long enough to whip the tarp off the large object. He threw a switch and a stream of light escaped. Lois looked up to see the shape of a bat projected on the overcast sky. Gordon turned back to her with his fists jammed roughly in his pockets.

“I’m about to call the Guard, at this point, and just bring the whole building down when he pulls up. On a motorcycle, like all of GCPD doesn’t have every rifle shoved up his ass. He gets off, comes straight to me and says ‘No more guns. We’re doing this my way.’ In a fair and just world, I’m thinking, these two will kill each other, so I let him go right ahead through the front door. Not 12 minutes later, he walks back out dragging Freeze behind him like dirty laundry. On his bike. Off into the night. No one’s crossed him since.”

Lois was quiet for some time as the massive lamp continued to hum in the background. After absorbing that new information, she stepped forward.

“Sounds like a guy you’d want on the payroll.”

“Absolutely not! It takes a special kind of crazy to subdue a man with a cryo-gun barehanded. He’s too good at this shit. I looked into his eyes that night and saw the look of somebody ready to die. All these years later, I still see it. Had a run-in with Superman in the Port of Gotham. I’m starting to wonder if he’ll get his wish.”

Lois tried to focus on not disputing that claim when she followed his eyes upward and gasped at what was above her.

It was a giant, bat-shaped shadow gliding through the Gotham skyline. As it made one more giant turn toward their position, Lois turned to Gordon, mouth agape.

“Heh, show off.”
A few more seconds, and he touched down on the roof far more gently than a man covered in body armor should. That’s what he was. Just a man. A large man. A touch taller and much more broad than Gordon was who, even at his age wasn’t a slouch. The Bat made his way to Gordon and the signal, regarding her with a look that had to be somewhere between confusion and annoyance. Of all the things, he shook the Commissioner’s hand.

“Gordon.”

“Batman. Good to see you still upright.”

“So far. How’s Barbara?”

“She’s fine. Finishing up undergrad at Gotham U in a few weeks.”

“Criminal Justice?”

“Yup. I’m thrilled.”

“Hm. You should be. She’s pretty good. Might be as good as you, one day.”

“We’ll see. Oh, got something for you.”

Gordon digs a single cassette tape out of his coat pocket and hands it to Batman. He turned it over in his hand and Lois could make out three green question marks on either side of the purple case.

“Nigma?” Batman asked.

Gordon shot a look that seemed to answer the question. Batman only grunted as he put the case away in one of the many compartments on his belt.

“When I have time. But I’m guessing that’s not what you called me here for.” He looked at Lois as he said this and she extended her hand to shake.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet.” He narrowed his eyes but shook her hand. “I was hoping to ask a few questions. Off the record, of course.”

Batman glanced back at Gordon. “Feeling generous today, Jim?”

He shook his head and said, “She called me. To talk to you.”

“About?”

“The Senate Bombing.”

“… Go on.”

“I understand you’re investigating the incident.”

Gordon, who was at first ambivalent, became much more interested in the interview. Batman crossed his arms and steeled his tone.

“The investigation is ongoing.”

“So have you found anything?”

“If I had, it wouldn’t be ‘ongoing’ and you are cutting into time that could be used elsewhere. Jim,
we’re done here.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a detective?”

Batman was a step away from the edge of the roof but stopped in his tracks. By the sudden shift in his posture, Lois wasn’t sure how glad she was to have halted his progress. He turned on his heel and spoke; and added edge to his already altered voice.

“A detective’s job is to examine the evidence and make judgment based upon the facts that are presented. The fact is only one person walked away from that blast.”

“You too, huh? You really think Superman was involved in some convoluted plot to blow himself up?”

“I only know what’s in front of me, Miss Lane.”

“And what about Luthor? Seems pretty convenient for him to skip out on a front row seat for the trial of a guy he hates.”

Batman cocked his head and considered this. “You’re not wrong. But it also seems convenient that the whole place went up right before Kahini Ziri was set to testify.”

Lois opened her mouth. Closed it. He had a good point himself. She knew Clark would never be complicit in such an act, but the optics weren’t good at all. Then she had a thought. Suddenly, furiously, she dug out a small plastic baggie from her purse and presented it to The Bat, who took it precariously between two fingers.

“What am I looking at?”

“This is a prototype round of some sort. I dug it out of my journal when I got back from Africa. But I don’t think it was meant for me.”

Batman seemed to think that, too, as he studied the odd-looking bullet which had a glowing green core. He brought it to eye level.

“Besides Superman: who else was in the desert with you?”

Lois recalled the horrific experience from that day and paused to compose herself. “Well, there was Jimmy Olsen—”

“Olsen was a plant,” he said while punching keys on his gauntlet. “He was expendable and he almost got you killed. His story won’t do us much good.”

Right then.

“And there were all these armed men. I forget how many.”

“The local insurgents.”

“Yes, but not just them. There were others. They took over the operation and then turned on them. They sounded Russian.”

She was taken aback by the sight of Batman’s eyes darting up to meet hers and he stopped what he was doing to pocket the bullet and pull out a handheld device that he held up for her to see.

“Recognize him?”
Lois felt her eyes go wide and her stomach drop at the sight of the man who not long ago had her facing down the business end of a rifle. Long, stringy hair. Neck Tattoo. There was no mistaking it.

“That’s him! He lead the operation!”

Gordon stepped forward and found his voice. “You know this vulture?”

Batman hummed in assent. “Anatoli Knyazev. He was behind the White Portuguese job. The one that Superman interrupted.” Whatever happened that day, Batman didn’t seem too happy and for reasons unknown, he had looked directly at her when he said it.

“So you’ll help, then?”

“I’ll do what I always do. I’m Batman.”

He nodded to the Commissioner and was once again headed towards the roof’s edge when, before she could stop herself, Lois had grabbed him by the arm and turned him back around. Gordon was surprised, but Batman had been oddly compliant to the whims of this person less than half his size.

“Come on!” Lois said. “No thank you’s for the evidence or the earth-shattering development?”

Batman exchanged a look with Gordon, then looked back to her and smirked.

“I’d hardly call it ‘earth-shattering’ but new intel is good intel.”

“What now?”

“You’ve done good work, Miss Lane. Stay safe. But from one investigator to another: focus more on solving the crime and less on saving your boyfriend.”

“Sure, thanks. Hey, wh-!”

By the time she turned around to face him, he had already disappeared over the edge. When she saw him next he was once again no more than a shadow flying high into the Gotham skyline.

“The hell?” Lois looked at Gordon as if to question what just happened. The older man only shrugged.

“He does that.”

Bruce generally preferred using the lake entrance to enter the Cave, but it was only big enough for the Batmobile to use. Seeing as the tank prototype had been put on the shelf, his only choice was using the Batwing as his main mode of transportation. It had made trips to and from patrol much less cumbersome, but getting it down into the Cave was a bother.

He touched down and climbed out as the bay doors above slid closed. He was walking with his mask in his hand. Had he been driving the Batmobile, he would have seen them immediately. Approaching from the far end, it wasn’t until he rounded the corner that he saw two figures seated underneath the main console.
“God, I can’t surprise you at all, can I?”

Diana looked up from the table set up before her and regarded him with a wave. Alfred didn’t: engrossed with a game of chess that he was hopelessly losing.

“Good evening, Mr. Wayne. I was beginning to wonder if you’d leave me to entertain myself.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, Miss Diana,” Alfred said as he considered his next move. Bruce surmised he was two turns at most away from losing. “Master Wayne is a horrid host.”

“Oh yeah?” Bruce moved up Alfred’s last remaining pawn to impede the progress of her rook. “What else did you tell our guest, Alfred?”

“Only that I was free to stay as long as I wished. Check.” Diana had moved her Queen up between Alfred’s pieces as he guessed she might. He had tossed his gloves aside at this point.

“Not exactly in a position to argue with that, am I?”

Bruce, to counter, had moved Alfred’s knight to cut off the Queen’s progress. She couldn’t take out the piece without being endangered by Alfred’s Queen and bishop. She acknowledged this; making eye contact as she slid her piece backwards. Alfred threw his head back, as if the move should have been obvious.

“So, will our evening of research precede as planned or do you have business in Metropolis tonight?” Bruce asked as he moved the knight.

“I did have business in Metropolis.” She captured Alfred’s pawn with her rook. “Plans have changed.”

“The night’s still young.” He captured her rook with the knight. “Don’t hang around on my account.”

“Do not worry, Bruce Wayne. I’m not. There is work to be done.” Diana took her forgotten Queen and shot it up the gullet of the board to capture the opposing Queen and held up the piece to Bruce, beaming. Alfred had dug himself a deep hole, but Bruce thought he managed well, considering.

“Check!”

“Checkmate. Alfred, if you’re gonna get worked like this you should at least call me.”

“So you can watch, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. Good show, Miss Diana. Ten games straight. You know, Master Wayne, if you ever cared for your promptness as you do for your vehicles, we might have a chance to best her.”

“That’ll be all for now, Alfred,” Bruce said as he draped his cape across the back of his chair. He watched Alfred walk to the lift as he moved closer to Diana, who was in front of the main console.

“What are we lookin’ at?”

Diana hit several keys on the keyboard before her. “Very little so far. But I did have an idea. I examined more security footage of the young speedster and was able to discover the company that owns the store he was in. They own a chain of stores, so I had to run a search through your system.”
Bruce looked up to see the task bar she had navigated to. It was barely 20% done. He looked back down to see Diana with a pensive expression. Perhaps a silent apology for commandeering his network in his absence. Bruce shrugged it off.

“Alfred’s given you his stamp of approval. Be surprised if I have any pull left around here.”

“Not too surprised, sir.”

“That’ll be all, Alfred! Anyway, this is gonna take awhile. We should do some more research on your cousin, the Angry Fish Man.”

Diana frowned at the mention. “Arthur is not the most agreeable ‘Fish Man,’ Bruce.”

“I’ve been known to be pretty persuasive.”

“And what of the Cyborg?”

“That’s a question for S.T.A.R. Labs. Doubt he’s still with his father.”

“Do you think he’s…?”

“I don’t know, Diana.” Bruce looked again to the ongoing search and down at his personal device to check the time. It would be a late night, certainly.

“But we’ve got a starting point. Thanks to you.”

She nodded and then tilted her head slightly.

“Would you like a moment to get changed out of your work clothes?”

Bruce looked down and saw that he was still in the suit. That wouldn’t enhance his detective skills any.

“Good point. You mind if I…”

“Take your time. I will begin looking for clues on Arthur’s whereabouts.”

“It’s gonna be a long night. Alfred should be preparing some food now. You can stay for dinner if you’d like.”

“You can also stay forever if you wish, Miss Diana.”

“That’ll be all, Alfred!”

Chapter End Notes

Just in time for Mother's Day!

Growing up on a farm in Kansas, I'd like to think Clark has a soft spot for animals. Not a gift of gab deal necessarily, but very in-tune with their needs. This chapter is also a shout out to one of my favorite Batman comics, Gotham Central. Part of the suspension of disbelief that comes from Bats as a character is how other people see him through their eyes. Criminals aren’t so much afraid of him as they are of what he can do.
Defeating Bane, taking down Freeze, standing up to Superman. All without powers.

Enjoy your friends and family this weekend.
Diana Prince was awoken by rays of light peering in through the windows as they crept above the tree line. She had spent the night on Bruce Wayne’s couch (which was terribly comfortable) despite his insistence that she use his guest room. Over the many years she had traveled and the many places she had been, she grew bored of the luxurious and modern amenities that had accompanied her newfound lifestyle. The tall windows of the living room gave her full view of the clear waters of the lake as well as the stars that were reflected in them. A novelty, perhaps, but it was as close to camping as she wanted to be for now.

She stood and stretched the kinks out of her body and really took stock of her surroundings for the first time. When she had first seen Bruce’s house – passing by the ashen hull of his empty mansion – it all made a bit more sense. His new “manor” had been stripped of all but the most essential amenities. A man like him who obsesses over even the smallest details wouldn’t want anything to distract him. Even the TV in front of her was normal for a man that owned entire chains of electronic stores.

She thought about turning the TV on before she decided against it and pulled a bag of Turkish tea out of her duffle bag. One thing she did not share with Bruce was the need for aural stimulation. After a period of being serenaded by sirens and shell blasts any moment of silence, no matter how brief, was always welcomed by her.

The water came to a boil and she dipped her bag of leaves into the pot. She was surprised but thankful that Bruce had accounted for any tea-drinkers that might visit his home, despite the likelihood that visitors were few and far between. She tried not to think too much of that as she pulled an extra-large Gotham University mug from the cabinet.

As she waited for the tea to cool she walked back toward the living room area and peered out onto the misty surface of the lake. Alfred had been kind enough to loan her an old shirt to sleep in: soft and worn from time and too many machine washes, a faded Oxford insignia on the front. With all that she had seen over her many lifetimes, things like boundaries became difficult to pick up on. Even now, she found herself so casually exploring her current setting that she very nearly forgot that she wasn’t in her own house.

That was until she saw him.

Walking toward the glass door she saw Bruce Wayne, barefoot and staring out onto his lake with something she presumed to be stronger than tea in his hand. He had a far-off expression on his face, not unlike the night she had first seen him.
She made to open the door but stopped herself when she realized that he hadn’t seen her. She knew because of the look on his face. It wasn’t just far-off, but incredibly sad. Sad and tired. She had seen the look only once before, in the museum in Gotham, and only because he thought no one was looking. A thought came to her.

Taking a drink of her tea, Diana made an effort of sliding the door open to announce her presence. As she expected, a wave of neutrality passed over his face; falling blank as his true mask was slipped back on. This mask didn’t belong to Batman. It belonged to Bruce Wayne: billionaire, philanthropist, party monster. She wondered vaguely how he had managed the act for so long.

“Morning, Princess,” he said tiredly as he sipped his coffee. She quirked an eyebrow at his greeting. Not even her sisters addressed her by her title. That should have made it an insult but, it did not feel that way. Still...

“How did you know it was me?”

He did something else she saw in the museum. It wasn’t a smile. Not really. Bruce didn’t smile unless it was for show. He took the very corner of his mouth and twitched it up the slightest bit, like he was a moment from actually laughing.

“Alfred isn’t as covert as he’d like to think he is.”

Diana drank from her own mug as she watched the sun rise. In her brief time in the area, this was the first day she had seen with no overcast in Gotham. Bruce had lived there his whole life. Perhaps it was the sun that made him sad that morning? It was hard to tell with him, so she let a comfortable silence settle between them until Bruce, of all people, broke it.

“I sincerely hope I didn’t keep you from something important last night. Alfred could’ve seen you back to the city.”

Diana held her mug close and reached out to gauge Bruce’s aura. He wasn’t lying. But it wasn’t even the third time he had said this to her.

“Only because I must remind you, I could have seen myself back to the city. It was my choice to stay. Still, I should thank you for having me. Your couch is lovely.”

“Ah, it’s alright. It’s just…there’s gotta be options for someone like you on a Friday night.”

“Nothing that can’t be rescheduled.”

“Like?”

Diana could sense a playfulness in his tone. She thought about holding her tongue. But she thought about having fun as well.

“A date.”

“Really?”

“Yes. A young professional named Sam.”

Bruce did well to feign his indifference. “Sam must be quite the mover to catch your eye.”

Diana smiled. “Yes, she is.”

This time Bruce failed to hide his indifference and became very interested in the Liverpool FC logo
on his mug. She turned to him.

“...You know what I like most about boys, Bruce?” A beat passes; he looks to her. “Their girlfriends.”

That actually got a chuckle out of him and something that sounded like, “Look at you,” muttered into his coffee. A few moments more and he said something else.

“Not lacking for confidence are ya?”

“The wisdom of the Gods guides me to this day. It is often difficult for mortals to grasp.”

“I’d like to try some day.”

*That* was a loaded statement. But Diana decided not to focus too much on the more suggestive implications. She already knew Bruce to be a student of history, and they weren’t exactly busy that morning. She took a whiff of her tea but did not drink.

“What would you like to know?”

Bruce paused mid-drink and shot her a questioning look. “Really?”

She answered wordlessly with a nod and he seemed to seriously consider it. What does a man ask someone who has seen so much of everything? He took a drink and turned fully to Diana, leaning back on the side railing. “The 300 Spartans: making their final stand against the Persian Army. They weren’t the only ones there that day, were they?”

Diana pursed her lips and shook her head, drinking her tea thoughtfully. “The Battle of Thermopylae is often misrepresented. Typical that the exploits of men become bigger and more fantastic as time wears on. There were 300 Spartans, yes, but there were also 700 Thespians and 400 Thebans. And a small horde of Amazons.”

“What happened?”

“I wasn’t there, but my mother recounted the story many times. King Leonidas had been betrayed and his army was being outflanked. They had held off the Persian Army for a full week but their task was to cover the Greek Army’s retreat. As the main battalions marched forward into the blocked path, a smaller group of Persians took a hidden path behind Greek lines – where the Amazons were waiting. It was, as you say, Fish in a Barrel.”

Diana didn’t miss the shudder that went down Bruce’s spine. No doubt he should have been thankful to be born in the age he was. He asked another question.

“Was it more about finding balance, or protecting the Empire?”

“Perhaps you can imagine, but Zeus preferred things to have a certain order.”

“So, if Brutus hadn’t caught up to Caesar in that hallway?”

“Most likely.”

“And if all of Sparta hadn’t gone looking for Helen of Troy?”

“Mm.” Diana returned to her drink, hoping her response would be enough to relay her feelings.

“Right. Don’t care much for dictators anyway.”
She eyed him suspiciously from over the edge of her borrowed mug. “You seem…rather accepting of this knowledge, Mr. Wayne. Do you truly take me for my word?”

Bruce lowered his coffee and looked out towards the rapidly bluing sky. It was a thoughtful, brooding look and she realized (purely objectively) that even when he was sad, Bruce still managed to be an attractive human. “Diana, I once nearly got my back broken by a 500-pound luchador and I’m currently chasing down a clown that robs banks. I don’t know if I believe in magic or underwater cities, but I know what I saw in that photo. For my life, Gods and Titans seems like the typical next step.”

*What a life it’s been*, she thought. There was a long silence before he spoke again.

“You never told me why, you know?”

Diana had been lost in her thoughts, but not so lost that she couldn’t scoff at his query. “Context would be helpful. I am not a mind-reader.”

“Hmm,” he said as he gulped his drink, “I have my doubts about that.”

Truthfully, Diana *was* a mind-reader, to an extent, but only with her golden lasso aiding her as a medium. Without it, her only method was by way of physical contact. She had held Bruce’s hand for almost a full minute and had gleaned some insight, but his mind wasn’t fully open that night. Still hiding behind the mask, was he.

“What is it you are curious of?”

“You told me why you left home, and it’s clear why you stopped fighting, but you never did tell me why you came back.”

“Came back?”

“Yeah. You were living in Paris before Lex came knockin’. Doesn’t seem very proper for an Amazonian Princess.” He sipped slowly from his cup and fixed Diana with a look that could have passed for casual were it not for the intensity in his eyes. She took a drink of tea to form the answer in her head.

“As you have no doubt worked out for yourself, I have walked this Earth for some time. Life on Themyscira is wonderful, in its own way. But your World has always fascinated me in ways it has not for my brethren. It is always changing and, before the beginning of this Third Industrial Revolution, I found a niche for myself that I could carve out and live without pretense.”

Bruce listened quietly and intently, only speaking when Diana came to a pause in her story. “But?”

She sighs and sips her tea. “But – this World can always be counted on to complicate things. I have not armed myself for some time, so I imagined I could assume my new identity without being compromised.”

“Must be difficult.”

“Well, given my experience, I am not normally the one that is pursued,” Diana paused for effect, “as you can attest.”

Bruce shook his head as he finished his drink. “Not that. I mean living such a long life. Watching your associates come and go. I imagine it was the same for Steve. Probably be the same for me and Alfred if you weren’t heading back.”
Ah, yes. For all their similarities, this is what Bruce had that Steven did not. Ever the observant one, his outlook was cold and clinical whereas Steven’s had been audacious and hopeful. It made sense that Bruce would have peeked ahead to foresee how this (what was this, exactly?) thing between them would end.

“A bit of an oversight by the Old Man, huh?”

Diana bristled unconsciously at that. “No! Zeus overlooked nothing! All Amazons were given the gift of agelessness.”

“That why you’re going back?”

She looked down into her half-full cup and shrugged, “One reason.”

“Hmm.” He didn’t seem convinced, but he let that subject drop and turned back to the lake, which was now almost totally awash in light. Diana grimaced into her cup and turned toward her host.

“Your turn to share.”

“You know, in that outfit, I could almost mistake you for a mortal woman.”

“Would you like me to demonstrate why that is false?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Then no changing the subject! I want to know why.”

“Lucky for you, then, I am a mind-reader.”

She ignored that as a poor deflection. His defense mechanisms were going up, but not before she asked her question. “Why have you not put down your cowl? Why do you fight?”

He got the look again: tired and hopeless and sad. She would have felt bad if he hadn’t just spent the previous minutes mining her of personal information. She wouldn’t budge now and he knew it. He set his mug down and leaned fully on the railing of the balcony. He made a gesture towards his chest and began speaking.

“Superman likes to say that the curlicue on his chest means ‘Hope’ where he’s from. Where I’m from, ‘Hope’ is not very plentiful. The People of Gotham lived in fear of the creatures lurking in the dark until those creatures ran into something darker than they were.”

“You rule through fear.”

It was Bruce’s turn to bristle at her accusation. “I’m not trying to rule anything. Half of the city doesn’t even know the Bat exists. Some people even think he’s a plague sent from God. The only people who know he’s a man in an armored suit haven’t stayed free long enough to tell the tale.”

“Or alive, yes?”

Bruce began to rub the bridge of his nose as he said, “Alfred told you everything, didn’t he?”

“I have observed your campaign for longer than you know; but from what Alfred tells me, you were not always this aggressive.”

Bruce turned to face her with an added edge to his voice. “Tell me this, then. 350 million people in this beautiful, fucked up country I live in - why come looking after me?”
Diana brought her cup to her chest defensively and said, “Is it so hard to imagine?”

Bruce put on a smirk; this one painfully affected. “It was the Lambo, wasn’t it? Chicks dig the Lambo.”

It took a great amount of effort for her not to stamp her feet down. It was maddening, dealing with this man. She had revealed to him her most-guarded secret and he still would not show his true self to her. Quite the opposite, in fact, as he was receding further into his carefully-constructed civilian identity the longer this conversation went on.

“Do not flatter yourself, Bruce Wayne! As foolish as this persona of yours is, you are still a forensic genius. One whose reputation precedes him.”

His face fell the slightest bit at her scolding but his curt response did not waver. “That doesn’t really answer my question, Diana Prince. I’m not the only detective in Gotham.”

Diana drank more tea and made a point to avoid eye contact. “Yet you are the only detective with a Cave and supercomputer.”

“So, you like fancy toys? I have a satellite, too.” Diana rolled her eyes with a huff and Bruce took the slightest of steps toward her. “C’mon, Princess, humor me. I would’ve never investigated Lex if he wasn’t connected to the crime families of Gotham. How did you know I’d help you?”

Diana, mimicking his own words said, “There was no one else who could help me. Not even the Gods fight necessity.”

Bruce cocked his head thoughtfully and considered this. “My guess is…” he drawled, looking right through her, “you’re not talking to me right now, but someone from a long time ago.”

She huffed at his audacity in her native Greek tongue. “[You foolish, arrogant man!] You remind me of Steven, yes, but not in the ways that matter!” Diana, in her anger, had not considered the implication of those words, but it hit Bruce immediately. His face fell into a deep frown as he turned away from her and looked down over the railing. Diana’s mind flashed briefly back to his panic attack at the office and she cursed inwardly. “Bruce, I didn’t-”

“What was he like?” he asked, his voice barely above indoor volume. “Capt. Trevor. He must’ve been a great person. For you to be so taken by him.”

“I…He-” Diana cut herself off with the brim of her mug, not trusting herself to speak. She wasn’t positive she wanted to divulge such information regardless; instead she let those long-passed memories wash over her. Fighting with Steven on the battlefield, their forays into espionage, the days she spent with him – for Hera’s Sake, the nights she spent with him. The very thought made her feel like she was there again.

Until she felt two rough, calloused fingers in the crook of her elbow. They belonged, not to Steven Trevor, but to Bruce Wayne who was looking at her with a softened expression that she didn’t recognize on him. She realized then that she had been floating – caught up in the memories of a past life – and that Bruce had kept her from drifting off his deck. He gently pushed her back down until her own bare feet padded onto the cool, metal surface. He kept looking at her in that new way and Diana felt a fuzziness in her gut that she convinced herself was the tea.

“Shit. That good, huh?”

She turned away and was thankful to herself for keeping her hair down as she felt her cheeks burning hot in the crisp Gotham morning. If Bruce noticed, he didn’t say.
“You’re right. I can’t compete with that.”

So much that could be said to that and the somber, pensive way he said it didn’t help. None of those words came out, though.

“Bruce…”

“Nevermind it. There’s something else we need to talk about.” He reached back toward the sole chair and produced a single manila folder that she had neglected to see the entire time. “Your search of America’s favorite quick stops got narrowed to a group of stores in Northern Arizona. I did my own search of reported sightings of power surges, streaks of lightning and other such anomalies and narrowed that to Central City. One meeting later and I have a positive ID. Bartolo Henry Allen: 23, consultant to the CCPD, known as ‘Barry’ to his friends.”

Bruce handed her the file and she studied it carefully. As he said, Barry was merely a boy. She could not imagine he could grasp the gravity of his abilities. That wasn’t what was troubling her, though.

“How did you get this?”

He shrugged against the balcony and answered, “I called in a favor from a friend of mine.”

He had put air quotes around the word friend and it made Diana upset. How many actual friends did Bruce Wayne have?

“This friend of yours; they owed you one, yes?”

“Pssh. They owe me _five_, but this is a start.”

She set her mouth in a line and finished off her mug of tea. “You were up all night.”

He quirked the corner of his mouth again. She relaxed a bit, if only because she knew this expression was true.

“I was only up half the night, thank you.” He paused as a look of worry flashed across his features. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No. But you are wearing a different shirt than the one you retired in. Also, I found your tie hanging off my couch this morning.”

He looked ready to dispute that claim, but quickly drew back and softened into _that_ look again. He crossed his arms as he addressed her. “Who’s the detective here, again?”

“Thank you for fixing my blanket. I’m afraid I am a terribly active sleeper.”

Bruce sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah. I can relate.” Another silence, this one awkward and protracted. Diana was the one to break it this time.

“What will you do about Barry Allen?”

He took the file from her and bent down to pick up his mug before he said, “First, I’m going to take a nap. Then, I’m taking a trip to Central City to pay our young friend Mr. Allen a visit and inform him of our mutual acquaintance. Shouldn’t be hard to find him. Catching up might be tricky. What about you?”

“Like you, I have other affairs I must tend to. So I will be returning to my room in Metropolis.”
“Well, you have my number. And I’ll give you a copy of the data I obtained. Let me know if you find anything useful.”

He made to go inside at that, but Diana wasn’t quite finished with the conversation. She hadn’t figured out what he was hiding; what she had figured out was what buttons to press.

“You know, you actually do have a nice smile.” Bruce stopped halfway in the open door at hearing this. She leaned back and continued, “If it is not an inconvenience to you, I would not mind seeing it more often.”

She chuckled inwardly at how his shoulders tensed. Her tone had dripped with sarcasm, but not enough to make her statement seem like a simple ridicule. Lie with the truth, he had texted her once. Bruce turned and leaned back against the frame of the door and ran a hand through his grey-flecked hair. He looked at her and didn’t smile, didn’t do the thing with the corner of his mouth but fixed her with a look she couldn’t mistake for anything but a challenge. When he next spoke, it was in a low, rumbly voice that did not belong to Bruce Wayne.

“I’ll see what I can do, Princess.”

Bruce Wayne was a mess.

Even he could admit to that much before he met Diana Prince. Now, as he – a man who dressed as a Bat – initiated a working partnership with a woman (no, more than that, a soldier) who had countless ages of wisdom in subject matter he couldn’t begin to absorb even if he lived to be 200 (a possibility) he couldn’t imagine feeling more inadequate.

Maybe that’s what hit him so hard when he saw her that morning. She really did look mortal in her sweatpants and too-large shirt. Conversing with her had been far too easy and it felt very domestic; familiar in a way that scared him greatly. Bruce realized sometime after she left his house that under different circumstances, in a different life, he would have melted into her. Let her consume him, right there on the patio.

What had stopped him cold was the sight of her floating in the air. It was the first concrete evidence of her abilities he’d seen and proof of the ancient power hidden within her. It made Bruce feel small and breakable and when he looked into her eyes he recognized them as the eyes from a hundred years ago, and saw that the fire still burned behind them. Changing the subject to Barry Allen had been a necessity. He had been mostly joking when he suggested the previous night that she could see herself back to the city. With confirmation that she could have, it gave him a feeling he couldn’t quite place that, realistically, was something like “shitty.”

It made him feel shitty because she could have left but she didn’t. She had stayed despite the fact he was unconsciously spurring her towards the door that whole night and then the next morning with petty accusations. It was his natural reaction when someone was so close to figuring him out.

Not the Batman. She already knew about that. Diana was on the verge of figuring out what made Bruce Wayne go and the last time someone managed that, it had ended in chaos for Bruce and his city.

Feeling more tired than he should have considering the light work he did the night before, he went to
his room and made the mistake of slowly drifting into the beginnings of R.E.M. sleep. He felt his eyes dart upward to see Diana, positively glowing, which didn’t surprise him much. What was surprising was the sight of her taking off into the air – not unlike him – and flying away, across the bay towards Metropolis. Her form grew smaller as she flew but not because of her own distance; he could feel the world around him receding from her, shrinking smaller until it fell into oblivion.

Bruce opened his eyes with a start but didn’t move right away as his motor functions caught up with his consciousness. It was a weird dream and served as a reminder why he often didn’t sleep until his body forced the need upon him. Then, a blinking light in his peripheral caught his attention. It was a message notification, so he forced his arm to reach out towards the night stand and take hold of the device. The message was from Diana, sent 3 hours prior.

**Whenever you are ready.**

Bruce let out a snarl and fell out of bed, his mind still in a sleepy haze. He stumbled into the kitchen and found the Liverpool mug he had used that morning on the drying rack. He palmed it in one hand and threw open the sliding door to the patio where he tossed the mug out onto the lake with a yell. The splash that came soon after went off like a blast in his ears and it caused him to shout further and indent his fist into the railing.

As his panting subsided he became aware of a presence behind him. He turned to see Alfred, an unreadable expression on his face, drying off a fork with the cloth in his hand. He was doing the dishes and Bruce hadn’t even noticed.

Alfred gave a one-shouldered shrug, his go-to show of exasperation and said, “That was my best mug, sir.”

Bruce didn’t hide the displeasure on his face, truly upset that he had implicated Alfred in his undue show of emotion. A former teacher had told him – after two too many fights in the mess hall – that if he must continue acting out, he should do so on his own time, where no one else could be hurt. He felt he had managed that mostly, but old habits never really died, despite the old saying.

Bruce pushed past Alfred back towards his bedroom. He returned with a crisp twenty-dollar bill and put it into Alfred’s front pocket. He put a hand on the older man’s shoulder and met his stare with a conflicted expression. Bruce stalked off then to prepare for that night’s mission leaving Alfred to look after him with light bemusement.

“You know, sir, Christmas is but a month away.”

“Is she there now?”

“She arrived shortly after you left, Master Wayne, and for reasons I can’t grasp asked after you.”

“Tell her I’m busy.”

“Busy catching air above the Oklahoma Panhandle?”

He glanced at the radar and answered, “The Navajo Reservation, actually.”
“Ah. You’ve made good time, then. But I suppose blatant disregard of FAA regulation helps with that some.”

“Only a little. Will you both be studying the evidence Lois Lane recovered?”

“Miss Diana will. I will be providing refreshments.”

“Lane said something else. Knyazev was in the desert that day. Said he was leading the local insurgents.”

“What do you think it means?”

“No clue. But he’s still out there. You should help Diana find more intel. Recent sightings, open contracts.”

“You seem quite casual about letting this woman you met on Hallow’s Eve have access to your vast network of intelligence.”

There was a coy suggestiveness to Alfred’s tone and Bruce didn’t like it. “She only has access to what I’ve allowed.”

“That isn’t what I meant, sir.”

“I know.”

“Then why have her over?”

“We all have secrets, Alfred.”

“Some more subtle than others.”

Bruce made a noise in annoyance. “Help yourselves to whatever, but make sure there’s some Dorayaki left when I get back, please.”

“You have my word, Master Wayne.”

The call was disconnected and he threw his head back on the seat cushion behind him, knowing that his butler would all too happily help their guest polish off the heap of Japanese pastries Bruce had made earlier that week.

He had taken the Batwing for this mission. Chartering a private flight to Central City would have been easy enough. And while Bruce Wayne flying to Northern Arizona only to catch the redeye back to Gotham wouldn’t have been impossible to explain away, it was too much of a headache to consider. So he didn’t; he put on his suit and flew Lucius’ prototype as fast as it would go across Middle America, where anyone who managed to sight his aircraft would likely report it as a U.F.O. Maybe the one thing he could thank Superman for.

It was part of why he had waited until the evening to leave Gotham. He would be making up time as he crossed time zones and the oncoming of dusk on the West Coast aided with concealing his stealth craft from prying eyes below.

Bruce reached into the back seat to retrieve his mask and was about to put it on when he noticed something else. A small handkerchief concealing something. He unwrapped the cloth to reveal a Dorayaki, which he only considered for two seconds before it was plopped into his mouth. As he chewed, he thought tersely of an old British man back in Gotham and his new co-conspirator
As the lights of Central City’s urban sprawl came into view it was easier to find the kid than he thought it’d be. A streak of red was proceeding rapidly from the Southeast section of the city hopping from rooftop to rooftop in bright arcs of light. The Batwing descended lower, no longer in Stealth Mode as it would take a large amount of power to keep up with the speedster.

Barry must have noticed his new running mate and made a quick cut to his right. Instead of running to the streets below, however, he simply made another leap to the adjacent building. Batman took note of this. Barry Allen was having fun being chased down by this strange machine. It was a tactical miscue, but this was a young metahuman he was dealing with, and that youthful exuberance would only aid him in being caught.

Batman locked onto Barry’s rapidly moving form and pushed a button, opening the cockpit before he was ejected into the warm night air where he unfurled his cape to glide above the city lights. Of all the tweaks and improvements Lucius had made to his gear, he found this the most satisfying. It gave him full view of his surroundings and the look on criminals’ faces when they saw that the Bat could fly very nearly made him smile. Nearly.

The Batwing’s auto-pilot was set to follow the man they called The Flash across the Central City skyline as Batman surveyed their path. The speedster made a loop around back towards his position and Batman went into a steep dive, hoping that the young man would maintain course. He did and Batman pulled up and opened his cape, landing solid on his feet just moments before Barry veered to his left to avoid him, crashing headlong into an empty pigeon coop. Batman plucked a feather off his cape as the younger man worked to wipe his bright red armor clean.

Batman put up his hands to show he was unarmed. “Barry Allen. I don’t want trouble. I just want to talk.”

The statement was regarded with a confused look that quickly turned to shock as the Batwing appeared.

“Mierda santa!”

It wasn’t quite the reaction he was expecting but, as he vaguely remembered the age of the metahuman in front of him he wasn’t sure why expected any reverence at all.

He answers him in Spanish: “Barry. Estoy aquí porque creo que puedes ayudarme con algo.”

The young man’s expression quickly fell from shock back to confusion. “Uhhh… Cool?”

“You don’t know what I said.” A statement, rather than a question.

“No, man, I really don’t.” Before Batman could translate he continued, “It’s my name, right? Just because my mom named me ‘Bartolo’ people think I can speak the language.”
“You live in the American Southwest, in a city that is primarily occupied by Native Speakers. It would be expected and suggested that you would be able to speak the language as well.”

Barry opened his mouth at that, then closed it. Opened it again and scratched his head. “Huh. Makes sense, I guess.”

“We should go, then.”

“Wait, wait, wait… Go where, exactly? And where did you learn Spanish?”

“Why did you greet me in Spanish?”

“My, uh… my friend in Texas is a ‘Native Speaker,’ and he taught me some basic phrases.”

“All the curse words?”

“All the essentials,” he winked and pointed his finger in a mock salute but withdrew once he saw that Batman didn’t flinch. He then became wary of the reminded presence of the Batwing overhead until its owner threw up his gloved hand, causing the large ship to whip around to hover behind him.

Barry gaped at this. “That thing listens to you?”

Batman glanced over his shoulder at the prototype and made a mental note to talk to Lucius later. “Not exactly.”

Barry shrugged and said, “Still pretty cool. I mean, you’re The Batman!”

“Come on. We have work to do.”

“Funny you mention ‘work,’ ‘cause I was on my way to do some before you – somehow – caught up with me.”

“Can it wait?”

A scoff. “C’mon, you’ve been at this longer than I’ve been walking. You know it can’t wait.”

“Hm. What is it?”

Barry perks up at that. As if the very suggestion of working with Batman to foil a crime in progress is the highlight of his month. “Bank robbery. First National downtown. Been listening to the scanner; cops have got the whole block roped off while they negotiate.”

“Hostages.”

He nods, grimly. “Yeah, man. I know the guy behind this. He’s not interested in taking prisoners. Just money. I could use your help. I’m not as experienced with hostage situations.”

“You aren’t experienced, period, but we’ll change that tonight.”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about, baby! What’s the plan?”

Batman forced down his smirk at Barry’s eagerness and answered, “The plan is to bait and switch. You’ll join the authorities out front and aide the negotiations. Only we won’t be negotiating. Your job is to stall and distract them while I clear the hostages from danger. Once I do that, you can get to your man inside.”
“Righteous! I’ll head there now and join the cops. They’ll make way for me. You, uh, you should probably find another way in.”

“I will.”

The Bat did find another way in. Descending from the Batwing he had to take out two armed guards patrolling the rooftop. The fact that the roof was even guarded at all meant that this group was all business. He would have to work quickly. He hoped that The Flash lobbing puns on the megaphone down below would buy him enough time.

The plan had been simple enough, for Barry’s sake, but with some good timing, The Flash would look like a hero and Batman would slip into the night.

Only thing was…

It was more difficult than he thought it might be to get an angle on the situation. The building design in this city was more modern – less gothic – than that of Gotham City. There weren’t any high-hanging adornments for him to scan the area. With no high ground, he stayed in the ventilation shaft and used his Tech Cowl to find the heat signatures of everyone on the ground floor. The Heads-Up Display behind his mask gave him a summary of the area below:

9 Hostiles
7 Armed
12 Civilians
2 Law Enforcement
3 Exits

He turned the HUD off and set his mouth in a firm line. His options were limited and, for a moment, he was at a loss as to how to diffuse the situation. A well-placed smoke bomb would give him more than enough time to disarm and defeat all of the bogeys – 38 seconds if he timed it right – but such a distraction would alert the criminals and spook the authorities outside. A shoot-out was not what he wanted if the goal was keeping innocents safe.

He began to move on and look for a way into the open vault, only to stop and recall words of wisdom from a man he hadn’t seen in almost two decades.

“Again, Bruce!”

When he finished university, young heir Bruce Wayne hadn’t imagined this is where he would be. High in the Himalayas, completely cut off from society, trying to catch fish in an ice-cold river with his bare hands. He decided then, after 30 minutes of this, that he might just let his teacher know that.

“Master,” he said, short of breath, “with all due respect I’m not sure what catching fish has to do
“with Ninjutsu. Shouldn’t we be training kata?”

Ra’s al Ghul allowed himself less than half a smile. He had heard this all before. Hearing it from his best student had been a surprise.

“For one,” he started, pacing on the riverbank, “you are catching your dinner. Practically, you are training your reflexes and anticipation. But if you are looking for the – how would you say – ‘Ancient Kung-Fu Wisdom’ in this exercise I’m afraid you’ll have to ascertain that for yourself.”

“Yes, Master,” he sighed as he cast his head downward.

“People will lie and technology will malfunction. The only sure thing is your senses. You have a brilliant mind, Bruce. Use it! Solve nature’s puzzle!”

Bruce had seen this puzzle before. Dozens of times, in fact, in boarding school and university. The old stock footage of the American Grizzly in the mountainous expanse of the Great Plains; watching, enraptured as fish after fish migrated upstream in an endless flow. The animal would sit and watch – seemingly wasting opportunity – until he would preemptively swat a single fish onto shore, repeating the process until his hunger would be sated.

Picturing that in his Mind’s Eye he looked back down at the river he was standing in. There would be no jumping for these fish, which made his task that much harder, but the water ran clear; so clear that he could make out each individual scale on the fish passing harmlessly by his bare feet.

Maybe it’s not where the fish are, but where they will be?

Bruce let two more fish pass by, mentally calculating the rate in which they traveled. He waited until he saw the whiskers of the third fish and shot his hand out a foot in front of him. It was all he could do to not drop his meal back into the current – so utterly surprised by finding his hand full of fish.

“It worked,” he said dumbly.

His master was smiling again, broad and wide. “Very good, Bruce. A few more like that one and you may survive the night.”

He remembered the lesson well. All the while he had also been watching the armed thugs below: calculating their movements and memorizing their sweep of the lobby floor. He saw that he could safely drop down from where he was and hug the wall without drawing any undue attention. Most of the lights were off and they weren’t exactly looking in his direction. He stopped himself when he noticed the teller windows on the far left-side wall: two muzzles peeking out from the slots near the bottom. He could make out the outline of the woman they kept watch over.

Making up his mind, he used his grapple to traverse, silently, to the top of the tellers’ box and descend. He landed hard on top of the nearest assailant; quickly grabbing a nearby paperweight and tossing it into the jugular of the second gunman, keeping him from crying out in shock. He bounded to the other side of the box where the gunman was still reeling and, in one motion, flipped the rifle’s safety on and ripped the gun from his hands – ramming it hard butt first into the mask he wore. It wasn’t a moment after hearing the groan from behind that Batman leaped over the terrified woman and came down with an overhead fist. If the man wasn’t unconscious before, he would be for some time now.

7 Hostiles Remaining
He peeked above the counter to make sure no one had been alerted. All he saw were the backs of the two lieutenants making demands to the authorities (and Barry) outside. All according to plan so far. He couldn’t worry about them yet. There was still the matter of the hostages. One of which he was untying in the tellers’ box.

_No sound_, he mouthed to her before removing the tape from her mouth. He then began freeing her legs and asked, audibly this time where the other hostages were.

“Down the hall and to the left. The vault is on the other side.”

He nodded. Keep the hostages out of view. Get the police nervous. Sure, it was risky for the two upfront, but there was no way to know if the people were safe or not.

He reached into his utility belt and gave the woman a yet-to-be-opened can of bear spray. “Make sure whoever comes near you has a really bad day.” He looks down to the disabled gun at their feet and removes the magazine from the rifle. A professional sneaker could never disregard any diversionary tactic.

With that he moved towards the door and waited: he remembered that there should be a bogey coming his way any second. He hears the footfalls moments later, going right to left as Batman edges the door open. He sees the man disappear into a door. Stalking down the hall he looked up to see the international symbol for the Men’s Restroom.

_Terrorists need piss breaks, too, huh?_ He grabbed hold of the handle and in one pull yanked it from the door, trapping the occupant.

Batman walked silently down the rest of the walkway; vaguely remembering his old sensei’s words about adapting to unfamiliar environments as he blended seamlessly with a dark, unlit corner. He waited: and then the directional mic in his cowl cracked to life…

“_Haven’t heard from Bob or Stacy up front._”

“That’s a good thing, asshole! It means nothing’s gone wrong!”

“Yeah. But what about The Streak? I can hear him out there.”

“Nah. As fast as he is, he couldn’t stop us from taking out the hostages first and he knows that. That’s why the boss has us posted up like we are. The good guys just don’t like getting their hands dirty.”

Batman grinned at that.

“_Hey! Come in! Does anyone read?_”

“Yeah, Tuck. Go ahead.”

“I’m uh…I’m stuck.”

“Wh- Stuck where? Where are you?”

“In the bathroom.”

“Ugh! What are you even doing in the bathroom? You’re supposed to be making rounds of the lobby!”

“Hey, I had to go, alright? Just help me get out of here!”
“You’re an idiot! Over. Alright, you’d better go get him.”

“Why me?”

“Because I said so, goddammit, now go get him!”

The second thug sighed in defeat and sulked towards the bathroom to free his comrade. He turned the corner and couldn’t have been more than 3 feet away from Batman as he crossed the threshold – none the wiser.

He reached the door (sans handle) and began to barge up against it. His plan had been set into motion but the timing would need to be precise. He saw the door open and felt his muscles uncoil like a spring. In two steps, he was perpendicular to the doorway and could see the whites of Tuck’s surprised eyes as he drove his forearm into his friend’s kidneys. You could choke a man unconscious in 5 seconds if you had the proper leverage. With all the air forced out of their lungs it takes about two which Batman counts out as he moves to hurl the full-grown man over his shoulder.

“What the fu-”

That’s all he gets out as they both go crashing, almost comically, into the waste bin behind them.

5 Hostiles Remaining

He wastes little time getting back down the hallway. There’s only one bogey left on this side of the building and he will have noticed the absence of his partners. He glances at the doorway leading to the vault room and turns his attention back towards the room filled with the hostages and the man who was now screaming into his radio for a response that wouldn’t come.

“Shit! Hey! Whoever’s out there, do not mess with me! I will kill these people!”

Taking out hostages without direct orders was unlikely to happen, but Batman decided not to test the man’s patience. He pulled out the magazine he stole from earlier and considered it carefully. Not where he is, but where he will be.

The magazine was tossed into the air – a high enough arc that it would seem as if it had been dropped from the ceiling – nearly landing directly on the gunman’s head. He was looking up in a sort of dumb awe, so by the time he realized his gun had been grappled away from him, he had already been swept off his feet. Landing hard on his backside, his vision wasn’t clear enough at first to make out the silhouette lording above him. When it was, Batman made a show of holding the 5.56 semi-automatic in a menacing way. The vigilante relished in the criminal’s terror before he used his face as a doormat.

4 Hostiles Remaining

Batman dismantled the gun and looked around to the hostages. None of them were gagged so he inquired their status.

“Is anyone injured?”

Various shakes of the head followed. Terrified: yes, but not hurt. A man spoke up, “None of us are hurt but one of the officers is.”

He looked to the other side of the room and saw the man was right. Two officers, a man and woman, had been obscured by an ATM. He made his way over and freed the woman, who appeared to be unhurt.
“Are you OK?”

“Sí. A little bruised up, but…my partner…”

Batman was already looking him over: no broken bones, no bleeding, his standard issue vest would have protected his ribs, conscious but unresponsive. He took a flashlight and waved it in front of the man’s pupil. No movement, which pointed to a concussion. He would still need medical attention, but a trip to the hospital was better than the morgue.

“He’ll need some help once he gets out of here, but he’ll live.” Upon seeing the woman’s shoulder’s visibly release their tension, he addressed her further. “Officer, the night isn’t won yet. There are two more hostiles in the main lobby and my guess is there’s more in the vault.”

She nodded attentively. “Of course. What should I do?”

“I’m not here to give you orders, Officer. Do your job. These people are scared and need your support. This smoke screen will provide you with cover if anyone gets too close. Remember your training.”

“Yes, thank you. Oh, Batman, wait!” He turned back from the door. “The Red Streak. Is he out there?”

“He is. He should be coming in shortly.”

“I never thought I’d see you in real life, but I thank you for your help.”

“Thank me later, when this nightmare is over.”

Back at the front, The Dark Knight could hear The Red Streak, as flippant and cocky as ever. The kid could talk and he was thankful as it had given him more than enough time to clear the area. Whatever was going on in that vault was beyond him but it didn’t matter. It was time to wrap this up.

“Barry,” he whispered into his com, “the hostages are safe. When you have a chance run into the lobby and take these two out. And tell the officers outside to stand down! You’re the hero, here.”

“You got it, big guy!”

The two thugs ahead of him seemed at the end of their already short ropes. The ultimatums came next: “Okay! Enough bullshit! We’ve already given our demands. I don’t know what pansy shoplifters you’ve dealt with before, but we are non-negotiable! If you don’t give us all the money you have with you right now and let us walk with the money we’re taking back there, we’ll start capping hostages. One at a time!”

He could see Barry’s smile from around the corner. “That sounds like my cue!”

No more than two seconds later the room was alight with his signature red flash. Once dim and dark, it was as if every light had been flipped on and multiplied. Batman’s excellent vision was just barely enough to make out the shape of a human whirling around the room’s center. The two men began to lift off the ground, slowly, as The Flash pushed all the air toward the ceiling. Suddenly, he stopped and made two passes through the lobby: one to knock their guns into the air, another to knock them to the ground.

He ran back to the center of the room where the two men lay, standing over them as he caught the guns and posed to the crowd outside – looking every bit like an old Stallone movie poster. He could hear the applause, and Batman snorted as he realized Barry probably had no idea who Stallone even
was.

Kids.

2 Hostiles Remaining

He threw the guns down and ran to where Batman was, out of sight of the mob that had gathered outside. “How’d I do, Boss?”

“Not bad, Rambo.”

“Who?”

“Nevermind. You did fine. But we’re not done yet. I think your man is in the vault.”

“What, still?”

“Yeah, still, which means he’s looking for more than money.”

Barry, always a showman, extended his arms toward the empty hallway leading to the vault. “You know best. Lead the way, Bats!”

Batman smirked at this. “You learn fast.”

“Fast is what I do.”

Digger Harkness was about to become a rich man – a richer man. On top of the money he was stealing from this bank there was also the money he would get from his mysterious new customer for completing this supremely odd contract. He never asked what they wanted with a funky, green rock because food wasn’t cheap and seven figures never lied.

“We’re gonna be rich!”

Harkness looked over at his accomplice with a wry smile. “Yeah, mate. You and me. Go and get the others ready. We got more than enough.”

“Right.”

The man nearly got to the entrance of the vault before he was cut down by a well-placed boomerang to the base of his skull. Harkness made to collect the man’s share of the earnings and make his leave but he stopped short as he saw The Bat of Gotham step toward the body, pick up and inspect his weapon of choice. Even from the other side of the room, he could see Batman’s eyes narrow in incredulity. He would have been insulted if he wasn’t so shocked. And then he showed up.

“Captain Boomerang!”

“Ah, bloody hell…”

The Flash took a step forward and narrowly avoided tripping on the man unfortunate enough to be Digger’s partner.
He made a show of clicking his tongue with mock disapproval. “No honor among thieves, huh?”

“Tell me, boy, do you ever shut up?”

“No. He doesn’t. It’s his best asset.”

“Yeah! What he said!”

“Flash, I have a few questions for your friend. Take him and meet me on the roof.”

“Say no more!”

“Oy! I’m not going anywhere with you! Put me down!” Flash had a little too much fun at his expense; streaking up the stairs to the service entrance, leaving Batman to follow behind.

All Hostiles Eliminated

---------------------------------------------------------------------

Batman had snuck into the alley and grappled up to the roof of the bank. Captain Boomerang was flailing on his stomach like a toddler learning to crawl. He was trying, and failing, to locate The Flash who was keeping him company until the interview could begin.

“Okay, Harkness, my time is short and my patience is shorter. Tell me what you were looking for in that vault.”

“How about spillin’ on why The Batman is in goddamn Central City?”

“This isn’t a two-way conversation. The only time you talk is to give me information.”

“Hey, dude,” Barry piped up, “I’ve only met this guy tonight, and even I know you shouldn’t test him.”

“Ah. The ol’ Good Cop, Bad Cop one-two, eh? Ha! Ya think that’ll get me yappin’?”

“I,” Batman growled as he picked up Harkness by his shirt, “am not a cop.” Where there was once solid ground beneath, the Aussie found only air as Batman dangled him precariously above the edge of the roof.

“Wh-what? Ya gonna off me? Just like that?!”

Batman peered down and considered his words. “About three stories up. You’d probably survive the fall. Walking might tough for a while, though.”

Digger stared pleadingly at the young hero near the center of the roof. “Ya gonna sit there an’ let him get away with this?”

Barry held up his hands defensively. “Not my jurisdiction, bro.”

“Hah! Okay! Fine, I’ll give ya what ya bloody want! Just put me down!”

Batman took no small pleasure in hurling the villain back onto the roof where he landed hard on his
back. He hadn’t taken two steps toward him before he was furiously digging into his pocket to produce what he felt might save him from whatever aggression was coming next. What he produced was a fist-sized rock – emerald green – glowing faintly as the moonlight reflected off it.

“Satisfied, then?”

“Yo… Bats, that’s Kryptonite!”

“Aye. Like manna from the heavens!”

“What could a stick-up artist like you possibly want with this?”

“Not me, Batboy! My employer.”

“Hey, cool! Dirty Aussies get employed, too!”

“Why don’t you sod off, ya runt!”

“Don’t mind him, Harkness. I need you to tell me who you’re working for.”

“Bah! Some bloke from your neck of the woods. Don’t know his name. Normally wouldn’t accept a job under these circumstances, but the wanker wired a six-figure advance. All legit. Untraceable. How could I say no?”

“Dude, how could you not? Isn’t it a bit fishy that some shadowy rich guy would go through all that trouble and all that cash just for one chunk of Kryptonite?”

“The kid’s right. Even a mutt like you wouldn’t take a job without details. This bank in this city on this night? Your contact must have known something.”

“Oy! You’re a smart boy, eh? Think about it. When’s the last time you saw a rock like this?”

“Black Zero…”

“Ding-ding, mate! Word is there’s deposits of Kryptonite all over the world, bein’ discovered all the time. Imagine whoever wanted this little guy had some pretty important reasons.”

“Important enough to tell us what it is?” Barry asked, hopeful and naïve.

“Important enough for you to toss me off, mate! Hahaha!”

Barry sputtered at this statement. “Man, you are such a sleaze!”

“But at least I’m not tryin’ to fool anyone.” He turns to Batman when he says this. “How many dogs have you put down, eh? Just this week? I’ve read about you. Anyone that gets marked by the Bat is a dead man walkin’. Put to death before they even ‘ave their day in court! Only difference between you and me is our bank accounts. I don’t know who you are, but there’s no way an accountant could afford to fuel up a fuckin’ jet plane!”

Batman leaned close to Harkness and scowled, trying to keep his temper in check. “If you know my methods, then you’ll know to choose your next words very carefully.” He leaned in too close, however, and stumbles back as the spit wad from Harkness landed true on his face.

There was a momentary beam of pride that didn’t take long to match Barry’s look of horror as he found himself staring into two black pools of rage. He scrambled backward toward the stairwell leading back into the building. Batman shortened his trip by grabbing him by the throat and tossing
him backwards, toppling the door.

The blow had Harkness seeing stars behind his eyelids until he felt the door being lifted and dragged out onto the roof. He opened his eyes and began to whimper as he saw a fist covered with a hot bat-shaped brand. Batman kept that hand suspended and ripped open Harkness’ shirt with the other.

“No…No, no! Ya can’t be serious, mate!” Batman lowered the iron to his exposed skin – hovering, to let him feel the heat radiate from it – to let him know just how serious he was. “Ah! Oh my God, please!”

“God can’t help you, Digger! Not now!”

“I was just kidding, I swear to God!”

“Swear to me! I’m right in front you!”

“I swear, I swear! I’ll go to jail, but I can’t go with that! They’ll kill me!”

“That’s the idea.” He brought down the iron hard, leaving an impression in the door inches away from the face of Digger Harkness, who had decided to relinquish his consciousness.

“He fainted? Dude…” As Batman began to enter coordinates into his wrist-mounted device – perhaps cooling off – Barry found it safe to approach him. “Hey, Bats, you’ve never actually used that thing right? You don’t, like, brand people or anything? Total scare tactic.”

Batman sighed tiredly and turned to him. “Barry. You are young so I can’t expect you to really know but, this is an incredibly dangerous job. It’s dangerous for metahumans like you, but even more so for someone like me. I have the scars to prove it. You survive long enough and you’ll be forced into some decisions you’d rather not make. I don’t like everything I’ve done, Barry, but I like being alive more.”

Barry nodded solemnly. “I get it, Boss.” For the first time that night, Batman believed him. He was a good kid and good for this city, but he wasn’t ready to see what Batman had seen. Still, he had upside and was an ally in a world that had increasingly few.

Batman walked back towards Digger’s prone form and picked up the chunk of Kryptonite, inspecting it carefully. Barry spoke up again.

“What do you think it’s for?”

“You know what it’s for.”

Barry shook his head; corrected him. “We know one thing it’s for. There’s still so much the science community has to discover. I meant: if it’s for what you think it’s for… Who wanted it?”

Batman frowned at this and pocketed the stone. “That, I don’t know. That’s why I need your help.”

An eager nod. “Just tell me how.”

“Here, take this.” He tossed the kid a small rectangular device. “It’s a two-way communicator that will put you in direct contact with me. During the day, only use the text feature. If you have any questions, call me. We’ll be in touch.”

They can both hear the Batwing approaching and Batman was walking to the back edge of the roof before Barry called after him. “Hey! You never told me where you learned Spanish!”
Batman looks back, one foot in the cockpit, and smirks. “Medellín, Colombia: 1992. I was on vacation.”

“Riiight…”

Batman climbed the rest of the way into the ship and watched as Barry waved after him with Captain Boomerang still motionless on the busted door.

Once the building is out of sight, he released a sigh and pulled off his mask. As he began to settle in for the long flight back he saw a message appear on the Batwing’s center console by way of his personal device back in Gotham. It was from Diana which caused him to open it just a bit too quickly. Bruce nearly laughed out loud when he saw what she sent.

It was a photo of her and Alfred, in the Cave, both with pastries hanging from their mouths. Diana, it seemed, was making the most of what time she had left in Man’s World. She wouldn’t be there much longer and Bruce knew Alfred would find a way to blame him somehow.

Chapter End Notes

The choice to make The Flash half-Latino was based on the 10 second security cam clip of Manbun!Barry in BvS. As it were, Ezra Miller just has a very unique face. But, we're gonna roll with it.

[Chapter revised on 10/16/17]
With the news of Zack Snyder stepping away from JL to tend to his family in the wake of his daughter's death, I'd like to preface this post by sending my condolences. My hope is that the family can find some closure in what is a tragic situation. Given the way the young lady left this world, I'd like to say this as well.

Depression is a big thematic element of this story. If you know someone who is depressed or think they may be, don't stop at telling them your door is open. Depression is a sickness that makes you feel like you're underwater. Go to them. Reach out. Be patient. They will need your help to get out of the deep end. Sometimes being a friend is enough. And sometimes not. You won't know until you try.

I hope you all enjoyed your long weekend. Here's some words.

Two decades as a non-meta crime fighter was not forgiving on the body. Some days were better than others and some days made it hard to blink. Granted, maybe it hadn't been wise 24 hours after his cross-country trip to go after The Riddler, but Nigma was dangerous, and worse, a pest. Having the man behind Arkham walls; it was a headache Bruce was glad to be rid of.

Yet, here he was. A toenail away from his fourth decade on Earth and Bruce could feel it as he inched his eyelids open. He knew it wasn’t, but it felt too early and he decided he wouldn’t be doing this waking up thing without help.

He reached behind his nightstand and grabbed a bottle of painkillers. It was one of several he had hidden throughout the house. Alfred had stopped filling out the prescription ages ago and once he remembered that Bruce could simply buy them whenever, he began to intercept and even steal them. Never missed a chance, Alfred, to scold Bruce on the dangers of abusing the drugs. The possibility of addiction.

It had taken all of Bruce’s training in the Art of Deception to even get one bottle past Alfred’s eye. Oddly enough, though, he found himself thinking about it less, recently. Even now, he was only taking one pill as opposed to two or three. Maybe the most curious part of it all was that the shift almost certainly coincided with Diana’s first visit.

He’d have to remember to make some charts later. Firstly, he waited as the drug eased into his bloodstream and then slowly lifted off his bed to limp into the kitchen area where Alfred was waiting with food.

“Good Morning, sir.”

“Hear from Diana today?”

“Always nice to speak to you, as well, Master Wayne.”

“Envy isn’t a good color on you, Alfred.”
“To say I’m envious one would have to assume I’m not already her favorite.”

“Her favorite chess dummy, maybe.”

“Still got a leg up on you, sir.”

Bruce took his plate from Alfred and began eating large mouthfuls as the other man sat down.

“To answer your question, however, I did speak with Miss Diana. She’s leaving town today.”

“Leaving?”

“Official business. She’ll be gone for a week.”

“Doing what?”

“Her job. You aren’t the only one with a cover to manage.”

“Guess not.”

Alfred cleared away his already empty plate as Bruce grabbed his laptop from the edge of the table.

“Will that be all for now, sir?”

“Yes.”

Alfred gave him space after that. He did a good job hiding it, but the butler knew him well enough. Bruce was aggravated at the news. Not that Diana had left, but that she had told Alfred of all people. It was childish, he knew, but feelings of any sort weren’t something he suffered lightly.

Bruce opened a browser and took in the local news. It was all typical Gotham fare up until it wasn’t. Bruce clicked on the video embedded above the article with the headline: Arrests Made in Connection to Illegal Shipment

“Last month the Port of Gotham was turned into a warzone by a group of vehicles involved in a smuggling operation. Now, as clean-up resumes and damages are assessed three arrests have been made in connection with the illegal import. Alberto and Mario of Falcone Family fame and Oswald Cobblepot were all taken in early this morning for questioning of their alleged role in that night’s events. GCPD Commissioner James Gordon tells gathered media members that the men will be held without bail.

“Rumors from that night seem to imply that The Bat was involved in a massive chase through the South Quarter and that Superman was also seen leaving the scene.”

“Who would you pick to win in a fight between The Bat and Superman?”

“Unless Superman can punch a ghost, I don’t like his chances.”

“Alfred, did you see- Jesus!”

He was surprised it hadn’t happened more often. He would get so focused on whatever had captured his attention, but seldom did he have to worry about someone sneaking up on him in his own house. And how many people had to worry about a Princess barging in? It was a unique problem to have.

“Καλημέρα!” No telling how long she had been there. Judging by the smile on her face it had been a disturbingly long time.
“Please, come in. Make yourself at home.”

She pondered that, and then said, “Very well.”

Diana kicked off her shoes and then gently pushed off the floor, floating towards the ceiling. She was inches from the top before she did a full turn, lightly brushing against it, and then just as slowly easing back down onto his couch.

Bruce looked back at Alfred who was conveniently turned the other way. As he wondered briefly when he had consented to being double-teamed in his own home, he picked up her shoes and made his way over. He hid his limp even though she wasn’t watching.

He let her flats drop haphazardly and she looked up at him, hands behind her head. She was in dark jeans and a pink sweatshirt and he honestly wouldn’t have guessed such a color was anywhere in her wardrobe.

They stayed like that for a moment before Bruce leaned forward and rested his arms on the back of the sectional.

“What am I gonna do with you?” A chuckle in his voice.

Diana hummed and stretched out her full length on the cushions. She opened her eyes and said, “You could let me take this back to Themyscira. My sister Artemis would adore it!”

“Tch, tch. Stealing my furniture now, Princess?”

She squinted her eyes at him and countered, “You are a billionaire, yes? Simply buy another.”

Bruce relented and would have let the talk end there, but was vaguely aware of Alfred’s presence as he rummaged around within earshot. Diana, who now had a pillow to her chest was looking toward the blank TV screen. Maybe thinking wasn’t the best course of action, for once.

“You think Artemis would like me?”

She seemed surprised by that, but did pause to think before she smirked up at him.

“I would have to warn her about the brooding. And I suppose she would need an intro course for The Bat but...” She did that thing with her eyebrows like Abbott gearing for the punchline. “...you aren’t bad as far as humans go.”

It was compliment, he realized. More than that, a flirtation. He knew there was no need for a person like Diana to play coy. But something she had said reminded him of why he couldn’t – wouldn’t – get too close to her.

He was a human. She was a goddess. In the literal sense! He could barely hope to match her in the suit. Without it, he wasn’t even in the same class. He already had one Big Blue Reminder of his shortcomings and limitations. To have another as pretty and kind and passionate as Diana was a worse fate than the solitude she had so swiftly interrupted.

Bruce was off the couch before he knew it and facing the bay windows.

“The Bat is a myth.” He looked at her peripherally and saw the beginnings of a frown; one to match his own. “It only exists when I need it to.”

She sat up fully and tucked her legs underneath her. She got a sad look that made him turn away
fully.

“What do you need it for, Bruce?”

There was the Billion Dollar Question. The one that had consumed his entire adult life. He could feel her eyes on him and he could feel Alfred staring but none of that mattered because he had to get out-

“Ah! Dammit!”

Bruce pounded at his left knee, furious at his body for betraying him at such a poor moment. Diana was over the top of the couch in an instant, kneeling beside him.

“You are hurt.”

“It’s nothing,” he answered through grit teeth. In truth, it was nothing to Bruce Wayne. He wasn’t so deluded as to claim he wasn’t hurt, but he had been living in pain for so long, it was hardly worth noting on his best days. He made the mistake of looking at Diana. The pain shooting through his leg made him feel his age; the look of pity she gave him made him feel Alfred’s age.

He felt his voice crack as he said, “Leave me.”

A second or two of worry, and then Diana’s expression twisted, as if the very suggestion had offended her. “I will not.”

She moved behind Bruce – one arm under his leg, the other over his shoulder – and picked him up off the floor in one go, his bad leg dangling haphazardly. He might have been embarrassed if he weren’t so utterly shocked. She dropped him onto the couch and made to elevate his leg. He raised his hand to protest but was cut off by a withering glare.

“Bruce! I’m trying to help you. Now stop being stubborn and stay still!”

Whatever he had planned to say died on his lips as he watched her roll up his pant leg. Then, suddenly she draped his leg on her shoulder and pushed it back toward him. Bruce went slack jawed as the pain left his knee in a rush. His mind was scrambling for words, an explanation, anything as he felt his joint being worked back into place and Diana just kept looking at him, wordlessly working out the soreness left behind in his calf.

“What did you do?”

When she spoke, her native accent began creeping in incrementally. “It is an ancient technique, forgotten by modern minds. My mother is a healer and she made certain that the Amazons could always rely on each other for strength.”

Bruce was shaking his head unconsciously. “Why would anyone forget how to do this?”

Diana shrugged as she placed his foot back down on the pillows. “They believe it is, how would you say, ‘bullshit.’”

Bruce laughed without thinking at hearing her curse. “Not from where I’m standing.”

“You are not standing.”

“Thanks to you.”

She smiled and it relieved him a bit. He noticed vaguely that her hair was in a ponytail again. He wasn’t conceited enough to believe that his suggestion a month ago was the cause of this. Not even
close. Didn’t mean he was above entertaining the thought. He craned his neck over the armrest and saw that Alfred had left at some point, clearly satisfied with how the situation had resolved itself. He could never prove it, but Bruce decided, as he settled back in, that this was all the butler’s fault somehow.

“I’ll be leaving soon.”

She hadn’t looked up when she said it, and the weight of that caught Bruce in a tender place.

“Yeah, uh, Alfred told me.”

“You will miss me.”

She did look up when she said this and pinned Bruce to the couch with a look he couldn’t place. The fact of it being a statement instead of a question gave him a clue. This was royalty he was dealing with. How many women and men had she said that to? Gazing upon them with an earned regality that conveyed all of her wisdom but none of her age. She didn’t have to help him. Jesus, she shouldn’t be helping him. Her kindness was above him.

He crossed his arms in a huff. “That’s hardly the point, Princess.”

She smiled back at him, sadly. “Yes, of course.”

-----------------------------

It was well into the afternoon and Bruce was still on the couch where Diana left him. She had only departed after he promised not to leave and he said he wouldn’t if he had his computer. She handed it over and then left so he could finish his brooding in silence, which is how Alfred found him when he walked back in.

Bruce kept his eyes on the closed laptop. He knew that Alfred would have more than a few words to say, so he braced himself for the ambush he knew was coming.

“You know, Master Wayne-”

“Nope.”

“But I would merely suggest-”

“Don’t wanna talk about it.”

“But that’s the problem!”

Alfred crossed the room and yanked the laptop off of Bruce and out of his reach. He paced around the couch as he addressed him.

“Miss Diana, truly, is the most patient woman who has had the misfortune of crossing your path. I imagine even Selina would have grown tired of your malaise by now.”

Bruce made a face at that name. “That was a long time ago, Alfred.”

“And what have you to show for it? A grown man pouting on his sofa?”
Bruce threw a cushion at Alfred, who sidestepped it and continued speaking: “I know what you’re thinking, sir, but I’m not just playing some childish game. I’m only tired of seeing you punish yourself!”

“Alfred, to live is to suffer. The only sure thing in this world is pain.”

“You have met a person who, quite literally, removed the pain from your body! Does that mean nothing?”

Bruce sat back and puffed out his difference as Alfred rounded the far end of the couch. The older man came up behind him and palmed the back of his head. A rather abrupt callback to Alfred’s version of corporal punishment from when he was a boy.

“She’s been a great help to us, Bruce. And she’s asked for nothing in return. Only your trust. Surely even you can manage that.”

Alfred let the computer drop onto Bruce’s lap and walked away. Bruce could hear a door sliding open in the den as the man made his way onto the lift to head underground.

Bruce opened the computer and connected to his secure server. He was at a bit of a loss. No more leads to follow, and he had already been decommissioned from patrol that evening. His mind didn’t do well with having nothing to do. He could train. But for how long? Until his finger nails ached? Until he couldn’t see straight from exhaustion? Until he collapsed on his bed in a dreamless sleep? It sounded more and more feasible with each second.

Before he could move from his seat, his computer notified him of an email received. The sender: Diana Prince. Subject line: Tonight’s Homework.

The message had an attachment, which he opened: it was a picture of what appeared to be a platter (or a wall?) covered in some sort of ancient writing. He looked back to the body of the email: Have fun Detective.

Bruce felt the beginnings of a smile as he phoned Alfred.

“Master Wayne?”

“Got a hit, Alfred. What do you say we do some decrypting?”

“I’d say it’s a nice change of pace, sir.”

----------------------------

ONE WEEK LATER

Bruce wasn’t sure what had been expecting as he came home from work. Regardless, he was terribly unsurprised to hear Reggaetón pumping through his home stereo system. He hadn’t kept a proper music catalogue in ages. That only meant one thing.

“Thought you were from Arizona?”
Bruce had yelled his question into the den, which caused Barry to streak out, go back in to turn down the volume, and run back out to answer him.

“Technically, yes, but my friend Jaime is from El Paso. Every month he gives me a new mix to listen to. Helps me learn.”

“Not a bad idea.” A beat. “You were in El Paso earlier?”

“Well yeah! It was on the way. Fastest Man Alive, remember?”

Bruce walked past Barry into the den. He pulled the phone from its pod, cutting off the music and tossing it to Barry. “I take it you’ve met Alfred, then?”

“I did, but he told me I should wait for you before I enter the hard hat area.”

“He was right.”

Bruce went to the bookshelf and opened a copy of After the First Death, which was a dummy with a button inside. That button revealed a keypad and retinal scanner to the right of the shelf; Bruce used both and the entire thing opened out to reveal the door to the lift that would lead them to the Cave.

Bruce let Barry walk in and asked, “You’re a scientist, right?”

“In my spare time.”

“Hmm. I’ve got some stuff down here I think you’ll like.”

As the doors closed and the lift lowered Barry asked, “Wait, what are your superpowers, again?”

The lift doors opened and Barry’s mouth fell agape as the Cave unfurled before him. Bruce clapped the younger man on the shoulder.

“I’m rich.”

Barry was every bit as exuberant as the kid he was. Running up to the many tools and gadgets scattered throughout the Cave. He stopped briefly at the still in-repair Batmobile before streaking out onto the vehicle’s runway to peer into the void below.

“Yooooooo!”

Alfred walked up beside him, cleaning a tool with a rag.

“Where did you find this one, sir?”

A chuckle from Bruce. “Followed me home.”

A beeping from the main console alerted the two to a presence near the proximity sensor above ground. A camera feed showed Diana Prince striding up the walk.

“Alfred, do you mind?”

“Whatever else am I here for, Master Wayne?”

Alfred passed him the tool and cloth and walked to the lift as Barry sped back to Bruce’s side. His smile spread ear-to-ear and Bruce did his best to be annoyed by it.
“Nice digs, man! A science geek could get lost in a place like this.”

“That’s actually why I called you over.”

Bruce led Barry to a lone table with a raised platform on top. On that platform, surrounded by tools, was a chunk of Kryptonite.

“Our friend Digger was kind enough to make a donation to my research institute. I’ve been able to run some tests but I do have other business. While I’m out—”

“You want me to figure out how it does what it do?!?”

“I want you to not blow up my Cave, please.”

“I can do that! Probably!”

“Right…”

Before Bruce could think too much about what a poor decision he’d just made, Diana was walking up to them with Alfred close behind. Bruce took notice. Barry took great notice. It was enough to knock him into silence. Nearly.

“Uh, who’s that?”

“Barry, this is Diana Prince.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. We were searching for some time.”

“You were looking for me?” Barry kneeled down and pointed to the Cave’s ceiling. “Praise be.”

Diana smiled at the young man’s histrionics, then looked at Bruce. Her expression changed to one of confusion as she thumbed at Bruce’s chin, who was now also confused.

“It’s a beard, Princess. Surely you’ve seen one before.”

“Never on you. I did not think you would tolerate anything but stubble.”

She turned her attention to the Batmobile, which hadn’t moved since Batman’s failed raid in the Port of Gotham.

“What happened?” Diana asked.

“Superman. Nearly folded it in half.”

“Shall I take a look?”

Bruce exchanged a glance with Barry but handed her the tool and cloth in his hand. Barry stared after her as did Bruce, who pretended like he was studying the monitor. After a moment, Barry turned to Bruce, oddly subdued.

“Well, that was a thing that happened.”

Bruce wrinkled his nose and did his best not to sound too defensive.

“You’ll have to cut me some slack. I don’t speak Millennial.”

“C’mon, man, I’m a profiler! I do this shit for a living.” He glanced back to where Diana was and
waited until she was out of earshot to continue, which Bruce felt was probably wise.

“Not like it’s been a hard read. You two have been projecting like crazy since she got here. Only way it’d be more obvious is if you had matching shirts saying, ‘I Heart You’.” He paused and considered the woman behind him. “Well, hers would say ‘I Heart You’. Yours might say something like: ‘I Am Experiencing A Reaction Stronger Than Apathy’.”

Bruce glowered at that and wasn’t too pleased to see his allegedly faithful butler trying and failing to suppress a smirk. Barry, on the other hand, saw this interaction and his eyes went wide.

“Nooo… That’s it, isn’t it?” Bruce said nothing and Barry positively cackled. “Ha! Alfred, I gotta admit, I thought you were bullshitting but this is waaaay better than I thought!”

Bruce put his face in his palm and ran it down longways before he spoke. “Alfred, remind me to fire you when I get back.”

“I’ve only been reminding you for the last 20 years, sir.”

Barry stopped chuckling long enough stare at Alfred dumbfounded. “20 years of this?”

“Thirty if you count boarding school, Master Barry.”

He put his hand on the older man’s shoulder in a show of faux sympathy. “I am so sorry.”

“Alright!” Bruce exclaimed, “I get it! I’m a big meathead who isn’t good with talking and feelings and shit. Happy?”

Barry tilted his head at that. “Oh, I’m always happy, man. But what you just said is only half the story. Wanna hear the rest?”

“You’re gonna tell me.”

“¡Tienes razón! Peep this. Di is super into the idea of having a companion she can just hang with because she’s been on her own for a while, but she’s hesitant because her lifestyle makes it tough to cultivate a long-term relationship. You, meanwhile, have been burned a couple times already and are low-key scared of getting curved.”

Barry accentuated that last word with a swoop of his arms and it left Bruce with a befuddled expression, which caused Barry to turn to Alfred for translation.

“You fear rejection, sir.”

“Yup! For guys like you, the only thing that scares you is missing out on the one opportunity you actually want.”

Bruce folded his arms and grunted, looking down and away. Barry studied this in silence before he said, “Tell me, Bruce, for real. Whenever someone says they like you, you just squint at them, don’t you?”

“Alright, Barry, what would you suggest?”

“I honestly thought you would never ask,” Barry said warmly. He glanced behind him to check for Diana again, who was peering into the hood of the Batmobile.

“God, that’s hot.”
“Barry!”

“Oh! Right! Fixing your problems, ahem! You were gonna fly out to Alaska today, right?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Did the plan include going with her?”

“Not initially.”

“Oh. My. God! Do I have to do everything?”

“I’m afraid so, Master Barry. Simply part of the job.”

It was Bruce’s turn to throw up his hands. “What interest would she have in seeing Alaska? It’s not even the green part of Alaska. I’m going to fucking Kodiak!”

Barry ran his palm down his own face. “She wouldn’t, obviously. That’s not the point! The point is she’d be seeing it with you! Dude!”

Bruce turned to Alfred, who only shrugged. “It’s not a poor suggestion, Master Wayne. Even Amazons need to stretch their legs every now and again.”

Barry audibly gasped at that bit of information. “She’s an Amazon?! That means she spent like, half her life being trained for war by women who could eat us all for breakfast!” He turned to Bruce and grinned slyly. “No wonder she likes you.”

Bruce made a point of ignoring that and walked to the main computer bay. He brought up the picture Diana sent him as she made her way over and handed the tool to Alfred, who took her place at the Batmobile.

“Did you finish your homework?”

“I did. It’s not a map. That’s what I thought, too. What it’s closer to is an urban legend. One the Internet is familiar with. Some digging on the message boards led to posted sightings of the ‘Aquaman’ off the Southern Coast of Alaska. Near Island is the place.”

“That’s where you’re going today?”

“Yes.” Bruce felt a jab at his ribs. Barry, who had been thankfully silent, was now fixing him with as stern an expression as he could manage. Outnumbered again. Brilliant.

“Diana. You want in on this job?”

She put a finger to her temple, as if considering a diplomatic query at the Embassy, and not a casual offer from a vigilante in a Cave.

“What do you Westerners call these things, Barry? A field trip, yes?”

“Uh-huh! Usually you need a permission slip, but I think we could make an exception for royalty.”

Diana smiled and gave a slight nod to the boy; it made Bruce think the kid knew more than he let on.

“It’s settled, then. Bruce, I have a few things to gather for the trip. Meet me upstairs in half an hour.”

She turned and made her way back to the lift, with Barry appearing in an instant at Bruce’s side,
reaching up to hug the taller man around the shoulders.

“Not a single word,” Bruce warned through grit teeth.

Barry instead sighed dreamily, “You know, you two crazy kids are gonna make out somewhere in
the frozen Alaskan wilderness and I’m so jazzed for you, but I’m gonna miss everything and that is a
bummer!”

Bruce positively growled and the sound made Barry take a step back.

“Truly, Master Barry,” Alfred said, “perhaps you would be safer on the lift with Miss Diana?”

“Good point, Al. See y’later Bruce have fungimmed eets!” Barry vomited out his last sentence all at
once and sped off into the lift just before the large door closed.

Bruce looked on in exasperation and tossed his arm around Alfred in a loose embrace.

“What have our lives become, Alfred?”

“You mean your life, Master Wayne. My life currently consists of preceding with today’s Golden
Girls marathon. Something I could do if you would keep an appointment for once in your life.”

Bruce chuckled at that and brought the man in closer to his side. “Getting more like Mother every
day, Old Man.”

Alfred returned the embrace and smiled fondly. “Bruce, I could only be so lucky.”

----------------------------

KODIAK, ALASKA

Bruce eased the Batwing down into a clearing shielded from the elements by a cluster of trees. There
was plenty of daylight left, going by the time, but with their location and the season, it wouldn’t be
long before darkness overcame the frosty landscape.

Bruce opened the hatch and was surprised at how rapidly Diana jumped out. He took his time exiting
the vehicle and saw her bouncing on her toes.

“Anxious?”

“I have not been in the field in for some time.”

He nodded and motioned out towards the water. “Right across the bay is Near Island. That’s where
we’ll start.”

“How will we get there?”

“There’s a ferry docked by that lighthouse. We should see if they can manage one more trip.”

“Could we not just use your plane?”
Bruce drew his mouth in a line at that question. “Having dealt with the situation before, I can tell you that leaving your vehicle unattended on a scary island isn’t the best idea.”

Diana didn’t seem too convinced of that reasoning, but let it slide. She readjusted her bag and instead she asked, “Will it be safe here?”

Bruce, to answer, pulled out his personal device and navigated the menus until he found the right command and pointed it toward the Batwing. Afterward, he picked up a nearby stone and chucked it at the nose of the ship, where it was sent flying by a spark of electricity. He put the device away and began walking toward the lighthouse, with Diana close by.

As they got closer, there was an older man already making his way down the steps. He was bundled up, as they were, his face concealed by a large and scraggly grey beard. He observed his two visitors with a questioning look.

“You folks aren’t from ’round here, I take it.”

Bruce greeted him with his most disarming smile.

“Hey there! No, uh…no we’re not. Just visiting. Well, my friend is. She’s from Turkey and she asked me to give her a tour of the States.”

The man chuckled as he lit up his pipe. “You picked a hell of a place to vacation, Boy.”

“It was my idea, actually,” Diana said, her accent especially thick. “I wanted to see the Northern Lights.”

“Ah! Got ourselves a stargazer! Well, ya come to the right place. No light pollution out here. But if ya want a total unobstructed view, that isle over there is your best bet.”

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I was hoping you could give us a lift. I mean, I’ve got cash if you need it.”

The man pondered that, puffed on his pipe, and then waved him off. “Normally, I’d take you up on that, City Boy, but for the lady, this one’s on the house.”

“Thank you, sir,” Diana said as he passed her to ready the gangplank. She looked back and waggled her eyebrows at Bruce who followed her onto the ferry in silent protest.

They were onto the water and on their way when she slid up to his left at the ship’s railing.

“I’m your friend now? That is an upgrade.”

“Lie with the truth, Princess.”

She smirked at his teasing. “Then will you tell me why we must take this silly boat?”

“Patience. You shouldn’t turn down a chance to plan your next course of action.”

“I see,” Diana said. “You…prefer to be grounded.”

Bruce shrugged, but didn’t disagree.

“As far as I can remember – since I was a boy, even – my mind has been-” He dots the air in front of him in a scattered fashion. “It’s hard sometimes to stay present. So I plan and strategize and research. The Bat helps with that but, I can’t be the Bat all the time.”
Bruce thumbed his beard thoughtfully at his own admission which Diana, thankfully, accepted as an answer. There were a few more moments of watching the waves crash against the side of the vessel, before he heard the unmistakable *click*! of a shutter closing. He turned to see Diana: her smiling face half-concealed by the high-def camera she had produced from seemingly nowhere.

“What’s this for?”

“For my sisters.” *click*! “Last time I went on a trip with a human boy no one believed me. Now I will have proof.” *click*! “Smile for the Queen.”

“How’s this?” Bruce put up two fingers in a V a gave a big toothy grin. Diana frowned into her viewfinder and glanced up at him.

“No fake smiles in my album, Bruce Wayne.” His face fell at that, but he still felt a smile tug at the very corner of his mouth.

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “Just like that!” *click*! “You look much better when you’re annoyed.”

Bruce felt his phone buzzing in his pocket and turned away. Diana was busy recording video of a school of fish skimming the water’s surface, so he deemed it safe to check the notification. It was a message from Alfred. A picture of a small package wrapped in black paper.

**A parcel has arrived for you, sir. It's from Talia.**

Bruce felt a heat flash behind his eyes. **Dump it.**

“What’s that?”

He put the device back in his pocket and gathered himself before he answered, “Alfred.”

She gave him a look. “Who is Talia?”

Bruce frowned and looked away from her, out to sea. “Former acquaintance. Long time ago. Don’t ask more.”

Diana hummed thoughtfully as she put her camera away. She then set her bag down and inched closer to Bruce on the railing. He acknowledged her with a sidelong glance – said nothing.

Diana looked up at him, but he wouldn’t meet her gaze; still looking out on the water, forcing himself to think of the task ahead. One hundred reasons plus why he shouldn’t be thinking of the woman now touching elbows with him.

Feelings that were, at first, merely difficult to ignore were now impossible to ignore. There was no denying it. Here he was: on the open seas, wind whipping into his face in what was surely near-30 degree temperatures and Bruce was *warm*. He could feel it flowing off Diana in waves, seeping through his clothes into his bones.

He had suspected at some point during their days together that she was an empath of a certain degree. The first signs of it had been unnerving. She felt so much and he, on his best days, felt little to nothing. She was projecting, as Barry had said. Trying to fill him to the brim. It had been so long since he had been happy about anything. He couldn’t recall what it felt like. But Diana was happy by her nature and she was trying to make him to feel it, too.

A part of him – nonsense, *most* of him – said that he didn’t deserve it. He needed no reminder. It had become a meme at this point. He was a cold, unfeeling monster who had driven away his adopted
son, and had let another get killed by a madman in clown garb. Good things weren’t meant to happen to people like him. Yet still. There was one part of him that *maybe* suggested otherwise.

Bruce reached over with his right and ghosted his gloved hand over her own, tapping her knuckles one at a time. She looked up at him again and this time he looked back. Her hair was tied back into a long braid, so he got a clear view of his reflection in her deep brown eyes. He looked tired but, as the warmth intensified, he didn’t find it possible to care.

“Diana…”

“Oy! Sorry to interrupt you two, but it looks like rain’s comin’. You’d best make your way into the cabin.”

The two of them were walking underneath an umbrella supplied to them by the ferry operator. Without the open air of the ocean waters, the precipitation wasn’t nearly as strong. There was hardly a need for the umbrella, but Diana was wary of her camera, which she was using again to take pictures of the tiny village.

Bruce recognized homes and storefronts and marketplaces. Some of them shuttered, others simply dirty. He didn’t know how they would find Arthur Curry or if he was even there, but the sooner they did the faster they could get off this rock.

“No much ground to cover,” Bruce said. He could see the end of the street (and the town?) from where they were standing.

“Where should we start?”

“You tell me. You found the clue.”

“It was a clue, Bruce. Only a clue.”

“Well, won’t find him standing here. You should go on ahead. See if there’s anyone here.”

“What will you do?”

He gestured to the watering hole across the way. “Make myself useful.”

She took the umbrella from him and continued down the street in silence. He didn’t expect to find anything of note in the rickety shack. Still, talking to one of the locals would be good for figuring out what went where in this strange place.

When he stepped inside he was taken aback at how full it was. There was no need for a fire marshal off-shore of Alaska, but if there were he wouldn’t have been happy with this scene. Teens, old men, fishermen, townspeople – all huddled near the middle of the single-room shack.

“You lost?”

Bruce turned towards the voice and put on his practiced smile.

“No. Well, maybe. I’m just waiting for my friend. You usually have this many customers?”
“Not customers. Trying to get dry like you. What’s your name?”

“Bruce Wayne. Maybe you’ve heard of me.”

The older man shook his head. “Can’t say I have, no. What brings you to these parts?”

A crowd had gathered in a sort of semi-circle near where Bruce was standing and it had his anxiety crinkling at the nape of his neck. He forced himself to stay calm. These people didn’t even know who he was. He should have probably waited for Diana. Probably.

“We’re trying to solve a mystery.”

“Yeah?” It was a question. A skeptical one.

“My friend found a post online about an ‘Aquaman’ treading these waters. I think it’s just a story but she seems to disagree so, here I am.”

“Well, wouldn’t say your friend is wrong. Just misled.”

“Really?”

“There is a… stranger, who comes to this town. He comes in the winter when people are hungry. Brings fish. He comes on the King Tide.”

Bruce lowered his voice as he made a realization: “That was last night.”

“Yeah. It was. Mister, why don’t you tell us why you’re really here?”

He steeled himself at that question. He was still Bruce Wayne, but he no longer had to be Bruce Wayne.

“I’m looking for warriors. My friend, this stranger, others like them. There are forces in this world and beyond who wish to do us harm and I’m building an alliance to defend us. Please, sir. It is very important that I speak to this man.”

The older man didn’t answer. Instead, a very shaggy man to his right slowly turned around to face Bruce. Large beard, ice grey eyes: there was no mistaking the man for anyone but Arthur Curry.

“Talk.”

He had barely uttered the word, but the intensity was no different than a man shouting at full volume. Bruce, carefully, took a step forward.

“Arthur Curry. Hear you can talk to fish.”

Bruce Wayne did not get surprised often and yet surprise still wasn’t strong enough to gauge his reaction to being lifted off the ground by Curry and slammed into the wall. The man was holding him aloft and trembling with anger which caused Bruce to bring his arms down and break free of the man’s hold. He was strong, and Bruce knew he couldn’t get grabbed again.

“Something I said?”

Curry wasn’t just strong, he was fast, too, so Bruce did get grabbed again; shouldered into a fireman’s carry before he could shift his weight and tossed out through the double doors of the shack onto the muddy streets outside.
The air was knocked from his lungs and for a time he just lay there. He didn’t know for how long, but it was long enough to make him feel his age again. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath in through his nose – his pride hurt more than his back.

*click!*

He opened his eyes to see Diana looking down at him; upside down from his angle.

“That’s a good look for you.”

“Thanks.”

As Bruce picked himself up, Diana took two steps forward and snapped a photo of the hovel he had been deposited from.

“You found Arthur?”

“Yeah.”

“He said he’ll fight with us?”

Bruce sucked a breath through his teeth. That was why they came, wasn’t it?

“More or less.”

Diana looked back at him, a smile in her eyes.

“More or less?”

“Probably more less.”

“He said no?”

“He said no.”

There was a laugh from her. Not a full one – somewhere between a chuckle and a scoff. She made her way toward the door but motioned for Bruce to stop.

“I will speak with Arthur. Stay close and mind your words.”

“Diana-”

“Bruce.”

Not even Alfred had managed to use his name as a warning before.

“Fine.”

She disappeared into the shop and Bruce felt more than heard the bellow come from inside.

“Madness!”

Bruce coasted in behind Diana to see Arthur Curry laughing into a beer.

“A face I thought I’d never see again. Diana of Themyscira. And you’ve brought a pet.”

Bruce flared up at that and cooled down almost immediately at the smallest of gestures from Diana.
Imperceptible to anyone else.

“Arthur, I’ve come to talk.”

“Really? No sign of you for years and suddenly you want to talk? This should be good.”

“We’re a long way from your throne, Curry. Doubt you’re worried about convenience.”

“Bruce, that’s enough.”

“Yeah, Bruce! Learn your place. Mortals aren’t welcome in this discussion. Certainly not one as pathetic as you!”

Bruce was moving before he knew it; before Diana could stop him. He strode to where Arthur was seated and smacked the mug of alcohol out of his hand. Even though he was expecting the punch, it was with significant effort that he kept from being toppled over. He parried it, came back with his own and as Curry made to block angled his strike to smack the other man across the face.

This angered him further and soon, Bruce had been grabbed by his coat again but was able to grab hold of Curry before he could be lifted. Caught in a stalemate, Arthur made to punch again. Bruce dodged it narrowly and reared back to hit the man with everything he had. He felt his fist connect, not with Curry’s face, but with Diana’s palm. A very angry Diana that was now between them.

In one motion, she pushed them both across the room, separating them. Arthur was a meta, so he simply slid on his feet. Bruce was not, so he once again landed on his backside, taken off guard by what was surely just a fraction of Diana’s strength.

“Enough! Both of you!”

“Why are you protecting this fool?”

“He’s my friend.”

That made Bruce felt a touch better as he got back to his feet. But the further this went on, the more tempted he was to leave without warning Curry about who was coming.

“Huh. The Princess abandons her throne. All so she can waste time with mortal playthings.”

Arthur had gestured in their general direction. Whether he was talking about Bruce or the camera, it wasn’t clear. What also wasn’t clear was that word he used, ‘abandoned.’ He must’ve seen the wheels spinning in Bruce’s head, as he turned to address him.

“Oh. So she never told you.”

“Arthur.” Diana used the same warning tone from earlier, but the man was undeterred.

“Typical. A true Child of Olympus.”

“Zeus was my creator. Not my father.”

“And still so similar. You actually got this flesh bag to believe you could travel to and from Paradise Island as you please. I bet you told him the ‘Formed from Clay’ story too, didn’t you?”

The confused silence from Bruce had Arthur doubled over, laughing heartily.

“You did! Sakes, woman! Is there even one thing you’ve told him so far that’s the truth?”
“Hold your tongue!”

“What are you talking about, Curry?”

Bruce had stepped forward, no longer aware of the large group of people still crowded around them. He threw a look at Diana and she understood. He wouldn’t be left hanging on this matter.

“She calls you her friend, Bruce Wayne, so it’ll be a pleasure to tell you what really happened that day. A bit before my time, but this woman’s legend precedes her.”

Bruce looked to his left again. Diana had grown silent and pensive. He looked ahead to Arthur who had returned to his seat.

“One century ago, a nosy human – not unlike yourself – was able to convince an Amazon to leave her home and fight a war that had nothing to do with her.”

“The Amazons were meant to be peacekeepers! The War had everything to do with me!”

“She left her home behind, but before she did her mother, The Queen, gave her a choice: stay and rule her kingdom or leave and never return.”

“And what if I had stayed? I could hardly call myself a warrior then.”

“And quite the warrior you became, Diana!” Arthur had been given a new beer and was sweeping it through the air. “The War ended and you left mankind to its own devices.”

Bruce noticed a shift in her posture. She hunched her shoulders, clutching at her camera, turning away from Arthur and toward him slightly. Everyone else would have been too busy listening to Arthur to notice. Bruce could see, though, that he had caught a nerve.

“Her shield, her sword, her armor. All of it was stolen from her people so she could fight another man’s battles.”

Bruce felt his eyes go wide at that bit of info and saw Diana cast her eyes down. It made sense now. Curry wasn’t trying to rile her up. Just the opposite. He was trying to embarrass her. And it was working.

“You’re no more a princess than me or him. This…fascination you have with mankind will be your downfall. Just as it was for Ares.”

“Ares had no one to blame but himself! He knew the dangers of crossing the King.”

“And you knew the consequences of leaving. Exile. Nothing less! Mount Olympus has fallen. Your gods are dead. Once I leave here, I’ll return to my kingdom where my people and my Queen are waiting. What about you? A Paperweight Crown. An empty throne. You will roam this earth; everyday wondering if that first decision was worth it.”

That brief flash of emotion disappeared from her as quickly as it came. The room had fallen completely silent. On top of this, Bruce saw a look on Diana he never thought he’d see. It was dejection and defeat.

Bruce made a beeline to Arthur, who cradled his beer from another attack. Bruce ignored that and spoke.

“Look, Fish Paste, we’re not asking you to come with us, but you need to pay attention. Because
there is a man after you now with unlimited resources! He doesn’t know where your kingdom is. Not yet. But he knows you’re out there and he is not the type that negotiates.”

Bruce stepped back to Diana to let Arthur mull over his statement. He leaned toward her and mouthed, You alright? She frowned, but nodded. Seconds more and Arthur Curry set down his drink to stand fully.

“You said you were looking for warriors. Are you one of those?”

Bruce glanced around the room, shrugged. “I’ve had my moments.”

“So you won’t mind if we invite you on the expedition?”

“Expedition?”

“Sure! Winter has come and crab season along with it. The boys here are always looking for an extra hand. Heh, considering you don’t lose yours.”

“Look, I’m no professional-”

“And that’s why I want you out there! If you expect me to come along and join your little club, I need to see if you’re really about it. Or if your rich boy mouth is writing checks your ass can’t cash.”

Bruce ran hot at that, even though he knew better. The look Diana gave him confirmed he should know better, but why else come all this way? He could fake being a roughneck for a couple hours.

“When do we leave?”

It hadn’t been one of his best ideas to date.

You could certainly fake being a roughneck, but it wasn’t nearly as easy as TV made it appear to be. The temperature had dropped even more and even on these docile waters, the foamy spray from the ocean was whipping up in his face as he held fast to his section of rope.

He looked up to see Diana in the cabin. She was allowed to help with navigation but not to help him. At that moment, he was only jealous of the shelter. Bruce spoke to her through his com unit.

“I didn’t know you could sail.”

“How else could I have left Themyscira?”

“Guess I didn’t think about that.”

“That is because you rarely think.”

Boy, did he deserve that. Practically every portion of this detour could be tracked back to his short temper. That temper would be tested again as Curry sauntered up to him, unfazed by the movement of the fishing vessel.

“C’mon! Show me what you got!”
Bruce grit his teeth and pulled with all he had, heeding the command of the burly fisherman behind him. When they muscled the cage up onto the deck, he was a little disheartened to only see the cage half full. Were crabs really *that* heavy? He peered back at Curry, who seemed less than impressed.

“Not too becoming of a king to be standing there empty-handed.”

Curry snorted at that, before grabbing a single net and diving headlong into the frothy mess below. Bruce didn’t get much chance to react, as the now empty cage was being lowered by the pulley once again into the sea. As they waited for the trap to fill, the Aquaman came leaping out of the water, his once empty neat full to bursting the crustaceans. He let the net drop to the deck and leaned back on the cabin with his arms folded.

“What are you doing here, Wayne?”

“Start pullin’, boy!”

Bruce snapped to attention and did as he was told, and did his best to answer Arthur at the same time.

“I told you-grr! I’m building a team!”

“A team of gifted people, yes. To do what?”

“Help people – Serve justice!”

Curry stroked his beard in thought. He eyed Bruce, who was holding fast to the rope and said, “I have my own people to serve, Wayne.”

Bruce huffed as he inched the payload higher. This cage wasn’t half full to be sure. “I know, but-These threats will affect them, too.”

Curry changed his posture at that. More defensive. “What business do you have with Atlantis?”

“None…right now.”

“Uh-huh. OK. Then what’s your business with Diana?”

Bruce let his concentration slip for mere moments, but it was enough for the salty spray to knock him off his base and to his knee on the deck. He caught the rope before it descended too far into the drink and felt a large hand at his collar hoist him back up. He continued pulling with renewed vigor as Curry was doubled over with laughter. Soon enough, the cage broke the water’s surface and as Bruce predicted the trap was full to bursting with bounty. The wench was swung around to the deck and Bruce let go of the rope so he could slink back to the side of the cabin.

“Hey, I’ll take it from here. Thanks, man.”

Bruce wasn’t too keen on being referred to as ‘it’ but he wasn’t in the best position to argue, still spitting up salt water. He followed Curry to the cabin door and was about to enter when he was stopped by a palm he just now realized was near the size of his head.

“Pretty good haul for a skeleton crew.”

“Yeah well, I try not to disappoint too often.”

“You’ll have plenty more chances, land-dweller. These shellfish need to be stripped and cleaned. A lot of hungry people will get fed despite your help.”
“Hm. Glad to be of service.”

“We’ll see. Warrior.”

Curry moved past so that Bruce could enter the cabin. He was thankful for the four walls shielding him from the wind chilling him through. Diana turned to greet him and was looking at him in that way he had grown used to. A reminder that she was miles ahead of him.

“Have fun out there?”

“Had a blast.”

“Something the matter?” She was looking at him sidelong through lidded eyes. The smile playing on her lips was almost invisible. Bruce was glad Alfred couldn’t see this exchange.

“He’s making this difficult.”

“I did warn you.”

“You should warn me again, next time.”

“Will you listen?”

Bruce felt his mouth tug against his will.

“Probably not.”

“Yes, of course.”

The rain had stopped some time ago and it was now completely dark. But the moon was out and the Milky Way was in full bloom. Bruce could make out the Orion constellation even with the fire blazing in front of him.

It took the rest of the day to prep the meat for cooking and the rest for storage. It was a messy, tiring process and Bruce couldn’t deny that growing up with grocery stores and a butler had shielded him from the realities of this way of life. Diana seemed to work into it easily enough but then, why wouldn’t she? There was so much that she knew, and so much about her he didn’t know. He wondered if he ever would.

Arthur Curry slapped Bruce on the shoulder, jostling his ribs. He frowned at the man above him, but relented and accepted the beer that Curry was holding out for him.

“Thanks.”

“I should be giving you thanks. Maybe an apology, too.”

Bruce shook his head no. “Not to me.”

Arthur tracked his eyes to Diana, who was helping an old man carry firewood to his cabin nearby. He nodded, as if to understand.
“Seems she’s watching over you.”

“I’m not a child, Curry.”

“No, but you are to her and it would be in your best interest to remember that. Human Boy.”

Bruce scowled at that, took a swig from his bottle, and hoped against fate that Curry would just leave.

“It’s not often that a god seeks the company of a mortal man. If she’s truly your friend, you shouldn’t take it for granted.”

Bruce said nothing to that. Just kept looking at the flames.

“Or you could ignore it. That’s cool, too. You land-dwellers seem to be good at that.”

He clapped Bruce on the shoulder again and stalked away, ignoring his growl. Bruce brought his gaze back to the fire, and then down to his bottle. He became suddenly aware of the condensation on the label, dripping down the bottle pooling in the crease of his glove. He began to hear each crackle of the flames one by one and could see the bottle shaking. He closed his eyes and took a tuft of night air into his nasal cavity. Then he felt a pressure on the bottle.

He opened his eyes and saw a gloved hand above his own, attached to Diana who was looking down at him expectantly. He let go and shifted over so she could sit. She took a drink from the bottle and held it out for him to take back. He took it and set it down between them. They stayed in silence for a long time, letting the fire warm them on the cold, winter night.

“I thought you would be upset with me.”

Bruce looked to his left and saw Diana staring into the fire. Her hair was free from its braid, framing either side of her face. He knew she had spoken, but the nature of her sentence had him genuinely confused.

“Why is that?”

“I misled you about my situation, even after you invited me into your home. I am sorry.”

There was no way Bruce would accept that apology. Diana shouldn’t be the one apologizing, especially not when he had his own motives for requesting her help to begin with. Guilt replaced confusion in short order and forced Bruce to look away.

“You were compromised and had no way of knowing my intentions. I…” He felt her eyes on him and he brought his gaze down to the hands cradling nothing in his lap. “I snooped my way into personal information, thinking I could use it to get more intelligence. All you wanted was to get your picture and go home. A friend would have recognized that. I should be sorry.”

A lengthy beat of silence passed before Diana asked, “Are you?”

He hesitated: not sure if she was asking about them being friends or him being sorry, so he just said, “I am.”

“Then, it is alright.”

She had her legs drawn up, with her head resting on her knees. She wore a wide, lopsided grin as she looked back at Bruce. The warmth in her eyes unearthed a feeling that had been buried for years.
“I’d still like to be your friend, Diana. Is that okay?”

Her grin didn’t fade as she nodded. An enormous relief flooded him from absolutely nowhere. It was such a small and simple gesture, but Diana did so much with so little. Even with a nod, it was like a hundred words had been spoken. Bruce removed the bottle from between them and wiped away its mark in the sand.

“How about we start over? Clean slate, right here.”

Another nod. “I would like that, yes.”

“Good. So, next time we take a trip—”

“We’re not going to Alaska.”

“Agreed.”

He was content with that and sat back on his hands, trying to stretch out his sore muscles. Doing so gave him a view of the northern sky. He grinned.

“Look up, Princess.”

She did and gasped quietly. The Aurora Borealis was weaving its way through the atmosphere; like a living painting in the starry sky. Bruce had only seen the phenomenon one other time and he had forgotten how beautiful it was up close. Even at the Glasshouse, the light from Gotham would have made it near impossible to see.

“Bruce Wayne!” Arthur walked up to just beyond the light from the fire. “This man is offering to have you for the night in his homestead. His way of saying thanks. I think you should consider.”

Bruce looked to Diana, who shrugged. Then thoughts of the bother it would be to pack everything back into the Batwing and leave for goddamn Gotham began to cross his mind.

“We’ll take him up on it.”

Arthur nodded wordlessly and gave Bruce a one more look before leaving.

Bruce pulled out his personal device and sent a message to Alfred: Change of plans. We’re staying over in Kodiak. Don’t wait up.

He put the device away and looked back up to the sky, awash in swirling hues of purple and green. He looked over and saw the lights reflected in Diana’s eyes. She was enraptured, and he wasn’t far behind. The response came about when he expected, but it wasn’t from Alfred.

(≡باس≡)

Bruce glanced up before replying, Go home Barry.

“Mr. Luthor, there’s a gentleman here to see you.”
“Send him in, please.”

“Of course.”

Lex Jr. was standing in front of the TV in his father’s old office. He had placed it there, of course. The old man would have abhorred any distractions in his workspace. But something had caught Junior’s eye. Several posts of a press conference piqued his interest, so as the sun set outside, he kept his eyes on the screen.

“Superman, tell me. What’s your mental state like now that we’re almost a month removed from the Capitol Bombing?”

“Doing well, considering. I still don’t know what happened that day, but the truth will come out. It always does. It takes a certain kind of person to carry out an attack that senseless. And even though the explosion came from his chair, I don’t believe Wally Keefe was that kind of person. He was a good man who was taken advantage of. I will find out who did this. Terrorism has no place in our world.”

Lex turned off the TV as three knocks sounded at the door.

“Войти!”

Anatoli Knyazev entered the large room and Lex walked to meet him halfway – arms outstretched ready to embrace his associate. He held the Russian at arm’s length and gave him a smile.

“Good to see you in one piece, friend. I was worried that the Bat had claimed another poor soul.”

“He would have, Boss, if it weren’t for Superman.”

Lex felt his eyes open wide and his grin stretch further across his face. He actually had to laugh.

“You say, sir, that Superman is responsible for delivering me the largest chunk of Kryptonite yet to be discovered? Oh! The sweet and delicious irony.”

“Yes, but what of those men from Gotham? They will want a cut.”

Lex motioned for the taller man to follow him to his desk. He picked up a newspaper and handed it to Knyazev. The headline: COBBLEPOT, FALCONE BROS ARRESTED FOR TIES TO SMUGGLING RING.

“I don’t foresee them asking for anything, really.”

Knyazev thumbed his goatee, mulling over this information. “Take the Kryptonite, keep their money?”

“Keep swimming.”

“But now that they are in custody, there is the very real danger of them giving you away.”

Lex’s expression became suddenly serious as he poured two glasses of Scotch for himself and Knyazev. He let the other take his drink and toasted with him. Knyazev tossed his back in one go, leaving Lex to sip thoughtfully.

“Did you ever see the show Catfish?”

“Yeah. Some stolen identity shit. What about it?”
Lex chuckled, shook his head chidingly.

“Not really *stolen* identities, per se. See, they used to tank cod from Alaska all the way to China. They were stored in vats below deck and by the time the fish arrived, they were mush and tasteless. Someone got the bright idea, before one of those treks, to slip some catfish in with the cod and keep them agile. There are catfish in the vat of life, too, Knyazev. People who keep us guessing.”

“You know I enjoy these talks with you, Mr. Luthor,” Knyazev said as he poured himself another drink, “but I would very much like it if you get to the point.”

“The *point* is people will accept any lie you tell them – no matter how large – as long as it brings meaning to their worthless lives. Those three were never talking to me. They never *thought* they were talking to me. They thought they were talking to your ‘boss’ in Russia, who just so happened to have an HQ in Metropolis.”

“And they believed it?”

Lex finished his drink and set his glass down. “They believed what they wanted to. Just like Barrows and Finch.”

Lex rounded the table and opened his drawer to produce a strange looking metal device that he set on the desktop.

“What is this thing?”

“This is a sentry. Created using the records of the Kryptonian Council that I have obtained from the fallen Scout Ship near the wharf.”

“The one with the alien’s body?”

“The same. The real sentries will be bigger, of course, but I needed a scale model to test mechanical capability.”

On cue, Lex hit a button on the sentry and it began levitating, slowly oscillating above his desk.

“I’ve named it Gary.”

“You’ve *named* it?”

“What else would I do?”

Knyazev cursed in Russian and took down the rest of his drink. He poured another.

“What about Batman?”

“Ah, Knyazev,” Lex said as he shut off the sentry, “don’t tell me you’re afraid of that hooded fool.”

“Wouldn’t you be? You weren’t there that night! He took out every *one* of my men and I know he’s still looking for me! He is relentless and your money will not dissuade him, so what do you plan to do?”

Lex pondered that as he slowly poured himself another glass. He looked to Knyazev and put the bottle away, walking across the space to address him.

“We’ve been working together for about a year now. And look. I know that my vision can be… difficult for people to grasp but you must understand that there is a method to everything I do.”
“Tell me, then. What is this vision? Just what the hell is the goal here?”

Lex paused to drink at that. The air around him darkened significantly.

“I thought once about destroying Superman. Just once. A silly thought. A greater man than me tried
and failed. But what if, I could recruit someone else? Someone with nothing to lose but his own
miserable life? A canary in the coal mines. That’s what Dad would’ve called it.”

Knyazev took another drink and his eyes lit up with realization.

“The Bat?”

Superman!”

Lex finished the rest of his drink and then tossed one of the ice cubes in the air, catching it in his
mouth and chewing down. Knyazev smiled.

“If you pull this off, Boss, you’re the best.”

“I’m already the best. Go. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

The Russian set down his glass and exited the way he came. Lex turned and gazed upon the large
painting of the archangel Michael on the back wall. It was the only thing he had changed in the
whole room. Flipped upside down so that Hell’s Angels could be seen from their proper vantage.

From above, not below – that is how the demons would come. Like the one occupying his city. The
same one who dropped a building on his father’s head. The company was better off, of course, but
even the Senior Luthor deserved the dignity of a proper death. And that had been taken from him.

No matter. Soon enough the world would be rid of the alien menace forever, and the people would
have Lex Luthor Jr. to thank.

But then there was the Bat of Gotham. Knyazev was right to be wary. He was dangerous on the best
of days; had even proven deadly. Lex knew the dangers of running a job in Gotham. The Bat would
have set the operation back months if he had caught Knyazev. Being rid of him would be a blessing
as well.

As dangerous as the Bat was, however, the man known as Bruce Wayne was incredibly smart.
Smart and nosy. Lex knew he was on his trail and had to utilize some rather quick thinking to throw
the scent.

The Meta-Human Thesis had been a rather timely red herring. He wasn’t really interested in metas.
At least, not as interested as people thought he was. Wayne’s actions at his benefit on Halloween
Night had been anticipated, not predicted.

What he hadn’t anticipated was the Amazon coming out of hiding so quickly. It was an unplanned
variable – which he hated – but his tensions eased when he realized she wasn’t after him. It was
funny. Bruce Wayne being distracted by a pretty face was terribly cliché given his reputation, but
Diana Prince egging on his game had been a fascinating wrinkle.

The other patrons were too absorbed with the party and themselves but Lex, from his raised platform,
could see clearly. The two had been staring at each other, ignoring his speech completely. And then!
Later in the evening, when Wayne escaped the clutches of Clark Kent, only to chase after the
woman across his living room, looking every bit the fool he was.
Not bad for the evening’s entertainment.

News of the woman being spotted in Gotham City had been the cherry on the cake. The duo would be too busy circling each other to even think about him. Even if they did figure out what he was up to, it wouldn’t be soon enough to stop what had been put into motion.

Lex gazed down to another newspaper. The *Gotham Free Press*: leading with an article on the Bat and his path of destruction through the Port. In the article was a brief mention of Superman, who had been sighted flying away from Gotham. Lex smirked.

“Led to your doom by a dangerous woman. Wouldn’t be a first for you. Would it Bruce?”

Chapter End Notes

Hope it was worth the wait. Feel much better about this version than the one I would have posted Saturday. Should be back on track this week. Maybe even a bit early.
Barry sent Bruce a message shortly after he returned from Alaska. The young man had his own server that he used for holding transmissions with his colleagues. Most of his colleagues weren’t The Batman, though, so he made sure to give Bruce access to a private line directly to him. Barry said he made some interesting discoveries regarding the objects Bruce had recently recovered.

He opened the laptop and pulled out his personal device. Reading Barry’s earlier text, he entered the information on his computer and waited for the IM client to secure the connection. Soon after, the line was ringing and not long after that, his young acquaintance was seen on screen sitting in what looked like a large, plush chair.

“Call at a bad time, kid?”

“No way, dude, I’m at HQ!”

“I can tell. Is that your favorite chair?”

“Technically, it’s my second favorite chair, but it’s pretty awesome anyway.”

“Sure. What’s the news?”

Barry put a finger up as he finished chewing on a slice of pizza.

“Regarding the Kryptonite, the news is pretty cray! Based on the readings I was getting, it looks like there’s potential for it as a power source. Not only that, but I may have stumbled on a way to convert it into a gaseous state!”

“Did you pull it off?”

“Incorrecto, dude! That’s waaay above my pay grade. I wrote down some formulas and left my notes on the slab. If anyone can figure it out, it’s you, Big Guy.”

“You think?”

“I do, because you have two things I don’t: tech and time. Not everyone has the luxury of making their own hours.”

“Being the boss has its perks sometimes.”

“Clearly. You look like you just woke up.”

“No, I’ve been up. Just because I have the day off doesn’t mean I stop being CEO. We can’t all be Oliver Queen.”

Barry’s eyes bugged wide as he gulped his drink, nearly spitting it out onto the camera.

“Dude, small world! Ollie was who I wanted to talk to you about!”

“You know him?”
“Hell yeah, man! We get into all sorts of shenanigans and I think he might have more info on those specs you sent me of the weird bullet thing.”

“How do you know him?”

“Huh? Oh yeah! The whole ‘Jewish Brown Kid, Rich Gringo’ thing.”

“That wasn’t-”

“Well… I guess it’s cool for you to know this, given our current arrangement. I took a trip up to Star City to track down Captain Boomerang and realized when I got there that I had no clue where anything was. Ollie met up with me to show me the lay of land and together we were able to foil Digger’s plot to blow up a train depot.”

Bruce absorbed all of that information and connected the dots in his head. “Oliver Queen is The Arrow?”

Barry nodded as he typed off-screen.

“Yessir! So, if he asks, you can tell him you figured it out yourself.”

More typing in between bites of food.

“Done! I just sent Ollie a copy of those specs. He should get back to us soon.”

“Sounds good.”

“Right! While we wait for him, we should probably use this time to get better acquainted as best buds, hmm?”

“Teammates, Barry.”

“Whatever you say, pal.”

“So. You’re fast. How’d that come about?”

“That sounds like an over-simplification. But, if we’re speaking in terms of gimmicks, sure: you Bat, me Fast.”

“So, what? Newton’s Laws?”

“Einstein’s actually. What you perceive as movement is actually a series of concurrent, subatomic vibrations. I can phase through solid objects and I’m even looking into time travel.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Maybe. It’s a bunch of quantum theory stuff that hasn’t been proven yet. So, for now, I say my powers come from the Speed Force.”

“Catchy.”

“I know, right? Oh! That looks like a ping!”

Barry hit a string of keys on his end and brought up a third window containing an annoyed-looking man with a blonde goatee.
“Ollie!”

“Barry, I know I ask this every time, but what the hell is this you sent me?”

“Actually, my new friend and I were hoping you could extrapolate on that.”

“New friend?”

Barry hit another key that brought Bruce’s window into view.

“Holy shit.”

“Yo! That’s what I said!”

“Oliver Queen. Glad to formally meet, at last.”

“Uh... Yea, man. Likewise.”

“So, what’s up, Ollie? Any idea what it is?”

“More than an idea. This is a LexCorp prototype: patent pending. Where did you find this?”

“I didn’t,” Bruce said. “It found Lois Lane in Nairobi.”

“The hell?”

“Mr. Queen, as I understand, you’re in a better position to more readily pursue this matter.”

“LexComm is just up the road, sure, but if you’re looking to tag team on some Corporate Espionage shit you’ll need to ask someone else.”

“I’m not asking you. I’m asking you to ask your friend. That won’t be a problem, will it?”

Oliver looked to Barry, who silently confirmed that Bruce wasn’t talking about him.

“No. Shouldn’t be.”

“Good. Have him do some recon. Find out what he sees and touch base with Barry. He’ll call me after that.”

“This is some crazy shit to try and wrap my head around, Wayne.”

“It’s a Brave New World, Queen. Adaptation is a must.”

“We’ll see what happens, then. Barry. Hasta luego.”

“Hasta la vista, Ollie.”

Ollie’s channel was disconnected, leaving a silence hanging awkwardly between the other two men.

“He knows Spanish,” Bruce said absently.

“Yeah. I’m not exactly proud of the fact that Long Hair Don’t Care knows more of the language than I do, but Ollie’s a smart cat. And he’s got resources and time. Like you.”

“Why didn’t your mother teach you?”
He saw Barry grimace at that. It was as close to a frown as Bruce thought possible for him.

“I mean, just the fact that I go by ‘Barry’ and you could probably guess. I didn’t move to Arizona until I found my foster family. I was born in El Paso and even as a kid I saw the agents trolling the streets there.”

“Hmm. Get home from school one day.”

“Mom’s not there. I grab a bowl of cereal, turn on the TV. Later that night, Jaime’s parents walk in and pick me up, sleeping like a baby.”

“You knew.”

“I could guess. Found out later she was booked on some bullshit possession charge. That’s really all it takes, man. That’s why I’m in forensics now. So people don’t have to fear being wrongly accused. I overheard Mom one night from my room. Basically said it’s lucky I look more like him.”

“Barry-”

“Look man, it’s cool. I know you’re not like that and I’m not either, but pretending it’s not a thing that happens is just as bad, dude. I’ve accepted it as a thing that’s happened. Best thing I can do now is get better at my job so I can help as many folks as I can.”

“I appreciate the help, Barry. You know I do.”

“I know, sure. Not positive that she knows.”

And to think they had gotten through almost the entire conversation.

“I’ll let you go, kid.”

“Already? I’ve still got a few minutes to hang.”

“I don’t do small talk, Barry.”

“I bet you’re great at the monthly rich dude social. They don’t...actually have those, right?”

“Goodbye.”

Bruce closed his laptop and set it aside. Alfred was out, and it was far too early to even think about patrol. There were no leads on Victor Stone, either, which meant there was little to do for him but sit and wait. Dangerous given the time of year. A time of year which inevitably brought him back to the darkest corners of his psyche.

He picked up his phone from the coffee table. He needed a second opinion, and he needed his house to be less quiet.

You busy?

Not really.

I could use a hand on the Victor Stone case.

Alfred is not there?

Supply run.
If you needed company, you could have just said so.

Not sure I could have.

A minute or more passed after he sent that text. A wave of guilt came over him rather unexpectedly. He didn’t mean to be a bother. It wasn’t her fault he got like this. It wasn’t really his fault either. It just...happened.

I will expect you off my couch by the time I arrive.

He almost smiled.

As you wish.

-----------------------------

“You’re sure he’s here in Metropolis, Diana?”

“Dr. Silas Stone is still listed as a S.T.A.R. Labs employee. Transfers happen.”

“It would make sense if he was at the Central Branch. The offices in Queensland Park specialize in marine biology.”

“What better place for a physicist to hide?”

“But what is he hiding from?”

“Or who? I suppose you will have to ask him yourself.”

“If I can find him. Business hours are over.”

“Men who have experienced loss like he has only find peace in their work. He will be there.”

“Hm. I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Alright. Be careful.”

Darkness had long since fallen on Metropolis. There were likely only custodians left in the building, but there was a dark sort of comedy to Batman’s current position.

From where he was it was a straight shot to Metropolis Harbor where S.T.A.R. Labs was stationed. The “where” in this case was the highest point of the newly reconstructed Daily Planet HQ. Bruce Wayne had always thought putting an actual planet on top of the building was cumbersome and cheesy. Batman had no opinion either way, but was thankful for the view it supplied.

He took a step and leaped off, opening his cape. It wasn’t the most efficient way to get to the infiltration point – gliding the whole way – but flying in with a prototype fighter jet, stealth or not, wasn’t as conspicuous as he would want. There was that. But he had some serious thinking to do.

Victor Stone was the last meta-human on Luthor’s list. The last one to be found. Interrogating his father would take him a step closer to completing this mission which, by extension, would complete Diana’s mission.
Having her voice in his ear had been oddly reassuring. Not that Alfred wasn’t, it only meant that he would have to work faster to resolve…whatever it was she made him feel. It wasn’t nothing. That was clear the night he met her. Tough to say what scenario was more unnerving: her decision to leave or her decision to stay.

“How long are we here for again?”

“All night, remember?”

“Who signed off on that?”

“You did.”

“Dammit, that’s right. I’m a dumbass.”

“Yes, you are. Nothing happens on long weekends.”

Batman waited for the two guards patrolling the hallway were out of range of his directional mic before he dropped down from the ceiling. He hadn’t had time to scout out any sensors on the roof, so he crashed through a large vent without landing and used his tech cowl to find a way in.

Diana had sent a layout of the building in digital form, which he accessed via his gauntlet. He was tucked away in an unlit corner – avoiding the cameras and timing security walkthroughs – going over the blueprint to ascertain the doctor’s position. If he was indeed still there.

He didn’t figure there was any reason to go to a lower floor. In this building, it was the equivalent of aquatic R&D. What he needed to look for was restricted areas and high-level access. Some place even employees would be steered away from. Like the room down the hall: Level 4 Clearance.

The two men from earlier rounded the corner and Batman peered around the large bin he was crouched behind. With the enhanced vision afforded by his Tech Cowl he could make out that the guard to the right had a Level 4 card attached to a cord on his belt.

He readied his mini-grapple and watched carefully as the camera overhead rotated slowly to the right. The timing would be strict. He rounded the bin and captured the left-most guard and sent him sliding down the hall toward his position, where he knocked him unconscious. His friend was trailing him, and when he got closer, Batman vaulted up over the bin, landing behind him and slamming him against the far wall – arm wrenched behind his back.

Batman pulled the card up to eye-level and looked it over. The number 4 was indeed printed in large blue font on its front. What was waiting for him on the other side of that door?

“What is this for?”

“Other side,” the man began frantically. “The door only opens-”

“I know what it’s for. What’s in that room?”

“I don’t know! I’m only supposed to guard the card and hand it off between shifts. You gotta believe
me, man!”

“I do."

Batman slammed the man’s head against the wall and deposited him in the large container with his friend. That was all the confirmation he needed. S.T.A.R. Labs was hiding Dr. Stone; for his sake or theirs, it wasn’t entirely clear.

He went down the hallway as quickly as he could and stopped near the door, out of any camera’s line of sight. He activated his cowl’s Detective Mode to scan the area behind the wall.

**1 CIVILIAN DETECTED**

**2 HOSTILES DETECTED**

**2 UNARMED**

Batman slowly raised the card and swiped it through the slot and waited for one of the men to inspect the open door. Once he saw the whites of his eyes he thrust his arm out and stole the guard’s baton, which he jammed into the keypad on the side of the door, forcing it closed.

“Freeze!”

Batman had his back turned, but could feel the man behind him, so he turned into a slide to avoid the oncoming blow. The other man in front of him had brandished a taser; Batman had accounted for this before he entered the room, so he side-stepped the barb and watched as it was pinned to the first guard. Before the second man could react, Batman grabbed the wire and pulled hard, sending the man flying into his forearm. He noticed the other man still on one knee, and bounded over, striking him down with an overhead kick.

**ALL HOSTILES ELIMINATED**

Batman stood to see one Dr. Silas Stone, clearly in shock at having his research interrupted.

“Dr. Stone.”

The older man recoiled and Batman put his hands up. “Easy. I’m not here to hurt you.”

“W-what do want, then?”

“I have some questions.”

“Look, whatever it is, I can’t. R&D is on a strict need-to-know-”

“It’s about Victor.”

With the mention of that name, Silas Stone lost all tepidness and slammed his fist down on the table he was seated at.

“You stay the hell away from him!”

“Doctor-”

“Don’t ‘Doctor’ me! You break into my lab and try to strong-arm me? Trying to get to my boy? I won’t let you!”
“I’m not after him. I want to help.”

The doctor scoffed at this as he left his chair.

“Don’t need your kind of help. Seems like the only expertise you have is in property damage and concussions.”

“I’m serious, Stone.”

“So am I! Has it occurred to you before that half of these kooks in their costumes wouldn’t even bother to show their punk faces if they didn’t have some other kook in a costume to gun after?”

Batman narrowed his eyes. “It’s Luthor.”

Dr. Stone cools slightly at that. “What?”

“Lex Luthor has been monitoring the activity of meta-humans across the world. Victor was on the list.”

Dr. Stone paled at that and returned to his seat, removing his glasses and wiping his brow.

“So that’s the score, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“You may have noticed,” Stone said, as he gestured down to the table scattered with tech, “but it’s not exactly normal for a disgraced scientist to be hidden stowed away at the top of a marine biology facility.”

“I’ve made note.”

“This little side project is being bankrolled by DARPA.”

“The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. What do they want with you?”

“Heh, not me. I’ve been a shit father, but I’m still a decent scientist. DARPA is developing detainment technology for use against metas.”

“And you agreed?”

“Not like I had much choice. It was that or give up my livelihood.”

“What does Luthor have to do with this? Why is he looking for metas?”

“Earlier this year, a Black Zero Dropship was found somewhere in the Arctic – left over from the Invasion. LexCorp arranged to have it salvaged and transported Stateside piece-by-piece. They’ve been working with DARPA ever since.”

“Reverse-engineering?”

“I don’t ask those kinds of questions.”

“How did you end up in Metropolis, then?”

“After the accident, my superiors arranged for my transfer. Saving Victor was the last thing I was able to do before I left LA for good. Right before I had to leave, I was able to nab the thing that
saved his life.”

“Object 6-19-82.”

“Whatever the hell it was, it worked. But I had to move him from the lab. He said he was hearing things late at night, but the only things running were the computers.”

“A technopath?”

“Seems so. I was worried he was going crazy.”

“He was in pain, Doctor.”

“You think I wasn’t?! My own son, begging me for death! I did what I had to for my family! Even someone like you can understand.”

Batman stood in silence.

“Don’t you have someone? Someone who means that to you?”

“No. Not anymore.”

“Huh. That…makes a lot of sense.”

“What’s so funny?”

“What?”

Doctor Stone was confused, as was Batman. He was certain he heard laughing from somewhere. Doctor Stone didn’t look like a man who was in a laughing mood, though, so he let it drop.

“Nothing.”

“Hmpf. Well, as you could guess, the use of that cube was not medical protocol, nor was it company policy. I spent days trying to think of a way to get him here to Metropolis no questions asked but-”

“His condition.”

“A tracksuit only hides so much. So, I gave him the rest of my budget and told him to hop the first thing smoking out of there. I purposefully didn’t ask him where, just in case some suits ever try to truth serum me. But, if I had to guess, I would say he’s in Jump City.”

“The college town?”

“More important: a beach town. Vic always loved the ocean.”

There was then a pounding on the door, loud and persistent, as more guards arrived to barge through the locked door.

“Sounds like your cue.”

“Thanks, Dr. Stone. He’ll be okay. I’ll find him before they do.”

Batman turned to a window near the back of the room and threw a handful of flash pellets toward it to knock it out. He was walking to it when Silas Stone spoke again.

“I know he’ll be okay. God’s watching over that boy.”
Batman stopped with one foot on the frame.

“You believe in God, Batman?”

He heard the laughter again, this time loud and piercing. He looked back and confirmed: Silas was not the one laughing.

“I believe in me, Doctor.”

Diana was in the living room when she saw Bruce arrive. She decided to finish talking with Alfred and give him time to make the transition from Bat to Man. He had returned earlier than expected which could either have meant rousing success or swift failure. She hoped for the former as Alfred gave her access to the secret lift.

In the Cave, she saw him in front of one of the many glass cases. She had noticed this one before, but said nothing after observing the way Bruce tensed around it. He was staring it now. It was a red and green suit of armor, a message spray-painted in yellow: HAHAHA! JOKE’S ON YOU!!

She wanted to ask so many things, but as she drew closer she could feel it. His sadness: the pain and anger - so much anger. Anger at whatever happened, but also anger with himself. She did not want to focus on it.

“Jump City.”

Diana blinked back into real time. “Hm?”

“Jump City, California. That’s where Dr. Stone thinks Victor is.”

“Is that where you will look?”

“I…guess I’ll have to.”

She didn’t like the way that sounded, or the way he sounded.

“Bruce, look at me.”

Not only did he not look at her, the man actually turned away! Diana grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him in her direction. Any trace of sadness that was there was now replaced with anger. He was fuming and his eyes, his eyes were... Where there once was a hazel color was now a sickly green, seeping in and overtaking the iris. Diana released a breath.

“You are sick.”

“I’m perfectly healthy.”

“No! Your spirit is sick, Bruce, I can see it!”

“Spirit, huh? Spare me the voodoo speak.”

Diana’s voice rose an octave in her frustration. “It’s not voodoo speak! This isn’t like you!”
“You don’t know anything about me, Diana!”

“Maybe I would if you would talk to me!”

“Psh. You too, huh? We’re done here.”

Bruce turned to walk away and Diana would have none of it. Without warning she made for his exposed forearm and grabbed-


Diana released his arm and recoiled. He did the same and leaned back against the glass behind him. Bruce was clutching his arm where she had touched him; he looked up at her in disbelief.

“What the hell was that?”

“Stay calm.”

“You stay out of my head!”

“I wasn’t trying-”

“Please.” Bruce put up a hand, still clutching at his arm. “I need to be alone right now.”

“That is the last thing you need. I’m not leaving you down here.”

She didn’t feel the anger anymore; there was only sadness now. Deep and overwhelming. She had only felt something like this once before. Of all the things that could remind her of that night, she did not think Bruce would be one of them. He was correct, after all. She couldn’t help him. Not like this.

Diana turned to leave and spoke in a quiet voice: “Whenever you are ready.”

Add it to the list of things he figured she could do but hoped he was wrong about. Memories that he had thought to be elapsed – or at the very least ignored – were suddenly flashing before his eyes as if he were once again present. Reliving his worst days of existence, not by choice. Diana had been scanning through his mind. He felt it.

Whether she meant to or not was very much not even the point. He’d been a fool to think he could hide from her forever. He needed to think. He needed to breathe.

“Unbelievable! Hahaha! You actually manage to find the one person left on this miserable rock willing to stomach the sight of you, and you tell her to Am Scray?! Classic Bats.”

What?
“Oh, don’t act so surprised, Batsy Boy, you knew this was coming sooner or later! Ever since that night in Arkham, you’ve had all of me inside of you.”

It was the Clown. Well, it wasn’t, obviously, but still there he was. In full garb, invading his most private of places.

“Come now! There’s no use trying to rationalize it! Even I can’t figure this one out! I mean, you’ve been ill for some time. Most people would’ve been in the dirt by now. But then…that’s what you want. Isn’t it?”

Bruce started walking. He couldn’t face what was waiting for him above ground, but he didn’t have to stay and converse with a shadow. It was a seasonal thing. Never this graphic or pronounced, but he’d beaten it once. Made it go away.

“What is it that keeps you going, hm? And don’t give me that ‘Power of Love’ bullshit. You and I both know that word is lost on you. I’m certain she knows, hahahahaha-

“Perhaps you’re a sadist like yours truly? Perversion would certainly explain dressing like an animal and beating up poor people. Chances are your noodle was fried waaaaay before I got here. One night of your job would ruin me! But you… Over a decade and more. This is your brain. This is your brain on meeeeeee!”

The Clown leaped backwards into the abyss of the Cave, near the Batmobile’s entrance ramp. Bruce silently wished that this would be the end of the ordeal, but was utterly unsurprised as he saw a green head of hair floating out of the darkness.

“You bastard! Didn’t lift a finger to save your old Uncle J! Not the first time you’ve let somebody down.”

Bruce said nothing as the apparition touched down next to him. He was staring into the void. As many times as he’d driven over it, he never stopped to wonder about its depth until that moment.

“I just got back and I can confirm, the first step’s a doozy! Not quite as deep as ya think but plenty deep enough. I bet a good man would’ve already tossed himself by now. A good man, would have, but it looks like we’re the only ones here! Hahahahahaha!”

Bruce turned away, but the Clown had already moved into his line of sight across the room, arms crossed in wait.

“My theory – and I know you’re dying to hear it: there’s a reason you won’t give in to the leggy one upstairs. I mean, besides the whole ‘She probably hates your guts now’ thing. You rope in these poor bystanders to aid your never-ending crusade on crime, and Every Single Time someone gets too close to you, they end up getting hurt. Really, really badly…”

Bruce had wound up back where he started. In front of the case housing the ruined costume. A permanent reminder of his greatest failure. The Clown was leaning on the glass, admiring past handiwork.

“Remember the good old days, Bats? No bird brains. No IT Department. Just you, me and a regular war against crime. Look around, now. Things change. Now, it’s just war. With you standing, right bang in the middle. And not just you: aliens, meta-humans and monsters! Oh my! Haha! What an absolute cluster your life has become.”

Bruce turned his back to the case. For once, the Clown didn’t follow and for a few blessed moments there was silence. He thought about his life before. Before Aragon Theater. Before Ra’s al Ghul.

“Uh-oh! Someone’s starting to remember; oh no no no, you don’t wanna do that, pal. Memories are terrible things. One moment they have you frolicking in fields of fun and fancy free! Skipping along through life’s oblivion like some mindless idiot! The next…they lead you someplace dark; someplace you don’t wanna go. Memories can be vile, repulsive little brutes. Like children, I suppose! Hahahahaha!”

Without needing a reason, Bruce turned and unloaded; his every thought involving turning the Clown’s face to mush. Of course, no one was there, and his hand went crashing through the case, cutting his knuckles to ribbons. He clutched at his wrist to stave off the bleeding and slid down the case until he was seated on the hard floor.

“Aw, see this is what I mean, Bats! You’ve gone and made a mess! I wonder. Is there worker’s comp for Bat Freak Vigilantes? I’m not in that union!”

Bruce looked up and saw the Clown square his stance. He was leveling a revolver he had produced from nowhere.

“There, there…let Mr. J take care of those pesky memories. You don’t have to suffer anymore. Now tell me, friend. Have you ever danced with the Devil in the pale moonlight?”

Bruce felt himself grinning.

“Once or twice, yeah.”

“That’s my boy.”

There was the sound of the hammer clicking back before the Cave fell into black around him.

-----------------------------

“Bruce!”

The voice sounded far away – almost underwater – but he knew who it was without seeing.

“Bruce, answer me!”

The Cave came back into focus; Diana’s worried face was the first thing he saw. He thought of extending his hand, then glanced up to see the hole he made in the case above his head. He looked down to see that his fist was still injured.

“What happened?”

Bruce tried to think. He remembered punching the glass. For his life, he couldn’t remember why. All he remembered was an anger so hot it made him go blind. It was the overwhelming need to strike something. For what, though?

“I…don’t know.”

Diana’s brow knit further at that revelation. Not what she wanted to hear.
“What can I do?”

Bruce looked up at the case again but…it was no longer broken. More accurate – it appeared to have never been broken. Looking down, he saw his hand was unblemished as well. Closing his eyes, he took in a breath as the laughter returned, convinced that none of this was real and he had imagined the past 10 hours (or 20 months or 20 years). He felt a hand on his cheek, opened his eyes and Diana was still there. That was all the proof he needed.

“Stay.”

--------------------

Waking up on his couch next to an Amazon should have been a more noteworthy occasion. Sadly, his brain was too fucked up on post-partum stress to really appreciate it. He was lying perpendicular from her on the sectional where she was reading, and listening to something apparently.

“How long was I out?”

Diana must have had excellent hearing on top of everything else, because she removed her earbuds and leaned toward him cautiously.

“Alfred, he’s awake.”

Bruce heard footsteps and soon saw his butler crouching down to eye level with him.

“Thank heavens. Master Wayne, you gave us some scare.”

“Sorry to have bothered you.”

Alfred chuckled and ruffled his hair. “Indeed, he’s back to normal. Miss Diana, please fetch us a water.”

She agreed and stood up to walk to the kitchen area. Once she left, Alfred rose and sat down next to Bruce, who was slowly sitting upright. Alfred was looking at him expectantly.

“This is what I’ve been trying to show you, Bruce.”

“A migraine?”

“No. Having someone care for you with no pretense. No expectation of reward.”

Bruce sighed and ran his hand through his hair, squinting as the living room came back into focus.

“I don’t deserve you, Alfred.”

“No, sir, you don’t. Fortunately, it’s not your call to make.”

Alfred stood to move as Diana walked back with a glass of water and he gave a look back that Bruce would have been annoyed with if his head wasn’t pounding. He made his way out the front door and left the pair sitting side-by-side.

“Two hours.”
“Huh?”

“You were out for two hours.”

“Right.”

He took a big drink of water and was aware of her eyes on him.

“I think we should talk.”

“I believe so.”

Bruce set the water down and gathered himself.

“His name was Jason. He was an orphan like Tim but…one day he stumbled on the Cave and said he wanted in. He was stubborn, but he was good. We did a lot together for this city.”

“What happened?” Diana asked as she put her hand on his knee.

“He was kidnapped and killed by a sociopath.”

Diana hummed. “That is why Tim doesn’t live with you.”

“This is my war, Diana. I can’t let anyone else get dragged into my shit. I should’ve tried harder to give Jason a normal life. I failed him, like I failed my parents. I shouldn’t even be here.”

Diana seemed upset at that. It wasn’t pity he saw in her eyes, just sadness. But she was empathic so maybe not even her sadness. More like his feelings through her eyes.

“The hardest part of losing Steven wasn’t his death. I knew that would come in some way. What hurt most is that our story was left incomplete. There were so many things left unsaid between us and I carried that weight with me for so long. But I’ve managed to make peace with that. Thanks to you.”

“Me?”

She smiled at him. Patient and kind. Bruce could feel the warmth again, venting from Diana. This warmth was different, though. It was intense and consuming, but he felt no pain.

“Yes, you. Before I learned that Luthor had my picture, I wasn’t aware a copy even existed. It was the only thing I had to connect to my past and you found it. You brought him back to me, Bruce. I can never thank you enough.”

“Don’t have to, Princess. That’s what friends do.”

“Come,” she said, standing, “you must rest.”

“You said I was asleep for 2 hours.”

“You were unconscious for 2 hours. You’ll get a proper night’s sleep, now. Alfred made me promise.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

Despite the sass, Bruce let her lead him away from the couch to his room. Ignoring Alfred’s niggling would’ve been easy enough – but Diana. He’d have to lie to claim that he could say no to her.
If it feels like forever since Chapter 1, you aren't wrong. About 7 weeks in, we're hitting the home stretch. I appreciate the eyeballs as usual. It's been an experience, for sure.

[Chapter revised on 10/17/17]
CH 11 - Self Control

Chapter Notes

That's right! It's the Cali-Fo-Nia Chapter! This was fun to write and I'd like to shout out two folks.

Firstly, to my friend and writing partner in the OC who has been a tremendous and helpful influence throughout the process of this story. Stay breezy, Lunchbox. Hope I did your home state proud!
Secondly, to the first on-screen Batman and a true movie star, Adam West, who passed away last week. Rest well, sir.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Los Angeles, CA

Bruce wasn’t sure he was gonna like this ‘California’ thing.

Following his episode in the Cave, Alfred had grounded him for four whole days. When he was cleared to make the trip back to the West Coast, he had been informed via Lucius that a car was waiting at the bottom of Wayne Tower, prepared to take him to the airport where the company jet and a week’s worth of luggage was waiting.

It would be the quietest week of Alfred’s life and Bruce did his level best not to be offended.

When he touched down at LAX it was as Bruce Wayne but only on a technical basis. Included in his luggage was an understated disguise, perfect for getting lost in a crowd like this. He’d only need it for the arrival, of course. Normally, he’d find no need to dye the grey streaks in his hair, but this particular get-up called for it. It called for the shades, too, but those were necessary for living in a state that apparently outlawed the appearance of even one damn cloud in the sky.

Bruce wheeled his luggage along, trying to ignore the constant din of confusion that went along with one of the busiest airports on Earth. It was hell on his nerves so he relaxed audibly as he saw a man in a suit holding a sign aloft with THOMAS on the front. He lowered the sign as Bruce approached.

“I imagine you are Bruce.”

“Some days.”

“Pleasure to meet you. My name is John Jones.”

“John Jones?”

“Yes.”

Bruce couldn’t help it. He tilted his shades down in question. He hadn’t noticed beforehand, but this man was odd. Very odd and normal. Not that normal was bad, but this man was normal in an unnerving way. And even though Bruce was the absolute last person to be allowed make this
observation, he was extremely Caucasian.

“Something you wanna tell me, John?”

“Her Highness told me to expect you.”

Bruce unstiffened at that. “Any friend of hers is a friend of mine.”

“Excellent. Your vehicle is waiting.”

-------------------------------

Bruce, upon entering his rental, remembered immediately why he didn’t do Southern California. The traffic was a brutal annoyance. It would almost be more tolerable if it was total gridlock, but no; his car was in perpetual idle, never going more than 20 miles an hour. He had fighting words for Alfred when he got back to Gotham. For all that the butler had planned, he hadn’t thought about time zones and it landed Bruce right dab in the middle of rush hour.

The plus side of this was the uninterrupted scenery: the swaying palm trees and the Pacific Ocean shimmering in the afternoon sun. The car’s satellite radio was tuned to talk radio, which helped fill unwanted silence but did nothing to stimulate him. When his phone went off, he picked it up too quickly. He was desperate for distraction.

**When u get a chance hit me up dood!**

Maybe not that desperate.

He threw the phone back down in the cup holder and pinched his sinus. It wasn’t that he didn’t like talking to Barry, really, but he had to be in a certain mindset to do it and right now, he was not in that mindset. He thought about digging up his tablet and working on spreadsheets when he got another message.

**Update from Ollie!**

A work call. Of course. So he couldn’t ignore this for the next hour. Fine. He pushed two icons on his screen: one to dial Barry, another to put it on speaker. He heard the dial tone sound and sat back in his seat, bracing.

“Nanananananana BRUCE WAAAAAAYNE!”

“Please don’t do this, Barry.”

“Oh. Come. On. You fly out to the Left Coast and don’t say a single word to ya boy?”

“Not in a perfect world.”

“The sourpuss routine don’t work on me, Big Guy. I know you love me!”

“That is a very strong word.”

“Still true.”
Bruce checked the cars in front of him. No movement. “30 seconds, kid.”

“Alright, get this! I got a message from Ollie about his recon mission. I’m gonna forward it to your inbox but the guys in the pics he took are classic baddie material.”

Bruce pulled out his tablet and true to Barry’s word, there was a message waiting along with an attachment. Bruce opened it and was greeted with many pictures of several men transporting various large containers.

“You know these guys?”

“I’m familiar.”

“What about the one with the charming neck tattoo?”

“KGBeast.”

“Seriously?”

“…”

“Right. Vengeance, The Night. ‘Course you’re serious.”

“Does Queen know what they were moving?”

“Not for sure, but he did mention seeing one of the boxes glowing.”

Bruce kept scrolling through the pictures until he stopped on one of interest. It was Knyazev and he was holstering a piece of tech similar to what had been scattered across Dr. Silas Stone’s table. He scanned the picture further and noticed other men with small DARPA patches on their uniforms. He hadn’t thought government johns would also be grunts for hire, but he supposed it made sense. Food wasn’t cheap.

“Looks like shady biz at LexCorp, Boss.”

“They’ve always been shady, just not for intergalactic reasons.”

“Something pretty big, huh?”

“Probably. But I can’t worry about it until I find the Cyborg.”

“Good luck, man! And if you need a mystery-solving buddy while you’re in LA-”

“I won’t.”

“You could.”

Bruce hung up without responding, as traffic had started moving again. He had much to think about, including the whereabouts of Victor Stone. The doctor had pointed him to Jump City, but Bruce had no clue if he was there, or where he would even be.

This would be a long job, so maybe it was for the best that he had been booked for a week. Maybe. The glare from the sun was already starting to annoy him.
In town at last. Well, not in town, but in the area – more accurately as close as he wanted to be. In his early days as a magnate – before he decided to drown his sorrow in criminals’ screams of terror – Bruce Wayne had once given thought to residing half the year on the West Coast. So enamored was he with the business community that would soon become known as Silicon Valley, that he had invested some time ago in buying and renovating spacious condo real estate in Orange County.

He hadn’t been to this property in several years. Even Alfred had visited more often on vacation. He had once employed a housekeeper full-time to keep an eye on the place year-round; eventually, he let them go once he found a responsible enough party to pass it off to. The understanding, of course, was that Bruce could pop in at any point, so he opened the door with some trepidation, not sure if he would find the house empty or not.

It was empty, but lived in, nonetheless. Someone had been there fairly recently, too. Bruce left his bags by the door as he did a sweep through his new quarters. Living room, kitchen, bedroom, bath, den, patio: all were clear. He felt he could relax at that, and decompressed after near two hours on the road.

He left his bags at the door and made his way to the building’s lower level. There was no need for basements in California, so building this ‘Satellite’ Cave had been a chore, but he was glad he went through the trouble. It was worth it, whether he found Vic Stone or not.

Bruce lifted the head of a bust near the loveseat and pushed a hidden button that revealed a keypad and optic scanner, both of which he used. These actions earned him a buzzer and a spoken electronic message.

“Access Denied.”


“Voice Confirmation Required.”

“Martha.”

“Confirmation Accepted. System Override Complete. Welcome, Bruce Wayne.”

The seemingly stationary bookcase bisected itself and slid to either side to reveal a computer hub with several screens not unlike what he had back in Gotham. Off to the left, a blank space of wall opened up to reveal an armored suit. It was lighter than the one he normally used, but strange environments often called for adaptation.

Bruce was about to pull a chair up to the computer bay to begin his investigation when his attention was grabbed by a single piece of paper. It appeared to be taped to the case of the suit, so he walked over to inspect it. His discovery was a message from the property’s keeper.

A little birdie told me you might be heading this way, so I tidied up for you. Don’t drink all the juice pouches!

~ NW

Bruce felt the left side of his mouth curl up. One of these days he might just give up on surprises.
Social media had been the first place to look despite the slim chance for success. Logically, why would the son of a scientist, gone incognito, post anything online? Still, he checked, because it was a thing people did. He found no corresponding pictures and saw no reports of a metal man running around LA County. What he did come across, eventually, was a tribute page to former football player, Victor Stone.

Bruce did some digging after that and found tape on his play. Before the accident, whatever it was, Victor had been a quarterback. A pretty good one. Seeing that he was an athlete had given him a starting point. Victor would want an outlet for that ability – despite his prosthetics.

That hunch lead to Bruce exploring the city for the better part of two days. Tracks, pools, courts and fields of different varieties were all potential landing spots. After another day of this, he settled on searching the gyms. Partly to look, but also to train.

If any of the patrons were ever taken aback by the affluent-looking fellow casually benching three bills unassisted, they dared not say. He had come to this gym last. It was a skip away from downtown and attracted college students like fruit flies. He didn’t have anything against college kids, but there was an odd paranoia he couldn’t shake that Barry Allen would appear at any moment.

Bruce racked the weights and sat up on the bench. His hair was still fully dark from when he arrived, and he had let his face accumulate several days’ worth of fuzz. It could hardly be called a disguise. Anyone who looked hard enough might pick him out in a crowd, but he was on the wrong coast for that. Bruce was famous, but not that famous. Only people in the valley who tracked Fortune 500 companies every waking moment would even care that Bruce Wayne had walked into their establishment. A group of kids training for their next CrossFit meet surely wouldn’t give two shits and that’s how he liked it. For a moment, he lingered on the bench and enjoyed the silence.

“Stone! What’s up!”

Bruce turned his head toward the entrance and saw two men walk in. The first was a blonde boy, short and small in stature. The second was a dead ringer for Victor Stone. That is – Victor Stone pre-accident.

No doubt it was him, but it was human him. No biomechatronic parts to be seen. He looked like he could take a snap later that night, but he climbed into the sparring cage instead, letting his shorter friend assist him with pulling on a pair of light gloves.

Bruce rose from his seat and starting walking across the room. The whole time he was drafting up an alibi in his mind. There was no Bruce Wayne. He was a stranger to begin with and Victor Stone had no reason to care what he had to say. There was also no saying ‘Hey, me and my Immortal Warrior Princess friend would like you to join our secret club, please.’

He drifted to the open cage door and watched Victor striking two pads held up by his friend. He had power, clearly, but his form was lacking.

“Pardon me for saying so my young friend, but, perhaps if you shifted your back leg more toward center mass?”

Bruce had affected a vague European accent and it got Stone’s attention well enough. Rather than
disregard the unwanted advice he did as he was told, shifted his weight, and punched again. The short boy was sent back almost a foot by the newfound power. Stone eyed Bruce carefully.

“Thanks for the tip.”

“It is my pleasure.”

“They call me Stone.”

Bruce stepped through the door and shook Stone’s hand. “I am Alexei. I have come to your wonderful country on vacation.”

“Ha! Well you picked the right place.”

“Yeah! Isn’t it like a million degrees below zero where you’re from right now?”

“This is Garfield, by the way.”

“’Sup, brah!”

“I am pleased to meet you, as well, friend.” Bruce paused to consider something. “Would you prefer to be known as ‘they’ instead of ‘he’?”

The two exchanged a look and Garfield answered Bruce with a nod and smile.

“Actually, yeah. How’d you guess, dude?”

“Things are…different where I come from. But, I understand that we live in a new era, and certain things must be acknowledged.”

Garfield leaned toward Victor and whispered, a bit too loudly, “This old guy’s pretty good – Hey!” That comment earned an elbow to Garfield’s ribs.

“Don’t mind him. Hasn’t been fed yet.” Garfield stuck his tongue out at his friend, but said nothing.

“Hey,” Victor continued, “wanna spar?”

“Oh. Me?”

“Yeahhhh. I can see your handiwork over there on the bench still. Not too shabby.”

“I don’t know, Vic,” Garfield said, skeptically, “You’ve already beat everybody in here a few times over.”

“Exactly. I need some fresh blood. How ‘bout it, Alexei?”

“Yes, alright. I suppose more exercise would not hurt.”

“Hold up. Wanna lose the specs first?”

Ah, that’s right. In his haste, he had forgotten about the GUNNARS he wore that day. They had been used for daytime travel mostly. He simply forgot to remove them. Being that they were ‘terribly expensive’ glasses (as she would say), it would have been wise for Bruce take them off, but he was playing a character, and it wasn’t like he couldn’t afford another pair.

“I think I will keep them on, thanks. California is very bright.”
“Fine with me,” Victor said with a shrug.

Bruce accepted a pair of gloves from Garfield, who stepped outside and closed the door. He had only ever seen Victor as a football player. He had no idea what to expect from him as a fighter. He need not wait long, as Victor charged him arms first. Bruce was much taller, but Vic was wide and stocky. Soon enough, he found himself squashed against the back edge of the cage. Vic feigned a follow-up blow, stopped to pat Bruce on the chest.

He turned his gaze down at that. So much for holding back.

Bruce moved forward with purpose, which Vic must have noticed, as he tried to shoot the half. Bruce dropped down immediately held him in a front face lock. Bruce was tall and heavy. Advanced biometrics or not, it would be near impossible for Vic to maneuver from underneath him without the proper leverage. Bruce waited for him to realize this, patted him on the shoulder, and rose to his feet.

A few people had gathered around them. It looked like he was increasing his class size exponentially.

Victor sprang to his feet and tried to overwhelm Bruce with a flurry of strikes (so much for sparring). He parried every punch and then tried a quick counter-blow that would’ve tagged any normal man. Vic was not a normal man, so he dodged it, using the momentum to flip Bruce over his hip.

Bruce was a normal man, but he was an experienced one. He landed on his feet – still holding fast to Vic’s arm – where he pulled him into a Ura-nage hold and slammed him hard onto the mat. The entire gym fell silent and now every pair of eyes was turned toward the match. Bruce looked at them, then down at his opponent, who was frozen in shock.

“Only in the movies, friend.”

Victor kipped up and came at him again with renewed vigor. A quick reminder that the kid was in his early 20’s. Vic was faster but erratic and the blows were easily tracked. His frustration mounted with every punch that met air.

“Quit movin’! This ain’t ballet!”

Bruce did as he was told. He caught Vic’s left wrist and swung it high above his head, coming down with a knife-edge strike to the solar plexus, following up in one motion with a broadside strike to the nape of his neck as his legs were swept out.

Vic hit the mat again, hands and knees, and looked up to Bruce, who had his hand extended. Vic didn’t look angry or embarrassed. No, after a moment, he almost looked impressed and accepted the hand to work his way back up. The crowd that had gathered began to clap for the two.

Bruce, still in character, looked directly at Victor when he spoke.

“Always remember, friend. Train smarter, not harder. I have been doing this for some time, and it makes all the difference. You are pretty good. But I’m better.”

He left the cage and bumped into Garfield, who smiled. Bruce returned that smile as he dropped his tracer into the boy’s open backpack. He’d have to count on the two of them being roommates, which wasn’t outlandish to assume. He collected his things and walked outside to his car. He was looking forward to catching up on rest, because he was still in California and even though it was practically seven, it probably wouldn’t get dark for another four hours.
Batman had a lot of time to think about why he did what he did in a place like Jump City.

He had never been crazy about the idea of going on patrol in Southern California and from the first hour it was clear why. Many of the buildings were spread over a wide area. Like if someone had unstacked Gotham and replaced the buildings over a 20-mile radius. He ended up downtown where the buildings were tall and the shadows were plenty, which was good, for a time.

Jump City reminded him of Metropolis in that way. Too sparkly. Too well lit. And even though he’d rather not think about the implications of this thought process: it was too safe for his liking. Not that he wasn’t looking forward to the day when Gotham outgrew its need for Batman, he just wasn’t used to being in a place that was already halfway there. He didn’t do this because he wanted to; he did it because he was Batman. It was who he always was, who he’d always been. Ever since that night.

Finding a vacant high-rise patio (because there were no stone fixtures present), Batman activated the tracker with his gauntlet and brought up its position in the HUD of his cowl. It was moving, which meant one of two things: Victor was borrowing his friend’s backpack or he had brought Garfield with him. The latter possibility didn’t sit well with him, so he leaped off the building and began to track the target.

The tracker lead him to a 24-hour convenience store: the dingiest thing he’d seen in this city so far. The automatic doors were wide open, partly to let in the warm evening air, but also to give the lookout man a clear path.

There was no Detective Mode in this cowl, but Batman could see clearly enough. Multiple assailants, most likely all armed, several hostages including the cashier. It made sense, robbing a dive like this one. No security, broken camera, frequented by college students: there would be no reason to expect any resistance on a job like this. Not right away, at least.

Ready to pounce from his perch across the way, he stopped once he noticed a hooded figure approaching the store. A bright red light was visible from above, which revealed Victor Stone as the Cyborg he was. If there was more time, he’d have considered possibilities as to how the young man had come to him earlier that day as a regular human. He didn’t have time, though, as Victor was quickly approaching the front steps of the store, hands deep in his pockets.

“Hey, buddy, store’s closed.”

“Looks open to me.”

“Hours changed. Get bent.”

It seemed like Victor was considering that, turning away slightly, before he made a sharp pivot and punched the man in his chest, sending him flying into the nearby alley. What the kid lacked in subtlety he made up for in effectiveness.

Victor stomped into the doorway and produced what appeared to be a cannon from his arm, pointing it at the man in front of the counter.

“Imma need you to step back from the cash box reaaaal slow.”

A second man appeared from behind him and pulled his hood down. Sloppy, but what more could
“How ‘bout you shut your mouth and put your fuckin’ hands up, freak?”

Batman didn’t know how many more were inside, but it didn’t matter. He had to move before anyone got hurt. He stepped off his ledge and glided down to the open doorway, extending his feet outward and knocking the man over into his partner.

“Move!”

Batman side-stepped Victor and threw a Batarang down an aisle to disarm one of the attackers. Victor aimed his cannon down another aisle and unleashed what appeared to be a sonic blast, sending another masked man back through the glass door into the beverages behind it.

“Start running and don’t look back!”

Victor was urgent in his order, not that it was needed, as the four terrified patrons sprinted for the door and fled into the night.

Batman neutralized the man in front of him before he could retrieve his firearm and then had to reverse course as another appeared from over the top of the shelf. He grabbed the man’s wrist and squeezed until he heard a pop, causing him to drop his gun with a yelp, after which he grabbed the upper arm and flung him head first onto the hard tile below.

“No more guns.”

Victor looked after the vigilante in a sort of awe as he picked up his Batarang. Realization struck as he said, “It’s you.”

“Не двигайся!”

It was the lead man from earlier; he hadn’t been knocked unconscious and he was Russian, which lead Batman to believe that this was a notch above an average stick up. He was pointing his 9mm in their direction and Batman was already thinking of two different ways to take him down. Before he could think further, he heard barking, of all things. Sure enough, a large dog came streaming in – a green dog – to grab hold of the Russian’s off-hand, trying to wrestle him to the ground.

Batman glanced to the Batarang in his hand and then to the gun that was hanging haphazardly. He threw the razor-sharp projectile as hard as he could and heard the man scream as it pierced his hand and embedded itself into the wall behind him. The gun dropped with a clatter and the Doberman, green fur and all, came running up to Victor.

“Gar, what are you doing here?” The dog answered with a bark. “I told you to stay back!” That outburst earned a whine from the dog, who sat down, apologetic.

Batman waved him off, stepped forward, and leaned down to pet the dog, who perked up at the contact.

“Good dog.” Garfield wagged his tail. “Go outside and keep watch. Let us know if someone’s coming.” The dog barked a salute and bounded out into the balmy night air. Victor shot an accusing glance as Batman made for the Russian pinned to the wall.

“I had it handled!”

“I could tell.”
Batman stood in front of the Russian and eyed his injured hand. A bit more roughly than necessary, he pulled his sleeve down and took note of a very particular tattoo.

“KGBeast. You work for him, but he’s not your boss. Who does he answer to?”

“Отправляйся!”

“Wrong answer.”

Batman grabbed the Batarang and slowly inched downward through the flesh of his palm, producing a terrible scream.

“Who?”

“Thunder…Corp.”

“Спасибо.”

The man was knocked out and Batman retrieved his Batarang, using the man’s own shirt to wipe it clean of his blood. Victor kept his one red eye on him as he backed his way out of the door.

“I’ll see you up top.”

There was a whirring sound and then the telltale sign of propulsion as the Cyborg lifted off the ground with the aid of boosters in his feet and arms. Batman then saw the dog transform into a bird – equally as green – and fly up into the skyline as well.

----------------------------

Up on a rooftop in the greater Los Angeles area is not where the Dark Knight figured this conversation would be taking place, but there weren’t very many things about this job that could be called typical.

Vic seemed unsure of what to say or how to approach him – or if to approach him. He seemed more than content with letting Batman type away on his wrist-mounted tablet, logging the details of everything that happened that night. He would talk to the kid eventually, but right now he was focusing on separating the digital display of his HUD from the endless stream of neon and headlights down below.

“I heard about you,” Vic finally said after a time. “Didn’t think you were real.”

Batman answered without looking up, “I’m real when it’s useful.”

“Yeah. He said you’d say that.”

Batman looked up this time. “He?”

Vic nodded. “The Bossman, that is.”

“You have a boss?”

“He doesn’t really like that word, but he acts like one.”
“Hm. Was he the one who taught you about reckless endangerment?”

Vic thought about it, then smiled. “Guess you could say that.”

If Batman’s hunch was right, Alfred might owe him $5. Victor continued talking.

“Anyway, he dismissed the team for an indefinite leave.”

“A disbandment.”

“We like to think of it as Winter Break.”

“In California?”

“No. One of my teammates went back to their home planet. Another went back to their home dimension.”

“And your boss?”

“On hiatus.”

“No such thing.”

“Sure there is. Even I don’t wanna fight all the time. And when I don’t…”

Victor procured a plain-looking ring from his pocket and slipped it on his finger. In a matter of moments, he was a Cyborg no more; a single band of light traveled the length of his frame and transformed him into Victor Stone: Human Male.

“Pretty tight, huh? Tag-teamed on this with the top guy. My little green partner has one, too, for when they’re not in NatGeo Mode. It’s not the same but…it feels good to not have to worry about people looking at us like that.”

“So you don’t always fight. But you want to right now?”

“I’m not a paraplegic, man. I don’t mind my friends having their space, but sometimes-”

“You want to do something important.”

“Or useful,” Victor said, as he pointed a look in the Bat’s direction.

“Want to make yourself useful? Take this.” Batman threw Victor (once again a Cyborg) a small device similar to the one he had given Barry. His red eye flashed and a current surged through his body before he tossed the phone back.

“Got it.”

Batman grunted his affirmation. “We’ll be in touch. Sooner rather than later.” He was at the edge when Victor called after him.

“Want me to leave a message?”

Batman turned to face him.

“Yes. Buy more juice pouches.”
“Mmm! Mrs. Kent-! This pie is otherworldly!”

“How many times do I have ta tell ya? Call me Martha!”

Lois Lane was in a diner in Smallville, Kansas. The lobby had closed a while ago, but Ma Kent had seen fit to hold her after hours to serve her the house specialty – her own secret recipe. Lois offered to help close up the rest of the shop as repayment but Martha would hear none of it. The older woman had just finished washing the dishes, which was the last order of business.

“OK, Martha, but I really wish you’d let me do something. I don’t feel right having you make me food for free.”

“Nonsense, darlin’, it’s the Holidays!”

“Exactly why-mm!-I should be waiting on you.”

“No, no, you’re the guest! Already got somebody to wait on me.” She placed the last dish on the drying rack and then put a hand on her hip. “Speaking of, where is that boy of mine?”

Lois pushed the platter away as she finished her dessert. “There was a massive landslide in southern China – 91 people missing. He’s helping crews excavate and look for survivors. Said it might be a 2-day job.”

Martha nodded as she took the empty plate off the counter. “China’s a big place. Even for Superman.”

“Yeah…”

“Lois, hon, it’ll be alright. He’s dealt with a lot worse than a lil’ dirt.”

“It’s not Clark I’m worried about. It’s everyone else.”

“Everyone, you say?”

“You know, everyone,” Lois gestured with her hands. “What if another landslide happens or, God forbid, more people end up dead? People are so ready to blame him for every bad thing that happens. I don’t want him to get discouraged by it.”

“Look here, young lady, he may have been born a Kryptonian, but we raised a Kent. His spirit is not somethin’ you need to worry about.”

“Mm. Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right! Besides, Clark’s gonna have more important things to deal with in the near future.”

Martha covered her mouth with a start, as if she’d given up some pertinent information. Lois, a reporter, picked up on this and grinned slyly at her from across the counter.

“The near future, you say?”

Martha began laughing. “Oh, shoot! My big mouth, again! Go on and get back to the house so you
can get cleaned up for dinner.”

“But—

“Go on, shoo! I’ve gotta count today’s earnin’s, yet. Out with ya!”

Lois was indeed shooed out, smiling the whole way. It certainly wasn’t the first time she had been kicked out of a place, but never under such friendly circumstances. The diner had been much busier when she arrived so she had been forced to park in the lot next door. It shouldn’t have been a problem. Shouldn’t have been.

Lois was, regardless, unsurprised to hear footfalls behind her. Even here in Smallville, the story rarely changed. Powers or no powers, this was one thing Clark would never have to worry about – being followed back to your vehicle as a supposed easy target. She reached into her purse and pushed a button on the key fob to unlock the rental. As she made to open the door, she had to move her hand quickly as it was roughly closed for her.

“May I help y-”

The words died on her lips as she came face-to-face with a large and imposing bald man with a number of conspicuous tattoos. In an instant, she recognized him as one of the men from that day in Nairobi and without thinking went for the taser in her purse.

She felt a strong pair of arms wrap around her, pinning her arms to her side. The bald man began to close the distance between them. Lois was no fighter, but she knew enough not to be strung up. She wormed around enough to extend her hand, letting Creep #1 run into the taser. Creep #2 tightened his grip, causing her to drop the contents in her hands. She pushed her bottom back to create separation and then stomped as hard as she could on his foot, hearing a crack that she sincerely hoped resulted in at least one broken fucking toe. He let her go and she turned, grabbing onto his coat and with as much force as her body could supply, drove her knee hard into his groin. The wheezing sound he made as he crumpled to the ground was delightful.

She heard another sound, then. A struggle from behind the diner, as she turned to see Martha being dragged away by more men into a black SUV. Her mind was scrambling. Did she go to help her? No. That was foolish, there were too many. She needed to get into the car and go. Find somebody, call the police, get help. It’s what she would’ve done if there wasn’t another blacked-out SUV blocking her car’s escape.

The first two men were still on the ground, so she scooped up her purse and did the next best thing she could think of – run. Run hard and fast and far. Get to someone’s house. Get to someone’s shop. Hunker down and call the cops. No, before that even. She needed to call Cl-

All of Smallville got flipped upside down as Lois felt her feet leave the ground. She didn’t remember hitting the ground – or feeling the ground – as dots spotted her vision. She felt herself being lifted and her eyesight became clear enough to see the man in front of her. It was the leader of the raid in Africa. What had Batman called him? Knyazev? He was leering at her and she wanted so badly to unload every curse she knew but she felt herself fading into unconsciousness.

She focused the last of her energy as she said, “he’ll…come for us…”

Knyazev nodded, agreeing. “We are counting on it.”

Chapter End Notes
Things are all at once coming together and falling apart for our heroes. Until the next episode. Same Bat Time, Same Bat Place.

[Chapter revised on 10/17/17]
Waking from a nightmare was never as dramatic as the movies would make it seem. No gasping for breath, no screams in the night; it was more akin to being jostled awake in a moving vehicle, if anything. For Bruce - who didn’t sleep well to begin with - it was one annoyance on top of many.

He didn’t open his eyes as he startled himself awake. He didn’t move, just laid still and slowly became aware of the dark room around him. He was aware of something else, too, but it was hardly a surprise. Thanks to his training, Bruce didn’t need his vision to know when someone was watching him. He especially didn’t need it to know when she was watching.

“You’re staring, Princess.”

He opened one eye and, sure enough, Diana of Themyscira was peering through the darkness, perched on a chair near his nightstand, one leg tucked underneath her.

“You were having a nightmare.”

He answered with a huff and became aware all at once of his shirt, which had been soaked through with sweat. Kicking off the lone sheet, he sat up in his bed and looked over to Diana, who was resting her head on the back of the chair. Even in a dark, unlit room she was stunning.

“You ever have nightmares?”

“Sometimes.”

Bruce swung his legs to the floor and removed his shirt, suddenly feeling sticky and clammy despite the fact that the heat wasn’t on and it was December outside. He exited his room and padded the short distance to the couch, where he plopped down.

With eyes closed, he let the open air of his living room cool him for a moment. In his head, he heard Alfred scolding him about Manners, Master Wayne! and he opened his eyes again to see if Diana had followed him out. He was starting to wonder if she had simply commandeered his mattress until he saw her floating down onto the couch beside him.

There was a stream of light from the full moon spilling in through the bay windows onto the couch where Diana was sitting. If Bruce hadn’t been watching, it’d be easy to assume she had just slid down from the night sky straight into his house.

“I ran into one of Knyazev’s men in Jump City.”

Diana said nothing to that. She could never be called chatty to begin with, but she seemed oddly subdued in that moment. Bruce continued.

“I’ve got an idea, but it’s not concrete. I’ll need your help on one more job.”

If he was expecting an answer, he didn’t get one. There was no indication she had heard him at all; he thought about repeating himself when he tracked her eyes to his exposed torso. How quickly he forgot. At the least, he was thankful there was no need to explain the scars to her. She had been a soldier once. She knew the marks of war when she saw them. Still, he felt unusually self-conscious
with her eyes on him.

“Did Steve look like this?”

She shook her head slowly. Not much chance for a pilot to get scratched up, he supposed. She was inching towards him then and he clenched his jaw soundlessly. He felt more than saw her reaching out to him. This was so very dangerous, but he did nothing to stop her.

Diana knitted her brow as she ran the palm of her hand up and down the length of a scar on his left arm. Bruce took in a breath he forgot he was holding as a very particular memory came rushing back to him.

“That was my first night of patrol,” he said in a scoff. “Three punks on a fire escape, 20 floors up, making off with a CRT. I was a punk, too. Young, sloppy, lucky as hell. If Alfred knew even half of what happened that night…”

He saw Diana’s lips turn up at mention of Alfred, only to straighten out again when she began to trace another scar. This one was near his ribcage. She only used two fingers to follow the length of it downward. He closed his eyes again; her touch was searing.

“Cobblepot. Fought him in the Iceberg Lounge, and I use that term ‘fought’ very loosely. Mostly just him throwing shit at me.”

She kept her face neutral and it unnerved him greatly. How handy it would’ve been for him to be the mind-reader. But he wasn’t, so he said nothing also as Diana slid her hand up from his side to the top of his pectoral.

She was studying one of the more pronounced scars on him. Remnants of a second-degree burn that took the better part of 7 months to fully heal. He didn’t tell her the story behind this one, because goddamn if he could remember what it was. Any memory he tried to drudge up was murky and distant. Instead he focused on her hand on the warped skin.

It was a case of supreme irony. Someone with the power to pound concrete into dust being so gentle. He thought about what it must be like, living among normal people with such power at your disposal. Always walking on eggshells because everything was eggshells. He wondered if it was the same for-

Bruce snapped his head to his left; Diana was sitting back now, looking at him, still silent. Why hadn’t he realized before?

“It was you,” he whispered. That much was obvious, so he clarified. “It was you. That night at Luthor’s estate and before that in the Port. You knew.”

Diana confirmed this without words. In truth, Bruce had dealt with a sinking feeling of dread on Halloween Night that he would likely never see that strange woman (or his drive) again, and how different would things have turned out if that had been the case?

“But…you never said anything.”

“I had to be certain.”

“Of what?”

All too swiftly, she rose from her seat and walked to the far side of the living area. Bruce strained his eyes to see what she was doing until he saw her walking back with her duffle bag in hand. She was
looking for something as she was approaching and eventually stopped and sat down on the floor to more properly search its contents. When she found what she was looking for, she rose and sat back down beside him.

“I remember how I felt when I left home. The feeling that one person could change the world – bend it to their will. I wanted to save the world but the closer I got, the more I saw the darkness within. Not unlike the darkness I saw in you. But there is beauty in this world, as well, Bruce. So much. I have seen it in my travels. I had to be certain, before I left, that there would be someone who was able to protect it.”

Bruce felt a small piece of plastic being placed into his hand. He looked down and saw-

“A watch?”

“Steven’s watch.”

Bruce was already pushing it away, shaking his head.

“Diana, no. I can’t.”

“You can,” she said warmly. “You will.”

As if to confirm this, she fastened the watch to his wrist. She shrugged as he appraised it.

“I’m afraid it stopped working some time ago.”

“Why are you giving me this?”

He saw Diana sigh as she brought her legs up onto the cushion she was seated on.

“Before Steven left in that plane, he gave me that watch and took a piece of my soul with him. In the moments that followed, I saw clearly thousands of men and their capacity to maim one another. But I also saw one man sacrifice his own life to save millions more. Steven Trevor overcame the fear and darkness in his heart to do something heroic. I see the same potential in you and in Kal-El, as well.”

Bruce stared at the watch, stricken silent.

“That’s why I’m giving you this. So that in your moments of doubt you may remember our deed that day and remember the task you have been given. Barry, Arthur, Victor: you will lead them and protect this world I have come to love. Even when I cannot.”

Bruce looked up from the watch to see that Diana was staring at it, too – obviously a long way from Gotham.

“He’d want you to keep this.”

She shook her head. “What I do is not up to him. You aren’t the only one who must learn to let go.”

And how had he missed that?

Diana was leaning her head against his shoulder, hugging her knees to her chest. He didn’t need clairvoyance to get the picture. Diana was tired. Not like the tired they would be from being up at 3:15 AM, but the tired that Bruce felt on his worst days. The tired that dipped into your bone marrow. The tired that came from surviving a war and then seeing another, and another after that – and another after that.
It was bad luck on her part. She needed someone who could properly reciprocate but, sadly, all she had was Bruce Wayne. He had never, in any instance, been good at being emotionally present. Still. No one made him feel like Diana did. Hell, no one made him feel period. Even if he sucked at this, he figured he should try.

He lifted his arm and draped it around her shoulders. She leaned further into him and let her eyes slide closed. Maybe she was actually tired, too. Bruce felt the warmth again, not overpowering like the day before, but it was there. He began thinking about how he could get up without waking her when she spoke.

“What is your idea?”

Bruce hummed in recollection. “ThunderCorp. I think Diana Prince should pay them a visit.”

Diana opened her eyes and ran her thumb across the watch. “Will Bruce Wayne be joining her?”

“Not Bruce Wayne.”

“Very well. You will need help on this mission.”

“And?”

She looked up at him, smiling. “You are a terrible spy.”

Bruce smiled, too, fully. “Damn right.”

Diana spent the car ride over rehearsing.

It had been about a week since she got back from her trip and in that time, there had been very few things concerning work she had to deal with. Most of that time had been spent watching TV with Alfred or researching open cases with Bruce. She had spent decidedly more time as Diana than Ms. Prince, but she always found that this skin was easy enough to slip back into with time.

It was Diana Prince she saw in her compact mirror, hair done up high and tight, as the dark town car worked its way through downtown Metropolis. Alfred Pennyworth was in the driver’s seat and Bruce Wayne was somewhere high above them, even though there was significant daylight left.

“Before we arrive,” Alfred said, “let’s test the links, shall we?” Alfred put a hand up to his ear. “Miss Diana can you hear me?”

“I can.”

“Excellent. Master Wayne?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Jolly good, then.” Alfred made eye contact with her in the rear-view mirror and she saw something like nervousness flash across his face. “I know this goes without saying but I do hope you’ll be careful.”
Diana would normally rebuke such a notion, but these were not normal circumstances.

“You do not have to worry, Alfred.”

“That’s right,” Bruce added, “I’ll be there the whole time.”

“On the contrary, Master Wayne, it is you that I worry for.”

She could picture Bruce rolling his eyes from the car. “Always good to have you in the field, Alfred.”

“I’m only being practical, sir. After all, you aren’t as spry as you once were.”

Alfred gave a wink in the mirror and she had to work to keep from laughing into the mic. When she was forced to leave Gotham for good, she felt like she’d miss these moments most of all. Down the street, she could see a large building of plate glass and steel, with a ThunderCorp logo adorning the side. Alfred cleared his throat as a serious edge returned to the vehicle.

“Let’s cover this one more time.” It was Bruce, but he sounded much different, which meant that he was now in a very ‘professional’ state of mind. Alfred nodded to himself.

“Very well. Miss Diana will meet with the head of ThunderCorp as scheduled and attempt to glean his true motives. You will infiltrate the building from above and find their server bank, where you will mine whatever intelligence you can. ThunderCorp is working with the Russian and his men. We need to find out why.”

“Copy that.”

“Good luck, sir, and do try to keep up. Miss Diana can’t be expected to do everything.”

“Thanks, Alfred.”

Bruce muted his mic after that and Diana gave Alfred a smile as they rode in silence to the front of the building. Alfred parked on the curb and walked around the back of the car to open Diana’s door and help her out.

“Have a good show, Miss.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Appearances were important in Man’s World, so she was silently thankful to Alfred for giving a steady push to get things started. No doubt it was Diana Prince walking through the large revolving door of ThunderCorp HQ, as the few people left in the lobby all turned to see her walking up to the front desk. The man working there, once terribly blasé, found renewed and immediate interest when he looked up and saw her standing there.

“Excuse me, sir. My name is Diana Prince. I am here for an appointment.”

She was speaking with a velvety clip to her voice. A practiced rhythm that had gained her access to some of the most exclusive places, including a charity gala where she happened upon one of Gotham’s elite. She knew Bruce was listening, even if he wasn’t Bruce right now. She wondered if, for a moment, he was recalling the same scene she was.

“Please, Ms. Prince. Your appointment is at 4 O’clock. May I confirm that?”

The desk clerk grabbed his notebook with a start. “Oh! Yes, uh, let me confirm that. Ah, Ms. Prince, of course! 4 O’clock. You can use that elevator over there. It’ll take you directly to the penthouse.”

“Thank you.”
She crossed the lobby floor and entered said elevator; it was separate from the others. It must have been reserved for special use, because there were only five buttons to press. She pressed the button marked with a P and watched the doors slide shut. It wasn’t until she started moving that she heard Batman in her ear.

“I’m in.”

“Good. I am on my way now to meet with the head of this…ThunderCorp.”

“Be on guard. He knows you’re coming and we don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“I am Diana of Themyscira. There is nothing beyond these doors that I cannot handle.”

“That’s why you’re on the job.”

Perhaps there was an extra meaning layered to that statement but it was no less true. Diana had done this before and she had, quite literally, been baptized by fire. As the elevator came to a stop, she walked across the way to two large, frosted glass doors. She decided there was nothing on the other side that would surprise her. When she walked through, she heard her mother chiding her about presumptive expectations.

“Good Evening, Mr. Luthor.”

The man turned to face her with a smile no more genuine than hers. Focus would be key these next several minutes.

“Diana Prince, welcome! Haven’t seen you since the benefit on Halloween. I do hope you enjoyed the evening.”

Diana nodded, despite herself. “I did, yes.”

“Oh, good!” There was a saccharine sweetness to his tone and it was beginning to carve at her patience. “I wouldn’t want anyone to leave disappointed.”

Diana slanted her eyes to his position, seated in a large chair, as he swiveled around to look out the large window, high into the Metropolis skyline. She lingered near the large, oaken desk and peered outside. A clear view of everything: is this what he saw when-

“So! What brings you to my side of the hub, hm?”

Diana thought about it a second too long, but answered anyway. “I am here to meet with the owner of this company.”

Lex beamed at that: throwing his arms in the air, giving his chair a full spin. “I am what I am.”

“I was not aware ThunderCorp belonged to you.”

“Yes, ThunderCorp is mine, just like Metropolis is mine.”

“And, what is it that you do here?”

Lex leaned forward onto his desk, engaged. “Work. Is that why you’re here today, Ms. Prince?”

Diana runs a hand up the sleeve of her blazer. “Perhaps you should tell me, Mr. Luthor.”

Lex waved his index finger as he popped out of his chair. He reaches below the desk and pulls out a
tablet docked to a keyboard. He turns the device toward her so that she can see the picture displayed upon it. Her picture. It was Steven, herself, and their band of covert warriors.

“I asked you first!”

Diana fiddled with her earpiece, focused on the sound of breathing on the other end of the frequency. It calmed her.

“Is this your business then, Luthor? Stealing what isn’t yours?”

“My business, Diana Prince, is making a better tomorrow, today. The only way to plan for the future, is to better understand the past.”

“Not everything is meant to be understood.”

“That, I’m afraid, is where I must disagree.”

Lex moves from around the desk and makes a show of walking to the center of the room. Diana keeps her eyes on him, doesn’t let her back get turned.

“I found that picture after some digging in the Library of Congress just up the road. A little Belgium village called Veld, hear it’s great this time of year. Numerous stories have been archived about the day before the armistice about a lone warrior crossing No Man’s Land and liberating the town from German control. A woman of wonder who freed the people from a year of occupation. Of course, it turned out to be little more than a bedtime story. A tall tale to spare those who don’t know how much their people truly suffered…when the gas hit.”

He had paused for effect when he said that and bared his teeth in a way that was too feral to be called a smile.

Diana was close to shaking. She remembered the absolute devastation; how useless and foolish she had felt. To expend so much time and energy, put her friends in danger, to save one tiny village that hadn’t even survived the next night. All the lives lost: the elderly, the women, the children.

“What do you want?”

“Just a little tenderness.”

Lex clapped his hands and into the room entered a small, blonde woman carrying a covered platter. She was dressed in clothes one would expect of a servant – clothes that Alfred had never been made to wear. Diana crossed her arms. No more games.

“It is my understanding, Mr. Luthor, that you are in contact with some very unsavory people.”

Lex, for his part, barked a soundless laugh at the notion. “What a fascinating string of words.” He walked behind the woman, who was staring ahead motionless, and trailed his hand along the underside of her bob haircut.

“How is Bruce, by the way?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Bruce Wayne. I believe you made his acquaintance at the party. Seemed as though you two hit it off.”

“I-” wouldn’t know, is what she wanted to say, but then that’s what he wanted, wasn’t it? Diana
wasn’t a fool and it didn’t hurt that Bruce had told her about such things. Curled up on his couch, telling her to go with the assumptions people make about you. It was such a cynical thing to hear, but it made sense in its own perverse context.

People, on reflex, would project onto you whatever it was that suited their current need. Lex Luthor was trying to catch her in a lie, trap her in a corner. She would not be boxed in. She collected herself and answered:

“He is doing well.”

Lex seemed surprised at that answer. “Really?”

“Mr. Wayne and I convened after that night to discuss mutual interests, but I have not seen him since. Our work keeps us busy, you understand.”

“I understand more than you know.”

Lex removed the lid from the platter (which he placed upon the woman’s head) to reveal a pistol and its magazine. Diana felt the grip of worry without warning.

“We don’t have to dance around this anymore, Diana. I know he’s here.” He punctuated his sentence by loading the magazine into the gun.

Diana leaned forward, putting every ounce of condescension into her posture, forcing her anxiety back. When she spoke, she cooed at him like the child he was. “Who is here, Lex?”

She could feel his composure slipping bit by bit. A battle of will was not one Diana would lose.

“Your partner in crime, and I do mean ‘crime.’ Prancing around my house like fools stealing my data and you have the gall to try it a second time?”

He punctuated this statement by clicking off the safety and pulling back the slide stop to load a round. Diana felt for the bracelets hidden underneath her sleeves. A reminder: she could neutralize any direct threat to her person, but her friend still needed her assistance.

Diana stepped back – not too far back – and raised a single elegant eyebrow.

“I have not seen Bruce Wayne in almost a month.”

“No, ma’am, you haven’t been seen with Bruce Wayne in almost a month. Do you expect me to believe you two haven’t spoken at all? A man like him?”

Diana turned her nose up at both ends of that implication. “You may believe what you want. Mr. Wayne does not make my schedule.”

“Why don’t we see how true that is?”

Lex crossed the room, gun still in hand, and punched a series of numbers on a keypad which opened a hidden door into what the LED lights and cool air would suggest was the server room. Not unlike the one where she ran into Bruce. That night this whole crazy experience began for them. Diana closed her eyes to remember. Lex must have taken it for something else.

“Surprised? That’s the thing about us smart guys: always covering our backside! So, what say we play a game? You’re familiar with Hide-n-Seek?” Diana says nothing. “Of course you are! Well, this is how the Lex Version will be played. If I find that muscle-bound, self-important, lunk, I get to paint
my CPU’s with his grey matter! If I don’t, you get to ask me one question about absolutely anything! Deal?"

Lex doesn’t wait for her answer as he turns into the room and tries the light. Perhaps predictably, it does not come on. Lex makes a dart back toward the desk drawer and produces a large flashlight, which he turns on and holds parallel to the gun in his other hand.

“Don’t be like that, Bruce! I only want to play!”

“I’m fine, Diana,” she heard through her earpiece, “but the data isn’t done transferring. I need a few more minutes. Keep him talking.”

“That will not be difficult,” she said as she walked towards the open door and, Hera help her, perhaps it was the stress of the situation, but she almost thought she heard the Bat chuckling in her ear. What a day.

Lex went on ranting into the dark for another full minute, swinging the beam of light back and forth looking for a man that would not appear. Bruce had told her of his training in Ninjutsu as well. If even half of his stories were to be believed, he may as well have been translucent.

After another few moments, Lex appeared from the dark room only to be meet by Diana, looking down on him and smiling with the sincerity of a bird of prey.

“Find your man?”

Her sarcasm was at critical mass. Obviously, Bruce was in the building and was, in fact, very close but Lex didn’t know that and as long as he didn’t, Diana was fine with embarrassing him for showing his true colors – the arrogant, unstable man she saw speaking on Halloween Night.

Lex kept his face carefully neutral as he unloaded the pistol. He placed the magazine harmlessly back on the platter and replaced its lid before he ordered his servant to leave the room. He placed the gun down on his desk and leaned heavily against it, as if he was moments from sending it flying out the window.

“I believe I have earned one question.”

His game, his rules. He relents. “Yes, you have.”

“Swing away, Princess.”

Diana wasn’t sure at first what question she should ask. She definitely knew what she wanted to say to this…person. Most of these things were very vulgar and would have earned a scolding from her mother and none of them would have aided the investigation that she was still helping to complete. She knew then what her question was.

“Anatoli Knyazev.” She observed Lex stiffen at the mention of that name and she hummed because she knows the response even before it is supplied. “This man has been seen in Gotham City. What is your business with him?”

Lex was silent then, finally, Diana thinks, except now is the part where she wants him to talk. He took his time, but Diana was patient. She could wait this out. He trailed his fingers over the grip of the gun and spoke in a low, measured voice.

“You wanna know why I own the two biggest companies this side of the continent?”
“That’s not the question I asked.”

“Humor me. Please. The payoff is well worth it. I’m sure your Gothamite friend has regaled you already about the life and styles of a Trust Fund Baby.”

“It’s not something we discussed often.”

“That’s because it’s a farce. Just because you’re good at something doesn’t mean you’re suited for it. Bruce and I are similar in that way. Think about it. Two men, two heirs: orphaned in the prime of their lives; forced as only-children to take control of multi-national conglomerates and pressured by board members to take them to new heights! Dad started saying that he named the company after his kid to impress investors at meetings. Rich old ladies and family men found it cute. ‘Write checks for Lex’!”

Luthor gestured with his hands with a bitter edge to his voice. Diana lingered by the hidden door and watched in silence.

“Dad was an immigrant. Born in East Germany, he came from nothing. His dinners were little more than stale crackers and every other Saturday, he had to march in a parade and wave flags at tyrants. The people of Metropolis have grown quite familiar with this practice.”

“I don’t understand,” Diana said, shaking her head. “What does this have to do with the Russian?”

“Oh, my! So smart and still asking the wrong questions! Anatoli is my friend but he is little more than hired muscle – a soldier of fortune, a gun for hire. The real question is, what was he hired for?”

Diana’s thoughts took her back to the Cave: Bruce and Barry standing over a strange green rock, one he said that Knyazev had been transporting.

“It’s Kryptonite, then?”

“I knew you weren’t just a pretty face. It’s true, you don’t have to make a silver bullet but if you do – well – then, you won’t have to rely upon the kindness of monsters.”

“The ones you call monsters, they have hopes and dreams. They are people, like you.”

“That is where you are wrong! There was no flying man to save me from daddy’s fists and abominations! And when the flying man did come, he buried Dad under 10 tons of rubble! A shallow grave for a shallow man. What a hero!”

“Is that what you see me as? A monster?”

Lex’s wild gaze softens into something else, not so much friendly, but unguarded.

“Ah, Dear Diana. No, of course not. You are better than they could ever hope to be. If you need to beat up some thugs, you call The Batman and, if you need something big and heavy lifted, you call Superman but you,” Lex held out his arms to his sides and Diana thought she saw emotion flash across his face, “you’re the one we call to end wars. A true Wonder Woman.”

Diana ran a hand unconsciously along the wrist where her watch used to be and her heart stuttered as images of its former owner flashed through her mind and the heat of an explosion in the sky washed over her anew.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Luthor, but Wonder Woman doesn’t exist.”
“I see. What a shame.” Lex turns his back to her and his hand lingered low to his side. Diana centered her stance.

“I suppose now I’ll have to call off the search for the Amazons’ Island Paradise. It’s not down in any map, you know? The true places never are.”

Even without her heightened Amazonian awareness, she had anticipated Lex reaching for the gun. Too much distance between them, so all she could do was lift her bracelets and watch as the round that was waiting in the chamber flew out in slow motion. The bullet was deflected back to Lex, where it struck the gun from his hand and sent it flying across the floor. His eyes were wide with shock. And then he started snickering: a man who had gotten what he wanted for the holidays.

“Ooh, ahh! Ahoy ahoy, so glad you could join us, Diana! How I wish you could have worn your uniform but, I understand. Trench dirt doesn’t always wash out, I’m sure.”

The audacity was incredible. It was more than just a man’s ego. Luthor was sick, and clearly didn’t respect anyone but himself, but she wasn’t his employee or his assistant; she was Diana of Themyscira.

She stomped her way to him, heels and all, and with one hand sent him flying up to the ceiling, watching as he landed awkwardly on the marble floor. Immediately after, she grabbed Lex by the corners of his sportscoat and dead-lifted him into the air, leaving his feet dangling.

She couldn’t remember a time her fury burned this hot. Her true warrior’s nature was emerging after years of hibernation; Amazonian blood reaching a boil. Her only regret would be the lack of a challenge. After fighting a war – fighting a god – this would be nothing. This would be squeezing the life from an insect. This would be crumpling discarded paper. This would be-

“Diana.”

She saw more than felt herself cool down at the sound of his voice. It had been a true out of body experience. Diana Prince had been abandoned, frozen near the still-open doorway. It had been Bruce, not Batman, that called to her. That meant his job was done, which meant hers was, too.

Diana let go of Lex rather than set him down, causing him to skid off the front of the desk with a yelp. He looked up at her through disheveled bangs and watched as she took his tablet between her hands and snapped it in half like a piece of Styrofoam before throwing the pieces down before him.

“Our business is done here, Mr. Luthor. Have a nice day.”

She turned and walked toward the large double doors and had one hand on a handle when Lex dared to speak again.

“Hey! Tell your boyfriend I said hello.”

She turned to face Lex but did not meet his eyes as her attention was turned to a dark shadow flying past a building in the dusk sky behind him. She looked down upon him with all the haughtiness she could manage – Diana Prince once more.

“When the time comes, you may tell him yourself.”

-----------------------------
Alfred had sent Bruce a covert message on his way back to the Cave. If he valued his life or, further use of his extremities, he would give Miss Diana some space. He had heard the meeting she had with Lex Luthor, so he didn’t need to ask why.

The punk was bold, speaking to her that way. If things had been different, he would have pounced on him: choked him out, kicked him through a server tower, suplexed him through his big boy CEO desk.

But it was Diana.

Lex had seen first-hand the Amazonian wrath he had thought he wanted unleashed. Bruce felt that would be more than enough. He was certain he had saved a life that day.

Bruce started the encryption process before he cleaned and changed himself. He saw Alfred’s car arriving on camera and he figured Diana would want to change into something casual herself, so he made sure she would have as little waiting as possible after that.

When she did make her way down to the Cave, the process was two minutes from completion and Bruce silently rose from the head chair as she stormed toward it. Bruce knew better than to say anything when she was this (rightfully) upset. So he let her sit down and placed a light hand on her shoulder. When she looked up he pointed toward his many sets of weights. She questioned him with her eyes and he shrugged.

“It works. Trust me.”

He walked over to a large table, then, and put on a pair of safety goggles. Recent down time had given him a chance to further experiment on the large chunk of Kryptonite he had collected. He was set to continue, but turned around when he heard a loud clang.

Sure, he had been caught staring at Diana before but, in his defense this one time, she hadn't been bench pressing every one of his weights with relative ease before. Him and his suggestions.

Bruce turned back to his work table. For once, Barry hadn't given himself enough credit. His formulas were pretty close. A few miscalculations where bonding was concerned, but the kid could hardly be blamed for that. This was a new mineral after all.

The right concentration of laser therapy (as well as Luthor’s own notes) had revealed what Barry had alluded to. A tiny piece of Kryptonite Bruce had chipped off was reduced to a tuft of green smoke. Once he found the right parameters, he took three larger pieces of mineral and captured their essence in small, black pods. His own personal Kryptonite smoke bombs. Those were set aside for the moment, however, as he used the remaining piece of Kryptonite to forge a more physical weapon. It was a meeting of two worlds as he carved the green rock into a spear head: razor sharp, meant for enemies not of this Earth.

He rose and removed his work glasses when he saw Diana return to the computer bay. He took the seat to her right and said nothing as she made her way through the new data. It was like that for several minutes. Bruce looking at the screen, then to her; Diana eyeing him from her peripheral. He didn’t want to say something stupid like ‘Feeling alright?’ but he didn’t want to say nothing either. He was hoping Diana would nudge him off the plank so to speak and, as usual, she didn’t disappoint.

“You’re staring, Bruce Wayne.”
“Don’t see how that’s my fault.”

“Yes, because nothing is ever your fault.”

“Nope. Call it a perk.”

“I will call it ridiculous.”

Bruce could see her chuckle even from his angle, and it made him grin, too. Diana hadn’t yet found anything of note and since his head was still attached to his body, he figured the getting was about as good as it was gonna be.

“How do you think it would’ve worked out, Diana?”

“Not a mind-reader,” she reminded him without looking away from the screen.

“Tch. I mean the two of us. Together.”

When she turned to look at him she wore a mixed expression, almost like she had once or twice considered the very topic. She faced the monitors and released an air of frustration.

“You have the worst timing.”

“Not a recent development.”

Diana sat back in the chair and folded her arms. She was considering his question carefully, which Bruce thought was more than he had earned.

“Shall I be honest?”

“Please.”

“It is difficult for me to see a relationship between us ever ending well.”

Well. She did say ‘honest.’

“Makes sense. You’re a princess from a secret society of immortal warriors. I’m a rich kid with issues.”

“Lots of issues.”

“Thanks.”

“Then again, you’re a creative human. Perhaps you would have come up with something.”

Diana looked back at him again and waggled her eyebrows. A lesser man would have blushed at the sight.

It was quiet again, so he scooted his chair forward and aided Diana with her search. He couldn’t name exactly what they were looking for – something corroborating to match what they had heard at ThunderCorp. The Russians had delivered the stolen Kryptonite to Lex after all (Queen had confirmed as much), but what was the angle? Was it really as simple as wanting to kill one alien?

“Bruce, look.”

Diana had the cursor hovering over a folder labeled CCTV. When she opened it, the screen filled
with line after line of numbers and letters that likely meant nothing to her. Bruce recognized them right away.

“They’re dates,” he clarified. “Security footage logged to the corresponding day.”

“Is this normal to archive your own footage? Why would—”

“It’s common practice these days. Footage is recorded, archived and then deleted every 30 days or so.”

“It seems odd that a man like Luthor would want his business recorded.”

“True, but we did just find it in a secret server room. Doubt he thought it would ever be an issue. May I?”

Diana slid over so that Bruce could grab hold of the mouse and scroll down the list. He had a specific string of dates in mind. The week before the Senate Bombing. He started on the first day and scrubbed through the video feed without seeing anything worth noting. Same for the second day, but on the third video he stopped scanning halfway through and let it play, thinking he saw something familiar. Twelve seconds later a door was closed, revealing a sleek, metal chair.

“There! That was Wally Keefe’s chair. The one that exploded.” Bruce let the tape play after that and it revealed what appeared to be a late-night penthouse meeting between Luthor and Knyazev.

“Mercy and I are taking the chair to him tomorrow. We’ll get him cleaned up, hold a press-conference the day after, fly him out to D.C. the day after that and then, the adventure begins!”

“What about the African woman?”

“Awaiting her finest hour in our nation’s capital.”

“You aren’t worried she will break down on the stand?”

“She won’t make it to the stand, Knyazev. She’s going to have…a rather unfortunate accident.”

“Yes. An accident.”

“Public transportation just isn’t up to snuff.”

“Those metro tubes can be quite dangerous!”

Bruce stopped the video and opened a web browser. One search later he sees the headline: **Woman Set To Testify Against Superman Found Dead In D.C. Subway.**

Bruce gripped the arm of his chair until his fingertips went numb. “Everyone thought it was unrelated. I did, too. *Shit!*”

He moved that file to another folder for later use, then went directly to the file marked with the date of the day before the bombing. He had to scrub through nearly the whole video but soon enough, he found the guy he was looking for. And his guest.
“I’m blocking the import license for your mineral.”

“…”

“The Red Capes are coming! The Red Capes are coming! I can’t say I’m surprised, June – may I call you June?”

“Call me whatever you want. Call an assassination tool a deterrent. Call a jar of piss Granny’s Peach Tea. You’re not going to weaponize a radioactive rock on my watch!”

“Hmpf. I’m unsurprised, June, but still disappointed. In fact, I’m downright hurt. This is bigger than you or me. Bigger than partisan theater. This is the whole world! We are not alone in the Universe, and Superman isn’t either. When – not if – our next visitor comes and they aren’t such tax-paying, law-abiding citizens and Superman cannot stop them – or will not stop them – your grandkids too will get to wave flags at their oppressors! Just like dear ol’ Dad!”

“…”

“And when they ask why they have to line the streets every other week to salute our overlords, I’ll kneel before them and tell them that Granny Finch had a chance to make lemonade, and instead, decided to make tea.”

Diana stopped the video. Bruce could barely register what he had seen but Diana was fuming in her seat.

“He’s a monster!”

“He’s a narcissist, Diana. Classic case.”

“It doesn’t matter what he is. You have to stop him, Bruce.”

“I will. We will. Together.”

He grabbed her hand without warning. Her expression, once past the initial surprise, morphed into one of uneasiness, maybe a touch of sadness. She pulled her hand out of his grasp and cradled it in her lap.

“Bruce, I can’t.”

“I know, I said ‘one more job’ but I don’t trust anyone-”

“Bruce!” She cut him off, swiveling her chair fully to face him. “I can’t.”

Bruce felt the words die in the back of his throat. The way she had said that word ‘can’t’ cut him in a place he didn’t like to think about.

“I have put off my exit for too long already. My mother has extended an olive branch – an end to my exile. I must reach the island by the end of the year.”

“That’s this week,” Bruce observed.
“Yes! If I leave soon enough I may still be able to make it back but I can’t do that if I engage in Luthor’s game. It has to be you, Bruce.”

Bruce frowned, partly in selfish objection, but also in concentration. He was memorizing every feature of the woman in front of him, since it was clear he wouldn’t be seeing her soon after.

It had been nice having Diana to work with as a teammate; nice to be with her as a friend. Her very presence had flipped his world on its head, but with her had come comfort as well. A peace that he hadn’t known since Jason was lost. He was going to miss all of that. Jesus, he’d miss her, too.

He was looking away when she took his hand in hers. He turned to see her looking at the watch before she cupped it with her other hand. Diana looked at him, eyes full of understanding. She always said so much without a single word.

“I wish we had more time,” she said.

“Yeah. Me too.”

Lex Luthor lowered himself into the Genesis Chamber a bit more gingerly that night.

Not only because his ribs were bruised from his earlier (exhilarating!) encounter with Diana of Themyscira; he also had a guest. General Zod, whose fingerprints were so generously donated to research efforts, would be impactful even in death.

When he had gained access to the inner sanctum of the crashed Scout Ship, calling it a boon would have been an impossible understatement. The complete records of the Planet Formerly Known As Krypton as well as 100,000 other worlds! That first night had seen Lex lose track of the hours spent – 12, 13, 14 – conversing with the ship’s AI encyclopedia. A disembodied feminine voice he had named Monica. She had told him of how Krypton came to be and the origin of her People. It was something in Superman’s physiology, he learned, that reacted dramatically to the yellow dwarf sun of Earth. It was one of dozens of notes he had jotted down since that day.

Lex waded to the stand in the middle of the chamber and activated the console. The water glowed blue as the ship regarded its new operator.

“Welcome back, Alexander Luthor.”

“Hope you don’t mind, Monica, but I’ve got a visitor!”

“And what would you like to do, sir?”

“I’ve got some very special DNA and I need your professional opinion. Prepare to analyze the sample.”

“Very well. Genesis Chamber ready to analyze genetic sample.”

Lex reached back up the ramp and slowly pulled Zod’s body out of its bag and down the slope. The chamber’s waters surged orange as it welcomed the new occupant.

“Acknowledging presence of genetic material. Analyzing. I’ve identified the host as General Zod of
Lex pulled out his switchblade and steeled himself. Going by what the records told him, he figured blood was the easiest, and most potent way to introduce his own DNA. Perhaps this was a tad extreme he thought, as he slashed the blade upward against his palm, but this was about more than just the sample. The pain coursing through his hand, bringing tears to his eyes, was penance. Every failure, every shortcoming, every Why couldn’t it have been you and not her, goddammit! was drip drip dripping down onto the grey, lifeless face of the former Kryptonian General.

“Acknowledging presence of foreign genetic material. Analyzing.”

“You flew too close to the Sun,” Lex said, misty eyed. “Now look at you.”

“Advising: Action Forbidden. It has been decreed by the Council of Krypton that none will ever again give life to a deformity so hateful to sight and memory. The Desecration Without Name.”

“And where is the Council of Krypton?”

“Destroyed, sir.”

“Then proceed.”

“Very well. Preparing chrysalis and commencing metamorphosis.”

“Excellent! Tell me, Monica, what is our ETA?”

“Animation will commence in approximately: 28 hours.”

It seemed that would give him just enough time. The appearance of the Amazon in his backyard had shifted his timetable up just so. It wasn’t a huge bother, really – an inconvenience if anything. Had their meeting ended on a friendlier note, he would’ve had zero qualms with asking “Diana Prince” to partner with him in business, taking down Wayne and completing his stranglehold on the greater Tri-State Area. It seemed, though, that the feelings he had perceived between them earlier had advanced further than anticipated. It was no matter, either way. She was no longer a necessary piece going forward.

He thought about something as the chamber’s mechanisms moved around him.

“Monica, is there anything else the Council wouldn’t want the good people to know about?”

“Oh the Phantom Zone, sir.”

“Ooh! That sounds promising! Please, tell me more about this…Phantom Zone.”

-----------------------------

Bruce in recent years, had become accustomed to operating at full efficiency on just a few hours’ sleep. He didn’t much see the point of trying to sleep when it was clear it wouldn’t be a good one. Last night had been a good sleep. He figured, though, that had more to do with present company than anything else.

He woke up on the couch. Odd. More than that, he felt like something was missing. Not his shirt and
it wasn’t the watch, thankfully. He realized, then, what was missing was a heavier-than-she-looked Amazonian Princess that had been using his chest as a pillow. No objection from him but the absence was noticeable.

He turned to get up and heard the tell-tale rustle of paper falling to the floor. It was still folded closed as he picked it up and he set it down on the coffee table unopened. He knew what it was, and his just-conscious brain wasn’t quite ready to take this hit.

A wash came, then breakfast, then a change of clothes and finally, as Alfred was walking in the front door, he opened up the paper and read the letter.

By now, you know that I have left. If you haven’t thrown away my note already, then you are reading this and I’m glad, because there is much I wish to say.

The trouble with agelessness isn’t the logistics; those are simple enough to manage with some practice. Nor is it the time as, after the first few centuries, its passage becomes indiscernible. No, the real trouble begins when people discover your true nature. They fear you or they worship you. They observe you or, worse yet, seek to curry some sort of favor from you in exchange for divine gifts they feel they deserve. This fear was what forced me into isolation for decades, after my friends in England passed on.

But you, Bruce Wayne – who could have anticipated you?

You discovered the truth for yourself and instead of pursuing me like an object to be won, you asked me who I was. Who. As if I were a regular person. It’s all I’ve ever wanted in this world. You and Alfred have both been wonderful. Working with you has reawakened an energy in me I thought to be lost. I am Diana of Themyscira once again and these written words are simply not enough to tell you how important that is.

I thought about what you said. About the two of us together. I realize as you do that there would be little chance of a normal life for you and I. Our time together would have been limited, but I truly do believe it could have been lovely in its own unique way.

I wanted to express all of this to you face-to-face, as your friend, but even now I am having difficulty. It seems once again I have run out of time. I must leave, now. I am needed on Themyscira, just as you are needed in Gotham.

I hope that our paths will cross again – in this life or in the Elysian Fields. Until that time, I will carry these memories with me. I hope you will always remember me, Bruce, for I will never forget you.

Με όλη μου την καρδιά,

~Diana
It was foolish of him. He knew this was coming. He’d known for weeks. Diana had to leave and he had made no plans of trying to keep her from doing so. It was the sensible choice for everyone. So why then did he feel this way? Why was he feeling anything at all? Bruce had grown so accustomed to the dull ache of sadness in his chest that he essentially stopped noticing it. This was different: it was the sharp and recurring pang of regret. So much that he didn’t say – couldn’t say. It was as if she had never been. All that was left was an antique wristwatch, belonging to a man he never knew from a story he would never be a part of.

“A tear, Master Wayne?”

Bruce swiped at his cheek and came away with moisture. So it was. He looked up to Alfred, who had been reading Diana’s letter from over his shoulder. Even through his glasses, one could spot the heaviness of unshed tears. I’ll miss her, too, is what Bruce saw in his eyes.

“Luthor was behind the Bombing. He set Wally up to frame Superman. Now he’s got something planned for the fallen Scout Ship in Metropolis.”

“Time to call the Cavalry, then, sir?”

“Get the jet out to LAX within the next hour. I’ll send word to Curry, wherever he is. Barry won’t need a ride.”

“Of course. Anything else, Master Wayne?”

“No, Alfred. Thanks.”

His butler turned to leave and make arrangements. He stopped and turned back to face him.

“You were her closest friend in a very unfriendly world, Bruce. She was thankful. More than you know.”

Alfred left the Glasshouse after that. Bruce looked down from the door to the broken watch on his wrist. He had to go to work and then needed to prepare for that night – but before any of that. There were no shortage of tools and work space in the Cave. It was high time to see what kind of stories Capt. Trevor left behind.

Chapter End Notes

Well. That turned out longer (and darker) than I thought it would. Such is the danger of exploring the depths of Lex Jr’s mind. I don’t recall if I touched on this in my preface, since I wrote it months ago, but I did see bright spots in Jesse Eisenberg’s portrayal in BvS. He had a great charisma in his delivery and a sinister edge hiding beneath the surface of a tailored Millennial mastermind. As with most things from the movie, I felt there was a lot left on the table.

Don’t mind the chapter counter, btw. There’s one chapter of the main story left. The two chapters after that will be Outro stuff. Thanks again everyone for your clicks and kind words. It’s been a pleasure being able to share this with you.
You've been very patient, friends, and now that patience is rewarded! It's the massive grand finale of DAWN OF JUSTICE! Everyone is everywhere and everything is everything! Commence!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ma? Lois? Are you home?”

No answer, which wasn’t all that strange. It was a farm, after all. She could be anywhere on the property, and Lois could be right there with her. Or they could both be out shopping which made more sense as he hadn’t seen either of their cars.

Clark deposited his cape on the rack in the front room and breezed through the kitchen out the back door. Despite the chill and setting sun, it looked like it had been a beautiful day in Smallville. He couldn’t remember the last time he had a proper Christmas. All those years he spent wandering, searching for his true self. It wasn’t fair to Martha, who had only tried to raise him as the son she couldn’t have. He’d make good for that somehow.

Clark opened the large barn doors and walked inside. He found the familiar trap door and swung it open. Beneath the floor was a crawlspace Jonathan Kent had made to hide the ship the Kal-El had arrived in. It wasn’t until later that Clark found the space filled with news clippings and printed articles, of the professional and amateur variety, of his exploits around the world – both as Superman and incognito. Ma Kent was a better investigator than people knew, but perhaps it could be chalked up to a mother’s love.

Clark popped open the lid of the ship and reached inside. It hadn’t been moved; a simple black box. He plucked it out and opened it. Inside was a ring with a mid-sized diamond. Not much – best he could do on a freelance reporter’s salary. Lois hadn’t seen the crawlspace, yet. He hoped he could work up the nerve to show her before the holiday was over.

“I thought it was you.”

Clark knew that voice. He returned the ring and closed the pod. When he flew up, he saw a man standing at the barn door with a priest’s collar peeking out from his coat.

“Father Leone, good to see you. Must have heard me coming.”

“It’s hard to miss you, son.”

“It’s what I hear. I’m glad you stopped by, though. I’m afraid we won’t be able to make Mass this evening.”

A sad smile flashed over the preacher’s face. “No, I’m afraid you won’t. Clark, they’ve been trying to reach you.”

“I’ve been away on business. What’s going on?”
“Your mother’s car was found abandoned in the diner parking lot. No one’s seen her all day.”

Clark felt his innards drop like a brick of lead. He wondered if he should even ask. “And the woman that was with her?”

“No sign.”

Clark ran a hand through his hair. He should’ve know better than to stay that extra day. They’d had the landslide contained. The situation was handled, but he also said he wouldn’t stop until every survivor was found. He kept that promise and didn’t regret it. But…

“I may know who took them, and if I’m right they are both in serious danger. I have to go now.”

Father Leone understood and let Clark usher him out of the barn so he could lock it up for the night. As he prepared to depart, the priest asked him a question.

“Would you like a prayer from the congregation for the family tonight, Clark?”

He thought about that. Coming from an alien planet he never really given much thought to gods or spirits, but he had been raised as an Earthling on a Kansas farm. He looked down past the barn doors into the crawlspace and through the tiny box to get one last look at the small diamond ring inside.

He heard his cape billowing as he said, “Father, the Kents will take any help they can get right now.”

-----------------------------

Bruce heard the bellow from the other end of the Cave and there was little mystery of the source.

The Batmobile had been repaired for some time but given the nature of his latest jobs, he hadn’t used it much. The hidden lake entrance had thus remained unused but an earlier conversation via text had suggested he open it. He did so via remote and seconds later The Flash was racing down the entrance ramp, skidding to halt on the other side of his work table – red armor and all.

“Woo! What a rush!” The Flash did a quick number of turns to dry himself of the water from the lake. “Coulda warned me about – whoa! Don’t think I’ll ever get used to that.”

He was referring to, Bruce figured, seeing the man under the mask. His pants and gloves were on, but his cowl and cape were draped across the back of the chair. That left him shirtless, hunched over a chest plate to be worn under his armored suit. He didn’t look up when the young meta spoke and the latter took notice.

“Hey, you alright, man?”

“Fine.”

“You sure? You seem…grumpy. Like, more so than usual.”

Bruce was simply going to ignore that, but The Flash caught sight of something on the next station over and ran over to retrieve it. By the time Bruce realized it was Diana’s letter Barry was already grimacing into the page.

“Aw, dude! I didn’t know.”
“It’s nothing.”

“Sure doesn’t look like nothing.”

“Drop it. Now!”

Barry frowned at that. It was the first real one he had seen on him since they met. Barry surprised him then. He put the letter down and removed his helmet, setting it down on the table. He tapped the bottom of the letter.

“These curly cues here. I’m no expert but they look Greek.”

“They are.”

“What do they say?”

Bruce hesitated. It had taken him a bit to realize what the characters said. When he had managed to translate them, he felt the sting that much more.

“With all of my heart.”

“See,” Barry said clapping his hands together, “that’s what I mean!” He waited to see if Bruce, who had stopped working, was going to interrupt him. He saw he wouldn’t and continued. “I don’t know what happened with you and Diana. It’s none of my business. But it wasn’t nothing.”

“What does that have to do with right now, Barry?”

“A lot, actually!” Barry said like it was obvious. “You may be immune to bullets, but that vest can’t protect you from the feels, man.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means, as your teammate, I’m worried about your ability to perform out there.”

Bruce was stunned. Barry Allen, who had more social media accounts then he had vehicles, was worried about his focus?

“Now, before you try to son me, just listen for a sec. You and I both know you’re the best in the world at…this thing we do, but that doesn’t change the fact that Di did a number on you emotionally. Whatever it is you’re feeling, you’ve got to get square with it, because bottling this up is not healthy, especially not when you’re about to go into a super stressful situation.”

Bruce hunched further over the table and Barry ran a hand through his hair as he seemed to remember who he was talking to.

“I’m not looking for any declarations or anything,” he amended. “What’d she make you feel?”

Bruce had been trying to figure that question for two months. He hadn’t found the right word, but he settled on one that seemed to fit closest.

“Everything.”

“OK. Vague, but an answer. Survey accepts. Next: how do you feel now that she’s gone?”

Silence as Bruce clenched his fist under the table.
“It’s okay to miss her, you know?”

“But what good does that do?”

“On the one hand, it’ll help you come to terms with this. On the other, you can’t throw away your memory of her just because you’re upset right now.”

“So, you’re telling me to move on but not-”

“Nope. Stop right there. Moving on is not the same as forgetting. I haven’t known you long, but I know what I saw that day. Di had an effect on you and if you just forget, you’ll be back on square one. How do you think that would make her feel?”

Bruce grunted, but sat up straight. “You made your point. So what, then?”

Barry seemed pleased by that, and picked up his helmet, clutching it to his chest.

“Before you go out there tonight, you need to remember everything about the time you two spent together, and then you need to let yourself feel it.”

“Feel it?”

“What?” Barry said as he put his helmet back on, “You think I have time to plot out where I run? My brain doesn’t move fast enough. I go where the sparks tell me to. It’s all feel, man.”

“The Speed Force, right?”

“Call it what you want, but it works.”

To show this, The Flash made several quick circles around the table before stopping suddenly and releasing what looked like a lightning bolt from his outstretched arm that went flying off into the dark before illuminating the far corners of the Cave. Bruce looked wide-eyed at the Speedster, who was posing with his arms stretched wide over his head.

“Like it? I call it the Thunder Spear.”

“Why’d you call it that?”

The Flash shrugged. “Kamehameha Wave was already taken.”

Against all odds, Bruce began to grin. “So, those electrical anomalies over the Scout Ship in Metropolis Harbor-”

“Dude, that wasn’t me!”

“I know. But there’s something big going on over there and I need backup.”

“What is going on over there, Boss?”

“Alexander Luthor, Jr.”

“Lex Luthor?! I thought he was just trying to game the black market, why is he doing this supervillain shit?”

“I don’t know,” said Bruce as he pulled on his chest plate, “but I know who’s gonna stop him.”
“Who? The Batman?” The Flash deepened his voice to match the cowl’s digital alteration. Bruce corrected him.

“The Batman, The Flash and friends.”

The Flash began to positively bounce with his excitement. “Oh, let’s gooooooooo!”

The young man streaked back up the Batmobile’s runway as if to explode out onto the lake. The only problem was the door wasn’t open. Bruce calmly worked his way into the top half of his armor and waited for Barry to realize this, too. A few seconds later he was back in front of the table, rubbing his head sheepishly.

“Yeeaaaaa… I should probably ride with you this time.”

-----------------------------

The first thing Lois Lane felt was pain, exploding through her knees as they hit cold, unforgiving ground. Her vision was still obscured by the cloth bag on her head but she felt her hands being released from their bindings. Before she could think to do it, the bag was torn from her head and she slowly got a grasp of where she was. High, high above Metropolis, on top of LexCorp Tower. The wind was whipping her hair wildly, and on top of that a storm was brewing. She could see the lighting striking in the distance but, curiously, it appeared to be coming exclusively from the harbor and that was where the-

“Ahoy, ahoy!”

Lois looked up to see Lex Luthor skipping up a set of metal steps to the tarmac of his building’s helipad. She then felt herself being roughly lifted to her feet; it took significant effort to stay upright after hours of cramped captivity. As soon as she felt herself regaining balance, she was pushed up the stairs onto the tarmac, falling to her knees once more. She might be scared, but looking up to see the smugness on Luthor’s face dissolved any fear into anger almost immediately.

“Welcome, Miss Lane to the Thun-” Luthor leaned in too close and Lois slapped him before she could think better of it. She heard the arming of a firearm behind her but Luthor put up a hand while cradling his face with the other.

“Knyazev! Where are your manners? This woman is our guest! You are needed elsewhere, friend.”

Lois didn’t dare look back as she heard footsteps receding. That left her alone with Lex and she let her anger return, using it to will her way to her feet. She was terrified, of course, but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“My, oh my! Lo Lane in The Morning! I’m a fan, let me say.”

“Some fan,” she spat. “I have Twitter, you know.”

“Oh, how cheeky! Come, enjoy the view.” Lex grabbed Lois’ arm and walked her forcefully near the edge of the helipad, overlooking the City of Metropolis.

“Now, the secret to the height is the building material – light metals. They sway a bit in the wind. You’d know something about LexCorp metals. Wouldn’t you Miss Lane?”
Lois shuddered in his grasp. “You’re psychotic.”

Lex bristled at that and whirled away from her, gesturing out to the skyline before moving back to her.

“See, this is what a few good years in J-School will get you. Do you know nothing Miss Lane of psychiatrics? I am… Obsessive Compulsive, I have crippling social anxiety but psychotic? No no no no no. Psychotic is the word reserved for the man who dresses like a Rat With Wings! Mm! But there will be time enough to deal with him, first, we must ring for your man!”

“I don’t get it. Why do you hate Clark so much?”

“Clark? No! Not Clark. Clark has done nothing to earn my ire. Kal-El is another matter. I don’t hate the sinner; I hate the sin. Superman’s sin is existing. And penance must be paid!”

“He’ll come for me,” Lois said, more aware now of the swaying, “and he’ll stop you.”

“That might be hard, dear, seeing as how he has no idea where you are. Oh, but we can fix that, can’t we?” Lex grabbed Lois again but this time took her directly to the edge of the roof, letting her feel gravity’s pull. “Rush delivery for Superman! Ground Floor: coming up!”

He released her and she began to fall. In those few moments, it felt like hours as she watched the window panes go by in slow motion. She could feel the ground fast approaching and was set to close her eyes and wait but before she could, an S swathed by flows of red obscured her vision. It was Clark, ‘falling’ with her before he scooped her up and halted their progress completely. She buried her head into the symbol on his chest.

“Let’s get you somewhere safe. Far away from here.”

“Yes.”

Clark looked down at her in question. Lois, who for 10 whole seconds was almost certainly dead decided to call her shot.

“The answer is yes, Clark. I’m an investigative reporter, and you Kents are terrible liars.”

He smiled at that: a bright, beautiful smile that took up most of his face. “Well, Mrs. Kent, looks like you’ll have the rest of our lives to show me the ropes.”

Once Lois was safe on the ground, Superman wasted little time flying back to the top of LexCorp Tower. As he hovered above the helipad, he saw Lex Luthor sitting cross-legged in the center. He had been waiting and it bothered him. What part of tonight hadn’t been set up by Lex?

“Boy, do we have problems up here!”

Superman crossed his arms at that. “Lex you’ve been a burden to more people than you know. But even after everything you’ve done, I’ll still take you in quietly.”

“And what would God know about being quiet, hm? Every other sentence is a decree, a commandment, a proclamation! I learned way back that if God is all-powerful, He cannot be all
good; and if God is all good, He cannot be all-powerful. Neither can you.”

“I don’t want to be their God, Lex. I only want to be-”

“Be what, Clark Joseph? Their hero? Oh, I think the spaceship has sailed on that! The people need to see you for the fraud you are. They need to see the blood on your hands. And they will. For you have a date across the bay!” Lex skipped to the roof’s edge and pointed to Gotham City, where a single beam of light was shooting up into the cloudy sky.

“His anger is a ripe fruit. Two years simmering over a lifetime of darkness. A few red letters, a big bang, **YOU LET YOUR FAMILY DIE**! And now you will fly to him, and you will battle him. To the death.”

Superman frowned at Lex’s outburst. There was no doubt Bruce didn’t fully trust him – probably didn’t even like him – but he had been willing to listen to his story about the Senate Bombing. To suggest that he wanted to fight? It seemed to be a stretch.

“He can do what he wants over there. I’m not going anywhere until you tell me where she is.”

Lex threw up his hands in feigned innocence and Clark finally felt his threads of patience begin to unravel. “Whoever are you talking about?”

“Where, is my Mother?!”

“Ah! Silly me! Martha, of course. Funny story: I don’t know! I would not let them tell me!” Clark felt his eyes go hot at that, as Luthor waved him off. “Now, you **could** kill me, but, Martha would die. Or, you could fly off to try and find her and Martha, would also die. But! If you bring me the head of The Bat, Martha goes free.”

Clark stepped back from Lex and looked at the signal across the water. It was as close as he’d felt to being powerless his whole life.

“Why should I believe you?”

“Mmm, probably shouldn’t, but you don’t have a choice, Clark Jo!” He saw Lex’s wild hair get whipped up by the whirring blades of a LexCorp chopper. “Remember Kal, pinky promise!”

Lex entered the chopper and flew off the helipad. Superman looked across the water again and heaved a great sigh. He didn’t know what Bruce was thinking, but he hoped he had some good news.

----------------------------------------

“Is he coming, Boss?”

“He will.”

The Flash was sitting on the nose of the Batwing, one leg dangling while Batman stood next to his eponymous signal. They were there for two more minutes when someone arrived. Someone they had been expecting, but not who they called for. It was Victor, boosting himself up above the rooftop and touching down near the edge.
“Yo. Rock on, freaky bro!”

Cyborg seemed annoyed by that comment, but not overly so. “That’s a new one. What are you supposed to be?”

“The Flash—” Barry intermitted his own answer by racing up an adjacent building and back—“at your service.”

“Uh huh,” Cyborg said, skeptical. “One guy who looks like a Bat, one guy who goes fast, and another made of metal. And the three of us are supposed to stop that?” He pointed out to Metropolis Harbor where unnatural bolts of lightning were arching from the superimposed roofing around the fallen Scout Ship.

“Not the three of us,” Batman said.

“Oh, that’s right! The big fish guy’s supposed to be here, too, right?”

“I don’t know, Flash. Curry doesn’t live next door.”

Cyborg tilted his head back with a laugh. “Big Fish Guy? This day just keeps gettin’ better!”

“He’s not who we’re waiting for, Cyborg.”

Cyborg was about to ask who when the figure in question was seen descending to the roof in a float, red cape billowing in the wind. Cyborg watched him touch down, mouth agape. “Didn’t tell me you were friends with him.”

“Why would he do a silly thing like that, Cyborg? Sorry, good hearing. I caught names a few yards away. Flash, is it?”

“Yessir!”

“Glad you made it, Kal-El.”

Superman quirked his lip at that. “Are you really?”

“For once, I am. My guess is we’re after the same man.”

“Good guess.”

“Luthor’s game ends tonight.”

“Wait. It’s not that easy, Batman.”

“Never is. What’s the problem?”

Superman frowned, as if the very answer were causing him deep distress. “He’s got my mom.”

Batman frowned as well. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Superman said, shaking his head, “he wouldn’t tell me. Not unless I found you.”

Batman mulled over this. He looked back to Cyborg and then to The Flash, who had an oddly serious look on his face. Batman turned back to Superman, who had his arms crossed.

“He wants us to destroy each other.”
“No fooling you.”

“Seems to be a miscalculation.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but it doesn’t matter as long as they have Ma. He’s got all the cards.”

“Hm. Maybe not.”

The other three tracked Batman as he moved over to the Batwing, kneeled down and placed a hand to his cowl.

“Alfred, do you read?”

“Of course, Master Wayne. Awaiting your instruction.”

“Luthor has kidnapped Kent’s mother.”

“Oh dear, that won’t do. How can I help, sir?”

“Do you still have data logged from Knyazev’s phone?”

“I do. Are you planning on tracking the Russian to Miss Kent’s location?”

“It’s a hunch, but it’s all we’ve got right now.”

“I agree, sir. I’ll start running the search.”

“Take control of the Batwing and sweep the city. It’ll help the search go faster.”

“Right. Do be safe, Master Wayne. We’re counting on you.”

“Thanks, Alfred.”

As Batman stood, the Batwing roared to life and soared into the sky to begin its search. He hoped Luthor trusted Knyazev enough with holding Clark’s mother captive. It would be his undoing. As he walked back, he saw The Flash scratching his head.

“You sure that thing doesn’t listen to you?”

“Not to me.” Batman looked to Superman. “I’ve got somebody on the scent. If Luthor is bluffing, we’ll know. If he’s not, we’ll know where she is.”

“Sounds good.” A beat passed. “What is it, Cyborg?”

The man had his own hand pressed to the metallic side of his head. “Picking up a police scanner. Says there’s a riot goin’ down at GCPD. Lots of escapees. And…a penguin?”

Kal-El passed a glance to Batman. “Friends of yours?”

Batman grumbled. “New plan. You two are on crowd control. Barry-”

“Say no more, Boss!” Even if Batman hadn’t planned to say anymore, Barry was off the rooftop and down the street before he could even form the rest of his sentence. That left Victor with his arms crossed in bemusement.

“Guess you were saving the real instructions for me, huh?”
"I’m sending GCPD’s coordinates to your processing unit. When you get there, find Officer Cash. He’ll be in charge."

"Right. What about you two?"

"We’re going to get into the Scout Ship and stop whatever’s about to happen."

"Sounds like a plan. Watch your back, Big Time."

Victor took a step back and then blasted off in the direction that Barry had run. Superman regarded him with a sideways glance, but waited until Cyborg was out of sight to speak.

"You think Luthor has my mom in the Ship?"

"If she’s not in Gotham, that’s the only place she could be."

"And if she is in Gotham?"

"We’ll find her."

Superman nodded, seemingly satisfied with the plan. “Got a long night ahead. Let’s get started. Need a lift?”

"Only halfway. I can make the rest."

"You can fly?"

"Not flying, Kal. Falling, with style."

-------------------------------

[Would you like any refreshments, miss?]

[No. Thank you.]

In some ways, returning to Themyscira would be its own relief. When she had learned of LexCorp absconding with her picture she considered a number of options, including disappearing like she had five decades ago. The new age of social media would have made living incognito more of a chore, but not impossible. With her first-hand knowledge of artifacts and antiquities, she could have quickly amassed a fortune and then taken advantage of recent innovations in traceless online banking to live with no paper trail. Luthor could look for the next century if he wanted.

Diana didn’t have to think about any of that now. The only thing she had to think about was the layover she’d have between here and France. She still had a whole life in Paris to pack up. It was why she left when she did; one must always account for delays. Sitting inside the Turkish Airlines flight, the plane had not yet begun to taxi and Diana was thankful she could speak this language on top of the many others for the sake of not appearing as anxious as she was.

Her luggage was stowed above her, the only two bags she brought. As she took her seat in the middle aisle she removed her camera and began to look through its files. Mementos from what had been an unexpected detour. She cycled through the slides in the viewfinder. Staying in Metropolis meant she had numerous pictures of the landmarks there: City Hall, Heroes Park, the Daily Planet,
Ground Zero.

She even managed a snap of the one they called Superman. He was often seen high above the Metropolis skyline but from her hotel room she had a good enough angle to capture the details of his uniform clearly – from his flowing cape to the symbol on his chest. It was innocent enough, but she had only taken the one picture. She didn’t know the man, after all.

A few more clicks through her gallery and she came across a man she did know.

“What’s this for?”

She had very nearly forgot she recorded this video. She hadn’t expected it, and hearing his voice affected her more than she thought it would.

“How’s this?”

“No fake smiles in my album, Bruce Wayne.”

“Your friend is quite the charmer.”

Diana looked to her left and saw an older woman peering down into the viewfinder. She was amused as well by Bruce’s dry wit. Diana smiled.

“He thinks himself a charmer.”

“Were you visiting?”

“Yes. Only visiting.” Diana sighed at that and the woman must have noticed, as she put her hand lightly on Diana’s arm.

“I’m sure you’ll see each other again, soon.”

Diana ignored the clenching in her chest and answered, “I hope you’re right.”

“Of course! Two friends that close will always find a way. I was your age once, after all.”

Diana had a flash of temptation to kindly inform her that she was centuries older; instead, she nodded and looked back to her camera, navigating to the next picture. It was a still of Bruce, leaning onto the ferry railing, eyes half-lidded and bearded lip turned up on one side. Smiling, but not quite.

Diana turned her camera off. Her exit was still too fresh. She couldn’t think about him right now. She sat back and tried to relax as she heard the plane’s engines fire. In a moment, they would be moving and then flying and Metropolis would be a memory. Like Belgium. And Gotham.

And then the engines stopped all together. Diana peeked up the aisle to try and make out any movement ahead of her, then turned to ask her neighbor what was going on.

“Looks like a delay, sweetie.”

Not that she hadn’t sat through them before but, this one felt…different.

She looked out of a portside window and saw Metropolis Harbor. It was alight with both natural and unnatural sources. Spotlights that seemed to be hovering and moving? Arcs of lightning that sprouted from the Alien Ship’s man-made covering? Something was wrong.

Was Arthur right to judge her? She had seen proof of what Luthor was capable of. The innocents of
Metropolis were likely in danger. Could she call herself a warrior as she was set to fly away from that danger? Could she call herself a friend as she let Bruce fly towards that danger? He did so much without the aid of powers and she, an Amazon, had done almost nothing.

[Are you alright, Miss?]

Diana looked up to see the attendant from earlier looking over her with measured concern. Diana looked down to see the straps of her bag twisted in her grasp. She worked her mouth into a line.

[No, actually. Excuse me, please.]

Diana stood around the attendant, opened the overhead compartment and tossed her camera into her luggage before pulling it down and shouldering it. She spared a glance to the older woman in her row, who gave her knowing look, and made for the nearest exit.

She felt a righteous fury bubbling up inside her. She was angry. Angry at Luthor for attempting to expose her. Angry at her mother for giving her this impossible choice. Angry at herself for turning away from her sisters again. And angry with him, as well. It was Bruce Wayne, she would decide later: he made her blink, made her look back, and made her care about this world again when she absolutely knew she shouldn’t.

“Coming through!”

Superman smashed through the large machine, true to his word, and landed with a thud on the ground near the Scout Ship. The place was crawling with these things. They were floating, sweeping the streets below with spotlights and seemed to be oscillating on a sort of tripod setup. More than that, they seemed to be vaguely Kryptonian, which unnerved him greatly.

Superman rubbed his shoulder, hurt more by the fall than expected and looked up to see another robot directly above him. He was a bit too scrambled to fly so he emitted a heat ray from his eyes that bounced right off the machine into a nearby building. Superman winced; it was a good thing the city had been evacuated.

A direct approach was necessary so this time, he did fly, or tried to. He jumped high into the air and waited for the familiar feeling of flight to take over. It didn’t. The only feeling was of his body meeting metal as the machine descended and swatted him out of the sky. Superman had the wind knocked of him, which was different, and it didn’t help that the machine now had one of its legs on his sternum. He tried to look inside the body but only saw a grey outline of blankness. Impossible, unless-

Out of nowhere, he saw a dark shape zip by his head and felt the weight of the machine leave him altogether. It was Batman, who skidded to halt on top of the robot some 8 yards away. He was slicing into the head repeatedly with what looked like a sharp bat-shaped object until the machine lost power. Batman ran back and helped Superman to his feet.

“You okay?”

“Yes and no. What are these things?”
“Sentries of some kind. They look alien.”

“They are. I recognize these from Black Zero, but when I crashed into one I felt my energy get zapped.”

Batman thought about that, then jogged over to the fallen sentry. He used his sharp object to cut open the chasse and look inside. After a moment’s search, he came up with a glowing, green shard. Superman held up a hand to shield himself. Batman put it in his belt.

“Self-sustaining battery powered by a Kryptonite core. Somebody was expecting you, Kal.”

“Luthor. Ma’s gotta be in there. Otherwise why make defenses this severe? We have to get in there!”

“We need to clear the area first. It won’t be safe for her surrounded by enemies you can’t fight.”

“But my heat vision is useless. I can’t get close.”

“No, you can’t. Wait for me to create an opening, then you attack.”

“So I have to listen to you?”

“If you’d like to keep breathing, yes.”

Superman felt a tension ease into his shoulders, but let it out in an exhale just as quickly. Batman was right.

“Alright. Hope you have more of those pointy things.”

-------------------------------

“WAAAAAHOOOOOOOOOO!!”

That was the first thing Cyborg heard as he touched down in front of GCPD. He recognized, only by ear, that it was the kid they called ‘The Flash’ as all he saw was a red blur whizzing through the streets. After seeing him run off on his own, Victor had dismissed him as a rookie with no sense of duty. Maybe he still was, but as he stopped to look over the scene Victor saw that maybe there was more to Barry than he knew.

The Flash was making a crude, broken circle around the building in quick, but random, intervals. He wasn’t so much focused on beating up the thugs (the various KO’d bodies were noticeable enough) as he was containing them to the square in front of the building. It was smart: Gotham hadn’t been fully evacuated yet.

“Ayo! Maybe save some for me, huh?”

Barry stopped long enough to smile and wave but then kept running, speaking to Cyborg in intervals between laps.

“No way, Vic! - maybe next time - don’t be late - to the party!”

Hoping he would hear him, Cyborg shouted, “Where’s Cash?”
The Flash did hear him, and stopped. “Uh, I don’t think the cops carry that much anymore.” He took off again. Right. Didn’t get that memo.

“Over here!” Cyborg looked to the direction of the voice and sprinted to the slab being used as cover by the officer who called him. “Said you’re lookin’ for Cash?”

“That’s right.”

“I’m Cash.”

“I’m here to help.”

Cyborg watched Cash look him up and down. He could see the light of his cybernetic eye on the officer’s face. “Uh huh. What do you do?”

Before he could answer, a rather large prisoner tried to flank them – tried being the key word. Cyborg armed his Sonic Cannon without thinking and sent the man flying back into a vacant stack of boxes. He looked back to Cash, who was surprised but silent.

“You with the Bat?”

“Sent by the Bat.”

“Good enough for me. Here’s the situation. There was a mass break out at the state pen. God knows how it went down. Before they could get it contained, a gang of The Penguin’s crew scurried over here to free their boss. Right now he’s got the building on lockdown and our weapons along with ‘em.”

“You’re talkin’ like this is normal.” He had also said very little about his visitor being made of metal.

“More normal than it should be, but that’s why you guys are here, right?”

Cyborg smiled as he charged his cannon. “Hell yeah. Let’s get out there!”

---------------------------------

“Batman! UP!”

Superman waited, crouched with his hands clasped as Batman ran toward him. The masked man jumped into his hands and Kal put his all into thrusting upwards and sent Batman flying through the air, into a sentry. He came back down to Earth feet first, flattening the robot into the dirt. In one motion, he rolled through the landing and produced another of his projectiles. He threw it skyward, where it ran along the front of a sentry, slicing it open.

“Superman!”

Kal saw he was pointing to where he had thrown the object and got the idea right away. He looked up, waited for the machine to steady, and sent a heat ray tearing through the hole and out the back of the chasse.

“They made a good team. If it hadn’t been for the inflammatory comments he made as Bruce Wayne, he might see it as more of a positive. Not that it wasn’t currently. Certainly not if it saved Ma Kent.
Kal-El almost noticed it too late. The whirring of a sentry, but not the floating type of whirring. It was the charging-my-attack type of whirring. He looked up and saw one of the last sentries fire off a heat ray of its own. That was new.

“Bruce!”

Batman turned around in time to see and dodge the blast, but he wouldn’t be able to avoid the robot’s charging attack. Superman made to intercept it, but was cut off by another object hurtling from the sky. He heard a crash as dust plumed into the air, expecting to see metal on top of Bat. What he saw instead was even more shocking.

It was a woman.

Tall and powerful – evidenced by the fact of her stopping the sentry with her bare hands. She pushed it back and crossed her forearms to release a stream of lightning that went crashing into the sentry, sending it flying back and exploding on the side of the massive shell. She looked down to Bruce who was still kneeling. Kal saw the look in his eyes through the cowl. It was recognition. And something more.

“Stay down!”

The last three sentries were advancing and she stepped forward, drawing a sword. Surprising him further, she flew up and met the middle sentry, slicing through the metal like butter. She stayed in the air and stabbed her blade through the second sentry, bringing it down and impaling the body. She was on the ground below the third sentry when she leaped into the air with a yell. She grabbed it by a leg and swung down hard, sending it crashing into the ground. It made an attempt to rise until she pounded her fists repeatedly into its head.

This woman was incredible, Clark realized. Incredible and terrifying.

Bruce stood slowly as she finished. “You’re back.”

She turned to him and he saw the look of recognition in her eyes, too. These two knew each other, clearly, very well. He felt like he was intruding on something.

“She with you?”

The woman looked at him and then to Bruce. Something changed then – her gaze, the set of her jaw – and she stomped over to where Bruce was, nearly knocking him over. She began speaking a flurry of words in a language he didn’t understand. Whether Bruce could or not was unclear; he was trying to calm her either way.

“Diana-”

She seemed agitated by that and yanked his mask off, letting it hang behind him.

“If you are going to babble on,” she said, “then do so in your own voice!”

Bruce was stricken at that and glanced sideways to Clark, who waved him off. No way he was getting in the middle of this – Superman or not.

“Bruce look at me and tell me right now what I’m doing here!”

For the first time since he’d met him, he saw Bruce’s face melt into something soft and gentle. Clark didn’t think such a thing was even possible! More curious was when he went to his utility belt and
pulled out a small black watch and held it up for Diana to see.

“Fixed your watch.”

It was true. Clark could hear the inner mechanisms turning from where he was. He saw Diana’s face soften as well before she caught Bruce in a hug, somehow avoiding his cowl.

“It’s your watch you stubborn man.” Bruce chuckled and returned her hug.

“Good to see you, too, Princess.”

Well, then.

“Uh… I hate to ruin the moment.”

“No you don’t,” Bruce said as he pulled his mask back on and was that a joke? Who was this woman and what had she done with Bruce Wayne?

“Oh! I see a red light. Is it on?”

The three of them looked up to a large screen on the outside of the building. It flicked to life, with a feed to the inside of the Scout Ship.

“Luthor!”

“Thaaaaaat’s right, Clark Jo! Look at the big brain on you. And I see you’ve found the Bat – good job, but there is decidedly less punching than I’d like.”

Diana returned with her sword in hand and shoved by the two men. “Luthor! Come out here where I can see you!”

“Diana! This is a surprise!”

“It’s over, Luthor. I’m putting a stop to this and I’m taking her back.”

Lex put a finger to his head. “No! I don’t think you will. Sure. You could ruin my plans, but then who would save poor Martha?”

“What?”

“I told you, I don’t know where she is! I am many things, Kal-El: ruthless, a mastermind, but I am no liar. Now, the mother of a flying demon; that must mean she’s a witch. What was the punishment for witchcraft again? Oh, yes: Death By Fire!”

Clark clenched his fists as Diana fumed next to him. Bruce looked at the screen in silence.

“Listen to me very carefully. You can come stop me or you can go find Martha. You cannot do both! But of course, there is Plan C. Kill the Batman where he stands and Ma Kent goes free, no questions asked. Mother of God, look at the time! She had an hour when you first arrived, Clark. Now she has less.” Lex held up an egg timer to emphasize this and the screen went blank.

Superman turned to look at Batman but saw Diana instead, in between them. Her sword and shield were at the ready. Clark didn’t know what to do. He knew he was being strung along by Lex, and he didn’t want to destroy anyone that night, but he was quickly running out of options.

“Kal, why did he say that name?”
Clark and Diana looked to Bruce, who was staring after the blank screen. He looked away and to them.

“What?”

“Luthor! Why did he say that name?”

“Wh- Oh. Martha is my mom’s name.”

Bruce said nothing to that, but his form tensed greatly. Clark was about to speak to him when Bruce turned away. Superman’s sensitive hearing picked up a familiar voice.

“Master Wayne?”

“Go ahead, Alfred.”

“I do hope you’ll forgive me for eavesdropping but I’ve located the Russian in a warehouse in Gotham. The Port to be precise. No doubt he’s watching over Miss Kent.”

“Send the Batwing back my way, Alfred.”

“Straight away, sir.”

“I know where your mother is, Clark. I’m going after her. You stop Luthor.”

He had turned away and was about to start walking when Diana grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back. Bruce was surprised enough that he almost fell down.

“Are you really doing this now?”

“Yes, I am. I have to.”

“No! Bruce, whatever it is, you don’t have to do it alone. Let me come wi-”

“Diana! You’re needed here with Kal-El.”

“Tell me why!”

“Because! I know what Knyazev has waiting for me. Lots of thugs and lots of guns. Luthor has been in that ship all day with mountains of alien tech. The sentries you just destroyed were tailor-made to kill Superman. That’s why you have to stay. I wouldn’t ask this of anyone else.”

Diana was holding onto his hand. Superman had seen first-hand her strength. They all knew Batman couldn’t leave if she didn’t want him to. But as the Batwing drew closer, she let him go and watched him turn and run, jumping into the open cockpit and screaming away toward Gotham City. She watched the jet go, then walked by Superman without a word.

“Thank you’ is what he was about to say. He quickly chose to say nothing as Diana kicked down what used to be a military checkpoint and walked into the building housing Zod’s last ship.

Superman looked up to the sky as rain began to fall. He was worried about his mother, obviously, but he was also worried about the wrath of this powerful woman should Batman fail his mission.

“Bruce, whatever you do, please don’t die.”
His heart was pounding, about to leap through his chest plate. Extra layer be damned! Nevermind
she saved him from getting flattened, seeing Diana at all was a shock. Not just seeing her, but seeing
her like that. Warrior’s garb from head to toe – Wonder Woman had returned.

Barry was right again. He was excited and relieved and was willing to admit it. Those feelings were
pushing away the jitters as he steadied the Batwing near the side of the warehouse. He was laser-
focused. More so than he’d ever been. Failing this mission wasn’t an option.

Martha wouldn’t die tonight.

“You have to take it, Alfred.”

“Ah! Right. Commencing Drone Mode. Thermal imaging is showing me two dozen hostiles on the
third floor. Why don’t I drop you off on the second?”

Batman climbed out of the cockpit as Alfred took control of the vessel. The nose dipped low then
shot up, sending Batman crashing through a second-story window. A quick peek with his Tech
Cowl revealed his starting point – a steel beam directly overhead. He took a moment to gather
himself and prepare his gadgets. He attached a mine to the roof above him and waited. The Russian
and his men thought the dark of Gotham was their friend, but he was born here.

They were merely visitors.

The mini explosive detonated and a man fell through as Batman grappled up to the top of the next
room. He let a group of magnetic charges drop and clamp to the guns of the men below. This gear
solved two of Batman’s most immediate problems: too many men and too many guns. He triggered
the detonator in his hand and the charges went up in sparks, disabling the weapons and stunning their
holders.

He attached a line to an assailant below and suspended him helplessly in the air. Before the man
beside him could arm himself, Batman swung the weighted tips of his cape to stun him and steal his
gun, which he smashed across the man’s face. Batman spied a man from across the room leveling his
gun at him; he fired his grapple gun, hooking it into the man’s shoulder. The line retracted and sent
the man flying towards Batman, who punched him out of midair, sending him skidding down into
the hole in the floor.

Threw a Batarang; sent another man to the floor. Ra’s would have strung him up for his sloppiness,
but he couldn’t be concerned with clean work – especially not if grenades were involved.Batman
delivered a roundhouse kick to the temple of the man suspended on the line. He heard the live
grenade rattle into the hallway behind him and then explode, all while taking out three more hostiles.

A man charged him with a knife. He ducked the attack, absorbed his comeback strike and took him
overhead with a devastating Ura-nage throw. The tide was turning and they were running out of
bullets. Batman didn’t need any ammo: he hopped over a crate and used his grapple to send it flying
across the room landing splat! into a thug’s face.


When was the last time Batman fought like this? This desperate struggle? His opponents could feel it,
too, as they converged with blades at the ready. Fighting four grown men at once could never be called opportune in any scenario, but the Batsuit took what was normally an impossible task and turned it into an improbable one. Not only because of the protection it offered from the gunshots that had disarmed him of his grapple, but also the gauntlets that warded off swinging knives.

This wasn’t a movie. They even had the sense to attack him all at once. He felt the strikes from every side – punches, kicks and slashes – the blows dampened by his armor and cowl. Batman, for a few towering seconds, could only parry and defend, not able to mount the offensive. These men were taking no chances. They knew how dangerous he was.

Only problem: nobody knew better than Batman how dangerous he was.

An opening came. He caught a man’s arm, knife still in hand, and used it to ward off an attack before driving it hard into the man’s quadricep. An uppercut, a parry, a left straight, and then he threw all his might into an overhead right that sent a younger-looking man standing upright on his head.

A thug from earlier charged blindly. Batman sidestepped him easily and began to rain down punches before being interrupted by a thudding on the back of his head. Bullets, he realized, on his bullet-proof cowl. He went for the gun, tried to disarm him – this isn’t like the movies, either. Batman forgoes the gun and takes the attacker over his shoulder. He drove his knee forward and hears the *crunch!* as the arm gives way.

Discombobulation: a kick to the head sent the Dark Knight scooting backwards. He cycled between gauntlets as two knives swung down. He dodged one and made to rise, but was kicked back down and stabbed near his upper pectoral. The armor was thick, it probably wouldn’t scar; he couldn’t think about it. Batman kicked the legs out from under the attacker above him. The one beside him got a well-placed knee strike to the head. He pulled the knife out and returned the favor, plunging it hard into the latter man’s scapular notch. The last man standing tried punching him from behind – Batman was undeterred, as he brought him to his knees and threw the man into the drywall.

Silence.

With a moment to gather himself, Batman activated his Tech Cowl and scouted the room beyond.

1 CIVILIAN DETECTED

2 HOSTILES DETECTED

2 ARMED

Two Russians behind the door, one of whom had a high-powered rifle aimed directly at it. Batman scanned for a weakness in the wall’s structure – found it. He readied himself then pounced through the drywall and caught the first Russian in a chokehold, commandeering his gun. Knyazev looked on.

“Drop it!” Batman complied and let the unconscious man fall to the floor. “I said drop it!”

There was no room for negotiating. One chance was all he’d be afforded.

“I’ll kill her!” Knyazev let his flamethrower spark to life. “Believe me, I’ll do it!”

Batman nodded. “I believe you.”

The Bat fired the gun and punctured the tank of gas, then leaped across the room to cover Martha as flame met fuel. His cape was flame-retardant and it shielded him from the heat, but not from the scent
of burning flesh as KGBeast went crashing through the third story window.

Batman rose to a knee and scanned Martha for injuries. She seemed unhurt.

“You okay?”

“Y-yes, thank you!” Terrified, yes. Injured, no. “What happened to that man?”

Batman spared a glance to the busted window. “Had to catch a ride. Took the short way down.”

She managed to chuckle at that, which was a good sign. Meant she wasn’t shell shocked.

“I’m a friend of your son’s.”

“I kinda figured.” She gestured with her head. “The cape?”

Diana let Kal-El take point. For now. He was a Kryptonian and he would know better how to navigate the ship. They were currently following a strange floating creature that she hoped would lead them to the inner sanctum where Luthor would be waiting. She was anticipating the chance to more properly show him her true nature. Still, it was difficult to stay focused on the task ahead.

It was just like him; how terribly predictable! She knew him to be a stubborn man, but she hadn’t expected his recklessness to be quite so fervent. She had no intention of letting him go, but then she saw his eyes under the shade of his cowl and she knew-

“Thanks again,” Kal-El said as he walked.

“Don’t thank me. There is work to be done.”

She saw Kal-El roll his shoulders awkwardly at that answer. “I know, I just-” he scanned the floor for the correct way to finish his sentence. “You could’ve went with him.”

“Bruce is more than capable,” she said, looking straight ahead.

“I’m sure, but…it looked pretty serious there. Like you didn’t-”

“His mother’s name was Martha.” Kal-El kept walking, but in stunned silence. “She was murdered in front of him as a child. He is not just saving your mother, Kal-El. He is repenting for a sin that was not his.”

Kal-El shook his head in disbelief. “That’s insane!”

“Σιωπή! Bruce is in pain. He has been his whole life. He sees this as his chance to heal and even if he’s wrong I won’t take that away from him! That is why I let him go.”

The floating creature vanished into the ceiling as they came to a large door. Diana drew her sword and shield. She would take point now.

“I have forgotten more about battle than you will ever know, but if Bruce wished for me to stay with you, it’s because he believes you are a warrior worthy of fighting by my side.” She looked back,
trying to reassure him. “Come, Kal-El. Do not make me regret his decision.”

No more Diana. Wonder Woman blasted through the door and stormed into the inner sanctum of the Scout Ship. Mere moments and she found the man she was after.

“Luthor!!”

He was hunched over a table, clad in a white lab coat, clutching what appeared to be a timer in his hand. When he turned, he was wearing the same smug smile; as if their earlier meeting had never occurred.

“‘Late, late!’ says the White Rabbit. Right, Wabbit?” The timer dinged and Luthor threw it up and away. “Out of tricks, out of time,” he paused to look at Diana, “and one Bat head short.”

Wonder Woman was an instant away from flattening him against the wall when a ringing came from the phone on the table.

“Ah! That’ll be the cook! Gotham Roast: well-done. Hel-lo! Break the bad news!”

“I’d rather do the breaking in person.”

Her heart leapt into her throat. He actually did it. She felt herself grin and saw Superman with his arms crossed in quiet defiance.

“You’ve lost.”

“I don’t know how to lose!”

“Come,” Wonder Woman said, twirling her sword, “I will teach you!”

She saw Lex’s face become grim, as if grasping the reality of his defeat. Then the weight of his expression fell off all together and he threw his arms out wide.

“How about I teach you something?”

Lex lead them to chamber with a shallow pool of liquid sloshing about. There were various mechanisms and more odd creatures working though the pool, but in the middle of the chamber was a large and bulbous shape. It was large and frothing and squirmed unnaturally in its pod.

“What have you done?” Superman muttered.

Lex removed the bandage from his right hand to reveal a fresh, ugly scar across his palm. “Ancient Kryptonian Deformity! The Blood of my Blood. I gave the Bat a fighting chance, but he was not strong enough. So if Man won’t kill God, then The Devil will do it!”

“Animation will commence in 10 minutes.”

“Thank you, Monica! You see? It’s all been leading to this, Superman! Our finest hour!”

Wonder Woman took another step forward. “We will not let this abomination be unleashed upon the world!”

Lex waved his finger in a condescending manner. “Remember what I said about smart guys, Diana? Always got their bases covered. Bruce proved that by sending you here. But he’s not the only one with contingencies. Ain’t that right Clark Jo?”
Superman, who had been standing to her left, was sent flying into the far wall by a dark blur.

“Kal-!” Before her exclamation was finished, Wonder Woman herself was sent flying back by unbelievable force. It took a great deal of power to knock her off her feet, so she was genuinely curious as to what had just hit her.

As her vision cleared, she got a view of a rather menacing-looking woman, wearing a body suit similar to that of Superman’s. Did that mean?

“Surprise! Clark has been acquainted but, Diana, you deserve an introduction. The large, dusty fellow over there is Nam-Ek and the fierce female standing on your chest is Faora Hu-Ul.”

Wonder Woman tried to move the woman’s foot and was met with firm resistance. Faora stared back at her, ice in her gaze.

“Funny thing, the Phantom Zone,” Lex began as he pranced around Nam-Ek. “It’s like a tunnel, connecting one end of the known Universe to the other. Fold the paper, step through, and out you pop on the Third Rock from the Sun! Only problem is when you get stuck in the tunnel. There isn’t really a proper way out, unless somebody opens the door!”

Nam-Ek walked over to Kal-El and dug him out of the rubble of the wall. He threw Superman up into the ceiling and then caught him coming down, sending him sliding across the floor. He closed the distance before Superman could recover and lifted him by the collar of his cape.

“I don’t…understand,” Superman garbled. “Why are you working for him?”

“Don’t be so naïve, Kal-El. We are not beholden to this human. But, we do owe him a debt for freeing us from that blasted prison and your death will be payment.”

“You don’t have to-”

“We do, Kal-El,” Faora interjected. “You killed our General and betrayed your people! And for what? A pack of dirty, hairless apes who would destroy their own planet?”

“These ’apes’…are my people.”

Faora was looking in the other direction and Wonder Woman used the moment to reach back for her sword and swing upward. The blade cut Faora’s forearm and caused her to recoil, freeing the Amazon from underneath her boot. The Kryptonian was aghast.

“How?!”

Wonder Woman bent low to pick up her shield and regarded the shocked faces of all three aliens (and human) with a look of proud confidence. “This blade is merely a conductor, absorbing the gifts that flow through me: the Power of Zeus, the Wisdom of Athena. No force, from this world or another, is fit to stand against me!”

Wonder Woman made her point by bracing her shield and charging full speed into Nam-Ek, which sent him skidding back to Lex and the chamber. She offered her hand without taking her eyes off her enemies, and Superman took it, working himself up.

“So long as I call this Earth my home, I will always defend it. So, if you still wish to destroy it, then prepare yourselves for battle!”

Lex, who was not prepared for battle, scurried down into the strange glowing pool. He barked his
instruction to the two lieutenants.

“Protect the Genesis Chamber, but keep Kal-El alive! I want him to see the fruits of his Revelation!”

“Animation will commence in 7 minutes.”

-----------------------------

Barry Allen was flying.

Well, not flying really, but, man how sick would that be?

He was running. Just like he’d spent the last two years running: up streets, down buildings, through walls! No one did it better. Granted, he maybe could’ve held up an extra second to see what Batman had to say. It’s not that he didn’t respect the guy. In fact, it was respect that made Barry run off. He wanted Bats to see him as more than just some kid. What better way to do that than to save his hometown?

Finding GCPD was simple enough after a few passsthroughs. He had to run through three boroughs, but when you’re the Fastest Man Alive, three boroughs don’t take as much time to cover. When he came to the right neighborhood, it was just a matter of following the chaos and fleeing cars. The smell of spilt oil from overturned squad cars was in the air, along with shouts and curses from both sides of the fight.

It was too soon to try and figure out who was who, so Barry circled the building and tried to get everyone’s attention on him. It was working, as most heads turned to try and follow (ha!) the Red Streak that was tearing through the courtyard. By the time Cyborg showed, he had gotten into a rhythm of moving cops and picking off cons.

The world was moving a fraction of its normal speed and the sparks were all around him. The only hard part was deciding which path to take first. There were levels to this thing. Hundreds of variables at play and outcomes to consider. He worked fast, not dumb.

“Woo! Hey Vic - looks like we got this - patched up, man!”

Almost as soon as he finished the phrase, the building’s front doors swung open, letting the rest of the convict crew come filing out. Vic shot Barry a stern, accusing look.

“Just couldn’t help yourself, huh, Track Star?”

At least a dozen crooks by his count and all of them with weapons stolen from inside the station. Barry crouched low into a stance. He could take out most of them in one go, but that would leave the others with too much chance to retaliate. Wait. What was that noise? Gurgling? Bubbling?

Barry peeked around the building to the canal in back and located the source of the strange manifestation. The next thing he was looking at was a giant wall of water that curled around GCPD and ran through the advancing group. Barry had one guess.

“Ay, Big Fish Guy! We thought you got lost, man!”

The Fish Guy smirked and adjusted his grip on - Mierda, was that a trident?!
“And leave all the fun to Batbrain? Not a chance, boy!”

Fish Guy swung the trident (!) and froze the water, causing the gaggle of goons to slip and quite hilariously fall to the hard ground. Maybe it was the trident or maybe even his soft spot for slapstick, but he felt the edges of his face tugging and before Vic could see, he took off around the corner and let loose a long peal of laughter that continued around the block and back towards GCPD.

The bogeys were practically frozen in place as he weaved in and out. He didn’t think it was possible to have this much fun. His face was in danger of being split by the smile and it hit him right there. Barry Allen was born to do this. All those nights camped out with Jaime, the endless nights of study in the Central City Public Library, it’d all been building to this. Lady Fate had a plan from the very beginning. The sparks were a part of him now and, unlike some big brooding weirdos he knew, The Flash had no qualms with letting go.

He shoulder-checked two guys trying to overpower an officer, saw Vic subduing another, passed by Fish Guy warding off another – gorgeous! Barry took another pass through the square to take down any stragglers and screeched to a halt in the center, reeling back and letting out a caw of victory.

“¡Vamos, perras! Who else wants some?”

“I’ll take some, you chatty bloke!”

Now, Barry knew it wasn’t Digger, but the accent made it sound way too close while he wasn’t looking. He turned to see a short, balding man walking out of the station, holding a gun to the head of a mustached man in glasses. Vic furrowed his one human brow and scowled at Barry.

“Aw, come on, Vic, are you really gonna blame me for losing track of one old guy?”

“Can it! Now, the Commissioner ‘ere is gonna escort me to the nearest working squad car and you lot are gonna let ‘im. Otherwise, he’s gonna ‘ave a rather unfortunate accident!”

The similarities were striking. It was as if he never left Central City. What a weird night that had been. There was even another hostage situation, but no Batman to help this time. Wait. What did he say?

“…do you ever shut up?”

“No, he doesn’t. It’s his best asset.”

Hmm…

“You know, I almost mistook you for a friend of mine back home. Almost. I get my megalomaniacs mixed up all the time.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re a dead ringer, man! Same weird colloquialisms, equally hard to look at, no sense of grooming.”

“Shut. UP!”

“All you’re missing is your own stupid signature weapon! Although, you do have the goofy name thing going for you. The Penguin, right? For real, is Gotham a city or a zoo?”

“Arrgh! Try and dod-“
Barry didn’t have to dodge anything, thank you very much! As soon as Pen-go swung the glock his way, he planted his foot and took off. Barry slid past him, grabbing the gun at least a full second before he could pull the trigger. A second to admire the delayed look of befuddlement before a kick sent him sprawling forward to the feet of Vic and Cash. Barry offered a hand to the Commissioner, who accepted and got to his feet.

“You guys locals?”

“Nope! Tourists from the West Coast.”

“Heh. Typical your first night in the city is the End of the World.”

“No sweat, man! As far as cataclysms go, this one’s in my Top Five!”

Wonder Woman had nearly forgotten what it was like to be in the midst of battle. The one constant of every fight she had been in was that they almost never lasted as long as it seemed. By her count, she and Superman had been fighting two of Zod’s generals for about five minutes. And if this ‘Monica’ was to be believed, that thing she had seen in the Genesis Chamber was about to be unleashed.

She had wondered about the true power of Kryptonians but never thought of exploring her curiosity. The only one left was Kal-El and she saw no reason to battle him. Now there were two more and she was taken off guard by their strength. She was locked up with Nam-Ek now, using her shield to ward off his heat ray. Superman had just knocked back Faora with a large gust of wind from his lungs and flew over to aid her.

“Animation will commence in 2 minutes.”

Nam-Ek ceased his attack and turned in time to see Kal-El who took them crashing into one of Luthor’s many tables. Wonder Woman saw her chance and picked up her sword before leaping for the Genesis Chamber to end the threat before it could begin. She saw the whites of Luthor’s eyes when she felt a heat in her midsection that sent her hard into the wall. She let her armaments drop and looked up to see Faora advancing. She reached for her sword but exclaimed in pain as Faora’s boot stepped down on her wrist. She was pulled up by her breastplate and felt the heat from her eyes-

“Stop!” Luthor had reappeared. “Bring them here, both of them!”

Her arms were wrenched behind her into a vice-like grip that felt akin to steel and was marched to the edge of the Chamber where she was brought to her knees alongside Superman.

“Animation will commence in 1 minute.”

“This is it Clark Jo! Broadcast live and in color! The whole world will see the truth!”

“Animation will commence in 30 seconds.”

“There will be no hero coming to save them, because no hero will be coming to save you! The final trumpet is about to sound! Ding-Dong, the God is Dead!”
“Metamorphosis: Complete. Animation: Commencing.”

“Kal-El of Krypton, welcome: to your Doomsday!”

The creature was massive and as dirty as the liquid it had crawled from. Wonder Woman felt the floor beneath her shake as the monster found its hold on either side of the ledge. It stood to its full height and let out a deafening, terrifying roar. Diana of Themyscira was not afraid of anything, but she was wise enough to know when a situation was dire. Outnumbered and without her weapons: would this abomination really be the thing that defeated her?

**BOOOOOOOM**

An explosion, as large chunks of debris landed on the monster, followed closely by two metal canisters that also exploded. They emitted a thick, green gas and Diana felt the pressure on her arms cease immediately. All three Kryptonians, and the monster, were doubled over, choking.

A dark shadow fell through the hole in the ceiling and sent Nam-Ek and Faora tumbling into the Genesis Chamber, which was filling with the gas. She watched as Luthor was knocked back by the shadow as well, tumbling into a table. It wasn’t until she saw the glowing spear by its side that Diana made the connection.

“Bruce.”

He glanced at her for the briefest of moments before looking at the monster, which was still stunned. He took out another canister and tossed it into the creature’s open maw and pushed a button to detonate it. A loud shriek filled the room as it fell back into the Chamber. Kryptonite. So that’s what he’d been working on last night. It also explained the green spear he was holding out to her.

Diana needed no instruction.

She pushed off the ledge and leaped toward the back of the Chamber. The years of training, the countless battles, the comrades lost, every ounce of strength left in her body. All of it was called upon as Diana drove the spear deep into the monster’s sternum. It shrieked and struggled, but she did not relent – not until it stopped moving beneath her.

“Diana, the console!”

Bruce was pointing to a strange fixture near the center of the pool. She had noticed it during the fight and theorized it controlled this sanctum. He must have thought the same. She removed the spear from the monster and drove it into the console. Moments later, a wave of energy sent Diana flying back out of the pool. The lights in the Chamber changed dramatically and everything began to pulse.

“Diana!” Bruce had her sword on his hip, her shield on his arm and Luthor on his shoulders. “We’re leaving! Grab Kal-El!” He shot his grapple upward and disappeared into the hole he’d made earlier.

Sure enough, Superman was at her feet. Weakened by the gas, he was in no shape to fly out, but Diana was, so she picked him up onto her shoulder and flew up through the ceiling, navigating as best she could through the sharp edges.

When she came out onto the roof of the outer building, she saw Bruce sliding down the edge which was still slick from earlier rainfall. They needed to create some distance, so she flew down to him and took his arm before making off towards his plane. She touched down on the other side of the vehicle and crouched underneath Bruce’s cape. There was a loud whir of increasing frequency coming from the Scout Ship, building to a crescendo before - pop! - silence.
They had all been waiting for an explosion, but all that was left of the building was a huge, smoking crater. As if the whole thing had vanished.

“Disappeared into singularity,” Bruce observed.

“Back to the Phantom Zone,” Kal-El added. He reached down to pull a small, round object from his boot. A tracker. “Right on time. Well done, Bruce.”

“Someone had to clean up your mess.”

“It’s an eyesore I’m glad to be rid of.”

Bruce nodded at that and faced Diana. “You okay?”

“Yes, I’m-” He lifted her arms to inspect them and the movement made her wince. There were bruises from where Faora held her captive. They would heal quickly, but that would do nothing to quell the anger she felt welling up inside the Bat. He let her hands drop and stormed over to Lex Luthor, who was just now beginning to stir.

“Why?!?”

“Wh-! Uh… what?”

“You create a giant, alien monster and try to kill the only people on Earth who could stop it! I. Want. To know. WHY!!”

Lex scrambled for an answer. He was no doubt hoping he could proselytize his way out of this, but the rage he had fostered in Bruce Wayne was now looking him in the face, and all he could do was shrug. It was the wrong answer.

If Kal-El wanted to do something, he made no move as Bruce pulled his hand back to strike. Diana hooked her arm in his causing him to whip his head back. When his eyes met hers, she felt the anger leave his body completely. There was understanding in his eyes as he let Luthor drop roughly to the ground. He dug into his utility belt and readied a pair of custom handcuffs, which he tossed to Kal-El.

“Take him away, Kal. Before I do something he’ll regret.”

He began walking towards the Harbor and Diana made to follow. She heard Kal-El speak to Luthor as she left.

“Time to go, Lex. Believe me, jail is the safest place you could be right now.”

---------------------------

Tired wasn’t a good enough adjective. Neither was exhausted. Drained seemed like a good place to start. Or maybe ‘wiped out’ as Barry would say. The only thing that could compare was his sleepover at Arkham.

Bruce was sitting cross-legged near the docks, far away from the site of the crater that used to be a building. It was a safe distance away to where officials and clean-up crews wouldn’t take notice of him or his jet, so he let his mask hang limp from his cowl.
The one positive – besides the world not ending – was that the Scout Ship’s event horizon had taken with it most of the debris created in their earlier fight with Lex’s sentries. Hopefully, though, they found enough evidence left behind to make use of. He sighed at that thought, finally allowing himself to relax. He could probably fall asleep like this.

And then he felt someone sit down next to him, as well as a pair of lips pecked to the corner of his mouth. Maybe sleep could wait.

“Getting too old for this, Princess.” He looked to his left to see her smiling.

“I will be the judge of that, Mr. Wayne.”

“Hmm.” That was all he said. It wasn’t all he wanted to say, and she seemed to sense it.

“What are you thinking?”

“That night I went after the Kryptonite. Even after I failed I knew I would try again. Then you texted me. And it sent me down another path entirely.”

“Getting cold feet?”

“No, I wanted to thank you. It’s been…educational.”

“And what have you learned, Detective?”

Bruce looked down to his right hand, squeezed to feel the Teflon and leather of his glove.

“That I can’t let the past make my decisions for me. I’ve seen so much darkness, unwarranted, and I’ve seen good people die just for being near me.”

“…”

“But I’m done using that as a reason to destroy myself. I have to get better. Everyone does. Half-baked won’t cut it anymore.”

Diana nodded. “There is more to life than loss, Bruce.”

“I know. I used to throw myself into my work ‘cause I thought I had to find a reason to live. Now, I just will. You showed me that, Diana.”

Bruce glanced down and noticed his hand on her lasso, which was glowing. Diana had a smile to match and the warmth was flowing from her. He rolled his eyes. The Lasso of Truth, indeed.

Diana took his hand, then, and scooted closer. Bruce let her and leaned his head against her shoulder. He closed his eyes, heaved a sigh and, wow, he really could fall asleep like this.

“Diana. You met me at a very difficult time in my life.”

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything!”

Of course.

“Wouldn’t be the first time. Clark.”

Oh so reluctantly, Bruce opened his eyes and got to his feet. There Kent was floating down with arms folded. Bruce saw the quirk of his eyebrows and tracked his gaze. He was still holding hands
with Diana. He didn’t let go.

“You and her?”

Bruce shook his head. “She and I.”

Clark seemed to agree. “Sounds right. Not sure who else would be able to handle you, Bruce.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it!”

The three of them weren’t alone for long. Barry, obviously, came streaking up first. Then, Victor flew in and touched down next to him. Shortly after, Curry shot up from the water and landed near Diana on the dock.

The next thing Bruce heard was a gasp from behind him. He turned to see Diana looking to the sky. He did as well and saw-

“Snow,” Clark noted. “Cyborg what’s the date?”

Victor’s red eye blinked as he scanned for the information. “Officially: Twelve, Twenty-Five, Sixteen.”

“Dude! ¡Es Navidad!” As the snow became heavier, Barry began running back and forth trying to catch every flake on his tongue. When that became impossible, he stopped and asked Bruce, “You’ve got a tree back at your place, right?”

“I don’t do Holidays, Barry.”

“Of course not. What about you, Fish Guy?”

“My name is Arthur. And there’s not much use for trees in Atlantis.”

“Still! We saved the World and Christmas! All we need now is a name for the crew! Hmm… I think you should do the honors, Boss.”

“Barry,” Diana this time, “I think the name can wait, but Bruce did have something he wanted to say in case you all gathered in one place.” She was right. Easy to forget when you’re fighting aliens.

“I believe an enemy is coming from far away. Everything I’ve seen tonight confirms as much. Earth is not equipped for an attack of that scale, but we are. Or, we will be, in time. What we did here tonight is a good start.”

“Think we’ll need to go around the horn on this one,” Clark said as he rubbed his chin. “Diana, what do you think of his idea?”

“I think he’s had worse, Kal-El.”

“And what do you think of him?”

Diana was hiding her face but he could feel her smiling through his cape. She lifted her chin to his shoulder and said, “I think he’s tougher than he looks.”

Clark nodded, a sincere glint in his eye. “I wouldn’t mess with him. Barry?”
“You already know, Bats. I’m with you all the way. Right Vic?”

“Sure. Not like I could pass up a chance to learn from the guy who trained the guy.”

“I still have my kingdom to think of,” Arthur said, “but if you ever need my help, I’d be fine with fighting alongside you.”

“Well, I’d say that clinches it. We got a lot done today, Bruce. Pretty good, don’t you think?”

Bruce looked around. He was the lone human in a circle of metas and they were looking to him for direction. Just one of many surprising turns his life had taken. He had no clue how any of this was going to end, and for the second time in as many months, he felt that was okay.

Bruce tightened his grip on Diana’s hand and let the corner of his mouth curve upward.

“Yeah. Pretty good.”

Chapter End Notes

And that’s the story of how Master Splinter trained Bruce Wayne to master the Four Elements and save the world from the Ginyu Force!

If you've followed this since the Preface, thank you. And if you're picking this up at some point in the future, also thank you. Outro stuff will be posted at some point in the next week.

Adventure: COMPLETED | League: UNITED
I really wasn’t trying to piss in anyone’s cereal.

I probably should’ve lead with that one. Way back in the Preface where I outlined why this little story even exists in the first place. I’m aware of the fact that many, many people enjoyed Batman vs Superman. I’m also aware that there are a number of talented people – including the director – who put a lot of work into making the movie what it was. Having worked on projects before, I know how tough it is, so let me say this real quick for the record:

I don’t dislike anyone who worked on this movie, but I did dislike the movie – very much.

Very little story structure and next to no action in a 3-hour action movie is not a good combo. Even the run time isn’t the worst part. I can handle a 3-hour movie; my attention span isn’t that scattered. The fact is that the bullet points matter, people. This was the first time in years I’ve made bullet points for a story and for good reason. Before that though, I’d like to take you through how I came out of BvS and produced an entire book.

It started with a single question.

Coming out of the movie early 2016: I’m a bit frustrated by the choices made but mostly just confused. Confused by the lack of communication and by Clark Kent: Ghost Whisperer and by Mad Max: Bat Road, among other things. And then one of my friends turns to me and says, “Why did Wonder Woman come back?”

I stopped on the spot in the lobby and thought. And I thought and I thought and I said, “I don’t know. Maybe she thought Bruce was hot.”

I was being facetious, of course, but that didn’t change the fact that we were never really told. Now, an adult human with two brain cells to rub together can work out that Diana was urged into battle by her sacred duty to protect the world from evil and hate. That’s all good and definitely what they were going for. The problem: all we saw was Diana looking at YouTube clips of Barry and the Boys. Again, that’s fine! But then she’s on the plane and about to leave but doesn’t and is in the fray. She’s been retired from the mantle of Wonder Woman since the Great War and the first time she puts on the gear in almost a century is to save Batman from Doomsday. That’s pretty significant, but the movie just put its hands up like, “Well, duh! Of course she was coming back!” Where’s the tension? What good is it to plant the seed if you’ve got a full-grown version of the flower waiting in some other room? Her reveal came out of nowhere, but not in a good way.

Back to my version, then. It’s not so much a Batman story as it is a Bruce and Diana story. I promise I wasn’t trying to ship-bait anyone. I don’t have that much preference for which characters get paired up. I have a reason why I went this way and it almost directly relates to Wonder Woman’s return in the climax.

See, when I started this way back near the beginning of the year I had an idea to take everything I knew was good about BvS, punch it up and then add my own KD flavor. I started with these two because that scene of them in the museum had me ready for a movie I didn’t get. It was such a good
dynamic, thanks in part to the great performances of Affleck and Gadot. Bruce is in Get-In-The-Guts Mode almost immediately and thinks he can use his name to charm her. Meanwhile, Diana (a goddess) who has been in Man’s World for some time and has seen this man’s type in more places than she can recall is just not having it. When she fixes his bowtie, there a look on her face that says,  
*You are so fortunate I need you upright.*

Before that in Lex Luthor’s house: Lex is going on about Prometheus or some shit and Diana is so done, then she locks eyes with Bruce who is sticking out like a sore thumb and about to take off for an obviously off-limits area. And when Alfred tells him to go find a girl to ‘make him honest,’ what does he do? Goes straight for Diana. That’s subtlety, kids.

So then how does their connection set up the grand finale? In the movie, Diana was a method to move the plot along for Bruce. In my story, it was all about slowly but surely getting the tiara back on our girl’s head. Make Wondy Great Again! She’s retired, and she prefers it that way, but then something changes. Someone comes into her life and flips her view of Man and the World once again on its head.

This is not to say Bruce is the only reason she came back, although he’s certainly a contributing factor. Diana, like the rest of the Amazons, was created with the purpose of protecting those without the power to protect themselves. Sitting on the tarmac with the knowledge that Batman, a mere mortal, was doing the job more effectively hit Diana’s pride in a certain way. She destroyed the God of War single-handedly. Was she really going to turn tail because of Lex Fucking Luthor? Unlikely.

But still, leaving wouldn’t have been the wrong thing to do. By all accounts, her business in Metropolis was done. She wasn’t beholden to the city and certainly not to Bruce Wayne. But she has come to care for him by this point and it makes her decision that much more difficult. You know she’s probably coming back but you’re still not 100% certain. That way, when she has her Han Solo Moment and shows up in full garb, you get the reaction BvS was going for, which is elation.

What’s the Han Solo Moment? It’s the moment from Star Wars: A New Hope, where Young!Luke has his sights on the Death Star’s exhaust port, but Darth Vader has his sights on Skywalker. Before the fatal shots can be fired, Han Solo swoops in to intercept the Sith Lord and give Luke a clear shot. Why is this scene important and why does it work?

Because Han Solo is a space pirate – a smuggler and, by all accounts, selfish scoundrel. He was hired to escort Princess Leia Organa and the Death Star plans to the rebellion. Once he’s done that, he jets because of course he does. Why put himself in further danger trying to blow up a moon-sized space station? We know deep down he likes Luke and Leia; what we don’t know is if he’s going to help at all because from the beginning, he’s made it clear he does not want to. We’re sold on that up until the 11th hour, moments before Vader is about to pull the trigger.
Diana comes back, alright, not only to save the city but also to help her friend. She doesn’t owe Bruce anything and doesn’t feel indebted to him; rather, she wants to look after him. I had a reader comment on Chapter 12 that they felt bad for Bruce because “anything between him and Diana has been doomed from the start.” Man, did that make me happy because that was exactly what I was going for! Yet another reason to not let yourself believe that Diana would return. Lois and Clark have a more classic romance, but Bruce and Diana have a star-crossed vibe going on for sure. Very much of it is Bruce being Bruce, but there are a lot of complexities to their relationship and I did my best to convey that throughout. This story is tagged ‘Slow Burn’ for a reason.

No segue here. Let’s talk about characters.

We’ll start with Supes because, well, it’s Supes. Any arc that he takes is usually gonna end up the same way and that’s a-ok. He’s iconic for a reason. I was a big fan of the first half of *Man of Steel*. The world-building they set up was some of the best I’ve seen and it appeared as if they were preparing our hero for an emotional journey of discovery. But again, we have Clark Kent: Ghost Whisperer, stepping into Jor-El’s Deus Ex Machina machine, laying out his Superman duds like it’s the First Day of School.

One thing I considered as well was the shadow Kal-El would cast on this story. I pulled him back a bit, not because I don’t like him; Supes, like Bats, is much more engaging when people around him are reacting to what he does. That, and I suck at writing Clark. Trying to get better.

We already talked about Diana up top. I thought she was wasted in the movie. So, I did what any ambitious fan would do and rewrote the story to showcase her. I think the only one who has more ‘screen time’ is Bruce who is of course the star of the show. I can only imagine if they knew how big of a star Gal Gadot would become, they would have given her more to do. Everyone knows now.

Bruce Wayne was a lot harder to write than I thought he would be. I never really hit my stride with him until about halfway through. Whenever he’s under the cowl doing detective work, his speech can at times be more extemporaneous, but when he’s regular Bruce Wayne his speech is very measured and clipped. Lots of one word, one sentence answers. Dialogue is what I do best, so having to scale that back was a challenge. Writing for Bruce the man was an exercise in less-is-more. Something I’ve been trying to get a handle on since my school days.

Bruce’s arc was about his growth and maturity as a hero. More wrestling lingo here: ‘good guys’ are referred to as Baby Faces (they are usually clean shaven) and ‘bad guys’ are referred to as Heels. Whenever a character flips from one side to the other, it’s known as a ‘turn.’ So, in Chapter 4 when Bats has his Walter White ‘Whoops, I’m the Bad Guy’ moment, we acknowledge it, and work our
way back from the ledge so that by the time the story is done, his Face Turn is complete. This is
helped along by Lucius (I know he was just in Nolan’s movies, but c’mon guys) and Alfred who are
the voices of reason when Bruce becomes too consumed in his crusade, and even if he doesn’t know
it at first, Diana steers him clear of it, as well.

Again, I’ll point out that making The Flash a Latino superhero was a spur of the moment thing. I
didn’t recognize Ezra Miller in BvS and thought, Oh, cool! They got a brown kid to play Barry. This
could be fun! Now, I like Ezra Miller and I think he’ll be pretty good, but I’m glad for sticking with it
because it led to a lot of great moments between him and Bruce as they got to know each other.

I was pretty pleased with what I got out of Arthur. So much so that I went back to the AcK-Wa Man
Chapter and rewrote it to give him some more play. For any of you reading this who saw the bear
attack version, know that you were gifted a vintage version that now only exists on my hard drive.
To everyone else saying, “wtf a bear attack?” don’t even worry about it. Rewrites happen. I do wish
I could have done a bit more with Victor but I was getting short on real estate. Having Beast Boy
helped a bit. On that note…

Never be afraid to put characters in your story. I mean lots of characters. It makes it a chore to keep
up with later on, but it adds much more flavor than if you just stick with the same four or five people.
My advice straight away is to give up the idea of fairly allocating “screen time” especially because
it’s a written story and you don’t have to worry about real-life actors lobbying for more play.

“Why do I only have 2 pages of dialogue?”

“Because you’re not Batman, that’s why!”

Introducing a new character can be as simple as one line. That line can be observation or exposition
or dialogue. For example:

Admittedly, he was feeling the beginnings of a buzz but his senses weren’t yet completely shot and he
knew it wasn’t his imagination that he saw a dark-haired woman in his peripheral… She had soft
features and olive skin and Bruce knew he would recognize her immediately if he saw her… But she
was nowhere to be seen.

That’s more than one line, sure, but did any of you confuse the mystery lady for anyone but Diana? I
hope not. And once the character is introduced, you can do whatever. Here’s another:

James Gordon was the Commissioner of the Gotham City Police Department and he was also
incredibly frazzled.

Done! No origin necessary! This is Jim. Jim is an officer. Jim is very busy right now. Minor details
aren’t important. What is important is that he is about to meet with a certain Daily Planet reporter and
discuss some very sensitive information. Part of why stories get bogged down is because too much
time is spent on ancillary info, like every article of clothing. That’s that corny shit made popular by
Fifty Shades and the like and it’s a terrible habit. What was Bruce Wayne wearing? What do you
think he was wearing? Unless it’s something he wouldn’t normally wear, it shouldn’t be noted.

So then, how do you deal with the issue of ‘screen time’ disparity between characters? My rule is to
give everyone something to do and vary that thing’s importance depending on how long they appear
for. If a character is introduced, but they’ll be back soon (Barry) just dialogue is probably fine unless
they have something important to do (Ch. 8), but if they have a one-off appearance (Garfield) then
I’d better find a way to have them make an impact. Either they help move the plot along (Waller Ch.
3) or they aid the characters who will move the plot along (Lois Ch. 7).

Think of the possibilities for the DCEU had they gone in this direction. Not only do you plant the seeds for an ‘Arrowverse’ spin-off down the line, but you also get the option of a Teen Titans one-off. Let’s be real for a minute: I like Cyborg just fine, but I don’t think his name alone has the weight to carry a solo movie. Aquaman has the advantage of being the most famous hero to have never starred in his own movie (like Wonder Woman) and the intrigue that comes from that (and a known star in Jason Mamoa). The Flash has a very popular TV show to help his movie track well. A Titans movie would also help sell the Nightwing and Batgirl movies they’re allegedly trying to make, in the same way Suicide Squad will help the Harley Quinn spin-off (or Gotham City Sirens, whichever comes first).

There were many things I added after the fact because of that. The scene with Knyazev in Lex’s study – maybe my favorite of the book – almost didn’t happen. I spent a fair bit of time thinking about how I would swerve the reader. The problem with that was Lex was still the bad guy. I had no plans to change this and even people who’ve never read a page of Superman comics know that Lex hates his guts. I was never gonna fool anyone, so I didn’t try.

It’s an old Hitchcock trope: reveal the twist/plot anywhere from halfway to two-thirds of the way into the story and from then on, the tension is no longer about whodunit. The audience now knows. The tension then becomes whether the protagonist can figure it out in time.

I wasn’t sure about keeping Doomsday in this story, honestly. One must consider that my exact quote when I saw it on-screen in theaters was, “Wow! That dog looks like shit!” Ultimately, I came to a compromise with myself. You can keep it in the story, KD, but you’ve gotta pull the rug out from underneath it. Totally give it the hook! I’ve seen the ‘Swirling Sky of Doom’ trope and the ‘Giant Death Monster’ trope, so I decided to go with the ‘Defuse the Bomb’ trope. Bruce and Diana end the threat before it begins because I have played way too much Metal Gear. (My ending also keeps Bats from looking like a total shoob.)

How do we get to the ending, though? And how can you avoid the BvS trap of having so few things happen in your alleged action movie? Again, this is a personal rule; take it as you will. I try to make sure one thing happens in every chapter.

That can be an action-y thing, certainly, but it doesn’t have to be. It only has to be impactful. Every good story has a beginning, middle and end – we know this. In addition, every chapter should have a beginning, middle and end, including a climax and falling action. All of this varies based on content. I’ll start from Chapter 3 [Hold The Line] and go up to Chapter 6 [Policy Of Truth] where the Second Act starts.

3 – You’d think at first the capture of Deadshot would be the climax and, physically, you’d be right, but there are many more things afoot here. Directly after, Bruce has a tense meeting with Amanda Waller who gives him timely information on the White Portuguese. Later, he meets Diana in Gotham and the B-plot is swung firmly in motion. After that, he returns to the Cave and unlocks the drive, where he uncovers the smuggling plot and has a falling out with Alfred about the Kryptonite. Depending on what you found more emotionally affecting, either the ‘date’ with Diana or the argument with Alfred was the climax which means the falling action varies in length. It all leads to the same place: Bruce decides, yeah, the alien really does have to die.

4 – Lots of sadness and troubling thoughts in this one. Bruce Wayne doesn’t need to be on top of tall
buildings. The highlight, of course, is the Batmobile’s chase through the Port but the climax is the first meeting of the two top guys in uniform. The falling action comes as Bruce hobbles home and sees a text from Diana. He replies and thus plants the seed for their partnership which will play a heavy role throughout the story.

5 – Bruce has a private “Please Don’t Be Cray-Cray No More” meeting with Lucius Fox and they witness the testimony of Superman on Capitol Hill. (Massive, massive missed opportunity for the film.) I felt good about giving Kal-El a chance to defend himself and his actions, but I’m all about compromise, so guess what Snyder fans? I blew up the Senate Chamber anyway! That’s the climax. The falling action here is little more than one line. Poor, befuddled Greg with his That’s not supposed to happen beat.

6 – Diana comes to visit Bruce at his office and we meet Tim Drake. He doesn’t do much himself, but he’s given personality and we can infer new things about Bruce and Diana’s characters through their interactions with him. Diana loves children; Bruce has a soft spot himself. The climax here is Bruce’s panic attack triggered by the archived footage of Cyborg. Diana calms him down, which is foreshadowing, as it won’t be the last time one of them will comfort the other.

In far too many movies (or stories in general) today, there is no sense of escalation. One movie that did it perfectly was Rogue One. There’s a flick I had moderate expectations for. Little did I know it would have such a grasp of stakes and how to progressively ramp them up with each scene. If there’s one thing Logan suffered from it was having two climaxes of equal stakes. X-24 should have died on the farm and then Sabretooth or someone else comes back to fight Wolvie one last time. No such worries in Rogue One, where it was one step forward, two steps back and everyone dies! The Real Suicide Squad.

That’s the big reason why I did what I did at the end in the Scout Ship. I knew bringing back Zod’s generals from the Phantom Zone was a stretch but really, how often has Deus Ex Machina been used to aid the villain, hm? A guy like Lex should always have his angles covered.

Awesome, we get to fight Lex!

Nope. Fight these robots first.

Now we get to fight Lex!

Oop! Amber Alert! He knows where your mother is, he’s off to save her.

Cool. That works, but we’re still going to fight Lex!

Oh, did I mention? The two aliens you barely beat before are back.

Wait, wha-

Oh, aaaaaand don’t look now but…giant monster.

[ROARING INTENSIFIES]

Why couldn’t I have been in the Batsuit today?

It was also my attempt to answer another question we had out of the theater. Just what in the fuck was Lex supposed to do in the very likely event that he couldn’t control the reanimated deformity? At least this way he has bodyguards.

And I’ll harp on this again. I’m familiar with Doomsday. I know what he’s supposed to look like.
They told me that thing in the movie was Doomsday, but I’m not so sure. Below is a recent snap of Doomsday. Take a look and you tell me:

Maybe you’ve noticed, but I have a thing for emotional climaxes. Crescendos that leave the audience mentally drained. Not to say I don’t love a good set piece, but damn you can rely too much on scale. “Hey! People want things bigger and louder! Let’s have a big monster man and explosions the size of 5 city blocks!” Yeah, but…who cares though?

Part of what made Logan so brilliant was how compact that ending was. Compared to the previous movie, where Magneto literally lifted a fucking city, the stakes were smaller but not less intense. It was more so, because it wasn’t about the end of the world, it was about the end of his world. Logan wasn’t trying to save the day – only his daughter. Even if you don’t have kids, it’s hard not to vibe with that.

That’s not to say this piece is perfect. Far from it, really. I feel like my work has improved ten-fold from the time I started to the last line, but if you could please allow me to critique myself – as the creator I am obligated.

The 2nd Act is a tad bloated per what usually happens with these stories. I’m okay with it, only because it was at the expense of giving Diana more to do, which is never a bad thing. Also, this is a book adaptation. This is one of the few times it’s cool to throw all the words out and see what sticks – even then I had to pull some stuff back.
I feel like the whole piece overall needs one more rewrite before I could call it perfect. Chapter 7 is some of the best stuff I’ve written, I wouldn’t touch that. Chapter 8 could use another coat of paint. Everything after that is mostly okay barring something earth-shattering but I’d like to get another look at everything from Chapter 1-6 and see how it stacks up tonally. It should be fine, but it could always get better.

If this book were to be adapted to the screen, what stays and what goes probably depends on the length of the Second Act. Granted, maybe not as bad as I’m thinking, because a lot of the prose could be condensed down to 5 minutes or less on screen. Diana making tea in the Glasshouse, for instance – lots of what you’d call B-roll.

Off the top of my head, the scene between Bruce and Diana at the start of Ch. 9 on the couch would probably be cut, considering the very next chapter has Diana watching over him after his encounter with PTSD Shadow/Joker. It’s fine for a book but in a movie, you’ve got to reign in the feels a bit. The new scene then would be: Bruce waking up, eating breakfast, watching the newscast, brooding on his couch (or at the counter), email from Diana. Also, the scene with Lex first entering the Scout Ship would need to be dropped in somewhere. I’d say…the end of Ch. 10 after Bruce wakes up.

And even though, I liked the scene, we could probably skip Barry’s pep talk in the last chapter and just go right ahead to Lois being held captive. Unless, of course, you just really wanna see more Barry and don’t mind super heroes talking about feelings. I wouldn’t mind.

I’ve gotten a question or two about a follow-up. Full disclosure: sequels are not in my wheelhouse. I’ve never written a true sequel to any one of my stories. I’m all about getting on to the new shit, buuuuut…stranger things have occurred, friends. I’ve got lots of ideas always and I’ll need time to work them out. You were incredibly patient during the last three chapters of DoJ and if you remain patient, you may be surprised what comes down the chute.

This story is not canon, however; BvS on the other hand is, and Justice League will be here before too long. It will involve a similar story of finding the metas and beating the baddie. There are a few things, though, I’d like to see to keep this movie from being bad or, worse, just okay.

- Have characters talk to each other. They’re a team and it’s often the only way the audience can fill in the gaps of exposition.

- Experiment with the environments. Some flora and fauna in between barren landscapes would be fine.

- Lunchbox takes credit for this idea. When it’s time to bring Supes back from being ‘mostly dead’ it shouldn’t be via the Deus Ex Taxi Service. Imagine a deeply engaging heart-to-heart between Bruce and Diana in the Cave. She knows they need Kal and Bats is hesitant, but will ultimately listen to Wondy. Diana will be the ring leader with Bruce as her right-hand man. Merely a suggestion.

I know I’m gonna forget something. 89k+ words: I plot everything except for this outro. Well, Chapter 13, too; I didn’t outline that at all. Like Barry said, all feel, man. I just go where the story tells me to. What it comes down to for me is practice.

I’ve been writing books since I was a wee freshman a decade ago. As Lady Fate would see fit, of course the book about Men in Capes is the first one worth a shit. Chalk it up to experience. Before, all I could write about was kid stuff, because that’s what I was. Now as an adult, I’ve seen a bit more
of the world and have discovered things that don’t get taught in school. You pay the city to pick up 
your trash. What a fun surprise that was for 19-year-old me.

It’s how I got good at dialogue. I’ve seen so much of every type of media, I know what the usual 
stuff sounds like and by the time the 3rd draft comes along, I can find every cliché and turn it into 
something that sounds different. That’s all it is, really. Finding new ways to tell old stories.

If I could offer any council at all, I’d say write it anyway. Don’t worry about what comes after the 
blank page. The first draft will be trash, no matter what. Accept that. The second draft will be 
passable but suspect. The third one will be pretty good, but may have some parts that make you ask, 
“Why, tho?” Focus on getting words on the page. You’ll have ample time to fix it, but not if you 
don’t write anything.

This won’t be the last we see from each other. Stories will always be told and new wrinkles found. 
I’ve got a very tentative plan, but until then expect some one shots. I’m determined to stay in shape. I 
went so long without creating anything; I forgot how good it feels. Thank you for letting me share 
that with you. Your attention has been appreciated.

Until next time, True Believers!

Oh, damn. Wrong company.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not on the Tweetin' Machine often, but I did just get the app back, so if you want to holler:

@KD_Ghostwriter
Web-Only Bibliography

A little extra for the folks reading this on AO3:

A brief run-down of the callbacks and references sprinkled throughout the novel. I won’t cover every one, but I will cover the ones that could use elucidation. Keep an eye out for Hyperlinks.

I’m sure someone’s noticed by now, but every one of the chapter titles was named after an old pop song. Most of them from the 80s, a few from the 90s, a couple from the 70s – except for Ch. 13 which was named after a more recent one.

“…was that Marx or Engels?”

“Oh, neither. Three nights with a Bolshoi ballerina and that line was all she gave me.”

I ended up doing some light research into the Bolshoi Theater and the company that operates there and it’s actually quite interesting. I’d encourage you to give it glance.

“Hello, this is Lucius D. Tommytown, CEO and Chairman of Thunder Corp. Can I help you today?”

“No, you can’t. Goodbye.”

Lest you think I pulled this thread from nowhere, ThunderCorp is a legit part of DC lore. A deep cut, but canon nonetheless. Lucius Tommytown is a fake CEO but the company is legit, often used to launder Lex Luthor’s criminal endeavors. It served the same purpose in this story.

What a terrible goddamn liar. He would be offended if it were anyone else. But it was Waller. He felt bad for the poor toadie that would get roped into this.

If you surmised that toadie to be one Rick Flag, you’d be right! Poor guy.

Bruce removes his hand from his right pocket and extends it outward in her direction…and she slowly places her left hand in his. She looks up at him.

“As you can see, my hands do not shake.”

There’s no greater influence than a good movie.

“That was some fancy shooting back there, though. You’re pretty good.”
This time he did take off, and Batman felt the force of his body leaving the ground behind as he shot up into the night sky. He kept staring after him...and then eyed the wounded vehicle beneath him.

“Hm. Pretty good…”

Once again, too much **Metal Gear**.

“What about the rest? Is Zeus still...out there?”

*If Diana was bothered by the question, it didn’t show. “The Amazons still reside in Themyscira. Zeus, his wife and his brethren were all destroyed many years ago by an angry, vengeful **Spirit.**”*

Yea, I know. It was Ares who killed the gods in the DCEU and not Kratos, but the Ghost of Sparta was technically the God of War for a brief bit. Allow me this.

“**Help yourselves to whatever, but make sure there’s some Dorayaki left when I get back tonight.**”

“You have my word, Master Wayne.”

**Dorayaki** is a small, fruity pastry common in Japan. I like to insert cool bits of other cultures into my stories. Why does Bruce like Japanese deserts? Not sure, he’s a fictional character. Does he need a reason?

“**Tch, tch. Stealing my furniture now, Princess?**”

*She squinted her eyes at him and countered, “You are a billionaire, yes? Simply buy another.”*

Couldn’t **resist**.

“**Did you ever see the show **Catfish**?**”

“Yeah. Some stolen identity shit. What about it?”

This is what I thought **Catfish** was about for the longest. Its true nature is more complex, and at times more sinister. Stay safe out there.

*Diana grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him in her direction. Any trace of sadness that was there was now replaced with anger. He was fuming and his eyes, his eyes were... Where there once was a hazel color was now a sickly green, seeping in and overtaking his iris.*

If you haven’t played Arkham Knight, please do. Or watch a playthrough. Great game, great story, and the **twist** is a real whoop, as well as what this scene was inspired by. Batman is infected by fear gas and spends the majority of the game hallucinating one-sided **convos** with the Joker (who in this universe is D-E-D).
"I suppose now I’ll have to call off the search for the Amazons’ Island Paradise. It’s not down in any map, you know? The true places never are."

A BvS slant on one of the more famous quotes from *Moby Dick* to appease Lex’s “Ahoy ahoy!” quirk.

"Like it? I call it the Thunder Spear."

"Why’d you call it that?"

"Kamehameha Wave was already taken."

Based off of this scene. Shout-outs to *Shingeki no Kyojin*. It’s a good story I would recommend.

“*You okay?*

“*Y-yes, thank you!* Terrified, yes. Injured, no. “*What happened to that man?*”

*Batman spared a glance to the busted window. “Had to catch a ride. Took the short way down.***

Jack, you *crazy*!

“*Diana. You met me at a very difficult time in my life.*"

Oh! It’s like that one *movie*, but not really. Even though there’s domestic terrorism in this story as well. 'Where is my Mind' indeed.
CREDITS

DAWN OF JUSTICE

A Novel

Written by KD Gardner

Adapted from

BATMAN V SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE

Directed by Zack Snyder

Written by Chris Terrio & David S. Goyer

Based on characters owned by DC Comics

Batman created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger

Superman created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster

Wonder Woman created by William Moulton Marston with Harry G. Peter

STARRING

Bruce Wayne as The Batman

Diana Prince as Wonder Woman

Clark Kent as Superman

“Bartolo” Barry Allen as The Flash

Arthur Curry as Aquaman

Victor Stone as Cyborg

Lois Lane

with Lex Luthor, Jr.

and Alfred Pennyworth

GUEST STARRING
Lucius Fox
Wally Keefe
June Finch
Mercy Graves
Anatoli Knyazev as KGBeast
Oswald Cobblepot as The Penguin
and Martha Kent

GUEST APPEARANCES
Tim Drake
Floyd Lawton as Deadshot
Zoe Lawton
Amanda Waller
Ra's al Ghul
George "Digger" Harkness as Captain Boomerang
Jim Gordon
Oliver Queen as Green Arrow
Silas Stone
Garfield Logan as Beast Boy
Aaron Cash
with Nam-Ek
and Faora Hu-Ul

FEATURING
The Joker as…
Himself
“Got a phone call. Show me your hands.”

…

“Alright. Five minutes.”

“You’ve reached the End of the Line… Your once and future king is speaking.”

“I don’t think you’ve reached the End, yet.”

“…”

“Happy to hear my voice?”

“Flattered, actually.”

“Don’t be. I have news.”

“Ooh! Would that be in regard to your recent coupling?”

“…”

“How is she, by the way?”

“Better, now that she doesn’t have to deal with you.”

“My, my. For such a loner, you certainly do keep a tangled web. The stories I could tell. But then, who would believe me? I’m crazy, after all. Not even fit to stand trial.”

“There are a number of facilities in the area, that treat the mentally ill with patience and compassion.”

“Indeed, there are.”

“You won’t be going to any of those. You’re being transferred to Arkham Asylum. Effective immediately.”

“You… Can’t do that!”
“I can’t. Jim Gordon can. You’ll meet him soon enough.”

“You don’t understand! The bell has been rung, the demons! They’re coming! They will rain from the sky! You need someone who knows…”

“We have someone. You shouldn’t worry yourself. There are people who handle this sort of thing.”

“And what of me? Must I really waste away in some padded room?”

“I have friends at the Asylum. They’ll keep you company.”

click!

“Okay, call’s ov- Whoa! You don’t look too hot. What was that all about?”

…

“Bats. Fucking bats!”

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!