Exteroception

by Holdt

Summary

Pain is always a subjective experience.

Notes

Storified porn.

*Exteroception is the Prequel to Position Awareness*

Fanmix: https://open.spotify.com/user/holdtvids/playlist/08BMS5KVfi1THifDjdyDNM
Check out Albi's AMAZING fanart for the series [HERE](#).

This story is part of [LLF Comment Project](#), whose goal is to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites:

- Feedback
  - Short comments
  - Long comments
  - Questions
  - Constructive criticism
  - “<3” as extra kudos
  - Reader-reader interaction

[LLF Comment Builder](#)

This author replies to comments.
Clark was sick as a child; it sounded like the set up to any number of sophomoric Big-Blue-related jokes. No one he knew now really believed that to be anything other than the deliberately ham-handed secret identity dross it sounded like, but all the same, it was true. Clark was sick as a child. If one had been privy to the secrets of the Kent family and asked, they would have been given a litany of ills hard to swallow.

At first Martha and John had been wary. When a child shorter than their knees lifted an entire vehicle, caution was understandable. When he grinned sunnily up at them, blue eyes sparkling, inviting their protective instincts…

Well.

That was all the validation Martha Kent needed. He was their little angel, their miracle child, and despite his obvious differences, it didn’t take her long before all she could see in those eyes was Clark.

It took harder hearts than theirs to walk away. It soon became clear that this wasn’t a case of one deviance from normality, but a whole host of physiological exceptions and quirks, which neither of them had encountered before. He seemed incapable of stillness. He refused to lie on his stomach. He paid attention when they spoke, hanging on every word, though he spoke no English. He babbled in some liquid clicking tongue that sounded more like song than any language they’d ever heard, and followed them about the house that winter, chubby hands gripped into Martha’s or John’s pants. Clark was unaccountably adorable, but of the few people he’d shared his childhood with, none ever believed him when he told them how bad he’d felt as a youngster, knowing that he hurt his parents.

Clark was sick as a child, incredibly so.

Clark was anxious; not anxious in the way that most children whose parents leave for a little while are, but anxious in a way that made him scream and cry if he wasn’t being held close, for many months. While being touched by John or Martha, little Clark would happily gurgle and laugh. What could they do?

So they touched him.

They touched him, and the results were less than optimal.

There was the period by turns horrifying and heartbreaking, when it seemed as though every single disease John or Martha had ever been exposed to ran through the child in waves. Measles; croup; an odd livid rash which came and went in stages across Clark’s body; something that seemed far too close to pneumonia for peace of mind - they all had their turn at the boy. There was the morning that the whites of little Clark’s eyes went blood red, alarming Jonathan to a quiet strain of
hysteria. There was the day that they were sure Clark had contracted smallpox. There was the night when Martha and John argued in low, intense tones about whether or not he had scarlet fever. Swollen joints, runny eyes, and hacking breaths; there was a time when prayer, Clark’s helpless crying and wheezing were what defined life for the Kents.

Clark ran a constant fever, which would have been accepted as his default, had he not also whimpered, vomited and moaned in his sleep. They’d been too afraid to consider a doctor and too terrified to let him sleep alone.

The worst ailment by far though, was the possible RSV in Clark’s lungs. There were a range of issues. On one hand, Clark’s heart beat so slowly at times, he seemed to be in a state of hibernation. He’d be near insensate, unable to respond or speak except for pupil dilation, shallowly gasping for air while his tiny chest heaved, and Martha would run the humidifier, and poultice and speak quietly to the suffering child. On the other hand, Clark’s heart beat so quickly at times that he seemed to be going through some type of cardiac arrest. Most distressing of all, during these episodes it was Clark who fought to give tight little sickly smiles, quietly clinging to Martha’s hand whenever he could. Clark could not have ensured their love more if he’d tried.

The Kents found Clark on the lead edge of an incoming winter storm - some said the storm of the century. There was no hospital within range, no natal unit. There were no inoculations they could have allowed, and there was no backup on the family farm.

They were powerless - trying to medicate Clark might have killed him faster than any Earth illness, so they sat and they kept watch. Night after night, year after year, Martha and John safeguarded their susceptible, unworldly child. To them, he wasn’t invulnerable - he was just a lost little boy. Now he was theirs, and they were determined to do right by him, regardless of where he’d come from.

There were other times later, though; times when he would cry out as a boy at night and thrash. Or they would come upon him in the field in his teens, curled tightly into a ball and hyperventilating at such an alarming rate that they were sure this was It. This was the day that they would lose their precious boy. When Clark recovered, which he always did, he was resistant to talking about his ‘fits’, and so the subject was gently laid to rest. If there was rhyme or reason to these episodes, the Kents never could find it; still they would hold him, and speak to him quietly until it passed. Under steady hands, Clark managed to find a measure of calm.

Eventually, to the good of Clark’s health and their sanity, his body began to acclimate to his new environment, as it had been engineered to. They began to relax, continued to teach the fiercely intelligent child to be just as fiercely hard-working, as selfless and as respectful of boundaries as those first days had revealed them to be. They taught Clark to be Human, to be a good man, and in return, Clark felt a deep and abiding love for humanity.

They taught Clark so much…

*(Eavesdropping is rude, Clark; Don’t inhale your food, Clark; Clark! No running in the house!; Nobody likes a showoff, Clark; Manners don’t cost nothing but time, son; Mind that sass, young man; Be good to people, Clark, and the right people will be good to you; Be kind, Clark; It’s not how fast you can run, honey, it’s how happy it makes you that matters.)*

Of all the things the Kents taught Clark, the most integral was the very first lesson, which he never forgot: to touch was to love; and to love was to heal.

There was a second lesson there too, but after learning how to fly, becoming first the Good Samaritan, then the Blur, and finally the indisputable Superman, it no longer seemed to apply.
Chapter Notes

pam

- acute mental or emotional distress or suffering :grief

Chapter Two: Detachment

~“But I promise now, my judge and jurors - my intentions couldn't have been purer,”~ - Depeche Mode

If adapting to Earth after prolonged intergalactic travel was enough to cause a Kryptonian child years of respiratory and visual ailments, then being buried away from the warm golden light of Sol’s glow for over half a year had its own predictable effects. The same as any other man who’d been laid up healing, Clark found that his body no longer paid him much mind: where before he was steady, now his limbs shake; where before he could fly, now he struggles to keep one foot in front of another as he walks, hand gripping the wood balance beam in the corner of Bruce Wayne’s sparring area. Frustration dogs his lurching steps.

So many things are more difficult now, it’s with a sense of numb inevitability that Clark accepts Bruce’s hospitality. By the time his hands can hold a razor, he’s already accepted Bruce shaving him, the touch reserved and painstaking. He spends so much of his time healing and trying to catch a taste of the colors and sounds he used to experience. He accepts the crutches, and later, the worn lakeside path. He accepts the five-star dining and the silent, somehow overly intimate nook. He accepts the house made of glass like ice floes, and the smoke-ridden vista of a city behind it.

The months pass slowly.

At first, Clark asks about Lois all the time. It’s been over two years, but he’s confident that once he’s back on top of his game, they can finally have a piece of that normality he dreams of. He wants to know everything: where she is, what she’s doing, how she’s doing. At first, Bruce answers him easily. She’s in Burkina Faso, covering hostage negotiations; she’s in Brussels, scooping the new Prime Minister; she’s in Calcutta, uncovering child smuggling rings; she’s fine, she’s good, she’s well. Slowly Bruce’s answers become shorter, his explanations perfunctory. It’s approaching two months when Clark realizes that Bruce never brings him messages, never includes personal information, never engages in speculation about her emotional well-being. Bruce never tells him when Lois is in Metropolis or Gotham; never tells him if she’s even in the country. Clark’s beginning to feel as if someone’s told a punch-line that he doesn’t know the setup for.

Clark approaches Bruce without subterfuge, and notes the careful five degree turn, sees how every countless window Bruce has open disappears into one small window of coded text, and he lets himself sink down in the only chair beside Bruce, in his chair. Something tells Clark to be careful.
“Bruce,” he asks, “how’s Lois?”

The cadence of Bruce’s typing doesn’t pause. “Miss Lane is in Guadalajara covering alleged assaults by a bone-saw wielding vigilante.” He always says her name that way: Miss Lane. He taps a bit more then says, “Her safety’s within acceptable parameters.” Bruce is preoccupied; he’s always preoccupied. Clark sits and watches him silently. Twenty minutes pass. Thirty minutes.

At the fifty-minute mark, Bruce’s screen goes blank (not still but blank) and he turns a full forty-five degrees to face Clark. “I’m listening,” he says.

Clark feels his way around the shape of a thought. “You’ve never had to check,” he starts. “You always know where she is.” It isn’t a question, but Bruce answers it anyway.

“Yes.” Bruce’s eyes are impassive.

“Because you…keep tabs on her.” Clark continues.

“Yes,” and that tone is far too reasonable for what he’s just admitted.

“Bruce…does she…did you tell her about me? Does she even know-”

“She knows, Clark.” Bruce doesn’t even look embarrassed for him.

She knows who Bruce is, who Batman is, so it’s sensible for Bruce to track her, but she also knows about Clark, so there are two other options.

“How do you have an arrangement with her? To stay away?”

Bruce looks intrigued by this suggestion. “Do you think I should?” Clark can feel the tendon in his jaw flexing irregularly. “No,” Bruce relents, “There is no arrangement, and believe me when I say that there is absolutely nothing I had to do to keep Miss Lane away. I won’t blame you for wanting corroboration, although my information is from a primary source. You’re free to find out for yourself - use the cell in your nightstand.”

With that, Bruce is already turning back to his screens and schematics, and the world settles just the slightest bit heavier on Clark’s shoulders.

“If it helps, she wrote a hell of an article about the death of Superman.”

“Did she write about me, about my death?” Clark can’t help pressing at the pain, just a bit.

Bruce conveniently glances away and tilts his head in a way that says ‘more or less’. So less, then.

“You’re joking.” Clark manages, bewildered. The pain is immense and removed, too much to process all at once.

Bruce’s expression freezes over. “We do not joke, in this house.” Careful what you say, he doesn’t warn; it echoes between them nonetheless.

“Ugh,” Clark groans. He lifts his hands and covers his face and regrets damn near everything—journalism; leaving Smallville; letting anyone get close enough to see him this way. “I want to go home, Bruce.”

“Mm.” Surprisingly, Bruce seems sympathetic. It’s quiet for a long while afterward.
When Clark walks into the atrium in the morning, his bags are packed and they aren’t alone. Bruce is sitting, Henley soft and unprepossessing, in dark jeans, reading with the Gotham Gazette Financial section in one hand and a double-mug of black coffee in the other. The everyman image is only a little spoiled by the graceful monogram on his custom raised collar.

“Clark,” he says evenly, without looking up. In spite of his reserve, or perhaps just because of it, Clark feels…balance.

“Good mornin’, B,” he shoots back, and smiles gently at the slight frown it nets him. “No breakfast?”

“Alfred’s at market. Help yourself.”

Really; Clark raises his eyebrows at that. “I could—”

Bruce sets his mug down lightly on a saucer with a decisive click. “I don’t break fast.” His delivery is utterly smooth; he doesn’t so much as peep at Clark as he sets down the Gazette and picks up the Chronicle, giving it an experienced flick to separate Finance from the rest.

Clark stops with his back to the room, then turns slowly, grinning. That…was definitely playful. Not a joke, as such, fair enough, but playful. Clark beams at him. “That’s fine, B—I was planning on eating it all anyway.”

Bruce gives a harumph-y sort of grunt behind his wall of print and the saucer clinks. “We’re going to visit your mother when you’re done.”

Clark is…honestly speechless. He pushes down futilely at the ball of warmth growing in his chest, at the wetness in his eyes. His voice sounds hoarse when he says, “Yeah, let’s—yes. Thank you.”

“Not necessary,” comes the curt reply. Clark eyes him a until he’s sure Bruce doesn’t intend to add to that, then starts something easy; two eggs sunny-side up, toast. He stares at the jug of fresh milk—fresh, not store-bought, through the clear glass fronting the refrigerator. He knows the difference and the cost of it; this close to the sea it’s prohibitive, a private signifier that’s a bit worrying, so he opts for juice instead. Bruce is a silent, heavy presence marked only by the twitch of newspaper and the snap of creases falling just so.

Clark thinks it’s only fair that he refill Bruce’s mug, so he does. Bruce’s gaze probes him, then returns to his paper as he sips his drink. He says nothing. Clark breathes out, all at once unexpectedly nervous, then sits down to eat his breakfast.

Bruce scans his paper, switches it out for the Wall Street Journal, and gives that one a brisk shake as well, before another soft clink rings out. His topmost luggage bag is open, and Clark can see that it’s full up with newspapers.

“Gosh,” he says mischievously, sounding just as flustered as he can. “Light reading?” The page in Bruce’s hand flicks again, sharply.

“Clark,” Bruce says, serene, “Eat.”

He does.
Forgiveness

Chapter Three: Forgiveness

~“This kid is going to wreck and ruin, I’m not quite sure of what I’m doing…”~ –Thin Lizzie

It’s the same argument all over again. Bruce had his ways and he got awful touchy whenever Clark got overly spontaneous.

“You can’t just rely on what makes you exceptional by birth—you need to anticipate and avoid those attacks that target your strengths as well.”

“So what you’re saying is, I need to be ready…for the unknown. I’ve been-” Clark’s tone was doubtful. He hadn’t intended it to be, but there it was. Accordingly, Bruce’s spine stiffened; his voice was level and biting when he spoke.

“You need to be ready, yes,” Bruce cut in smoothly. "Use what makes you different, but don’t rely on one trick to get you out of a situation. Do it again.” Bruce struck out before the sentence had ended, coming at Clark in what to a normal human, was probably a blur. Instead of ducking, blocking or grappling, Clark took the soft hit to his shoulder, tried to roll with the momentum, and ended up off-balance, feeling Bruce follow through down to the floor, until they stopped, Bruce straddling him. Clark, pinned, held Bruce’s arm lightly, but with unbreakable power.

“I won’t hurt people, Bruce,” he said stubbornly.

“On purpose, you mean. Let go,” Bruce commanded, displeased tilt to his mouth.

“I need you to listen to me-”

“No, Clark.” Bruce didn’t raise his voice, but the steel in his tone was enough that Clark reflexively released his hold. Bruce promptly rolled away and to his feet. “You’re disrupting a lesson to make an invalid point. This isn’t some joke, Superman. There’s a half-mile crater studded with Kryptonite mineral not five miles from here. You may appreciate the Wayne Foundation’s efforts to contain export and shipping of K, but let me be clear - Wayne Industries was not the first on the scene. You think a little smoke bomb was bad, you haven’t seen bad. There are people out there with guns, Clark-” For the first time, there was an urgency to Bruce’s tone, but Clark’s blood was up; he couldn’t—he didn’t want to censor himself.

Clark scoffed at him, stung.“Are you hearing yourself? Guns? I’m not afraid of guns, Bruce-”

“-with Kryptonite bullets! Do you have any idea what that compound will do to your bloodstream? No, you don't, because you never think farther than your own nose! I am trying to teach you how to defend yourself, something you should have learned before you began throwing yourself into danger with no backup. You have no training, no discipline, and remarkably little self-control.” Bruce’s eyes looked wild, as though he should be pacing back and forth instead of impassively laying out Clark’s flaws in that low and certain tone.
Wow. Clark took a careful breath before he spoke again, but his voice still shook roughly.

“No, I don’t have your training—just a decent upbringing. Maybe I don’t have your discipline, but all I’ve tried to do is help people who need help. That’s all I’ve ever tried to do. You don’t know anything about me—all I ever do is control myself! I stopped that thing. I did that, Bruce.”

He refused to call it ‘Doomsday’—fuck Lex Luthor.

“Yes, let’s discuss that, why don’t we. Congratulations, Clark - you killed the monster and then you went and got yourself impaled in the process. Salud. You didn’t have a plan - you were thoughtless. Any one of us could have dealt that blow, but you’re arrogant; you think you can punch your way through anything. You didn’t stop to recon - you didn’t even listen to your nosy fiance tell you it was a bad idea. Admittedly, it’s my error as well; I assumed that during our conflict, your anger was what made your attacks inaccurate. There was also the possibility that you were toying with me. Do you actually think I would have let you go after the spear if I’d known that you weren’t trained to fight, Clark?” Bruce’s chin was up aggressively. “Let me help you.”

Thoughtless? Arrogant? What a load of horseshit. And yeah, so Clark learned how to fight on a farm—like most of middle America, so what—there’s no need to shit on him for it. Nosy fiance? It’d be one thing if this was purely tactical, but this feels personal; Clark can’t help but feel like Bruce is enjoying cutting him down. “I never asked to be chased by that psychopath. I never wanted to fight him. I never expected—”

“You never expect, so you’re never ready, Clark. That’s the difference between you and I; I plan. Flexible tactics. Repeatable results. You, are disorderly. You need to learn strategy, or you’d better learn how to listen to it, and you’d better learn now.” Bruce is dusting chalk onto his hands with the ease of long experience, completely unconcerned with Clark’s ire.

He’s lecturing Clark about collateral damage. God help him, Clark wants to hit the man.

It’s as good a time as any to remind himself that he knows the man in front of him is an assassin. The urge to throw it in Bruce’s face is overwhelming, but that’s not Clark and it’s not who he wants to be. Clark forced himself to stop; he ran his tongue lightly over his teeth to keep himself from grinding them. “You think you can teach me?” he managed over his own anger.

“I don’t think anyone else can,” Bruce challenged humorlessly. “The pertinent question is, can you learn? You’ve already shown me how well you listen.” Clark knelt up from the mat and stood slowly, fists clenched.

“I can listen. You’re saying that I need to get my head in the game.”

Bruce stared at him for a long minute, then turned to the pommel horse. “I’m saying this isn’t a game. That’s enough for now; we can’t work while you’re agitated. Practice your breathing. I can hear you from here.”

Clark repressed a frustrated sigh.

‘Agitated.’

Don’t waste my time, Clark. It didn’t need to be said.

“Do you expect me to just accept everything that you say, without any question—”

“Yes.” Bruce hisses imperiously, and that’s too much. That is enough to make Clark walk away. He doesn’t look back; doesn’t need Bruce’s perfect posture and perfect confidence shoved in his
Clark wants to learn. Clark wants to be orderly. Clark wants to punch something. Instead, he practices his breathing until his head is empty and the burning guilt in his chest subsides to dull embers.

~~

*Slam.*

“Focus.”

Clark can’t be blamed for his awe - it isn’t as if he’s ever known an actual *ninja* before - which is exactly what the confluence of words like ‘League of Shadows’ and Bruce’s skill-sets say. Not that Bruce ever said as much to Clark and generally, he tunes people out, but he’s not at fault for hearing what’s said on-property. He hadn’t even meant to listen in, but he’d heard Bruce speaking one night. He’d heard his *real* voice and Clark had eavesdropped his way through half a conversation between Bruce and Alfred before he realized it.

*Focus.*

Clark listens and watches and tries to anticipate -

And is slammed down on the training mats again, face crushed against Bruce’s chest, a hand cradling the back of his spinal column, with a soft “Umf!” He lies there on the exhale; he inhales, pinned until Bruce releases him, and Clark’s shaking his head with a rueful laugh and pulling himself back to his feet. *This* is what Bruce does all day, when he’s not wining, dining, running or stalking Gotham? This, research and microsleep? He’s been throwing Clark around like an unwieldy sack of muscled potatoes for *hours*, and he’s barely winded. Clark, on the other hand, would very much like to not meet the mat again today. Clark is tired physically and in a way that makes him slightly ashamed of himself.

Bruce *is better at this than he is.* Even after months, Bruce *is better* than he is, at so many things. It’s an honest first for Clark; many people have been able to do things that Clark found himself unable to - stomach Ke$ha songs, perform surgeries, and sing karaoke; write Pulitzer Prize-winning passages that fill people with the kind of hope that Clark has to put on a bright suit to inspire; keep up with all the characters and plot-lines of whatever television series is popular these days, normal typical people things. This is different. Bruce is the only person Clark could trust who’s ever been better than him at something purely physical. Bruce is a *specialist.*

Clark readies himself then before he can shift, *slam*; the impact and pressure pushes the air out of him. Invigorating. Infuriating. Pinned, and Clark could get free, but not without using super-strength, and this training relies on him being weaker, or equally as strong as an opponent. His strength is a liability here; this is about adaptation. Bruce gives the back of his neck a little squeeze; calming. Settling. *Slam* and again; rough and patient. He smells good. What is it?

“Focus, Clark.”

*Slam.* Metal and fruit? Stone and pine?

*He can do this.*
“Again.”

Slam. A woody scent—warm and earthy; oily-sweet with a mineral tang.

Clark can’t do it, not yet. He’s never been so handily maneuvered. He’s seen this before, in others; the mistaken hero-worship, the lust for an ideal. He knows what this is and he knows exactly how inappropriate it is, to have this fascination when Bruce is teaching him, but it’s Bruce. How is Clark supposed to not want him? Even worse, how is Bruce supposed to take him seriously when Clark can barely stay on his feet?

He’s insufferable, Clark reminds himself. It doesn’t help.

Slam. God, he smells good.

Focus.
~ “It is possible to interpret without observing, but not to observe without interpreting.” ~ -Mason Cooley

Flight on a private jet with Bruce was much like anything else involving Bruce: periods of intense quiet broken by the sound of Bruce leaving himself tersely coded Dictaphone notes. When Clark had first woken, Bruce’s notes were composed of an amalgam of Spanish, colloquial French and Arabic. Once he’d realized that Clark spoke all three (because why wouldn’t he?), Bruce had switched his languages up soon after, to something that sounded a bit like Mandarin, a bit perhaps Punjabi (or maybe Sanskrit) and something else… was it Berber, or maybe Swahili? Clark wasn’t sure. Still, it was soothing in a way, the flawless low cadence of Bruce’s voice wrapping around the pressurized cabin. Clark tended to fly via machine as little as possible in the past; this is a pleasant departure from the long lines and scans, the crowding, the chairs too small and ceilings too low to accommodate his physique; the general noisiness of public transportation. Maybe if every flight was this peaceful, Clark would have a better opinion of planes in general. It’s a nice thought.

Conscious of Bruce’s dislike of being watched, Clark keeps his gaze on the bay of windows. There’s more resistance vibrating through the metal frame than he’s used to. To the world below, Clark doesn’t exist anymore and he feels curiously unnecessary, high above the clouds. Untethered. He glances over and Bruce is settling small ear-buds in.

“Ninety minutes,” he mouths and Bruce closes his eyes. Clark looks out the window again, looks back at him in disbelief. The sound of Bruce’s voice, Bruce’s notes, drifts from the tiny speakers. The scent of protection dismissal possession swirls around the opulent cabin.

Clark lays his head back and lets it enfold him.

Landing is a quiet, private affair. They step out to crisp ice-overlaid tarmac; it’s March in Kansas. Not cold for him, but thirty-four degrees is just this side of comfy at this time of year in these parts. Steam fogs Clark’s glasses and Bruce pulls on fine leather gloves without complaint. There’s the nondescript black American sedan with wide tires and the solicitous valet who hands Bruce the keys. There’s a familiarity in the gestures that grates on Clark’s nerves—this isn’t the first time Bruce has done this exact thing; he can tell. It begs the question; not what Bruce was doing in Smallville while Clark was interred, but why.

Bruce doesn’t offer the keys to Clark; flips a number of tiny switches in the dash and drives the slick dirt roads with a studied smoothness. He’s at ease—obviously he knows this vehicle. He doesn’t panic when the car fishtails, leans into the slide and gets her straightened out with nonchalance. He knows these roads. Clark tries to relax into the seat, but as the mile markers fly past, he feels a frantic desire to be there now.

“Easy,” comes from his left, barely a breath from Bruce.
His mother smiles, then she cries. She does this while hugging him, while kissing his cheeks, while welcoming him home. She cries while she busies herself fussing at them to settle down and fussing around the kitchen until she chases Bruce into the guest-room. Martha Kent is not a crier. Clark apologizes until she threatens him with a frying pan, then he subsides, smiling.

His mother’s smile is worth every moment of pain watching her cry. They have a teary reunion at the winter sun-dappled Kent family table, over coffee, iced sweet-tea and cake, and Clark’s never been so grateful in his life. They stay for a week, and he expects Bruce to go, but he doesn’t. Instead, Bruce commandeers the guest-room and sets up a mini-HQ. Micro-fans and the sound of electronics run inside the house day and night. Clark wonders why Bruce is even welcome, if Clark even welcomes him, after all he’s done. It feels petty, no—it is petty, but it’s real and human: Clark’s suspicious of his motives. When he decides to bring it up, hushed, Ma Kent is pragmatic about it all.

“We, Bruce and I, thought it’d be better for you to recover in Gotham after you woke. There was no way to know… Less memories. I thought it would be easier for you.” Clark keeps the smile on his face with effort. Easier for him, but not for her. Not for Bruce, either, which brings him to his point.

“Bruce actually hasn’t mentioned you until now, Mom. To be honest this all seems pretty strange. Are you sure…” He couldn’t really ask if she was sure Bruce was safe, could he? If she was sure if this was okay, when Bruce had brought Clark back to her? Clark sighed and dropped his hands. “I just worry, Mom.”

“Honey, Bruce has helped me a lot since… well, since. We’ve been in contact often. He’s a little eccentric, but he’s a thoughtful man, and he means well.”

“Why—he doesn’t belong here.” Too difficult, to keep the strain out of his voice. “He shouldn’t be here. When did he start coming here, Mom?”

She fixed him with a stare. “He came straight after the service, Clark. He’s a guest in my home; lower your voice.” Years. Bruce had been coming to his mother’s home for almost three years.

Clark rubbed his face in frustration. “I… you’re right. I didn’t mean…” he sighed again. “You’re right, I’m sorry.”

She rubbed his arm gently. “Honey, aren’t you and he… aren’t you staying with him?” Not what she’d wanted to ask; he can hear how her heart stumbles over the question. He took a long drink of his tea, let the sharp cold sweetness soothe his temper before he answered.

“Ma, he hates me. He actually hates me. This is… I don’t know, guilt. Regret, something. Not… he doesn’t want to be friends—”

“He has a funny way of showing it, doesn’t he? Clark, he’s the only ‘friend’ of yours who ever took the time to stick around, so if we’re grading on consistency, I’m afraid we’re just going to have to disagree.” His mother’s tone is no-nonsense done.

“Ma!”

“Don’t you ‘Ma’ me, Clark Joseph. Now, you can go on and get washed up — not too old to help me with supper, are you?”
Clark feels… impolite, so he smiles, despite his misgivings. “Never.”

—

“Mrs. Kent,” Bruce says quietly. The bug-zapper crackles over his mellow tone, but he sounds unfazed by all of it.

Ma’s exasperated snort comes through clearly. “Oh, please - Bruce, how many times have I told you to call me by my name?”

“Mrs. Kent,” Bruce insists, “I think it’s only proper to inform you that I… am not actually a friend of your son’s.” There’s a short silence and the wind blows just a bit. Then Clark’s mother sighs.

“Well, tell me something I can’t figure out for myself, Bruce. I raised that boy in there - you think I can’t tell a lie from the truth?” She snorted again. “Honestly, you super-people and your secrets. The word you’re looking for is ‘was’, not ‘am’, by the way. Come inside and have some pie.” And Clark doubts his hearing for the first in a long time, because it sounds like a hand patting expensive cloth; it sounds like his mother just pet Bruce, just like she’s touched Clark to calm him his whole life. It sounds like his mother is reassuring Bruce, and the thought that Bruce might need reassuring is unsettling.

“Mrs. Kent.” Now Bruce sounds perturbed. “It isn’t appropriate for me, to—"

“Martha. I have had it with you boys. Now, you can use my name or you can get right on out of my house, young man, and don’t think I won’t toss you out without dessert.”

There’s a slight shuffle of feet, then Bruce says, “Lemon chess, ma’am?”

Clark knows the laugh he hears; it isn’t his mother’s polite laugh and it isn’t the one that says, ‘I won’t tell you what a fool you’re being’—it’s the laugh that wrinkles the edges of her eyes and transforms her face, a family laugh and he wonders what Bruce could have done to warrant it.

The ghost of pine drifts through the open window. Clark closes his eyes.

—

“—Sally Robinson leads the PTA now, and if she and her husband are buying up real estate—”

Clark heard it—the sub-vocal moan under the hiss of water from the shower-head in the guest bathroom. Low, close, lurid in Clark’s ear where he sat in the bright kitchen, chatting with his mother.

“-and then they violate fifteen municipal ordinances, honey you should have seen it! We’re in council and the DA looks at me as if I’m the one who can explain it-” There was the quick shush of soap on skin, fast and economical. Another moan, almost silent.

“Clark!” Martha frowned at him as he stared into space, then slapped him smartly right across the back of his head. “Boy, we trained you better - you stop that eavesdropping right now!”
Clark hid a small smile and ducked his head, fighting a blush. “Sorry, Mom.” She pursed her lips at him.

“Sweetheart, what’s been going through your mind?” She cupped his cheek gently and gave a him a rueful smile. She didn’t look surprised, but that was his mom—always ahead of the class. She looked worried for him, though, so Clark tried, he did. He remembers being small, the smallest person he knew, feeling so lost. He remembers countless hours spent in the sun with his mother while she told him, ‘look again—there’s more’, when he described the terrible things he’d heard and seen.

“Nothin’, Ma,” he said. “Nothing… it don’t matter, anyway.” Mumbling, because he’s never been able to lie to his Ma worth a damn, and most likely never will.

And now his mother looks him in the eyes and tells him, “Clark, look again.”

All Clark can see is Bruce Wayne; he doesn’t know who else he’s supposed to be looking for.

~

Clark looks again, in the days before they leave the farm. He looks again, and he doesn’t understand, how the man who sits at his mother’s scarred heavy oak table and makes her laugh with dry wit can be the same man who wakes him up at the crack of dawn to run the property. He doesn't understand how the man who has no problem dressing down in jeans and climbing under his mother’s car can be the same man who drives Clark out of his mind with frustration and self-doubt while dressed to the nines. He looks again, and he doesn’t understand what he’s seeing.

“You stay as long as you please, this is still your home.” Home; it’s all he wants. It’s all he’s ever wanted.

But it doesn’t feel like home, not anymore. It feels like it used to be home, but now home is fir trees and coastline, off the water with a skyline that breaks the horizon into slivers.

“I know,” he says, smiling gently, and his mother hugs him with dry eyes, and tells him to be careful, to be safe, to try to be happy. He hugs her back, rests his forehead on hers in the way that’s always been so natural to him, and breathes his mother’s love. He tries to put everything he’s afraid to say into his embrace.

He tries not to listen to her cheerfully threaten Bruce, or to Bruce’s solemn acknowledgment as he sits waiting in the car. This may not be what’s best, but it’s what Bruce seems to expect, and it’s what Clark wants to do.

~

“No,” Bruce says, spreadsheet in hand. “Absolutely unequivocally not. You cannot mow my lawn. You will not mow my lawn. If someone put you up to this—it isn’t amusing. This is unacceptable,
Clark.” He looks at Clark as if Clark is the one who’s crazy for even suggesting the idea. Clark can’t decide if this is the problem with rich people or with city people.

“I’ve done this type of job before—why not,” Clark asks. “Would it be so terrible?” He’s trying to joke about it, trying earn his keep. He doesn’t feel right about just living off of Bruce—he’s been cooling his heels for over a year and Clark needs to do something. So, alright; he even comes right out and says so, he lets it fly, “Hey, I’m just tryin’ to earn my keep.” Easy. Reasonable. Concerned. Bruce looks at Clark as if he’s committed a huge faux pas. The acreage around the lake house is kept carefully overgrown.

It isn’t the most glamorous job, granted, and he’s betting there’s no John Deere in the garage; all the same Clark’s pretty sure he can still manage a decent perimeter trim. Bruce’s expression of faint horror is getting less funny by the second. Clark’s brow furrows slightly.

“Hmmm, no. I refuse to fire my staff because you get it into your head that you need to do on-spot lawn maintenance. You don’t even understand what you’re asking,” Bruce says dismissively. “First it’s my lawn service, then they talk; next thing you know, it’s my laundress, and they talk, then my dry cleaning—maybe my maids—people talk. Listen; before you know it, I’ll lose my entire staff. Alfred won’t have it, I won’t have it.”

Clark is almost speechless with outrage. Here he is trying to be a helpful guest, and Bruce is concerned with the inconvenience of explaining having to replace his home maintenance services?

“Your reason why I can’t mow… is bad PR? Seriously? That’s—”

It’s rude—it’s elitist and above all, dickish, and Clark is opening his mouth to tell him so, when Bruce says,

“I can’t just refuse to pay people because you want to play at skilled labor, Clark. If I don’t pay them, how are they supposed to feed their families? Worse, if I pay them for no work, word on the street will be that Bruce Wayne doesn’t know the value of a dollar. I don’t think so; the subject is closed.”

Wait, what? Each argument is polished and cool, comes out off-the-cuff but feels scripted. Bruce is treating him like an outsider, as if they’ve had this argument before and Clark’s done something wrong, and Clark still isn’t sure what he’s supposed to have done when Bruce taps a column on his read-out and walks away without looking in Clark’s direction.

Clark isn’t sure which one of them is more offended. He closes his mouth, unsure who he’s even been speaking with, and quietly re-evaluates everything he thinks he knows about Bruce Wayne.
Chapter Notes

Apologies for the slow rate of posting - I'm doing my best to make sure that I won't have to re-edit any sections. Please bear with me while I make sure everything is beta'd.
Feel free to point out any typos or inconsistencies missed. I appreciate everyone who's on-board for this, and who took the time to read the tags. ;)

Chapter Five: Hedged

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” - Viktor Fankl

She won’t have him.

Lois doesn’t want to be Superman’s wife. She doesn’t outright say so, but it’s difficult not to think that as much as she doesn’t want to be married to a Superman, she wants to be married to Clark Kent even less. He can’t blame her; he doesn’t blame her. He loves her, or at least the idea of her, being happy with him. Somewhere under a big sky, a small horde of children (if that were even possible) and a good stretch of land; somewhere quiet and private and safe. Somewhere they could make a covenant, between city and country. He’s thought of it more than he’ll ever admit. It’s a dream, and Clark’s always known that it was a dream, but it was his dream. It’s useless to try to imagine it anymore; it won’t happen now.

“I understand,” he says woodenly. “It’s fine.” It’s shattering.

She explains how it isn’t him, it’s her, but of course it must be him; he’s the freak, not her. She’s mailed his ring back to Smallville, she’s left the Daily Planet. He can’t rightfully be upset with her for leaving him when he left first, can he?

She asks if he’ll be okay.

Well sure, Lois - I’ll be just fine.

“No,” he tells her, before his mind catches up to his mouth. He sets Bruce’s antique streamlined rotary receiver down gently, as gently as he possibly can. No more questions.

No comment.

For a while there, without Lois, Clark feels as if he’s died all over again. He’s numb, when he isn’t in pain. He’s furious, when he isn’t trying desperately to keep himself from falling apart. He isn’t aware of when the shift happens over the next year, only that it does.

It doesn’t take Clark long to understand the dilemma he’s having—when he walks into rooms, he
gravitates towards Bruce. When Bruce speaks, Clark can’t help but listen in. Clark is aware of Bruce, in a way he’s all but forgotten how to be aware of anyone. There’s something in the way that Bruce stands, in his studious attention to detail; something that’s always attracted Clark, if he’s being honest. Lois had it; Zod had it—even after he’d declared how he was going to kill Clark; the Lang girl Clark had pined over for four years in high school, the boy he’d pined over in his undergrad years—they’d both had it.

None of them have ever had it quite so much as Bruce, though, and whatever it is, Clark responds to it like sunlight. Something primal maybe, something deep within him that even temporary death or stasis couldn’t erase. One day he realizes, partly, what it is: like Lois, Bruce takes up room. Unapologetically, unreservedly. Whereas Lois took up room with her energetic body language, vivacious curiosity and a torrent of fact-minded but spelling-deficient words, Bruce takes up room with his deep silences, his deliberate lack of signifying body language and his dynamic but obsessively analytical mind. They both wanted to know everything about Clark—they both wanted something from him, and he isn’t entirely sure that what they both want are actually different things.

And it wouldn’t be so bad; honestly it wouldn’t, but Bruce is taking up space in Clark’s mind. Thoughts of his presence, desire for his presence, become… intrusive.

Bruce stands too close. Not close enough to comment on, but just close enough to notice. He smells of fir trees and bergamot, oak and something clean and herbal. Bruce doesn’t drive him away as much as he used to anymore, so Clark has had plenty of time to acclimate to his scent. The Batman doesn’t brand those he catches, anymore, so Clark doesn’t even have that to agonize over. Bruce is still a criminal, he still thinks he’s above the law; when it comes down to it, isn’t that exactly why half the world was baying for Clark’s head? It takes time, to shake off some of his initial assumptions.

All the same, Bruce calls him Kansas and farmboy and son, and not-leers at him in a way that’s too predatory to be anything paternal, and Clark likes that too much. He makes Clark jumpy, makes his skin itch—makes Clark hyper-focused on him, makes Clark clumsy.

He excites Clark, Bruce arouses him and it’s unacceptable. Half of the time he thinks Bruce already knows about his half-formed fantasies and is just waiting for the right moment to strike. It’s presumptuous and stupid to think that anything he feels has the slightest chance of making a difference, now.

It never has before.

~”The love I get from you is something I can't chance

and I could let you slip away, without a second glance.” -Calvin Harris

“I need to get back to Gotham,” Bruce offers. “I brought you home.” (The ‘as you asked’ is implicit.) “Enjoy it.”

“I know, and I appreciate it, I do.” He does, but the thing is... He’s made his peace with the new details: the little alcoves with switches and the cameras and the cone of static that shrouds the Kent farm now, courtesy of B. He wishes he could have seen it in action: the old farm-house and attached buildings being refitted and upgraded as they’d never been before. It blows his mind that
Clark takes a deep breath. “Bruce, I. I want to come back. If I can.”

If he’s welcome; if he’s wanted. Not out of guilt; not out of B’s overinflated sense of obligation. The silence stretches out between them, between the farmhouse and the space they’re occupying.

“What,” Bruce asks, “are you waiting for, precisely?”

Clark squints up into the winter sun. “Mostly? For an invitation, honestly. Be nice to have one. You know, as people do.” He waits, tensed for lash-back.

Bruce hums, considering. Clark sees him clasp his hands in front of his bulky coat, oddly formal in Clark’s peripheral view. “That’s fair. Clark Kent, will you come to live with me and provide mission assist in the times required?” Again, strangely formal and overly specific.

Clark sighs. “That’s the best you got? You’re a terrible motivator.”

Bruce’s eyes target him with exacting concentration. “I believe that there is a threat coming, one that will demand a unique response team—”

Clark rolls his eyes. “Still terrible. You have no idea how to talk to real people, do you?”

Bruce’s lips twitch. “Huh. I’m usually an excellent motivator.” He shifts, a sign of tension that doesn’t reach his face. “You can keep an eye on me, since you’re so concerned with the wellbeing of the criminals of Gotham. Come and keep me honest, Kansas.”

He says it as if there isn't any other reasonable alternative to his suggestion, as if Clark ‘keeping an eye on him’ is somehow more valid than friendship, and Clark can’t help needling him a bit. “I don’t know; I hear Batman keeps track of all that business, Bruce.”

B tilts his head slightly and settles his stance a bit. “I did warn you not to believe everything you hear, son.”

The unmitigated asshole; he is a good motivator.

Clark can’t help the swell of fondness or the bark of laughter that escapes him. Nodding, he watches Bruce’s jaw relax. He feels his Ma’s eyes on them through the windowpane. “Alright then, B.”

This could work.

It wouldn’t be right to say that his mother catches Bruce shaving him; this is a routine they’ve followed faithfully, regardless of argument, once every two weeks without fail. Clark sits in a chair, preferably one facing outward; he likes to watch the trees and sky. But it’s his old home, and so they’re upstairs, in the bathroom Clark’s spent his entire childhood running in and out of.

They don’t talk, when they do this, beyond monosyllables and low hums. Clark is sitting on the commode, undershirt and jeans on, while Bruce stands between his legs, forcing his thighs wide to accommodate B’s nearness, a focused frown on his face, eyes sharp as he guides a sharper Kryptonian-alloy blade along the bristling planes of Clark’s cheeks. Clark always feels that he’s
overstepping, by taking so much pleasure in this, but he hasn’t been called on it yet. A practice in trust and calm, it’s routine, something that’s become natural to them, but even though it wouldn’t be right to say that Martha caught them, it still feels that way.

The door and bathroom windows are wide open, Bruce’s thumb on his jaw nudges slightly, and Clark tilts his head obediently. Everything is distant and muted. The razor scrapes, the water splashes. Bruce breathes out and with a light touch, wipes a smear of cream from Clark’s newly-smooth chin. His finger grazing the corner of Clark’s mouth is no shock, it’s familiar. Welcome. The towel’s tucked over Bruce’s bare shoulder; the blade scrapes again, whisper light across Clark’s skin. The morning is still; it’s quiet—private and confidential.

Bruce always processes the interludes of peace in his own way, or perhaps he really does enjoy micro-tasking that much. He never draws blood; his concentration never wavers. Clark could have shaved himself; by now he can do all of his small necessities alone, but he hasn’t wanted to ask Bruce to end this particular ritual, and Bruce hasn’t yet complained. Clark enjoys the rare opportunity when he can just exist, being who and what he is, and trust that his needs are being cared for. Bruce’s fingers: long, nimble and strong, stroke and slide from Clark’s temples to his jawbone, to the thick juts of his collarbones in a hyper-attentive rhythm. Bruce doesn’t ever stop until it’s to his standard; it’s wonderful.

Clark’s so in his own head that he doesn’t even realize his mother’s been standing at the top of the stairs for long minutes. When he blinks his eyes open and focuses, he sees her quietly making her way back down, and he glances up.

Bruce is completely immersed in his task, he seems unaware that Clark is even animate sometimes when he’s this fixated. Then his thumb strokes long and slow across Clark’s cheekbone, testing. His eyes flicker over Clark’s expression then to the open doorway and back. Bruce rinses the blade with an efficient movement and raises it again. His scent furls focus care composure, his hand presses attention into Clark’s jawline.

“Three minutes,” he murmurs. “She came up with towels. Don’t move yet.”

Clark closes his eyes and tries to regain his lost serenity. He readies himself for an uncomfortable conversation downstairs, but his mother doesn’t say anything during the meal, or afterward. His shave is perfectly smooth.

She doesn’t ask him to explain himself. The topic of Bruce standing half-dressed between his thighs is never broached. What Martha asks about is Clark’s health.

She inquires for a good twenty minutes as to his heart rate, its condition, about his neurological processes, about ‘the shakes’. She asks about his respiration now, whether or not he’s still having those old headaches (he is), whether the old water remedy—Clark under water, that is—still helped (it does). She wants to know if he’s eating well and how much he’s eating and whether his lungs are acting up and the questions become more esoteric and homeopathic until finally she bursts out into the increasingly tense silence with,

“Well, the bathroom’s not the best place for it, but I suppose it’s better than the barn.”

Clark makes a monumental effort to ignore his own red face, and Bruce’s considering eyebrow.

“That depends,” Bruce drawls, setting his glass aside. “What did you do in the barn, Clark?” He looks distressingly interested, both eyebrows raised.

Clark goes on the offensive. “When it comes to the barn, ‘what didn’t I do’ is a better question, B.”
He gives a satisfied little smirk and lounges back in his chair. Expectation tightens his smile. The second of surprise that slips through Bruce’s nonchalant mask is worth it.

His mother waves her hands across the table and shouts it all down. “Okay, okay—that’s enough, you two. No, I don’t want to hear any of your filth. Clark, I’m telling you, don’t you start!” Clark grins and bends his head back over his plate, but not before he catches the split second of amusement around B’s eyes.

They have pie, lemon curd, his favorite. In the wash of evening news, local gossip and shooting star watching, Clark sees his mother glance at him curiously a few times. Then she looks at Bruce and gives Clark a knowing look. Not The Look, a different look—this one isn’t ‘cease and desist immediately, mister’, it’s more of an provisional inquiry.

Clark smiles and shrugs lightly; she knows him too well. It’s unfortunate that he’ll have to disappoint her.

What was he thinking?

This will never work.

Clark has no intention of giving Bruce another reason to call him out over self-control issues, not after what happened in the gym, so Clark will get used to this routine, too. He’d planned to watch (this part, anyway), then he would know that Bruce was, and had always been unavailable, and he would get over his absurd Bat-based obsession and move on.

Clark sat forward when the live coverage began, with a queasy stomach.

He didn’t know her, and that was a mercy. She was quite beautiful, actually; pretty in a polished patrician way, and she glittered with an embarrassment of gems. Her ears; her wrists; her fingers; her boldly frocked peacock green dress; her hair, with her impeccable chignon and the feathers—everywhere Clark looked, he saw diamonds. She was everything someone like Bruce was expected to want.

Only a Gotham debutante would think that much largess appropriate for a charity event…

She really was a lovely girl; younger than Clark had thought at first—the cut of her dress was deceiving. He’d never watched this play out all the way, the seduction, the acquisition, of Bruce’s nightly relaxation. Clark chewed at his lip as the crowd moved. Now that he’d thought about it, he knew her. Not that they traveled in the same circles, of course—that would be torture—but Clark remembers her with a different… nose. She’s Saskia Kane; deep pockets, deep Gotham roots and doubtlessly deeply insured, fresh from her Swiss finishing school—she can’t be more than twenty-two years old, if Clark’s memory serves (and Clark’s memory is frighteningly good). Bruce is old enough to be her father; twice her age, really. It hadn’t occurred to Clark until now, that Bruce is at least ten years older than Clark is, as well; Clark shifts restlessly.
The thought was extremely appealing.

*And this is why I’m watching this.* Because the whole world knew that Bruce Wayne would screw just about anything with a warm pulse, and there was nothing better for Clark’s inhibition than seeing that someone else already had what he wanted; always the perfect excuse to step back, stay away and move along. In the last few weeks, Clark had lost rest, lost his peace of mind and lost his patience—he needed to see this happen, he needed to be able to breathe again without feeling *Bruce* on his skin.

He crossed his arms over his chest, holding his sides tightly. There was Bruce, on-screen at Wayne Medical’s prominent Spring Benefit, eyes soft and disturbingly empty, smile slightly befuddled, dressed to the nines with a willowy brunette draped all over his side. It’s been awhile since he’s seen Bruce this way: Bruce tended to casual clothing that was relaxed and combat ready, when at home. He looked good; better than Clark remembered; more stylish than Clark remembered; more everything. Like most attendees of note, he sported a smartly layered ensemble—the wind coming off the coast was cutting tonight and Gotham in the early Spring was no lamb. Bundled into one of those ridiculously imposing Gucci woolen coats he favored so much, the perfectly imperfect cant of his russet bow tie framed stark and austere against the starched white of his fitted collar; his silhouette squared up and lengthened in the way that made Clark’s heart beat faster; he was gorgeous. Clark moved to adjust himself, then stopped, self-consciously.

*Damn.*

He would have liked to be able to say that Bruce looked happy, but that wasn’t true; Bruce never smiled when he was happy, and he certainly didn’t show his teeth like *that* unless he intended to use them. He might be driving tonight—he was a known reprobate, and a few drinks had never stopped a Wayne before. The Kane girl swayed on her heels, delicate face turned towards Bruce. She giggled at something he said behind the veil of his hand, and walked in a tight lock-step with him, heedless of the shouting and jostling horde, clinging to her prize. Clark watched Bruce Wayne’s swagger; that entitled, leisurely, goddamned *dashing* stroll towards the road. Of course, Bruce would never let a stranger chauffeur any of his family cars.

Bruce Wayne, however, was more than willing to hop into the first car that looked enough like his, and demand that they take him home *at once*. He’d done it on several occasions recently and Clark always felt more than a little sorry for the poor guys stuck driving a drunk, over-friendly, intimidating Bruce Wayne. The chauffeurs Bruce abused were always men, because even though female chauffeurs were becoming fashionable with Gotham’s elite, Waynes didn’t bend to nouveau fashion—they defined timelessness. (That was the prevailing opinion in print, anyway, as Bruce never did answer questions about his motivations.) Waynes did not justify themselves, even when they were being sexist assholes and yes—that was good, that was another thing for Clark to remember—another reason why it was completely ridiculous for him to be reaching down to—

Clark took a deep breath and willed his body to calm down as he watched. Was it actually sexist for Bruce to *not* hire women chauffeurs, when he habitually harassed every driver who wasn’t Alfred? Clark carefully unclenched his jaw.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to feel sorry for *any* chauffeurs tonight and he didn’t have to watch the debacle of Brucie’s ego again just now. He just had to get through *this*. No Rolls tonight—Clark could see the silvery-grey bulk of the Bentley clearing through the press of paparazzi that covered the city nightlife; Alfred was driving, then. Clark thought of how spacious that cabin was, how open and lush; how private and *cozy*.

*No.*
Clark wasn’t used to this routine; he wasn’t used to the instability of his own feelings and he definitely wasn’t used to the want of having them in the first place. He had to close his eyes, to let the swell of distress and nausea pass. Something was wrong with him. This wasn’t like him, he hadn’t been like this since high school. He looked again, and un-muted the television.

Bruce’s hand was firmly attached to one svelte hip, his limbs loose and languid as he talked to the press while the woman wove her fingers into granite-tinged hair and giggled. Bruce was trying to drop a sound-bite or two about Gotham Central widening the entrance limitations for his city-wide, free health-care system; she seemed to be doing her best to become one with Bruce’s lapel pin. As he watched, Clark frowned. The woman leaned in, cream-tipped nails touching the pin’s elegantly monogrammed surface, lipstick smearing luridly over Bruce’s collar; over the side of his face. Bruce’s head turned at the last possible moment, as if he’d been startled, and he smiled blankly at whoever was behind the cam. Bruce seemed to stumble in a pleasantly drunken fashion as he spoke; not much, just enough to prompt a few laughs from the less tactful behind the press badges and make the kiss that was aimed for his mouth land wetly on his neck.

Damn, damn, damn.

The corners of Clark’s mouth turned down and he swallowed hard over his sudden anger. He should get up, turn the t.v. off, read a book, listen to music, practice his breathing, practice his stretches; anything but sit there with a hard-on and watch as a stranger pawed her way into Bruce’s pants and tried to stick her tongue in his mouth in public. Clark picked up the remote then paused as the woman hitched herself up and threw herself onto Bruce, giggling in the flash of photographers.

The remote cracked and fell to the floor, middle crumpled and twisted. Damn. Clark forced himself to get up and reach for the t.v. with trembling fingers. He wouldn’t watch another minute.

He was unaccountably furious.

This wasn’t right; nothing about this was right. He stopped and stared at the television as the familiar light baritone of Bruce Wayne, Gotham’s bluest blood, her favorite son, eased into Clark’s room. “Bruce Wayne—good to meet you!” Bruce enthused, grinning toothily. Somehow in the process of shaking a reporter’s hand, Bruce managed to swing the remains of his drink liberally over the woman clinging to his arm. “My people tell me it’s the latest thing—oops,” he smiled. “Here, let me get—” There, the tightness in Bruce’s jaw, below the affable smirk.

Clark gaped at the screen as he watched Bruce lean in, lose his balance, then tumble down, pulling the woman after him with some the most disgraceful, sprawling, cringe-worthy awkwardness Clark had ever seen. That dress really hadn’t been held together by much of anything, it turned out. Nothing was visible—Bruce’s bulk and bumbling blocked out everything but her disdainful expression. Cameras panned out to a scramble of security guards and the sounds of Bruce being ineffectual. Of course Bruce would set his scarf over her exposed decolletage—the quality thing, if not the classy thing to do; of course that was Bruce Wayne’s voice blearily demanding that there be ‘a tailor in the house’, right this moment, and of course in the ensuing media scramble, Bruce Wayne would slip away. Did slip away, without the brunette who was supposed to be his cover for the night and with his scarf. There in the upper corner of the screen, the Bentley slid easily past the crowd.

That was going to be some kind of front page news—Clark wished he could sign off on it. What the hell. All in all, a damn impressive performance. If Clark hadn’t known better he’d have thought it was completely unintentional. Even knowing better, he still hadn’t seen the exact place where the interview breaks down.
Clark sat back on his sofa gingerly, as if it might bite him. Despite himself, he felt warm relief as he watched the now tousle-haired heiress being bundled into a car by her security detail. *Bruce wasn’t bringing anyone home tonight.* He concentrated on his breathing until he didn’t feel like breaking his t.v. anymore, or flying to Gotham City proper, then he turned the television off and shook his head at the useless scrap of plastic and circuit board at his feet. He wasn’t looking forward to the conversation about this with Alfred; he was fairly sure that Bruce’s Guardian (and wasn’t that a strange thought?) avoided him out of contempt. Clark had never found it in himself to blame the older man: Bruce was his Charge, and Clark had ripped that tank-thing apart around Bruce—not one of his finer moments. (Bat-Tank?) At the very least, Alfred didn’t trust him one iota beyond what Bruce did; if Bruce even did such a prosaic thing as ‘trust’.

*What the hell was Bruce doing?* (Did they call the tank a Bat-something? Surely not a Bat-mobile?)

He blew out a tiny irritable burst of super-cooled air, then, in spite of it all, Clark quietly began to laugh. He’s old enough; he knew better than to be swayed by a showman. He’s felt this coming for a long time.

Clark’s sick, and it’s not in his immune system or in his head; the sickness is in his heart. Not because Bruce is a man, but because despite all Bruce has done to help Clark, he’s most likely the one man in the world that Clark can’t ever fully have.

Clark doesn’t wait up, or at least he doesn’t mean to. He doesn’t want to send the wrong impression; when two heartbeats arrive at the property line, he turns out his light, shrouding the glass in shadows. When the sound of dress shoes on marble and wood clicks in his ears, he lays himself down silently and hovers, just above the bed, eyes open in the dark. Bruce’s voice bounces off the walls two levels below.

“She’s half my age, Alfred—that’s disgusting.”

“Mm, yes. One can see how disgusted the gentleman is on TMZ, I daresay. That’s going to bruise; the young lady has an arm. Ice pack, sir?” Alfred sounds unruffled, as usual. There is a silence, then Bruce grunts negligibly.

“She was wearing Djaba and I broke her heel - I was asking for it. Stabilizers? Alfred?”

“On your right. Your other right. Yes, Master Bruce?”

“Grappling hook, the three-hundred line.” The tink of metal rings sharply, then, “I hope you didn’t plant her on me.”

“Very good for the both of us, then. Perhaps a neutral letter of apology to young Miss Kane is warranted?”

Bruce was silent, and there was the sound of neoprene, leather and Kevlar. It took every ounce of control Clark had not to look where he knew Bruce was gearing up for patrol.

“I see. Well, I will tender the letter, in that case. The car is ready, Master Bruce,” Clark heard.

“I’m not apologizing - I did her a favor. And the other matter? You’re quiet, Alfred. I thought you’d have more to say.”

“I could caution you, for all the good that would do, but no, Master Bruce - you must do as you think best. You are, after all, your father’s son… and as your father often said in confidence, Waynes marry up; never down.”
Bruce sounded detached. “Marriage is not my goal. My mother hated that saying.”

“Yes, Master Bruce, of course she did. People do tend to hate that which threatens those they love - not a skill which you need to further cultivate. If I may, all great partnerships require a marriage of one sort or another. Mind that alternator, now.”

He hears Bruce grunt again. There’s comfortable silence and muttered directions, the sound of the tunnel opening smoothly beneath the foundations. Then there’s the growl of engine and afterburner, and the night is again as quiet as it ever was for Clark.

He makes himself turn his attention away from the radio frequency where Alfred and Bruce continue their strangely circuitous conversation. He let himself open, sifting through channels until the sweet strains of Kansas City Country filled his head.

Along with the quickening beat of one raging heart.

*Damn.*

“Mom,” he asks in a lowered hush, hand over the receiver. “If there was something going…on. Between you and Bruce, you’d tell me, wouldn’t you?” The laughter is so long and hard that Clark has to hold the phone away from his ear. He winces.

“Me and Bruce!” she hoots. “Bruce Wayne - that’s a riot, oh Clark, honey, that’s just so improbable can you i-ma-gine?” And she’s off again, and that’s decidedly a cackle. Clark stares at the receiver and bites his lip, waiting for the snickers to die down with fraying patience. “Clark! We’d end up killing each other!” she gasps, still laughing. Clark feels like a fool.

“Oh yeah, why?” He wants it sound as if he was joking the whole time, but is baffled by his mother’s renewed hilarity. “Mom. Mom. What’s so funny?”

“Clark, if there is one thing I do well, it is put uppity men in their place, and Bruce is no exception. Believe you me, that is the last thing that man is interested in.” She laughs under her breath some more, and Clark ends the call with her in embarrassment.

He’s antsy, looking for his mp3 player and there’s no reason why he shouldn’t be able to find it. Clark knows where he put it; the thing just isn’t there anymore.

The low melodious hum from a level down probably shouldn’t make him pause; after seeing everything else B can do, it shouldn’t be a surprise that the man can sing as well. Clark would have put good money on that bet, but he wouldn’t have anticipated the sweet velvety croon that’s coming out of Bruce right now. Is that… it is; Bruce is humming, but Clark doesn’t need the words. He knows this song; it’s on *his* running playlist. He listens as B swings flawlessly through the bridge and transitions from a velvet baritone to a clear tenor without a sign of strain. [1] Clark knows the *song*, but Bruce makes bluegrass sound… jazzy.
He has to look.

“No I wouldn’t be a man, if I didn’t feel like this…” peals out, the notes shining—resonating, before Bruce clamps his teeth around a blinking, rod-like tool and hums absently some more, both hands buried in the guts of some extremely technical looking piece of machinery. The careless streaks of engine oil and grease all over Bruce shouldn’t be as appealing to Clark as they are. Bruce spits the tool into one hand and makes an adjustment. “Have to be from another planet…where loooove doesn’t exist…if I didn’t feel…like this;” The growl as his tone slips deep back down the scale makes Clark’s gut flip.

He’s doing it again, being a… a super-creep.

Clark looks for a book to read instead, goosebumps prickling across his skin. There is no way in hell he’s going in there to retrieve his property now.

[1] Thank Kevin Conroy’s pipes for B’s singing: as Bruce Wayne (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuHwYMTxmR0) and as Batman (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57zFkL9GSZA)
Chapter Notes

pain

• one that irks or annoys or is otherwise troublesome

Chapter Six: Fetter

“Truth is like a loaded gun; you don't wanna point that thing round here…” -Bishop Briggs

There are days when Clark wishes he’d stayed asleep. Today was one of them. He’d made the effort. There wasn’t much to be said for the returns. It’s been grueling, but he can do all the strengthening exercises that Bruce and he developed, he can run the entire property in under a minute, he can lift what first was an unbelievable, then a laughable amount of weight. He can fly and he suspects that he can leap just as well as ever, though he hasn’t tested that on the meticulously planned greensward of the lake; it seems a bit asinine to ruin Bruce’s view for the sake of jumping. He doesn’t feel as if he’s achieved anything; he’s right back where he started. He’s just Clark. Even so, Clark isn’t ready to return to the world yet.

The lakehouse, despite having two other people in it, feels just as empty as ever. He waits until he can’t anymore, then he sticks his head into Bruce’s study. “Hey wow, I didn’t think Bruce Wayne got up before one p.m.”

“He doesn’t.” Bruce says without missing a beat. He thumbs through a sheaf of paperwork, reading glasses perched on the crest of his nose. “Bruce Wayne is in bed, sleeping off a hangover. That old drunk won’t be seen till ten-thirty tonight at the Thames, Uptown.”

“Work again, B? You’re always working.”

Bruce grunts ambiguously and agrees, “I’m always working.” It’s a minefield but Clark’s determined in his goal, so he plunges forward before he can reconsider what a monumentally foolish plan he might be enacting. He steps into the room, consciously disregarding every little social signal that says ‘go away’. His host doesn’t sigh—he takes a breath instead, but Clark can tell it’s a close thing. “Go on, Kent.”

Clark knows the flavor of these words, the heft and the sharpness of them - he’s been bullied plenty before, and it’s on the tip of his tongue to tell Bruce to go fuck himself. Then he has an odd moment; a flash of past-Bruce superimposed over Bruce in the here and now that stops him. No; Clark is misreading something important.

In his few years at the Planet, Clark had read plenty of slush about Bruce Wayne. He’s read
unbelievable, unpalatable, unconscionable things about the man, but in all of it, Bruce Wayne has defined himself by keeping his sharp side to those who can fight back. This is not in-character, the offness of it strikes Clark even though he can’t put his finger on exactly what the difference is. This isn’t Bruce bullying him——this is different; maybe a test——yet another damn test—and Clark finds it more than slightly insulting.

“Okay,” He says as mildly as he can, then decides to throw in a nice friendly smile, just for the hell of it. How hard is B grinding his teeth right now? He could check, but he doesn’t. “I want to go into the city. I was thinking you should come with me.”

“Hmm, the direct approach. Fine. For the sake of argument, why would I want to do that?” Bruce sets his paperwork sharply down; a careful, gauged display of irritation.

But he has Bruce’s full attention now, and Clark’s as close as he can be to the heartbeat that measures out his relief, so he grins. “Because,” he presses, “I want you to show me Gotham. And it’s been almost a week since you drove.” It isn’t precisely true. To be fair, it isn’t true at all—Bruce drives every night, but driving the tank made from the bones of a Lamborghini through manky alleyways and driving a Lamborghini on the open road are two different things.

Bruce radiates exasperation. Still, there’s a lightening to his posture that suggests he might be interested.

“You’re not about to sweet-talk me into crossing the bay into Metropolis today, Kent.” Bruce glances at his papers again, a fleeting look. His lips press into a displeased line. “Clark. And I meant what I said. Come on, B.” Clark smiles teasingly. It’s anticipation in Bruce’s eyes, he’s sure of it. He leans further into the room. “Drive me around, show me the sights. I’ve never seen the appeal of this town, but maybe I’ve never had the right guide. Besides, you’re not going to the Thames, not like that, with your arm all—” Clark shuts up as Bruce’s eyes zero in on him and narrow dangerously. Oh. Well now he has his full attention.

Bruce calmly takes off his reading glasses, folds them and sets them into a case. He quietly puts that case into a drawer in his desk and closes it. Sweeps his paperwork together into four separate folders and closes them pointedly. “Clark,” he says finally, “We aren’t in the type of relationship where it’s appropriate for you to look under my clothing without my consent. I am working.” He stacks his folders. “I’m sure there’s something or someone or somewhere else you could be…”

He’s furious.

Clark blanches.

“I didn’t mean - I smelled blood, and. I’m so sorry.” Clark had known that he and Bruce’s paths crossed rarely now unless there was jogging or training involved, but he hadn’t realized that it was intentional. Several things suddenly become clear. One, that Bruce has never actually invited him into this room; two, that he’s out of practice with this sort of social interaction, because his body is still moving forward as if he’s welcome. Three, that already in the space of less than five minutes he’s infuriated Bruce, violated a trust and managed to get thrown out of the room despite barely being in it.

He can feel the smile freezing on his face. He’s already stepping back, backing out, waving away the explanations. Working hard not to look desperate.

He’s completely misread the situation. “Right. Sure. Sure, okay, no problem.” It’s no problem; why would it be a problem? It’s no problem at all that he can’t speak to anyone about what’s
happened to him; he can’t explain it, not to his ma, definitely not Alfred and now, apparently not Bruce either, but it’s fine.

He has nothing to offer Bruce—nothing to offer anyone in the way of companionship; his only redeeming qualities involve giving fast rides out of danger-zones for no pay to people who mostly despise him for being able to do it; that’s been made abundantly clear to him. He’ll probably die alone, in his Fortress, with no one to leave anything to but some stupid dog. Jesus, he’s going to die moldering in self-pity like his sixteen year-old self; ugh. He’s disgusting even himself! He bumps into the doorjamb and shrinks away from it; turns to the hallway and a hand on his arm stops him.

“Clark. Please forgive me. That was unkind; I should have realized. I’m… not accustomed to others knowing my business. Come back in. I won’t be—I’m not going out at all today. Stitches. Which you already know.” Bruce rolls his left shoulder in a careful movement, expression blanking where most other men would wince. He’s come out from behind his shield of a desk and he’s touching Clark. Looking at him. Seeing him. Awkward and almost apologetic in his stance, even while his eyes scan Clark’s face to see if he’s debased himself enough.

The relief of simple contact is blinding.

“Come on,” Bruce says, giving him a quick evaluating look before turning to the bookcase. “Even I get a night off some time. Let’s find out what I have hanging around in here.”

He turns out to have quite a bit ‘hanging around’.

After a couple ounces of McCallan and a glass of B&B, everything looks a little brighter. It doesn’t affect Clark, but it’s… nice: the sweet herbal taste, to just sit with someone familiar, someone who (possibly?) doesn’t hate him, finally. Even someone Clark had decided wasn’t worth his time, before. He admits it; he’s surprised. It’s galling; embarrassing how wrong he was about Bruce. Usually Clark knows exactly what the people around him want, what they don’t want, he can figure out how they feel and from there, how they’ll act—it’s natural for him. He has to expend more effort to not know, than he does to just let it come to him and pass on by. It’s something he can’t help but know like he can’t help knowing how different he is, but Bruce… Bruce is a puzzle; an invariably shifting puzzle that shows different pieces to Clark the moment he blinks.

Bruce is charming this way, low-voiced, teasing edge to his words; his long frame slouched into a hand-carved leather chair that would look just as at home in one of the period dramas Ma’s always watching. He keeps his cuffs down and his robe drawn; even when he moves his robe hugs him so Clark sees only brief flashes, no matter how he slows down his relative perception-speed of the world. A swift flash of shiny creased flesh. Clark’s seen the same wound pattern on horses caught in a barn fire with fuel; he winces internally. He’s already been warned, he’s not going to pry again, but the sight of Bruce’s scarred skin shocks him more than the sight of the long ragged lines of stitches across Bruce’s shoulder and back had. Who did that to Bruce? Did they get away with it, and what else did they do for Bruce to have pursued them in the first place? There are too many questions, and Bruce hasn’t answered one yet to Clark’s satisfaction.

He feels frivolous, leaning into Bruce’s space, not quite hipped up against his desk. It reminds him of how Lois used to almost perch on his desk, how people leaned into Bruce’s wake in public, and Clark tips back, into the wall behind him instead. He finishes his drink, waves away another with a quiet demurral and sets his glass down safely on a granite coaster. Who would use something that would just as soon break the glass as protect the table? Was it Bruce who chose these, Alfred, or someone who’s already passed into the vaunted Wayne Mausoleum? So many questions.

“It wasn’t my intention to invade your privacy, Bruce.” It’s important that he makes that clear; that he knows he’s wronged Bruce and he’s willing to make it right. Bruce waves his apology away
with a tiny twist of his lips that Clark doesn’t know him well enough to read, then says that it’s not a problem. That, Clark can read—it’s a bold-faced lie and it only makes Bruce’s heart trip for less than half a beat. A polygram would have missed the deviation. Clark can hear the difference between truth and lie; it doesn’t tell him what it means; he doesn’t know why.

With nothing in hand, it’s more difficult to hide his mounting restlessness. Bruce doesn’t need to lie to him; Clark is more than capable of handling the truth. Clark shifts lightly, his heels then the balls of his feet lifting off the floor. It feels better; he’s more comfortable in the air; has been ever since he discovered the ability. His incredible gifts.

Normally he’d never do this, but he and Bruce are friends (almost), or they will be soon (hopefully). There’s no need to hide what he is, here—they already know everything they can. He runs a hand back through the hair hanging in his face, ducks his head nervously a bit when Bruce perks up, eyes on the empty space between Clark and the floorboards.

Bruce takes him in over another long sip, then begins to talk. For a taciturn man, he’s good at it. Clark’s not naive; this is all a part of Bruce’s mythos: the man who can convince anyone to do anything. He’s good at making people feel comfortable, he excels at it—just as much as he does at making them feel otherwise, Clark supposes. Bruce’s heart, though, rarely varies—not when the corners of his eyes crinkle slightly (which is how Clark knows it’s a real smile); not when Bruce companionably tells him a (possibly untrue) story about a freak skiing accident he’d had one winter break away at school. It doesn’t waver one beat while Bruce relates a hilariously improbable tale about how he fought a tiger shark and won, either. It makes it hard to tell if he’s being sincere or if he’s just enduring Clark’s company.

Eventually, Bruce tells progressively more ludicrous stories in his dry baritone until Clark can’t help the snorts of laughter that keep bursting out to match Bruce’s sly-eyed gimlet of a stare. He waves his hands.

“I surrender! I surrender! Oh hell, Bruce—I needed this. This is much more fun than city-hopping, any day. Sorry about the drive… maybe another time?”

“It’s just as well,” Bruce muses, “You’ll find that when the chips are down, I’m not a terribly safe driver outside of Gotham. Or inside her either, for that matter. Not really appropriate for public consumption.” His face makes a terrible expression, a kind of non-smile that looks ghastly on his features. “Not that I drive outside of Gotham much these days in any case.”

Clark tries to shake off the sudden cessation of good humor. So he’s not the only one with doubts. He leans in against the desk, mouth dry, too tense to take a seat on the only place left: the wide leather ottoman that’s the match to Bruce’s chair.

“I know how you drive. Modesty doesn’t look good on you, Bruce—you know, it’s fine to be a hero and just look out for one city, you’re just one man—” Clark grins, completely unprepared when Bruce’s voice raises and deepens at the same time.

“Stop—stop calling me that. You can go to hell, you sanctimonious prick—you don’t know what you’re talking about, you don’t understand—” Bruce downs the remainder of scotch in his glass and pours another five fingers from the cut-crystal decanter that probably belongs in a museum somewhere.

Sanctimonious prick? Clark eyes the full glass, holds up his hands in a peacemaking gesture, and avoids the distraction of anger mostly by his own curiosity and luck.

“Wait, stop calling you what? You’re saying I don’t understand. Fine—I don’t; tell me, Bruce.
Make me understand. Please.” It’s probably the last, frustrated with pent-up energy and longing, that gets him an actual answer beyond a contemptuous glare. Bruce lounges back in his chair haughtily. He moves his glass, sniffs his whiskey, and sips it.

There’s a slight slur in Bruce’s voice when he snaps at Clark. “You want a bedtime story, alright. Hows this: the League of Shadows opened their doors to a little rich brat who threw a temper tantrum and ran away from home. They gave him a place to live, food to eat, and put great effort into training and teaching him. They even wanted to appoint him to lead them into battle against injustice in Gotham.”

He sips his drink. Fear brushes Clark; he’s afraid to break the singular tension; afraid that if he so much as shifted, Bruce would shut down and close him out again; afraid to lose what little contact he had. Bruce barely blinks, eyes distressingly focused somewhere, somewhere else. He doesn’t gesture as he speaks; posture stiff. “They organized an elaborate but tasteful initiation ritual for him, where all he had to do was execute a criminal.” The voice was scathing, engineered to cut them both. “What does he do in return? Refuses to kill the criminal and instead blows up their headquarters—which they probably put a lot of effort into building—and likely, hopefully, kills most of their members.” The words pour out of Bruce on a torrent of bitterness and exhaustion like poison; pus from an infected wound.

“You see, this spoiled boy, this little idiot, he’d been training with them for a while and surely by then knew what they were all about, but he ignores his instincts—no; he wants to believe, and so he acts incredulous when they ask him to ice a bad guy. Idiot boy.” Dark eyes stare into the distance. “To add insult to injury, he uses the training that he acquired there for the rest of his vigilante career, taking complete advantage of them. In short, this kid, barely into his twenties, but damned well old enough to know better—he used their training, their resources; he ate their food, lived in their home, then because of some illogical philosophical grandstanding, left them in ruins. They taught him that recidivism is universal, and in payment, he burned their house down around them. So, Clark,” Bruce finishes, teeth bared, “you tell me how that makes that brat a hero, and I’ll tell you another fairy tale. Spoiler alert - they were very into all that eye for an eye rhetoric.”

Clark thinks carefully about the burnt-out ruins of Wayne Manor before he says another word. “This criminal,” he gets out finally, “he’d had a trial?” He knows it was the right thing to say even as Bruce tenses further and stalls. B tips back most of his drink like it’s water and makes a vaguely appreciative sound. Suspicious eyes regard Clark flatly.

“I never got a satisfactory answer. Criminals take advantage of compassion - I was expected to follow orders, not ask questions.” He shifts slightly and the shadows flit over his face as effectively as any cowl.

Oh God. Alright.

“So why didn’t you?” Clark thinks his voice is fairly calm, all things considered.

“Clark—”

“If you believed in their philosophy so damned much, why didn’t you kill him?” He’s done playing whatever game this is; if Bruce wants him to make some kind of… heroic sense of this (as if Clark is qualified to give out judgements on anyone), then Clark needs clearer information.

Bruce’s hand clenches on his thigh in a spasm of rage. It’s the only outward indicator of his emotional state, but it’s physicality is as loud as a scream. “They wanted to burn Gotham,” his voice is ragged. “They said we were the ‘pinnacle of decadence’, they wanted to destroy it all—everything; everyone, because of a minority of bad people. Even if forty percent is bad, the sixty
that’s left deserves a fighting chance; even if it’s just… even if it’s the forty percent that’s good. But I told the leader, I told him back then, that compassion was what separated us from the animals.” Bruce swirls his scotch and drinks again, breathing out oak and smoked ginger. “Then, of course, twenty years later, I start branding people.” The twist to his lips is not a smile, and this isn’t something Clark can absolve him of, but Clark can listen.

“Is that what heroes do, Clark—want to brand criminals so they can get stabbed in prison?”

Clark bows his head, feels a curl fall over his brow. He genuinely isn’t sure that he can answer that question anymore. “I think,” he says quietly, testing, tongue probing at his front teeth, “that Batman chooses to fight on behalf of a corrupt city, standing up for the guilty and the innocent equally, most of the time. I think that he believes that he can achieve redemption for Gotham through more principled means.”

Following an impulse, an instinct pulling deep inside, he slides to his knees in front of Bruce’s chair, willing the man to look at him. “I think a hero’s primary ethical instinct should be that even a city as— as wicked and lost as Gotham is worth saving, and that this saving can only be accomplished through ethical means. I think you made a hard choice, between believing what you wanted to hear and what your ethics told you was right. The day you turn your back on that is the day you become more like Them. And,” he forces out past a growing lump in his throat, eyes on Bruce’s face, “I think that if you’re not branding people anymore, then it’s not any less heroic to want to do so. I—Bruce. Bruce, you do so much good, and you think you’re not a hero because you saved your city?”

Bruce is leaned forward slightly in his chair, pupils the tiniest bit wider. Clark can’t interpret the expression on his face. It looks a little like wonder, but it also looks just the way Bruce does before he says something particularly belittling. Clark isn’t wearing his glasses—it’s dark enough in this room that he isn’t being bombarded with light every second. He can see a lot clearer without the fracture-wave pattern of glass constantly masking his vision. Clark can see, but he isn’t sure what he’s looking at just yet.

A worn huff of of tiredness comes from the shadow of the wingback. “Now this is interesting, from you, Kansas - are you saying, ‘it’s not who am, it’s what I do’? I killed fifty-two people that day, at a conservative estimate. Hm, fifty-three; I’m fairly certain that the prisoner I wouldn’t kill cleanly died in the explosion. I killed twenty-four people in the room where they were holding your mother. So you see, recidivism is universal—murderers don’t change.” His tone is as dispassionate as if he’s giving a battle report. The heavy glass clunks down on the side table, with a slight slosh. “Christ, wicked? Redemption?” Bruce’s nose wrinkles briefly. “No wonder you went into print. Gotham isn’t wicked - it’s infested.” Scotch-colored eyes challenge him.

Fifty-three. Conservative estimate. Twenty-four. He’d had no idea. Nausea assaults Clark. “Something changed—you changed, and now you’ve changed again. You’re not telling me the whole story,” he accuses. Bruce, to his chagrin, laughs outright at that, a sharp bark closer to a stab than an expression of humor.

“There are a lot of things I don’t tell you, Clark. With good reason.”

“If you believe that killing is wrong, and you killed those people, then why aren’t you serving time, Bruce?” And why are you telling me these horrible things?

Bruce tilts his head to the side, unreadable eyes cold. “I am serving time—every day and night.”

Clark has to put his head down, has to feel something other than shock and pain. There are eleven million people crammed into Gotham, another five million living in the surrounding cities. The
math still doesn’t add up. The cool silk of Bruce’s smoking jacket is soothing against his cheek, much more interesting than the huddling and shaking that the rest of Clark is doing. The rasp of his own voice is a shock. “Did you want to kill them? Did you enjoy it?”

Bruce looks at him as if he’s said something profound. “Yes. No.” He doesn’t specify. Clark can only nod. Haltingly, Bruce’s hand lands in his hair, fingertips stroking the back of Clark’s neck. “Easy now,” he rumbles, inebriation rounding his vowels.

Clark has killed precisely two beings, and both times felt like he was ripping himself apart to do it. He’d knocked his head against the wall during culling time for years in Kansas, trying to drown out the constant noise of cattle and hogs in extremis. He’d horrified his parents until they’d had realized what the problem was. Jonathan had maintained that Clark needed to become accustomed to the sound and overcome his aversion.

It was the only time in his life that Clark ever heard his mother curse at his father; she’d told his Pa to get out and come back when he was ready to be useful. After that night, they’d begun to work with Clark to help him learn how to filter out most of the bad and not-here from the background noise of life. He can’t imagine killing more, not like B. He can’t imagine.

He should get up now—that would be the right thing to do. Instead, he rests his head there against Bruce’s leg, relishing the first moment since he can recall in all his sick grieving, for some surcease. Clark knows what touching a murderer feels like: he’d touched Dru-Zod, felt grief-stricken desperation squeezing his chest; touched Lex Luthor and felt crackling insanity and the firebrand of unending fear zipping across his skin. Bruce’s hand in his hair is strong and soothing, despite his unpleasant revelations. It’s a touch Clark doesn’t have the strength to pull away from, a touch not because he’s saved a life—a touch because someone wants to touch him. He can tell, feels the coolness of calm and security seeping into him. He shouldn’t be comfortable here, on his knees; it should make him feel weak, but it doesn’t—he feels fortified, feels right, as if he could say anything and Bruce would just understand.

“I’d never fought another Kryptonian before,” the words float from deep inside him, seem to bypass his brain entirely. “Never even seen one before. I didn’t know who they were. I didn’t know how they’d be. They didn’t know… no one ever taught them how not to hurt… how to use the powers, how to be safe. It’s my fault—I tried… so hard, to talk to them. I tried to reason with them, but they—they killed so many people. So many people. I’d never… never killed anything. Not anything, not even hunting. Oh God, it’s my fault—I never wanted to kill, I worked so hard Bruce—I worked so hard to be good. If I was better—if I’d tried harder—he made me, he made me, he said he’d never stop, never—” he was whispering into the silk by the end, unsure if Bruce could even hear his frenzied confession. “I didn’t want to, God, I didn’t want to, I did what I had to do—I never meant to hurt anyone—” His throat pulls too tight for words.

“You really do think you’re invulnerable,” Bruce muses calmly after a bit, from far above him. Clark can’t seem to stop himself, and Bruce’s voice is an anchor. That hand strokes and toys idly, slips down to grip the back of his neck again, harder than a Human could have taken. Clark melts further against that leg, ignores the wetness beneath his face, on his face; sighs. Concern zips through his skin.

It isn’t that Clark can’t imagine killing being his reality—it’s that he doesn’t want to. He understands Bruce’s anger; he understands why Bruce won’t let anyone put that mantle on him: the scales aren’t equal. Saving one doesn’t bring back one; what you lose, who you lose, is gone. Results matter more than intentions, even for people like he and Bruce; especially for them. Clark shudders. Hears the glass being picked up again, hears the sip. Fingers twirl and play slowly, a rhythmic inertia.
“Easy.” Bruce repeats, quieter.

This is nice, Clark thinks fuzzily. He could kneel here, just like this, for hours. Days, even.

Bruce is completely sober when he says, “You still tried. Listen to yourself - you didn’t want to hurt them. You sit here and you tell me how badly you feel for the people who came here to kill everyone you know, then you turn around with that word in your mouth and you use it on me. You see the problem here, now? You go out on my streets and we’ll eat you alive. Gotham has no heroes.”

We, he says, not them.

‘We’ll eat you alive.’

If Bruce wants to pretend that the Wayne Foundations, Wayne Medical and Wayne Chemical don’t award monthly medical breakthroughs, provide fellowships and grants to promising humanitarian research and biomedical advances; if he wants to ignore how much he, as the last surviving Wayne, has managed to simultaneously look too stupid to breathe and pushed social initiatives improving the lives of dispossessed and underprivileged Gothamites all over the city through education, arts, family services, and advocating tolerance for young and new offenders, then there isn’t anything Clark can say that will convince him. If he wants to devalue his achievement of lessening the wealth gap in a city that runs on grinding down its poor, fine—Clark won’t call him a hero.

Not out loud.

Some of that must show on his face; Ma always said he never could keep what was on his mind in his head. Bruce gives his hair another long stroke, then looks down at him. Clark smells arousal. He’s projecting, has to be, but no. It isn’t his imagination.

“Go to bed, Kansas. I told you not to sweet-talk me - some of us have work to do.” The words are biting, but the tone is easier, almost permissive.

“I can help-” he protests, even though he’s far too emotionally drained to be of any good, right before Bruce gathers up his hair in a fist. Clark looks up, unblinking, in surprise.

“Everyone has a limit. Go rest, I said.” Bruce doesn’t look upset, he doesn’t look even remotely drunk, and he scrapes his fingernails across Clark’s scalp. The sigh slips out before Clark can bite it back, and he leans back on his heels. There’s a second where Bruce looks as if he’s running calculations, then his hand is smoothing its way out of Clark’s hair, and Clark, for the life of him, can’t think of one reason why not to do as Bruce requested. The truth is, the last thing Clark wants is to put on that Suit and go back Out There.

As much as he does want to rush out and save every person (innocent and un), everywhere he can, something holds him back. He doesn’t owe the masses anything and he owes them everything. He loves them and he’s equally terrified of them; it’s too much to bear just now. It isn’t just about his life; can’t be just about the lives of those he loves. He’s supposed to do good works, like his pa would have wanted. He’s so tired.

It feels good to know that Bruce sees he’s tired; that Bruce is taking him in hand. It reminds him of something, but he can’t quite pull the memory into consciousness. He uncoils from the floor, stands and even though Bruce is still sitting, Clark feels as though he’s the one off balance.

“Goodnight, B.” It’s four in the afternoon; see how much Clark cares.

Bruce doesn’t answer him as he walks out, but then he hadn’t expected one. He doesn’t expect to
ever broach this subject again, and he’d lay even odds that Bruce won’t go out of his way to, either. Clark goes straight to his room, undresses in a mental fog, and climbs into the bed. He only realizes that he’s managed to lose time against Bruce’s leg when he sees that the display on his clock is three hours later than it should be—it’s seven p.m.—then he lets himself fall into a tense resting trance with the memory of strong fingers carding through his hair.

~

The world is fire. Clark is frozen. He wasn’t looking, he didn’t see it, and this is the price. Clark can’t save them now. Only, he could have; he could have. The flames writhe up around him in slow motion, Clark can see them—he’s looking now—the entire room full of people. He can’t move. He can see Senator Finch, eyes open in fear, the knowledge of what’s about to happen to her bright panic in her sclera. He can’t move. He can see the explosion, a dim glow just beginning under the chair in the coolness of the court chamber. Soon it will expand, blossom, destroying everything, and Clark is frozen in sorrow and fear, Clark is immobilized, he can’t do this again, he can’t move—

He can’t move—

Clark wakes, sobbing, to the sound of his own screams. The world is burning.

“Clark,” he hears, “Clark,” then, “Dammit, Kansas, wake up, wake up—” and he gasps, eyes open. He’s on the floor. The light is on. There are scorched pin-marks in the ceiling. There are cool hands on his shoulders. The bed is a ruin of wood and ripped fabric beneath and around him. Clark squeezes his eyes shut, chest pounding erratically. Bruce is behind him.

*Thank god Bruce wasn’t in front of him.*

“Sorry, I’m sorry, Bruce—” his voice is wrecked. He shakes his head, distraught.

“Hush.” It’s all he can do not to press his face to the warmth that runs up into his hair. “Hush,” Bruce says again, firmer. Quiet. “I know.”

Clark doesn’t doubt him for a second. The whole world whispers hatred of him in one ear and adoration into the other. He can hear himself, his body still gasping, his pulse surging. Legs are twisting in the sheets wrapped and hindering them, hands clench and unclench on the wooden rods of the bed-frame. The body retches and sobs; it isn’t him; it can’t be him. He isn’t allowed to feel this way.

He feels Bruce’s hands on his skin, he feels Bruce’s concern and sees his shrewd scan of the disarray. He feels foreign emotions pressing at him, he flounders—

—and Bruce says “I know, Kansas - easy,” touching Clark, offering, and Clark assents. He turns his face into Bruce, wraps an arm gently—so gently—around his waist, focuses.

*He sees an island rising high, out in the ocean. He swims towards it.* Instant cooling relief; safety. Bruce’s composure seeping into him. He can breathe; the world gets smaller. A single heartbeat remains.

Bruce calms him with steady hands, and Bruce gets him moving upstairs to the second guest-room; he tips Clark over into the bed. Clark imagines that he feels that hand stroking his hair again, and
Bruce leaves him to have quiet conversation with Alfred, which Clark is too tired to pay mind to.

Then Clark covers his face with both hands and with quiet, ugly sobs, he cries for all the people he wasn’t fast enough to save. He cries for the humans—normal folks like the poor people in a no-name truckstop in Kansas, decent homesteaders whose lives were upended by a gas truck coming through their windshield; folks like poor Jimmy, struggling to find his way in the world and shot down because of the fancy new camera lens he was so proud of. He cries for the children who’d died in a field trip under the Wayne Building’s toppling mass and for the children, Human and Kryptonian, who would never be born because Zod and everyone who followed him were too proud to share a planet with what they considered an inferior race. He cries for folks like Lois and Ma, unfortunate enough to be tied to the common denominator in all these events.

Then Clark cries for them—the would-be conquerors of Earth’s shattered beauty—the people he’d never known, who connected him to generations of his own blood and who he’d never knew now; the people who came down bearing unfathomable potential and decided to lay ruin to everything they saw instead, because Clark hadn’t been enough to satisfy them; because they’d looked at him and felt cheated.

Even in the moment when he’d felt the closest he ever has to another being, his own people had thought him weak, which says much more about the type of life they’d been missing than it did about Clark’s abilities. It doesn’t occur to him that he ought to cry for himself. Exhausted, finally he wrestles himself quiet and hears the pin-drop silence of the upper level; the reluctant lub-dub beat of the heart of someone who is trying very hard not to be heard outside the door. Someone whose heart-beat is unnaturally even and strong; fortifying.

Bruce must be so satisfied, to hear what Superman really is inside. Clark doesn’t have the energy to pretend that this doesn’t affect him anymore.

‘I’m sure there’s someone else you could be…’ drifts through his head. Had Bruce actually said that?

He closes his gritty eyes, the mental stress enough to finally allow him a strained rest.

It figures that that’s when the night-sweats and the irritation begin.
Chapter Summary

He wants.

Chapter Notes

Tag check; remember how I said this was porn? Let's get to it.

Chapter Seven: Cohere

~“You become responsible, forever, for what you’ve tamed.”~ — Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

He doesn’t entirely recall the week leading up to Bruce’s announcement; what Clark remembers is the endless ravenous want that makes him shake and grip himself. He remembers becoming increasingly terrified of his own actions and thoughts, swinging between wanting to be too close to B and wanting to stay as far away from him as possible. He can’t sleep—the world is too loud; when he does sleep, he dreams of being left behind and alone, of billions of voices gone silent, infinite blackness and a crashing jolt that always makes him jerk awake.

He’s cold, maybe for the first time ever. He can’t eat—food is too loud, he much prefers the taste of Bruce’s musk on the air. He’s upset, so upset. So lonely.

He stares at the sun for hours. He stares at Bruce for hours, can’t seem to stop himself. Bruce kicks him out of the gym for breaking a heavy bag, Clark yells at him to mind his own business, only to beg Bruce for forgiveness five minutes later. He’s overly sensitive to Alfred’s disapproving gaze, overly conscious of being watched. They don't trust him, they might be out to get him, he wants…

He wants.

He remembers his inability to orgasm, though not for lack of trying; he remembers crying, and yelling. He remembers diving to the bottom of the lake and refusing to come up for hours.

It all reminds him of something he’s been through before, but by the time he realizes that, he’s too lost to instinct to care.

Bruce has to tell him, afterward, how it went.
The Colony-Ship AI is exceptionally polite when Bruce informs it that he won’t be terminating it’s code. If it were flesh and blood, Bruce would be tempted to say that the intelligence is content. As it is, he has to base his observations on assumed intention of integration with other bipedal lifeforms closest to Kryptonian norm. ‘Happy’ is an acceptable premise.

“Clarify user designation please,” it asks. Bruce tires of thinking of it as an ‘it’.

“User designation: Nocturne.”

“Designation accepted, User Nocturne. Please choose interface designation.” The voice is light, gender-neutral, but it definitely expresses overtones indicating emotional pragmatism. He names her Nightbird; she’ll be useful.

There are too many variables at play to know if the AI has tested him or if this is standard operating procedure, but a great deal of reserve gets pushed aside once Bruce names the construct.

“Greetings and welcome, Nocturne. Nightbird now active and willing to collaborate. Identifying Kryptonian technology within structure,” she says. Bruce doesn’t look at the blue textured Suit being held in the second display case. “Crest, House El, standard deep-Journey garment.” It whistles something too fast that sounds like home-remember-heart. He’d prefer less emotion, honestly.

“Concur, Nightbird. It’s mine.”

Nightbird makes a trilling digital glissando and Bruce has the uncomfortable feeling that the AI is laughing at him. “Negative assumption; the Commander will return.”

Bruce snorts despite himself. “I highly doubt that.” The leader of the invading force was definitely not coming back, not from where he’d been sent. “He’s dead.”

A short mournful cascade of sound, then Nightbird replies. “All honor to General Dru-Zod. Commander Dru-Zod reported decommissioned. The Commander will return.” The AI sounds far too certain for Bruce’s comfort.

His mind runs wild; there’s another invasion force, perhaps waiting just beyond the reach of Earth’s early warning system; there’s another contingent of Kryptonians on Earth waiting to strike now that Clark is dead; perhaps they’d even managed to send word to other displaced Kryptonians galaxy wide—Bruce had no way of knowing how many, who, where or when. “Appreciated. Later,” he mutters.

A single bright tone is her only answer.

More of the flowing lines of Kryptonian script run up his monitor. After hours of deciphering the looping scrawl, Bruce’s eyes burn. He runs a hand back through his hair and squeezes the bridge of his nose before focusing in again.

It’s an impossible feat, finding a disease no one’s ever heard of in a database that’s so damaged even the AI tasked to administer it has to crawl line by line, for a man that no one has ever examined medically.

Bruce absently sips a mug of tea long gone cold and murky. The bitterness matches his mood perfectly. It isn’t wise to use up so much of his resources on a problem that can be solved quite expediently with the application of six grams of K and a good sturdy chain…but then what? What
will he do with a sick, emotionally unstable Kryptonian? What is he supposed to do when Clark reaches the zenith of whatever this is?

He runs the symptoms through the computer again, cross-indexes them with the database of known Kryptonian illnesses.

Days later, Bruce is still searching for the answer. There are no earthly viruses or bacteria that could cause this reaction. He has to go back further, past the history he’s already covered. He rubs his temples briefly and glares at the screen.

Bruce sets an algorithm for the AI to chase down. There’s just no conceivable way that he can sift through this information manually. It doesn’t come easily; all the symptoms Bruce keys in: the irritability, the strange fugue-like state that Clark falls into, the increasingly feverish sheen of Clark’s skin, the way he tracks Bruce whether he’s in the room or not—they all come up negative. After another fruitless pass, he adds a new symptom: mature male designated person of interest.

He jerks awake at the multiple-toned chime, leans forward to see it, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

“Unsanctioned fear-regeneration response, User Nocturne.” He’s already wishing that he’d chosen something a touch less dramatic.

It comes upon him quickly, between a centuries-old biochemical analysis, the tantalizing hints from an outdated learning module and a letter from a “Fosterling” to his guild home: what he’s looking for isn’t in medical records. If it can’t be found in academia, then what Bruce is looking for must be ubiquitous to Kryptonian culture. It won’t be found in anything but the most basic of children’s health studies, because to the average Kryptonian, this must not have been a subject of importance.

“Nightbird. Filter adult media, centralize on children’s tales, mythology, cultural training, sexuality.”

“Query, Nocturne. Subject is how many Sol revolutions of age?”

Facts—finally something Bruce can do. “Years, Nightbird. Subject is male Kryptonian, thirty-six Earth-based solar years.”

“Acknowledged. All honor to the newly presiding Commander. Data packet will be prepared for Commander's viewing shortly, Nocturne.”

He can feel the headache coming already.

“I know what's wrong,” Bruce says, apropos of nothing, one day, when Clark is fighting screaming and sobbing both. Yes, there’s something wrong, hasn’t Clark been trying to tell him; hasn’t Clark been saying it every way he can?

It’s a hormonal shift, because fuck Clark’s life.

“Just once, I’d like a normal explanation. Just once, instead of more weirdness.” Clark fidgets and
moves, hovering because the floor is too hard, too solid. His skin is too tight, and that smell… that 
*smell* is everywhere.

“Mm… inaccurate. Not weird; quite normal for an adult Kryptonian without a particular set of 
gene blockers, according to the medical database. You’re healthy - it’s a recessive trait,” Bruce 
points to a series of lines and bars on graph. When he moves, the scent intensifies. *It’s Bruce.*

“Okay, we can just wait it out, then.” Clark can deal with this, a little abstinence never hurt anyone 
and he’s had more than his fair share of practice at that.

“Unfortunately, that is not one of our options.” Bruce’s tone is resigned and grim. *Our,* he says, 
and Clark looks sharply at him, bristling.

“Why. Not?” he retorts, fairly calmly as far as he’s concerned. Considering. Bruce’s carefully 
blank expression means that he doesn’t sound calm at all, and now that he’s heard himself, he 
*doesn’t.* He sounds angry, he sounds like he did that night that he came to Gotham looking for 
trouble and caught that same scent, muted under body armor and anger.

“The shift was already active, but it was accelerated by your regeneration cycle, Clark. A cycle that 
wasn’t meant to happen for another…” he checks some figures, re-checks them then consults his 
indecipherable notes. “Fifty to seventy years, given the influence of a yellow sun, possibly. You’re 
too young to be undergoing the shift now. The good news, however, is that you have a compatible 
prospect.”

Clark doesn’t like the sound of what it seems Bruce is headed towards. The idea that he’d even let 
anyone else *near* him, after everything that’s happened…

The idea that he might have to let one of those people so eager to touch his cape, touch his skin is 
nauseating.

“No strangers.” He won’t be experimented on like some sort of animal. His voice is foreign to him, 
cold and hard in a way that he’s never been. Bruce’s eyes flicker for a second to the upper drawer 
of his console, then he deliberately leans back in his chair. Relaxes and meets Clark’s eyes until 
Clark breathes in and realizes how he’s looming. He deflates with a guilty twitch and coughs 
lightly. Has to keep moving, from one long window to the center of the room and back. Has to 
ignore the warm scent of amber and good tea, of Bruce.

*Nervous. Anxious.* He already knows what the solution is; he’s been avoiding it. He doesn’t want 
to see the look in Bruce’s eyes once the man realizes what the *real* problem is. Bruce is going to 
lock him away like a rabid dog, he’s going to finish what he started and Clark should let him.
Clark is… Clark is *dangerous.*

The information held in the database confirms that Clark’s condition can only proceed from bad to 
worse. But Bruce doesn’t go for whatever he has in the drawer, in fact he relaxes even more into 
his chair, looking neatly composed.

“No. No strangers,” Bruce agrees. “I have a proposal for you.” His voice is pleasant; the words 
don’t matter. Clark shifts, trying to ignore the waft of spice and bergamot luring him in. He stops 
himself; he’s suddenly a step closer and he isn’t quite sure when that happened. Bruce’s eyes 
flicker again, down to the floorboards then back up to Clark’s face. He’s measuring the distance, 
Clark realizes.

“So,” Bruce continues smoothly, “standard human-equivalent equipment?”
Clark blinks, then flushes. “Yes,” he grounds out, embarrassed. His head hurts, he can’t see what any of this has to do with the constant heat and the creeping anger that seems to be around every corner of the lakehouse for him.

An eyebrow raises at him. “And you can detect Human touch—” What?

“Bruce—” Clark is so far from alright being talked about as if he’s some kind of anomaly, as if Bruce needs to emphasize how abnormal Clark is. He crosses his arms over his chest defensively.

“—like this?” A brush to Clark’s cheekbone and his eyes close, he’s leaning in automatically and Bruce smells so. Good. Clark jerks himself back and has to look away because he wants to cry at the feeling of overpowering disappointment it causes. “I assume there are no caustic or variably supersonic fluids, no tentacles, no… surprises,” Bruce is still talking.

“No… God, no—nothing like that.” Nothing surprising to Clark, at least; nothing he hasn’t seen for himself watching slick pornography. What does he think Clark is? Bruce stares through him broodingly then looks directly at him.

“Fine,” he asserts, “I propose an experiment. We should have sex.”

What?

“Together. After I patrol.” Clarification is warranted, but not particularly helpful. Not helpful and not calming, either. Clark genuinely has to look away before he fries something critical.

“What?” is all he can spit out, irritation and something like thirst, something like hunger pulling him in to stand directly in front of Bruce’s chair. Bruce tilts his head back slightly, indefinably regal as he does so, eyes opaque.

“I’ll explain it this way: your recent difficulties are a matter of concern. Your difficulties regarding my person are a matter of concern. You,” a gesture encompassing Clark’s state follows, “cannot be allowed in the general populace with this kind of physiological response. The problem is the hormonal imbalance; the solution the AI built by your ancestors and my own research indicates that appropriate stimulation by persons with a compatible genome will result in positive outcome to your affliction. Genetically compatible persons can be identified via scent receptors and are…” he glanced again; at the carpet then back up to Clark. “—appealing. I’m aware of the situation, Clark. So, choose: either we can copulate, or I can get the K and we find a different way to deal with this. But you will not walk this house, or this hemisphere, in this state, while I am the catalyst."

The thing is, Clark is utterly American; Bruce can’t hold him here; nobody can hold him—

—and that is where Clark’s train of thought comes to an abrupt stuttering crash. He finds it’s difficult to concentrate on what Bruce is saying, so loud, so many sounds; it’s so bright—

Clark covers his face and the world tips. He’s eighty percent sure that Bruce is carrying him, which means Clark probably did something very undignified, but his head is pounding and it feels so good to just relax against Bruce that he does. Smells so right. And that… is better.
“In order for this to proceed, I’ll need you to say what you need.” Bruce cuts to the chase, as usual.

Clark shakes his head, looks away from too-knowing eyes. “Can we slow down a moment? This is… not romantic.” Despite his own words, his body is already angling towards Bruce.

“It’s not a romance, Kansas.” Bruce’s detached tone should be a bucket of cold water, instead it’s like fuel. “Say what you need.”

Clark looks over his shoulder, unnervingly still for long moments, then exhales, deflating slightly. He meets Bruce’s stare bravely. “I want this, with you this way. Can we just, I need… I always. I get tired,” he confesses. “Of being… super, of being—”

“In control. Yes. Have you done this before; any of this?” There’s no judgment in Bruce’s expression or tone. He waits for Clark to pull the words from the air.

“Bruce, I want—will you… I want you to do it.” No. He can see Bruce shutting down already; Clark corrects himself before Bruce can speak. “I’m not a virgin.” He isn’t, not precisely, not that it matters; he knows what he’s asking for. “I’ve had quite a bit of practice with oral sex.” Bruce blinks at him and makes a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat. Belatedly Clark’s aware that he just informed B that Lois put him on his knees. His face warms. “Forget I said that. I want to do this with you. With you, B.” No one else, no other attempts that might make things worse than they already are—just this.

“And you trust me that much. You do know what I am, don’t you, Kansas.” Bruce isn’t showing any emotion that Clark can read, he’s a cipher in shades of navy and charcoal. Another of Gotham’s gargoyles, standing guard silently over the outline of the city behind him. Clark’s caught his arousal on the wind so many times, yes. He’s pretty sure he knows what Bruce… what he likes.

Clark sighs, smiles fondly, lets the smile fade when Bruce doesn’t give an inch. He shrugs, shy. “Sure. You know I… I think we have a lot in common. I know we have our disagreements, but you’re my best friend, Bruce. This probably isn’t comfortable for you, and I’m sorry for the… the trouble this is causing. If it helps any at all, I wanted this—something like this, before. There isn’t anyone else I’d trust with this.” There’s a sadness in that that Clark shies away from; he’d rather not make the mistake of asking for more than Bruce can give.

Bruce’s face tightens at the admission, voice glacial. There’s near to no accent in his tone when he replies. “One: the probability of me ever being able to forget what you’ve just said to me is zero to nil; two: there are certain things that you should not say to a man like me, Clark, but it’ll come to you later, I’m sure. Three: You need to provide me some specification when you say you want to ‘do this with me’, because I promise you, the equipment that I have is very different from whatever you became accustomed to with Miss Lane, and I would very much not like there to be any misunderstandings between us on this point. Four: let’s keep feelings out of this.” Because out of all else failing in Clark’s life, that’s the thing most likely to happen. Right.

“I mean what I said, B. Are you getting the mineral out now?” He isn’t going to specify; Bruce knows damn well what he means. Clark decides not to justify a comment best not responded to.

“No.” Bruce eyes him suspiciously. “Not yet.” Then he taps his hands thoughtfully together, nods and goes to prepare.

There’s no specious argument about orientation or sexuality; there’s more than enough half-recalled scandal regarding Bruce’s public persona that he seems like a realist instead of suicidal. Clark trusts that he knows his own mind, and as for Clark, it’s never been an issue—he wants who he wants, he’s avoided labels and classifications and that’s all there ever has been to it.
He wants Bruce.

There really isn’t anything to argue about, after all.

~“The room is spinning, I am turning; egos in the night. My legs are shaking; I’m smiling, faking, moving into the light.”~ -Hurricane Love

The first time is like this:

Clark is ready when Bruce slips into his room, already bare and burning beneath his sheets, and Bruce draws the sheet back and slides into his bed as if he does it every night.

The slow glide as he palms Clark’s thigh might just be the most erotic touch Clark’s ever experienced. It’s only passing sexual, but it is completely inquisitive, daringly sensual; exploratory. The warm hand trails feather-light circles and diagrams on Clark’s skin, experimentally. Clark gasps, surprised as the sensation pricks across his body, hips flexing. He’s never been touched with such casual boldness; it’s enlightening. Also enlightening: Bruce’s hardness, his cock, is a hot brand against Clark’s bare hip. Bruce doesn’t look at his cock and he doesn’t look at Clark’s face—he’s too busy watching his hand stroke up and down the length of Clark’s long leg. Clark bites his lip to hold back a moan when those clever fingers trace over the back of his knee.

This leisurely appreciation is nothing like what Clark expected.

Bruce leans over, kisses him firmly once, then again as if he’s making a point. “Ah,” he says, hushed, as though he’s made a monumental discovery.

Before Clark knows it, he’s trading slow syrupy kisses, tingling. All Clark can hear is the scrape of hair, skin, sweat; the steadfast beat vibrating from Bruce’s chest; liquid, slick sounds: mouths and tongues slipping, wet and mobile; hyper-focused. He could come just like this, and Bruce has barely touched him. He moans openly into that mouth when sneaky fingers pinch a nipple, electrified; breathes air out his nose in a rush. A kiss to his jaw, another to the hollow of his throat, then Bruce bends his head and hot lips and tongue are sparking fire through Clark. His chest; Bruce is—

Clark yelps, babbles something most likely irrelevant and Bruce pays him no mind. A tug to the light fur on his chest; a hard thigh slots between his legs and suddenly, blessed relief; something to grind, to press against. “Please-help me-don’t—” Bruce lifts one of Clark’s wrists and presses it above his head, then the other. He scrupulously doesn’t meet Clark’s eyes.

His voice, pitched low, reliable velvet at Clark’s ear, “House rules: don’t move. Speak, don’t move.” Clark is stupidly grateful that Bruce heard, that Bruce understands he meant ‘help me not hurt you’. Clark nods frantically. “Verbal answers, Clark—you don’t have to worry anymore, I’ve got you. You just… follow. Objections? Yes, no, stop?”

“No objections, yes, I—” Clark puffs, “yes, Bruce. This is—good. Good.”

“Tell me, then. Tell me who’s in charge, Clark.”
He’s always had to ask—everyone, every time, he’s had to ask, and in his experience, most people he’s set his cap for haven’t in the least been interested in Clark Kent’s surrender. A shiver works its way down Clark’s spine and the words are just there, waiting for him. He weaves his fingers together on the cool sheets eagerly. “You are. You’re in charge, Bruce.” He can feel the tension washing away, can feel himself hovering heavily. “You… you’re in charge.”

“Good.” The word is drawn out long; fingers smooth along from the underside of Clark’s wrists to his underarms, lightly graze the hair there. Clark whimpers. Back and forth across his skin, brushing turns to stroking across and down his ribs. A wave of heat runs through him; he’s already leaking, aching. That mouth back on his chest, that tongue laving his nipples, sharp pinches making him shake—Clark barely makes it past ten minutes their first time.

When he comes, trembling, voice gone dreamy and yearning; he’s squirming with tears pressing their way out through his lashes. Bruce makes a noise too savage to be a moan, then kisses Clark aggressively, nipping and licking his way in.

“Yes. No. Stop?” is bitten under his ear and he arches, lips bitten red and hanging open, “Yuh—yes—”

Bruce mutters something guttural about Clark’s mouth, climbs onto him and rides his cock down back and forth, along the humid slick coating the joint of Clark’s hip and thigh. He mutters louder, “Christ, look at you,” undulating into Clark, catches his mouth up again, fingers tangling tight in Clark’s hair. “So wet,” and that makes Clark’s head float just a bit.

Bruce rocks his hips against Clark, the whole hard length of his body, thrusts against him fluidly and stills with a gruff breath, as he pumps out liquid heat all over Clark’s stomach and abs. “Better?” he pants out, inches from Clark’s mouth. Clark means to say yes, but what actually comes out is a wordlessly deprived moan; he’d hardly softened and now he’s hard again. His arms start to rise and Bruce’s hand firmly presses him down.

“Tell me what you want, Clark.” Deep and smooth in his ear as if he isn’t falling to pieces.

“I. I. I want to be good,” The whisper barely passes his lips. Unflappable Bruce says, “Good answer.”

He touches Clark everywhere. The places he touches Clark—the back of his knee; the nape of his neck; a spot just under and behind Clark’s ears that makes him shout; the network of nerves spanning the skin between Clark’s fingers and the overly-sensitive skin of his inner wrists—they all strike true. Bruce knows too much—it’s obvious that he’s researched how to do this, from the archives of the Ship. He’s shockingly thorough, from the quiver-inducing rub of Clark’s feet to the indescribable bliss of his tongue licking Clark open; he drags Clark through hours of Kryptonian multiple orgasms. Though he curbs himself well, he definitely doesn’t stint on his own pleasure. It settles the itch under Clark’s skin almost as well as bathing in Sol. As far as that goes, Clark can see for himself what this is doing for Bruce.

The first time, Bruce fucking kisses him and fucks him simple without even approaching penetration, then he gets his hands in Clark’s hair, and Clark finds that that’s pretty damn good too. The first time, he gives Clark a friendly pat on the jawline, looks at his eyes but not into them when Clark tries to kiss him again—like a commander assessing battle readiness—then he leaves Clark to his quiet and his covers. Clark’s fingers swipe through cooling slick; he licks at them greedily and his mind buzzes with satisfaction. He doesn’t question it - the impulse is too strong to even want to fight.
He doesn’t realize yet, that there’s been more than one miscommunication.

That morning, Clark sleeps. He’s forgotten how restorative it can be. It’s so revitalizing and calming, he feels like an entirely new person. His patience and attention span are increased, his anger is banked, his concentration grows by leaps and bounds. He heads to the deck, where he eats mornings, when B’s not around—the water’s song calms him, usually.

There are books waiting face-down beside his breakfast tray, and he turns them over curiously: something by Tristan Taormino called The Ultimate Guide to Kink: BDSM, Role Play and the Erotic Edge.\footnote{1}

Oh.

Another, titled The Bottoming Book\footnote{2}, by Dossie Easton and a Janet Hardy. The last gives him pause: The Joy of Gay Sex, Revised and Expanded Third Edition\footnote{3}, the cover proudly proclaims.

Huh. He can’t help glancing at the see-through door back into the house. They’re obviously for him. Nervously, he picks them up.

The edges of the pages are crisp and unfoxed; the spines are whole and uncracked. Clark looks at his tray, impeccably tidy, with it’s small closed-bud carnation; it’s the same tray he receives every day. He swallows a suddenly dry mouthful, chagrined at the thought of that gentleman butler carrying this tray to Clark, knowing what it held.

It’s more exciting than he’d like to admit. He flips through the first book slowly, munching a fresh city bagel in one hand, then stops as something catches his eye and flips through it again.

Here and there, scattered throughout the text, are ruler-straight margin notes, highlighted blocks and darkly underlined phrases and chapter headings. Bruce’s scent is in the pages; so is a lurid bookmark depicting a painfully complex looking arrangement of small ropes and knots cradling a nude penis and balls. There is absolutely no room for doubt or mistaken meanings.

He turns back to the first page.

‘This book is a celebration of sensational submissives and marvelous masochists, of the naughtiest schoolboys and the sluttiest slaves, of those who love to struggle and serve and scream and submit and come and come and come…’

Clark blushes and stares, before stowing them under his pillow to read later.

Clark moves his daily exercises into the sun for a couple of days, feels that he can control himself, basks in as much energy as he can.

It doesn’t last, and three days later, Clark is pacing and pent-up again, distracted and furious, so they continue the experiment; of course they do.

Like clockwork, every three days, then every other day. The books are invaluable.

It seems every fifth day is a good day for Bruce push up his sleeves and catch him up against whatever vertical surface is available. He does this, Clark thinks, just so he can see Clark weak in the knees, fisting the crumpled midnight of Bruce’s ties as he comes in his pants like a teenager, all the while Bruce looks on, politely disinterested, as if he’s timing the process.

It’s humiliating; it makes Clark’s insides writhe and it makes him come harder than he can ever
remember coming before. The harder Clark comes when Bruce changes a variable, the more Bruce introduces that variable. Clark finds that he loves the feel of Bruce’s ties in his hand, he loves being forced to mind his grip. Bruce wears ties more often.

Clark keeps expecting Bruce to strip down like that first night. He keeps expecting Bruce to climb onto him again, to feel his warmth and his want, but Bruce doesn’t offer him more than a few words of direction, possessive praise and a clinically efficient sensual touch. After the first time, Bruce never pushes; never presses for more, never so much as mentions reciprocation. It’s good; really good.

Which is why it takes a few months for Clark to realize that with as much sex his body tells him he’s been having, he has yet to actually feel Bruce inside him. Or have Bruce ask him for anything.

He realizes hard on the heels of that: Bruce never even asked if Clark was attracted to men, let alone him, and Clark’s been so happy to be able to think straight, he hasn’t bothered to tell Bruce that he is.

Clark hadn’t stopped to consider that Bruce might think Clark didn’t want him. This is a problem; Clark wants more.

~

Clark’s feeling more himself every week, but that doesn’t stop him from looking, from wanting. He doesn’t ask Bruce to stop, and Bruce continues to come to him.

Sometimes his suit smells of too much bourbon, but the ghost of cherries is on his tongue instead, and he tastes like snow-pines and firewood, dark and intoxicating. When he kisses Clark, it crowds his thoughts out. Clark gets drunk on as much of that taste as he can.

“That mouth, Kansas,” Bruce husks one day, “is going to get you into trouble.” Clark moans and presses lightly into his hands; trouble sounds delightful.

“Please,” he begs. Bruce eyes sharpen, he lays a hand on the side of Clark’s face and presses his thumb to Clark’s lips, rubs back and forth at the seam of his lips until they open.

Bruce looks down at him, mouth grim. “Whatever I want.” And he slides his thumb right across Clark’s tongue. Surprise and lust shock Clark to his bones; he moans again, knows that if he chases that digit it will be withdrawn, and Bruce teases the edges of his lips, with blank focus.

“Undress,” he offers, in the same casual tone that Clark uses to order cream in his coffee. Clark shoots a paranoid look around the upper stairway; the house is silent save the footsteps of Alfred in the garden. “Here,” Bruce says, thumb sliding spit down Clark’s chin. “Now.” Burnished brown eyes watch Clark as he wiggles out of his jeans and pull-over, revealing sun-touched perfect skin. The front door closes with a solid thump and the whisk of Alfred’s polished shoes on the snow mat in the front entrance drift up the stairs. Clark’s eyes are wide; he’s holding his pants in one hand when Bruce reaches out, nimble as a snake and snaps the thin material from Clark’s fingers. He drops them on the floor, eyes raking Clark up and down with practiced nonchalance. Out of season roses waft coolly up the stair and Clark’s face flushes in panic.

“Bruce,” Clark hisses. “He’s back— “
Bruce leans in and meets his wide-eyed gaze with equanimity and a low, rich tone. “Be quiet now.” Clark blinks, mouth closing. His skin prickles. “House rules: Yes, no, stop.” Bruce is impatient, pulse thudding along at a crawl, jaw clenched as he waits.

Clark sucks in a breath, then another and nods jerkily, eyes falling. “Yes, Bruce.” The whisper is so low he’s not sure Bruce can hear him, so he repeats himself, louder, eyes closing. Humiliation makes him turn into the wall when the sound of steps on wood echo crisply.

Quick as thought, Bruce crowds into him, blocking the corner, wide-shouldered and silent, cologne redolent of spice and winter. His right-hand fingers are tight around Clark’s outer wrist, pressing it to the wall beside Clark’s head, while his left arm is straight, boxing a very naked Clark into the cage of Bruce’s arms. Bruce lowers his head slightly, breathing Clark’s air. “No,” he says mildly. “No hiding.” He’s pulling Clark’s arms up, above his head along the wall, pins them there with his weight. His collar is pressed to Clark’s nose. “You’ll stay where you’re put.”

The thrill catches Clark aback; heat floods his face and chest. Bruce speaks as if it’s the most sensible request possible, as if the only reasonable thing to do is comply. His stance is balanced, weight light on Clark’s hands; even if Clark were a normal man, he might be able to break free. He doesn’t want to break free. Clark inhales freshly laundered fabric, english oak; bitter orange and sharp pine. He stays where he’s been put.

“A very good afternoon Master Bruce, may I bring your noon constitutional?” comes from behind Bruce. Clark squeezes his eyes shut tighter. He’s bare of even his glasses, achingly hard; he’s being practically ravished up against Bruce’s upstairs hall and Alfred can see him. He whimpers quietly, sure that Bruce will let him up, call a timeout, something.

“I’ve discovered where the missing funds are being rerouted; I’m at a decent stopping point. That would be fine, Alfred,” Bruce says, light and natural while he absently kicks Clark’s legs wider, looking at his valet. “I’ll have those lemon scones today if there are any left.”

“I assume you intend to eat them. I do believe it would be a tragedy, should I find otherwise, Master Bruce. Will you be requiring anything else, as of this moment?” Clark blushes hotly, right down to the soles of his feet. He’s about ninety-nine percent sure, judging by prior situations, that Alfred doesn’t actually see his nudity, or won’t look to inquire in this circumstance. Ninety-seven percent. It’s just that he could, if he wanted to, and with that, there’s no stopping the rush of heat and hard that sweeps Clark. Bruce’s pants are brushing heavily against his nagging erection as he moves. Clark freezes, hesitant; cock jerking up, conspicuous.

“Oh god,” he thinks. He bites his lip and turns his unsteady whimpers into Bruce’s collar, eyes burning and blurred. He feels insubstantial for all his bulk; swallowing the tears is near impossible and fine tremors run through Clark now.

“No,” Bruce replies thoughtfully, as if nothing out of the ordinary is happening. “Not as of this moment.” His fingers squeeze Clark’s wrist steady and certain as bedrock, and Clark melts; goes loose, lets his weight pull at his wrists and tips his burning face against the cool wall. His head swims. Tears trace down his cheek and his arousal peaks; he muffles his blush into Bruce’s shoulder.


“Very good,” Bruce presses into Clark’s hair. “But I’m not done.” There are two large sandwiches on the tray that Alfred brings, alongside a pitcher of iced cucumber-water and a small platter of the pastries. That blessed haze descends again, thicker now, somewhere between Bruce neatly cutting
the second sandwich, and the third bite-sized piece that he feeds into Clark’s mouth by hand. The world lenses down to this: this room, this heartbeat. This choice.

Bruce doesn’t eat a single scone; he feeds them to Clark in his study, one by one, Clark nude on his knees between Bruce’s clothed thighs. Then B kisses Clark until he’s dazed and pliable, combs tangles from his hair and runs contemplative hands over every inch of his flushed skin.

He’s accepted, uplifted.

*Beautiful*, he imagines Bruce saying.

---

People are screaming, people are in pain; the only reason they aren’t screaming for him is because they all think he’s dead. The storm watch has been active for hours. It’s taken him three long minutes to make his decision and it’s three minutes longer than he had any right to take. He can’t wait any longer for what’s right to *feel* right; he knows what needs to be done. He doesn’t know what reception he’ll get.

Clark lingers in the doorway, then takes a breath and marches up to Bruce. The shy facade shucks away as he walks, leaving Clark, standing tall, arms folded across his chest. “I’m going out.” His voice rings out steady and that’s wonderful, because Clark doesn’t feel steady at all. “There are people who need my help. There’s—”

“A tornadic storm-front across the eastern plains. It’s about time; go.” Bruce is occupied by a screen of data that shows an array of emergency response networks, superimposed into one map. His voice is sharp, the Gotham scrubbed out in favor of his real accent—flawless intonation. He doesn’t look at Clark oddly, doesn’t say a word about Clark’s hours of vacillation, doesn’t try to stop him or hold him back. “Natural disasters are definitely your lane. Suit’s ready, GPS is installed with this earbud for emergencies. Don’t count on it in a wind for communication purposes.”

The news-feed behind B shows scenes of panic and disorder. He presses a device into Clark’s hand then turns back to his screens. “Emergency aid incoming, but the fastest will be two hours out, yet. I have a list of priority situations arranged by immediacy.”

“Tell me all of them.” Clark’s heard enough. He moves so fast that the Suit is gone from the storage case, his pullover and jeans are still settling to the floor when he rockets into the heart of the storm. The weightlessness and the *push* come to him as easily as ever.

There’s no way Bruce can hear Clark through the howling gale but underneath it all—the screams for help, the cries of pain and the whispered prayers—Clark can hear B... B, but not Bruce. His voice impassive, centralizing and relaying information from hundreds of sources at once. A heartbeat pulsing sure and steady in his ear.

He refuses to be frozen, ever again.
He doesn’t save them all, but he saves as many as he can. He looks for more, in quickly widening circles, growing frantic before he finally registers B’s voice, calling his name (their name for him) patiently and quietly. All he can hear is storm amidst the dust and debris, so he bursts upward, up and up until the light touches him again and he can turn his face into the sun’s golden warmth. He wants to lose himself in it. The screaming is quieter here, for now. It gives him no joy.

“Superman. Superman, can you hear me? Superman.” B’s tone hasn’t changed, but the cadence of his words shifts slightly, his consonants sharper. He’s worried. Clark looks down at the storm-front again, then jets across the sky and swoops abruptly down into the cave passage, stopping directly in front of Bruce. He hovers, ankles together, arms crossed again. The wake of his passing knocks a stack of B’s papers to the floor. Clark stares at the wall.

B approaches him, swift and silent. His eyes flit over Clark’s dusty face, his wind-swept hair.

“I waited too long.”

After a tense, fraught silence, Bruce leans forward, slides a hand firmly round the back of Clark’s neck and reels him in. He doesn’t seem to care at all that Clark’s feet aren’t on the ground. Clark presses his face into him, into the scent of him. “You did well,” he hears. “You did a good job. It was—” Bruce clears his throat. “You were very heroic. More than anyone else could have done.”

Approval understanding calm seeps into Clark from the points of contact. There’s little he wants so badly as he wants to believe. He doesn’t feel as if he’s done enough; he never does.

Bruce settles him there, against his shoulder and urges him up the stairs, through the streamlined austerity of the open day-room and up to the bedrooms. He silently pulls the red boots from Clark’s feet. He tries to peel the skin-tight sapphire from Clark’s skin, fingers sliding across it’s scaled surface without making a mark, until Clark, too tired for words, takes Bruce’s hand and lays it solemnly over his heart.

Bruce watches his hand instead of his face, and it might be courtesy instead of avoidance, after all. The suit retracts as it always does when the wearer’s intent is clear, leaves Clark feeling less naked as it always does.

He isn’t sure what to say, how to react, when Bruce goes into his en-suite, returns with a warm washcloth, then urges him with firm hands to sit on the bed. Clark closes his eyes when Bruce begins to draw the cloth across his skin, wiping away dust and grime. There’s a part of him that wants to pull away, to protest that it can’t be this easy, that his mistakes can’t be wiped away, that he shouldn’t be forgiven so painlessly. When he opens his eyes to speak, there’s no worship or anger in Bruce’s eyes, only a bleak understanding. Only pride. It undoes him. Clark breathes out and tries to relax; commits himself to Bruce’s safekeeping and lets Bruce wash him clean.
Fanart by Albi


I don't suggest that anyone do anything that I write about without knowing what they're doing. Some of the things I write about shouldn't be done at all, period. This is *fantasy* and DC universes are inherently fucked up. It's all downhill from here.

---

**Chapter Eight: Echo**

~“The self is a smokescreen.”~ —Kris Kidd, *Return to Sender*

It’s bedlam. They all want to talk at once; they all want to have their say about him. The voices and screams of joy, horror, anger, outrage—they all blur together. Citizens are advised to speak to him, and to keep their distance; to call local law enforcement and to keep the 911 lines clear; to cooperate with him and to tell him to turn himself in.

Talking heads and pundits discuss Superman’s return, what it means, what it could mean. They hypothesize about his goals and his intentions, his grievances and his reasons for helping. They speculate about his reasons for *not* helping, both during major emergencies and minor. They talk about how they don’t need him, they don’t want him and the world was better off without him. They debate on his effectiveness, his kill record and leave a sea of flowers and candles lit for him in Victory Square. They argue over whether it qualifies as a monument, they arm themselves into neighborhood militias, they riot, they make his head pound with their squabbling fanaticism.

*Why doesn’t Superman rescue pets? Why didn't Superman help the rebuilding efforts of Metropolis and Gotham? What does Superman have against the Projects? Why won't Superman show his face? What's Superman's favorite flavor of ice-cream? America stands with Superman, but for how long? Why won’t Superman answer questions? Superman - citizen or illegal alien? What happened during the bombing of the Capitol Building? Why won't Superman take the stand? Does Superman hate Free Speech?*  

It’s been years since Clark has thrown up, but he wishes that he could now, if only to finally make the nausea stop. Bruce finds him curled into a tight ball, hands clenched as he clasps his forearms over his ears.

God, they won’t *shut. Up.*

“Trust me.” The blindfold in B’s hands is soft, Clark knows. It’s heavier than it looks; it will fit snugly and smells of his and Bruce’s perspiration and adrenaline. It will block Clark’s sight—all of Clark’s sight, for as long as he leaves it on.

Clark unlocks his jaw. “It’s not sight that’s the problem. I need… I need a… minute—” He’s dizzy with the excess of input, the influx of attention focused on *him*, the millions of mouths calling his
“Trust me, Kansas.” Clark trusts Bruce; he takes the blindfold. He leans into Bruce and lets himself be led. Down wooden stairs, through the scent of butter and sugar bubbling. Across floors worn smooth as glass beneath Clark’s bare soles and down further. More stairs, metal now—into the smells of iron and sweat-flecked canvas, the faintest tinge of blood and antiseptic.

Another smaller step down, then…

Silence.

“Bruce?” Clark stops short, his own breath loud in his ears. Bruce’s hands close on his wrists before he can touch the blindfold, steadying.

“Clark.”

He doesn’t need the question. “Yes. Yes, please.” His mind and his body go in opposite directions. When he sinks down, Bruce’s hands stay on his; Bruce sinks down with him.

“This is what I want,” he says quietly beside Clark’s bowed head, the only voice in the world besides his own. “One hour, here.” One hand slips up under Clark’s shirt to rest against his tensed stomach. “Still yes?”

“…Yes…” Clark is fading, but not into passivity. He grabs the hem of his shirt and strips it off above his head, slow enough for B to avoid his movements. Clark’s body tells him that the world is about twelve feet square and has only two people in it.

“Breathe.” A light stroke to his face, and Clark bows his head further, a slight scuffing sound makes him cock his head, waiting for more.

Silence and the regular, reassuring displacement of air.

“I…” There aren’t any words for this gift. A droplet hits Clark’s cheek and skims the corner of his mouth. He tastes salt with Bruce’s tongue and tries to focus, to prepare himself, but after that kiss there are only hands massaging him. There is only a silence so profound that it makes his heart ache with the beauty of it, and the warmth of Bruce.

There is only the shift of fabric and the simple joy of aligning his breathing, Bruce alive and present by his side.

It’s not a romance, Bruce said, but oh, at times like these, the truth feels like a lie. It’s no flight of fancy, but it’s gone far beyond necessity for Clark—too far. It’s become an affair of the heart, and as these tokens have become more commonplace, Clark holds them tightly for the day when the memories are needed.

One hour becomes one hour per day.
“The problem with a quiet night like tonight,” Bruce muses darkly, “is all the animals that get hungry and come out to feed while the sheep are sleeping. It’s quiet now, but you’ll see soon—it’s going to be ugly. Drink one with me, Clark.” He pulls a bottle from the shelf behind his desk, pulls two glasses from the same recessed compartment before he slides two fingers over the join and the wall looks whole once more.

“Kentucky bourbon?” Clark frowns at the bottle, and that’s probably what sets Bruce off that night. Morning. Evening? Between his own lack of need to sleep and Bruce’s nocturnal predisposition and workload, if it weren’t for the effervescent pressure of sunlight that waxes and wanes in proximity, Clark would fast lose track of the passage of time. “Seems a little below your usual price range.” He’s fully aware that what he’s said is somewhat shitty, but he doesn’t care—he’s jittery and on edge; doesn’t want Bruce to go. Doesn’t want to admit it.

“Poor manners,” Bruce observes. Clark breathes deep, focuses on Bruce’s clothing; customary
well-tailored suit, no jacket. Casual. Mid-level sleeves, waistcoat and hair swept to the side in a wing of salt and pepper. That’s no help at all. It could be morning—Bruce could be headed to meet with some executive. Clark watches Bruce snap red wax from cut glass, narrows his eyes. Bruce’s hair is slightly disheveled, no tie. Clark wonders if he’d even know what time it was, without his enhanced senses, if it would be another one of Bruce’s games. Nine p.m., or somewhere thereabouts, is what it feels like to Clark, but with the drapes drawn, Bruce makes it look like seven am. Clark tunes back in with a feeling of dislocation. He really doesn’t want Bruce to go.

“Sometimes what’s important is tradition, not the cost,” Bruce is saying, pointedly pouring four generous swallows of aromatic amber liquid across two rock glasses. “Maker’s Mark, for example, has been distilling bourbon since 1805, Clark. You don’t disrespect that type of craft.” He took a long thoughtful sip, swallowed with no visible sign of discomfort, then set the second glass in front of Clark, sardonic slant to his manner. “You’re a country boy, don’t you already know this?”

“I did. Do.” Clark doesn’t try to keep the bemusement out of his voice. He laughs slightly, lifts the glass and tips his head in a quick nod of thanks, though he hadn’t actually intended to drink until this very second. He prefers beer, the tiny bubbles popping against the sensitive roof of his mouth, but he’s interested enough to taste it. “I just didn’t think you would, with your… vests and all your fancy bows and lines and pocket-squares and… things.” He throws his drink back in the quick snap customary in the circles he grew up in, defiantly ignoring the date on the bottle—1877—laughing inside at the brief consternation in Bruce’s eyes as he watches Clark gulp down an obscene amount of money in one long motion. The liquor burns dully as it slides down, and Clark licks his lips. It tastes earthier, smokier than any bourbon he’s had before, but it’s still bitter; over-strong, like Clark. He much prefers the taste of honey and spices; the tastes of the spirits Bruce really drinks. “You were saying,” he prompts. “About tradition?”

“I was. Tradition. Says that Bruce Wayne must arrive at the Elliot Relief Fund, well begun on his journey to get blindingly drunk.” Bruce takes another sip, slowly pours another measure of liquor. “Tradition, Clark, says that a Wayne will accept a glass of scotch or one of Benedictine, but never a glass of wine that’s been opened before he entered the room. But they’ll be so busy trying to out-drink me, each congratulating themselves on being my equal, that they won’t even realize that I’m wearing this, instead of the Macallan.” Bruce lifts the glass as he speaks, drinks half in one deliberate swallow then upends the remainder all over his freshly pressed, immaculate dress shirt. The heavy reek of strong liquor is immediate. He seems inordinately pleased about it.

“I like Benedictine,” Clark offers, smile lopsided, apprehension sparking. He wrinkles his nose, consciously forces his senses to ignore the smell.

“Everyone with sense likes Benedictine; five centuries of dedication is fairly definitive.” Bruce sniffs dismissively in a way that’s very Alfred, and adjusts his waistcoat. Clark presses his lips together to keep his smile from widening. “Tradition says that I treat these people, most of whom are one mutual fund away from the penitentiary, as my equals.” Bruce sets the glass down, smooths a hand carelessly through the alcohol staining his front, then runs that same hand up through his hair, mussing it into a ruffled, feathered coif. He leers at Clark with a grin, drops his shoulders just a bit into a gentle slouch. “By the by, Farmboy - it’s a waistcoat, not a ‘vest’.”

Clark raises his eyebrows with the most exaggerated expression of bland interest he can dredge up, thinking hard. Bruce’s mood, the vicious snobbery, is setting off alarms across the board. “Oh really, there’s a difference? Wow, Mister Wayne, Sir - I did not know that. Gosh.” He knows damn well that there isn’t, is what he knows. His voice is Metropolis-chipper, sunshine and progress; he lets that smile out and it’s as wide and open as he needs it to be.

Bruce Wayne looks at him from Bruce’s eyes, flops a sweaty-feeling hand onto Clark’s neck and
pulls him in with a grip that seems weak but feels like iron. Whiskey-scented breath hazes Clark’s lenses. “The difference between a vest… and a waistcoat,” Bruce Wayne purrs, swaying lightly, “—is style.” He steadies himself, using Clark’s shoulder as his support. “Now listen.” His voice is persuasive, resonant, consonants rounded and genteel, with an erotic razor-edge; it cuts right through Clark. His fingers dig into the ridge of muscle between Clark’s neck and shoulder, right where Clark is… where he’s sensitive. Clark, tensed, shrinks a little from that invasive touch. He knows it’s on purpose, that Bruce is deliberately making his body react this way, but that doesn’t lessen the impact any at all.

“Tradition,” Bruce says heavily, “states that I leave early, and get caught canoodling with whatever debutante needs coverage tonight. But I’m hungry, Kansas. Tradition doesn’t have an acceptable answer for that.”

Bruce touches his face and leans in too close, smiling his awful predator’s smile. Clark doesn’t move, can barely think straight. Everything is changing, right in front of him. It’s like a terrible magic trick in reverse—watch Bruce pull ‘Bruce Wayne’ out of a hat. Clark shivers.

“I find social progress is a cure for overly binding traditions.” If there’s one thing Clark can do well, it’s discuss sociological quandaries while under pressure. He’s relieved when the words come out firmly, with just a touch of confident worldliness. He sounds close to righteous, slightly disapproving, and it feels good. It almost sounds as if they’re having a rational discussion for once, as if they’re on equal footing, and why shouldn’t they be? Clark’s just as smart, just as informed, as Bruce is. Bruce makes a very un-Bruce-like snort. He’s in the Between, an absence growing in his mannerisms and voice.

“Oh progress,” he says loftily. “Tell me more. I should be a progressive, hmm? Like the board of LuthorCorp? Just build and build and pay no attention to who gets crushed underneath? Like these idiots with their resettlement relief for the Narrows, pushing people out who have nothing so they can say that they cleaned the place up? Progress. Progress puts kids on the street in Gotham, farmboy. Good kids, bad kids - they all turn out wild, in the end.” His eyes gleam, his voice dropping deeper—for the barest half-breath, he’s almost someone else. Clark fights the urge to edge away from the fingers stroking insistently at the back of his neck, tries not to feel clumsy shrinking back from Bruce’s slinking menace, tries to contain his shudder when those short nails scratch at the base of his skull. He fails. Bruce’s nostrils flare like he’s scented weakness.

“No, no - I’m sorry, please. Crime Alley - you had a point. Go on,” Bruce laughs, eyes cruel. Bruce… is Bruce laughing at him? He is. Deep in his chest, a low chuckle that takes up space, fills Clark’s head, pisses him right the fuck off. He laughs, and he hangs on Clark while he does it.

“Displacement and an odd thrill of challenge. Clark wants Bruce to stop this, wants to pull away, change the subject, something, but he can’t let that stand uncontested. He knows his eyes have narrowed. “I think the children of Park Row and the… the Narrows—” How Clark hates that name! “—would argue with you there, B - I mean, are they expected to stare at the mess the good people of Gotham have left and just deal with the fact that society doesn’t know what to do with them? The world isn’t fair. Early intervention, that’s the key, you know that. It’s a progressive notion, yes, but there’s no substitute for a strong civic ethic, Bruce - I’ve read the statistics, I’ve seen the numbers. Those kids are getting a chance at a real education now, because of your company, because of your policies - safe room and board, clean food and water, decent medical care, clothes - a system that cares about their welfare so they won’t just throw ethics in the trash because life gets hard.”[1]

Bruce... is Bruce laughing at him? He is. Deep in his chest, a low chuckle that takes up space, fills Clark’s head, pisses him right the fuck off. He laughs, and he hangs on Clark while he does it.

“No, no - I’m sorry, please. Crime Alley - you had a point. Go on,” Bruce laughs, eyes cruel. Clark’s face is hot.
“You can’t lock them all away. I’m a journalist, Bruce. I support truth and social justice - you don’t get the right to choose one or the other for everyone. You’re not convincing me that you don’t know civic duty, but you talk about Gotham as if it’s your property, you know that?”

Bruce’s smile doesn’t fade one watt. “Gotham is my property,” he agrees.

“It’s just an awful shame to watch a city like this tear itself apart then throw those kinds of views around.” Clark continues, then pauses, running the conversation back. “Wait, what?” Clark moves his shoulder, uncomfortably; stops when Bruce’s hand tightens warningly. That’s it - he’s tired of this; tired of arguing and tired of being Bruce’s amusement. Not this way—he’d much rather take his licks on his knees. “Alright, Bruce, I won’t apologize for being optimistic. Let’s not, please. Can’t we just—” Clark presses his lips together to stop himself. Bruce strokes him behind his ear, chuckling, and Clark resists rolling his eyes by the slimmest margin.

“Kansas, I was wrong - you are good company tonight. I ought to take you to this party, let you wow all these desperately guilty reprobates with your optimism and a dash of Kansas pluck. Unfortunately, that would be a blunder of immemorial antiquity.” His voice lowers gradually, intense; sets a stage that forces Clark to lean in and take note. “These people don’t care about you,” Bruce says. “They don’t care about each other. They don’t care about this city. They certainly don’t care about your homeless. Felonious. Dirty. Poor kids.” Clark flinches. Bruce’s eyes glint coldly as he grins through a snarl. “All they care about, just like me, is making sure that they feel as if they’ve left a lasting Heritage.” Shame curls tight in Clark’s belly, licking an ember of a different sort higher. “Now, be a good boy and keep the sheets warm for me, will you beautiful? If I miss out because you’re too tired, why… that would be a real crime.”

It’s a terrible line; worse than most of the lines anyone’s ever tried to lay on Clark, including the time when he was living on a fishing boat for months with a crew of repressed sailors who spoke another language and routinely propositioned him. Clark is sure his expression isn’t saying very nice things right this moment. He goes from a frown—because what if Bruce is serious—to amusement, then back to irritation. He can’t help it—the laugh breaks free, too-loud and nervous, half crazed. Ashamed, because he’s never let anyone speak down to him this way, and he isn’t sure why he’s letting it happen now. He wants to blame the sheer strangeness of this exchange, but that’s a poor deflection and he’s more self-aware than that. There’s a part of Clark, a rather large part as it turns out, that enjoys it when Bruce speaks to him this way, that gets off on Bruce’s casual cruelty, that waits to know how Bruce will break him next.

“Jesus, Bruce. Easy. I give - you win; you win the Academy Award.” Clark reaches to adjust his glasses, trying to calm his pounding heart and Bruce, the bastard, takes them from him. Squeezes the back of Clark’s neck firmly, again, sending another pulse of hot, want, more through Clark.

“Too sweet for your own good,” Bruce croons, and if Clark didn’t know. His simulacrum is so convincing, Clark finds himself wondering if he saw what he thought he saw—if Bruce drank the whiskey, if he really spilled as much as it seemed he had, if the smell of oak rising up around them wasn’t from inside Bruce instead of on him. Bruce is disturbingly good at this; the illusion of being slightly off-balance, the warmth, the careless touches, rubbing Clark’s shoulder and neck, this wide-voweled way of speaking that makes Clark gravitate towards him, makes Clark want to listen, even when Bruce is clearly being an asshole. “Hiding - against the rules.” Bruce ignores Clark’s hand and slips Clark’s glasses right into his own pants pocket, instead. Bastard.

“I swear, Kansas, these things should be illegal, c’est un désastre.” Bruce mourns, face all sadness and sympathy. Clark’s ears are more than good enough to hear B mutter “Démodé,” under his breath.
“That’s the point,” Clark tries to say; his voice is stuck in his throat. His face is over-warm. Being unfashionable is the point; and there’s no reason at all that he should feel ashamed about it, but—

Bruce chuckles again, distractingly close. “I hope I see my posture collar when I get back. Yes? Remember: sheets. Warm. No touching what’s mine. Yes, you will be graded.” He winks, runs his tongue over his teeth suggestively and, even though there’s plenty of room, he stumbles into Clark. “My… sturdy, aren’t you. What do we say, pretty?”

Clark looks anywhere but at Bruce. “I…”

“Ah, ah ah. *Chante le, mon beau garçon* [3].” Bruce’s French is perfect, his accent sublimely Parisian. Bruce Wayne’s French, on the other hand, is a badly twisted, trashy-accented mess. The smile is warm, charming; charismatic Bruce Wayne—the eyes are hard, piercing and determined. Clark feels a zing of shock when Bruce reaches down between them without breaking eye contact and firmly rubs his other hand over Clark’s crotch, where Clark is distressingly hard, he’s just realizing. *Clark is hard,* from being vetted by Bruce Wayne. From being called a *pretty boy,* by *Bruce Wayne.* No, *his* pretty boy.

*He’s teasing.* Clark has to wonder how long Bruce has been planning this scene. B’s pushiness, the defiant bossiness is working; it’s definitely working for him.

Bruce smirks openly, displays his power as if it’s his due and it is; *it* is, as long as Clark wants it to be. B’s mouth hovers, his gaze snaps down to Clark’s lips then back up slow and obvious. He adjusts his grip slightly, fingers trailing a line of fire up Clark’s zipper-seam, chin lifting. “Are you planning to make me *late,* Kansas?”

Clark’s eyes had begun to drift shut, the rhythm of blood and the scent, so *Bruce* underneath, lulling him in. He blinks fast, mouth opening, automatic. *“No , Bruce - I’m. I’m not sorry, but yeah. Yes, I’ll wear it,”* he stammers. Bruce’s mood swings are giving Clark whiplash. He has to get better at responding to this, as soon as possible.

“Slow.” Bruce complains, fingers stroking deceptively down the line of Clark’s spine. “That’s *one* , Kansas, because you’re honest. Be happy I’m feeling generous tonight; next time you make me late, well… You know blue blood is *hot* blood; I might… react. All this talk about progress is ruining my appetite.” He pats Clark on the face, then once on the cock, like he’s inspecting goods. “Gag yourself for me. You know the one.” There’s something sharp and wrong in the angle of his smile. He lingers, lips close but doesn’t close the gap between them.

*Yes,* Clark knows the one, alright. *Intimately.* The big one, the *thick one.* The one shaped exactly like Bruce, but shorter. The one Clark has to concentrate on, has to practically suck the entire time just to keep his jaw open and pliable. And Bruce will be pretending to… *canoodle,* for at least an hour. Clark’s mouth is open, frustrated enough to protest, but the look in Bruce’s eyes clearly says that *two comes right after one,* and Clark’s too restless to want that just yet. Not just yet.

Clark takes a moment to fully appreciate that he’s apparently in lo—lust with someone exhibiting extreme sociopathy. Then he bows as gracefully to his own desire as he can. *“Yes, Bruce.”* Can’t help leaning *towards.* The more he surrenders, the more he says it, the easier this becomes. This isn’t Bruce, not really—this is just another costume that Bruce wears. This is nothing, it means nothing; it’s a game Clark’s been invited to play whether he knows the rules or not.

Bruce’s eyes flash and he grins, slow and satisfied at whatever he sees on Clark’s face. “So much for tradition,” *hums,* quiet in Clark’s ear. He presses in just enough that Clark can feel the heavy weight of his cock, half-hard and definitely interested beneath the impeccably proper folds of his tailored pants, then pulls back, looking completely unaffected.
With an appreciative once over and an eyebrow waggle that should not be as attractive as it is, Bruce strolls out, whistling to himself. Clark would love to go after him, to demand that he drop the Brucie act and say all that shit to Clark with a straight face, but the odds are that Bruce doing that wouldn’t prove anything but that Bruce can do it.

Tradition: this is who Bruce has to be, what Bruce Wayne is for, to keep Batman a secret and keep those close to him safe. The cost: this is why Bruce’s voice is never more scathing than when he’s talking about himself. Bruce Wayne is a walking disaster, on every social level. Clark can only be relieved that at least Bruce knows it.

Clark eyes the contents of the silk-lined wooden box in his room with trepidation. He’s bitten straight through seven so far in his attempts, to the point that he’s sure Bruce has a small collection shored away, but this will be a record. This will be conclusive, as Bruce says. It’s the thirtieth time, give or take, and he has the fear that if he can’t succeed tonight, Bruce might just turn into yet another someone else he doesn’t know how to handle, all cutting edges and mocking eyes. It doesn’t matter that he knows the fear is groundless; it twists in the pit of his stomach all the same, whispering that tonight will be the night when B gets tired of playing pretend with Clark, when he decides that he’s bored with Clark.

Clark doesn’t want to meet another of Bruce’s avatars; he wants Bruce. He cleans himself up, takes his time, wonders again why Bruce talks so much about how smooth his skin is, when the fur curls dark and thick on his chest and down to his pelvis. There is no explaining Bruce, and that’s probably as close to the truth as Clark will ever get. As he thinks, he wonders if what’s been asked of him is even possible for a Human. He soon finds that no, it really isn’t. Or at least, it shouldn’t be.

Bruce is already pulling back into the driveway long before the big clock announces the hour.

When he comes into Clark’s bedroom, he smells like he’s dropped upwards of twenty drinks on his shirt and pants. The miasma swirls around him; strong and unpleasant. Clark blinks as the sudden light sears his retinas, before his eyes adjust, hears him come in.

Clark reestablishes his grip on one wrist, keeps his arms stretched up, hands palm-up just above his head on the bed, the way Bruce prefers. Sucks at the bite gag pressing his tongue a little, desperate, and resists the urge to cover himself. The sheet drapes across his hips, hiding nothing. The stiff-ribbed posture collar presses Clark’s head back, forces him to keep form or risk breaking yet another toy; the gag is strapped tightly, still secure where Clark fastened the buckle, the dark charcoal leather of both warm from his skin. Clark’s is bare and buzzing everywhere the leather doesn’t touch him. The bite, roughly five inches of dark spit-slick medical silicone, rests with its bulbous end tucked just into Clark’s throat. The end of it, a large matte sphere, protrudes from his wet mouth, makes it look like Clark has a dark ball resting on his lips.

It’s impossible, from the front, to see what it does to Clark; how it prods and props his jaw open, forces him to be mindful. Clark’s failed this so many times he could cry just from that, he huffs, knows Bruce is watching. Spit runs down from the corners of his mouth, no matter how readily he sucks, making a ruin of the pillow. Bruce stares through him for what feels like forever. Heat, shame, please builds and crests over, wracking Clark, rude and humbling in its force, as tears run down and mix with his saliva. He struggles to breathe evenly, to keep calm and wait for Bruce.

Bruce starts the shower. Clark hears him disrobing, hears the door open again and the sound of clothing hitting the hall floor. The door closes. The shower runs, and the rank smell of overindulgence fades under the wash of humidity and near-scentless soap that floods the room from the open bathroom. Yes, good. The smells help convince Clark that Bruce Wayne is gone,
that Bruce is reassembling himself even now. Clark floats, eyes closed.

His heart jumps as a hand cards into his hair, he makes a low questioning noise deep in his chest and Clark is expecting the yank pull twist, but Bruce just strokes his hair, coiling too-long curls around his fingers idly, runs inspecting fingers over the strap and buckle. Clark opens his eyes and Bruce touches lightly—the corner of Clark’s distended mouth—a look of concentration on his face.

“Good,” he says simply, sober and resolved. “No, stay.” He slides his hands over Clark’s jaw, angles his head, gentle, to one side then the other, so he can see. “Pain?” Clark blinks firmly once, twice. No. No pain. Bruce’s hand slides down, fingers dabbing in the moisture collected on Clark’s lips before tracing warm and heavy down his chest. He leans his head down and licks, long and slow, across where the gag splits Clark’s lips. Clark’s moan rattles in his ribs before it ekes out alongside the gag.

Bruce leans up over him and Clark feels sliding heat and slipping weight and his mouth is free, trembling. Bruce licks his way in, slow and dirty, kisses Clark like nothing Clark’s ever known. Invasive, hard and grabby; kisses like fire and fighting, more tongue than he’s ever given Clark before, and really, Clark was on the fence about excessive tongue but now he’s seeing the error of his ways.

More deliberate provocation, more teeth and guile than any kiss Clark’s ever had—he’ll never be able to kiss again without comparing it to this frantic shoving, right here. This heat, this intensity. It goes straight to Clark’s head and he’s kissing back earnestly, gladly; quiet gasps sifting up out of him as he tastes Bruce again and again. He can’t stop pulling in air, white-knuckled, body wound up.

“Bruce,” he gets out, then Bruce is sucking at his tongue, there’s a clink and the collar pops; falls open and Bruce’s hand is terrifyingly gentle on his throat. Strong fingers press and stroke at the nape of his neck, a thumb pressing right into the junction of muscle connecting to his shoulder. Fire cramps up his spine and greedy, hungry; that’s exactly how Clark feels. “Please.”

The gag nudges Clark’s lips again and he opens. Bruce’s gaze is electric on his mouth. Clark licks at the gag, tries to make it look good, hollows his cheeks and sucks lightly, laps at the fat head as Bruce watches. Then Bruce’s expression settles, and he pushes the gag in. In, until it slides all the way back into Clark’s throat… and he holds it there. Clark blinks, uncomprehending, then blinks again. While he processes the intention, eyes darkening, Bruce just observes him. Bruce’s other hand flexes slightly on Clark’s throat, and he looks… unmoved.

Clark can’t bear it. He squirms, firebrand burning in his chest, and makes an unseemly muffled yelp when he feels a large hot hand wrap around his cock. Bruce stares at the gag as he holds it in place, and starts stroking Clark. It’s perfect, this rhythm, a grip too firm for a human man, slick from Clark’s precome; full rough strokes with just a hint of thumb swirling at the top and a hard bounce at the bottom. Clark knows this rhythm - it’s the one Bruce uses when he’s trying to get Clark off fast, but not so fast that he’ll allow Clark to have any control over it. The hand holding the bulb of the gag rocks firmly, pressing the bite into Clark’s throat methodically, a touch too hard and irregular for Clark to anticipate. Fucking Clark’s throat while he sucks and gulps, doing his best to make room, to stop making the whimpers that get stuck when Bruce blocks his airway.

Clark can’t get away from the thought that this is what Bruce wants to do to him, hold him down with hard hands, on his big cock, and make Clark swallow it until his head spins. Clark whimpers as the sensation takes him, twitching all over. Suckles at the taste of himself and warm medical technology, pretends he’s getting what he craves, held still by the gag in his mouth and the man holding onto it. Bruce drives Clark hard and fast. It’s coming, he’s going to come undone—there
was never any doubt about that—but just as Clark starts to lose it, Bruce fumbles, presses at the base and pulls away at that crucial moment. Leaves Clark bobbing and spurting, thwarted without a hand on him when he needs it most, body spasming while pleasure stays just out of reach.

“One,” B says darkly.

And when Clark is crushed and panting futilely around the gag, spend stripping his chest and Bruce’s fist, Bruce slowly pulls the bite from between teeth that can crunch through titanium.

He silently shows it to Clark, and wild exhilaration streaks through the yearning, because in Bruce’s hand the gag is whole.

~

“Show me.” Bruce is stripping Clark’s cock with a sure hand, hard and fast, muscles bunching in his forearm, while autumn leaves fall outside the window, and Clark whinnies high in his throat. Melts against the wall. Sucks eagerly at the thumb in his mouth, the taste of Bruce, metal and bitter coffee, the only taste he’s allowed. Thinks let me, let me Bruce, let me. Moans and laps and gives until it’s too much, until he can see the glow of his own eyes fading, reflected on Bruce’s face. Clark has a brief wash of panic, of unadulterated terror at the thought that he might have hurt Bruce; that the reason Bruce isn’t moving, the reason Bruce has that wild-eyed look, is because Clark lost control. Then Bruce is pulling his finger free with a wet pop, examining Clark’s expression before his gaze turns speculative. He loosens the knot of his tie briskly. “Good,” Bruce murmurs and shows his teeth, hand dropping to his belt. “Now show me.”

He doesn’t move an inch to make room for Clark, and yes, that’s—that’s good, that makes him feel as if Bruce can see right through him as easily as Clark can see through anything else. Bruce slides his hand down; slides a glistening line of spit down Clark’s chin and squeezes the junction of Clark’s neck and shoulder, leans in. “Yes,” he breathes out reverently. Above him, Bruce exhales hard once, through his nose, crowds him in against the wall, then stills.

“Go on, son… make me a believer.” So dry, so cold.

More.

Bruce glances down once, forelock of silvered hair touching his brow, lays a hand in Clark’s hair and the other at the back of his neck, mutters something under his breath about being crazy, then gives a sharp decisive tug. His hands are confident, but he doesn’t hold Clark down, and even though Clark knows what he likes, Bruce doesn’t try to choke him. He doesn’t steer and he doesn’t drive; he lets Clark find his own way, breathes curt approval and twists his fingers endlessly through dark locks.

“That mouth,” he mutters, a rough curse; a prayer from on high a little while later, and all Clark can feel is yes, now, yes and a writhing twist of possessive pleasure. He takes full advantage of his lack of need for air.

Within the hour, Bruce will be lost to his city and his Mission; he’ll come back to Clark bloodied
and bruised or not at all. He’ll come back with fire in his eyes and fury in his heart and he won’t accept anything but pain because of it, but for now he’ll take Clark’s gentleness and attention. Right now, he’ll allow himself to be touched. This; this belongs to Clark, and no one can take what’s his from him, not ever again.

*I’ll make you believe,* Clark thinks, sliding his hands up Bruce’s hips as he dips his head to taste the tang and salt of Bruce’s balls. The waning sun slides down the wall—there isn’t much time left. Bruce draws it out, forehead pressed against the paneling, fingers stroking Clark’s face and the hair at his nape as Clark slurps and sucks that thick length back down. His sub-vocalizations are music concealed for just Clark’s ears, telling him exactly what pleases Bruce best. All he wants is to hear more.

The world, his focus narrows: Bruce likes being taken to the brink and teased endlessly. *Edged,* Clark thinks, and moans around his mouthful. A bitten-back grunt from aloft, barely a breath, has Clark spilling in his pants; it only makes Bruce harder. He licks long and wet up Bruce’s shaft until his shudders fade, then buries his nose against Bruce’s tensed abdominals. Fading sunlight churns through him, mixing with the quiet praise from overhead until it all runs together into simmering brightness. Taste of midnight and ocean on his tongue and Clark is finally satiated. For once, Bruce is the one who looks disheveled.

After, Clark wanders the dark grounds, avoids Alfred’s suspicious gaze and the bank of gleaming monitors that shows how close Bruce comes to his last breath every night. The sun’s moved inside him, and it scorches everything in its path.

There are no more gags after that, just Bruce.

~

“No,” he replies evenly, kissing Clark hard, pulling away before Clark can spill while they’re attached. He never lets Clark come like that; never in a kiss. “No, you have to earn that,” he pants, pressing sucking kisses to Clark’s bared throat while Clark goes out of his mind, one hand wound in shiny black hair.

He has to earn it. The thought stabs at Clark, sharp and hot and he spills embarrassingly fast.

Bruce doesn’t care; just as he never cares about the mess Clark can’t help leaving each time. He kisses Clark afterward just as intently as he did before Clark came, kisses Clark as if he’s content just with that, as if Bruce isn’t just as hard and ready. Sometimes, B doesn’t want to be touched; he wants this, Clark, falling apart for him over and over.

It’s not an onerous task.

Clark could love B for these small moments without too much provocation; he knows that. He should love Bruce for his loyalty, for his valor and bravery, for his compassion, his sense of justice and fury—Clark knows that, too, and those are all admirable traits that Clark can’t ignore. He’d
never have agreed to allow one part of this to start, even as sick as he’d been, he has to believe that —for himself, if no one else—but the truth is both more complex and much simpler.

The word ‘compatible’ has so many permutations in Kryptonian, according to Nightbird, and the vast majority of those modified meanings have more to do with psychological matching than anything else.

~

“Clark,” Bruce says quietly, two floors away. There isn’t any more; after a brief listen, Clark slides out of his stretch, to his feet and heads in Bruce’s direction. Bruce doesn’t make him wait long, nods to the seat beside him and Clark sinks down. He takes the opportunity to enjoy the savage handsomeness in the profile of the man while he has the right. “Look at this,” Bruce tells him, not asking.

Clark sees a bunker, newly raised in the trees on the far side of the lake. Bruce presses a sequence of keys and a number of camera angles show the inside of a structure—ramps and ballistic gel, shadowed recesses and life-sized, people shaped dummies. A simulation of a busy urban street. Clark’s heart squeezes painfully.

“This area is a speed run. This area, is a soft-run. The third section was designed with your specific attributes and abilities in mind.” Bruce points to each camera. “Everything will be recorded.”

Clark looks closer, interested despite his reluctance to engage. “For me,” he asks gently. “Bruce, I’m grateful, but you don’t need to—”

Bruce glowers at him. “I don’t want your damned gratitude. I want you to be better. What I’m teaching you isn’t doing you enough good. I won’t have the planet suffering for… my distractions.” From the contemptuous way Bruce says the word, it’s clear that he blames himself. “What you need isn’t to be taught how to be a counterfeit Human—you’ve had thirty-plus years of acting human, and what good has it done you?” He rides over Clark’s stammered protests, voice hard. “You get angry and your eyes glow. You get scared and you disrupt my electrical insulation. You get… excited,” he says heavily, “and you act like you’ve killed someone. No, stop speaking.”

Clark’s throat is dry, aching. He subsides, can’t look anywhere but at the screen showing him row upon row of test dummies. He swallows.

“You’re only going to get stronger, do you understand? I’ve done the math - you will only ever get stronger. You need to learn how to use your abilities, not just how to stop yourself. When you complete the speed run without setting the place on fire, you pass. When you complete the soft run without breaking a test dummy, you pass.” He looks at Clark. “When you complete the final section with a minimum of structural damage, no fire, no life-threatening injuries to the dummies, you pass.” His eyes are steady. “When you pass, when I can trust you to trust your own limits, then we’ll… revisit our earlier conversation.”

Clark absorbs that, anticipation sparkling. “Is there a punishment for failure?” is what comes out of his mouth, and he blinks. Bites his lip and tries to pretend he absolutely did not just say that. Bruce doesn’t, won’t pretend. He’s not near concerned enough about things like feelings to pretend. He rakes Clark with a look that makes the hairs stand up on the back of Clark’s neck, and Clark feels as if he’s been a disappointment.
“The punishment for failure,” Bruce enunciates, eyes hard, “is failure. Failure doesn’t come with an expiration. It just sits there until you overcome it.” There doesn’t seem much to say to that lash, and when he looks at Bruce, the comments don’t seem to have anything to do with Clark.

In the silence that follows Clark finds it difficult to meet Bruce’s eyes. “Go,” Bruce says. “Go practice.”

And he does.

---

[1] It’s a disaster.

[2] Outdated,

Haunt

Chapter Notes

pain

- usually localized physical suffering associated with bodily disorder (such as a disease or an injury); also a basic bodily sensation induced by a noxious stimulus, received by naked nerve endings, characterized by physical discomfort (such as pricking, throbbing, or aching), and typically leading to evasive action

Chapter Nine: Haunt

~”Must be homesick for the real—I'm the realest it gets; you probably still adore me with my hands around your neck.”~ -Dua Lipa

“How much may I do, Clark?” he asks. Clark gapes at him and does a double take. It isn’t a question he’d expected to encounter on his way to the sun-deck. Bruce looks as if he’s working his way through a complex equation; clever and intent.

“I—how much?” Clark’s had more intelligent rejoinders,

“That’s right,” Bruce affirms, “How much may I do?”

How much—Oh. Bruce has all but told Clark flat out what he really wants; it’s not much of a stretch for Clark to figure out. He wants the same.

“How much may I do, Clark,” he asks with the same odd formality, patiently for a man who hates to repeat himself, and now Clark sees the gleam in his eyes. “What if, hypothetically speaking, I want to hurt you?”

Clark swallows. Okay, it’s not exactly a new thing—lots of people surprisingly, have enjoyed pushing Clark around a little. Hell, he’s enjoyed being pushed around rather a lot. He’d loved getting on his knees for Lois and he loves this, now, with Bruce. “Whatever you like, yes.” He sucks at his bottom lip, pensive. He’s not planning to ask a question they both already know the answer to, but he wants to hear it plainly. “Is this hypothetical?”

“No.” Bruce’s pulse jumps once, then settles. He has an air of intensity about him, a new type of watchfulness. Clark swallows again and watches Bruce’s pupils dilate, his gaze goes inward. Bruce stares through him before his sight sharpens, and yes—that was definitely a once-over. Bruce is checking him out, not bothering to hide one second of it. At times like this he fills the room.

“All of it, anything,” Clark starts and Bruce cuts right in.
“All of it? Fluids. Bareback. Kryptonite sounding rods and a steel cock ring?” He’s wearing a patently false expression of cordial interest.

Clark’s blinks. “No,” he shudders suddenly. “No, not kryptonite.” How have they gotten from Bruce hypothetically wanting to hurt him to sounding rods in under five minutes?

Bruce’s expression is a sharp, complex construct. “So, not ‘all of it’, and not ‘anything’.” He sips a small glass of water blithely in front of Clark; beads of condensation glisten on its surface. “Now we negotiate,” he suggests. “Specifics. Hard limits, expectations, now please.” The ‘please’ is automatic, not so much a request as it is a mechanism to move Clark through the conversation. It feels like a prod.

Negotiating. Is that what they’re doing?

“No Kryptonite. No… scat or watersports.” Clark clarifies quickly. “Everything else… okay unless I say stop. I—”

‘Fluids, bareback.’

His mind is static. “Do what—do what you like.” Do your worst, he barely keeps from blurring. Bruce’s eyebrows go up. “As long as it’s you.” Clark finishes, feeling clumsy as ever.

Bruce’s brow lowers into a frown first, possibly at the implications of Superman knowing what ‘scat’ is, then his eyes go wary. “Clark,” he protests. “That’s too far. It would be more efficacious for both of us if you told me what you expect.”

This isn’t working. He’ll never get what he wants—what he really wants—by being vague with Bruce.

Clark sits up straighter, removes his glasses and pulls up a small smile. He scrapes his hair back smooth from his face, feels that one unruly curl touch his eyebrow. He knows exactly what Bruce sees. He’s heard it often enough: how his eyes shine when he sees something he wants, how wholesome he looks.

“This is what does it for me, Bruce,” he says evenly, “I uh… I care. About your preferences. I expect you to… surprise me. I want you to do what you’d like.”

Bruce regards him disapprovingly then tilts his head. He’s still, then he stares hard at Clark; there’s something flinty, something different in his eyes. He looks like a man waiting for the punchline, and as Clark stays silent Bruce’s stance eases gradually.

His stare sharpens. “I have my own limits: you’ll tell me no, you will tap out or you will say stop immediately if something happens that you do not want, otherwise you’ll do as I say. When you do this or you speak these words, everything stops. The reverse is also true. Say it.” When, he says, not if. There is no negotiation in his voice.

Clark looks him right in the eye and agrees verbatim. Then, just because he can, he smiles and says it again. “Whatever you like, B. I want that.”

Bruce gives him an opaque look; he speaks without emphasis. “Kansas, you dirty, dirty boy.” He says it so dryly that Clark thinks that he must have misheard. “We’ll talk more later.” Bruce gives him another thoughtful look, then paces away down the hall.
His spine is jelly, his wet face pressed into the sharp crease of Bruce’s collar. It’s scratchy; Clark doesn’t care. He never complains when Bruce won’t undress. Some nights the feeling of imperfection next to Clark’s ever-youthful body is biting. Bruce never says it (neither of them ever do), but he understands. It’s worth it, though, for this.

“What does it feel like, Kansas, when it takes you?” Bruce asks.

Clark tries to think of a way to explain. “When I go under… There’s a quiet place behind my eyes.” He turns his head towards Bruce, inhales the scent and sweat of him. “It’s like that. Pure, real. Everything’s quiet.” Now that he’s said it, it sounds inadequate and just like the sort of thing some yokel would say.

But Bruce tilts his head, inclines it once and stares at the ceiling thoughtfully. “Quiet.” His voice is contemplative.

Clark laughs wistfully. “You have no idea how hard ‘quiet’ is to come by.” It’s the biggest understatement of his life. He makes the little sounds he always does when he’s trying to wipe his tears away without Bruce seeing. He loses his ability to filter in the moments after they’ve lain together. Clark tries not to be embarrassed about it.

Bruce seems always gripped by the need to wipe Clark down at these moments, to clean his hair and face; to wash him down and dry him. To see him stretched back out in the bed that Bruce made for him, long-limbed and shameless, all broad shoulders and trim waist. He’s shown that he likes few things better than to fetch a book and a tray; he’d probably like to feed Clark in bed and read to his heart’s content. Until, of course, it hits whatever hour B has locked in his head as “too intimate” for the night.

“Mm.” That seems to be the end of the discussion; Bruce busies himself as he always does, hands sweeping into and through Clark’s hair until he’s pleasantly heavy against Bruce’s chest. It might be a Kryptonian thing, the way the wisp of coolpleasure-calm-warm soaks down into Clark from his hands; it might be that Clark is feeling what everyone else gets to experience. He’d like to believe the latter.

“I’m going to tie you down now,” Bruce breathes in his study. “Yes, no, stop?”

“Yes,” Clark says. He isn’t afraid; he’s buzzing with anticipation. He isn’t sure exactly what he was expecting, but it certainly isn’t for Bruce to strip him down, and sit in his massively-armed straight-back chair, regarding Clark’s nude form for near twenty long minutes.

It isn’t for Bruce to have Clark kneel before him only to loop a laughably thin filament of thread around his wrists, then tie that filament to the high armrest of his chair with an even thinner looking piece of… silk?

Yes, definitely braided threads of silk, and Bruce looks down at Clark, infinitely satisfied; tugs on his curls and says “Don’t break it.” Bruce sits in his tall chair, legs pressed warm against Clark’s
sides, the tip of one leather shoe pressed lightly into the nude vee of Clark’s hip, keeping Clark’s legs spread wide. Clark leans into the leg of the chair, arms extended upward, head against Bruce’s thigh, Bruce’s foot rocking ever so subtly whenever Clark fidgets.

Then Bruce apparently forgets about Clark, kneeling there waiting for… waiting. Bruce doesn’t shuffle or make any sound other than that low absent hum, the steady double-pulse of his arrhythmic heart and the scratch of pen on good paper. From time to time as he moves paper about, his fingers comb through Clark’s hair.

From the silence since Bruce’s initial question, Clark intuits that he’s expected not to speak. A hazy calm descends; not all at once—it comes on like morning fog, until it fills Clark’s head and the thread holding him feels as durable as nanomesh cable. The only part of him that doesn’t relax are the muscles keeping his arms in place. That foot strokes randomly, teasing him to focus at odd intervals. Keeps him on edge until his panting interrupts the quiet of Bruce’s study.

No; it isn’t what Clark expects at all, to be seemingly discounted, but it excites him. The evidence stands proudly, nudging the sole of Bruce’s immaculate shoe. Bruce hums to himself, turns a page and rocks his foot again. Clark knows that Bruce usually spends three hours at a stretch at research this time of afternoon; that Bruce can lose himself for longer periods without a flicker of discomfort. He tries to relax his shoulders—and the thread pulls taut, warning pings from the fibers singing in his ears. Clark freezes and that foot rocks on him again. His breath hitches.

Sometime later, when Clark is deep in the music of the magma rushing below the granite bedrock, the rush of blood and electricity through Bruce’s capillaries and cells, he’s untied. His arms are lowered and strong hands rub and knead his shoulders and back. He comes back to himself with the memory of Bruce’s voice telling him how good he is, how singular he is.

Not what he’d expected at all.

~

“This is Nightbird,” Alfred explains one morning, waving Clark to sit on the seat closest to Bruce’s customary chair. The underground area is full of the taste of metal and sweat. The air is cooler here, probably best for the banks or servers lining the wall nearest Clark. “You and she should become acquainted.”

He’s talking about the computer.

Bruce’s computer has a name and gender, sings and calls Clark ‘Commander’ no matter how many times he asks it not to. He finds this uncomfortable on several levels, particularly once he realizes the reason that B’s computer speaks at all: somehow Bruce has managed to merge Kryptonian technology with his state-of-the-art WayneTech. Beyond that, Bruce has managed to put the source code of a Monitor-Servant into his system and convinced it to cooperate.

Clark is familiar with the technology, he knows that it isn’t actually the computer. Nightbird manages the flow of information, constantly pursuing correlations and sweeping records. He knows the AI won’t attempt to hurt the humans it (she?) serves, but given his own experience, he’s still more than a bit wary. The entity is helpful and answers all of his questions with an almost troubling speed.
On the very first page of the third book, the words ANUS and BAREBACKING jump out from the print in bold 18-point font. Clark stares at the page, feeling the back of his neck flush, then slowly closes the paperback and returns it to its place under his pillow. Days later he reopens it, and is soon working through it steadily, pausing every twenty minutes or so to process what he’s read.

Clark takes his time, because it’s important and because he finds that the frank, information-rich approach in the literature B’s marked for him is enjoyable. He’s engrossed in a book much less embarrassing and much more plain-spoken than he’d known he hoped for. It relieves him.

A week later, Clark waits until the Tank’s motor fades into the sound of Gotham, then plants both feet flat on his mattress and slides his fingers up the crease of his own bare thigh. Reading has taken him as far as it’s going to, and there is still too much he doesn’t know.

There’s the bottle that B left in the bed-stand, a blend of lube that Clark doesn’t realize is custom until he breaks the seal. He inhales the scent of pine and oak and he’s hardening, eyes closing as Bruce’s scent wafts up into his nostrils from the slippery liquid on his fingers. It drives Clark crazy.

It doesn’t take much thought to push the sheet down and slide his fingers over himself, into the cleft. Bruce. Clark bites his lip, takes a breath, and slides a finger up his own ass. It’s… new. It isn’t exactly sexy, but it’s something, and it seems like a shame to waste a perfectly good opportunity with that smell lingering in the air.

There’s a moment of awkward angling as he works out how to grip himself and he presses again, moves his hips into the slow glide and strokes and—

“Oh…” It’s…

Clark frowns, shifts his elbow a touch to the left and presses again.

And jerks, moaning, hand tightening on his cock, hips shoving forward and up when a bolt shoots through him. Oh, sweet Jesus, yes.

Once is hardly conclusive evidence, so he does it again, then again. It’s more than just a new sensation, it’s mind-blowing. He chases the feeling, hastily slicks his fingers again and presses first one, then two into his hole.

So tight, hot where he’s stretched and panting around his nervous touch. Clark gasps and twitches at the burn, his other hand trailing up and down his length; he’s so hard it hurts, hand slick with the lube and his own juices. He can control the depth much better this way, and his rocking hand, brushing over and over, makes stars bloom behind his eyes. It builds low in his spine, makes the top of his head tingle and his thighs clench, each gasp taking in the scent that reminds him of Bruce. It isn’t just the scent though, it’s the fact that he’s putting it inside himself, putting Bruce inside him. The idea swirls, and he can’t help but notice how now it smells like Bruce and Clark—
The first jet hits his upper abdominals and slides down his clenching stomach, and Clark hisses through his teeth and continues to stroke. Uses Bruce’s sharp tempo and presses his head back into the pillow when his fingers press deeper.

“Mmmph…”

God, he wants to do this with B, it’s all he thinks about—all he can think about right now. He’d had doubts, of course he had, but he wants it now, with an intensity that he’d have found surprising only hours ago.

~

~“The process of repair demands a re-association with the body, a commitment to dive into the body and feel today what we couldn’t feel yesterday because it was too dangerous.”~ —Alexandra Katehakis, Mirror of Intimacy: Daily Reflections on Emotional and Erotic Intelligence

It’s a black-dog cold night, the kind of night that makes the wind whip the Liberty to a scuzzy grey froth and sends most right-minded people running for home. In other words, it’s spring in Gotham. Patrol was quiet—only six muggings, three attempted rapes and one minor armed robbery. No real casualties, not the sort that Bruce worried about in any case. The night is over and the day has barely begun, and Clark is nude, achingly excited, head muzzy and mind lifted.

Clark’s skin hums and tingles in its netting of delicate threads. After forty minutes of sitting still, allowing Bruce to strip him down and truss his arms, he’s reached a quiet place. He’s floating numbly, barely against the surface he’s supposed to be sitting on, feeling slightly dazed. Bruce adjusts his arms and Clark leans into the position, blinks slowly at Bruce’s closed expression. Excitement guidance fierceness flutters in waves from his hands to Clark.

Bruce looks him over again, plucks the string wrapping Clark’s arms together behind his back from thumbs to elbows, runs searching fingers down them, checking the tiny knots. It’s not a proper binding, more of a repeating pattern that Bruce has painstakingly laid down. Each grain-sized point digs into Clark’s skin purposefully. He presses Clark to perch against the edge of his desk, sets his lips to the curve of Clark’s throat and draws them slow, contact zinging, to Clark’s jaw. It’s less a kiss than it is a claim.

“When I asked you about Kryptonite sounding rods and steel cock rings, you said an interesting thing. You said, ‘no Kryptonite.’” He takes a small pouch out of his pocket along with a ridiculously tiny bottle of lubricant and sets them both on the side table. “I’m not actually partial to cock rings; I find them lacking in aesthetic integrity.” His eyes flit over Clark from head to toe then he looks into Clark’s eyes. Bruce is charming when he quietly says, “So having you help make these, even though I could tell you didn’t know what I was making… That was inspiring.” His eyes gleam at Clark’s incomprehension. “I’d like to hurt you now, Clark. Yes, no, stop?”

A jolt sizzles through Clark. He throbs with it. “Alright… Yes, Bruce.” He wants it, wants to feel something more than numb. There’s no guarantee that Bruce can even deliver on his desire.

“I won’t blindfold you tonight.” Bruce drops something, a soft-looking piece of leather on the table that registers as a dull solid plate to Clark’s eyes. Lead-lined. “Is there anything I need to know
before we start?’

Clark swallows. Blindfold? He’s breathing faster; Bruce has surprised him already. He’s so hard it hurts. “There are a lot of things I’ve never done, but I’m willing to give some of them a try.” No, Bruce already knows that. “I’m ready.”

Bruce stares at him until Clark thinks he’s looking through him. Then he reaches down and grips Clark. “When you’re calmer.” He looks expectant; he sounds serious.

He’s utterly serious, and he proves it when he reaches over with his other hand and comes back with the remnants of Clark’s ice-water in a small metal bowl. “It’s best if you’re not erect to begin with. On three, then. One,” he says evenly. Clark startles. What does B plan to do?

“Bruce—”

“Two, Kansas.” Bruce’s hand tugs at him slightly; one dark eyebrow lifts. Clark fights a rising sense of panic. He’s safe; he isn’t supposed to move; Bruce is in charge.

It doesn’t help.

“Wait. Wait, let me—”

Searing cold. Clark’s bottom lip catches between his teeth, he bites down and breathes through the frigid trickle of ice melting against his skin. Bruce’s grip shifts and now ice is sliding up and down, wrapped within a fist. Bruce hums to himself and strokes Clark’s hair soothingly as he shudders and Clark’s cock slowly goes limp. He’d been wet at end, the slippery glide of it obvious even with the thinner scrim of water. Bruce rubs his fingers in it, spreads it all around the head of Clark’s cock, thumb pressing underneath.

He turns to the table again at last, the sound of a zipper heavy in the air. The bottle Clark had though was lube turns out to be antiseptic; Bruce rubs it into his hands briskly while looking over his supplies. He holds up a thin elongated bit of dull metal and moves back to Clark.

It’s Kryptonian steel—Clark would know that greasy sheen anywhere; he remembers the night Bruce asked him to use his heat-vision in the forge; he remembers how Bruce removed his face-shield and walked away without an explanation. Clark’s entire focus is on the small rod in Bruce’s hands.

He isn’t afraid, he’s… nervous. It won’t hurt; it can’t hurt him, can it?

Bruce squeezes the tip of Clark’s cock without ceremony, pressing the tiny hole open. More clear fluid wells up and Bruce’s mouth twitches once, knowingly. Clark says nothing, cheeks heated; Bruce’s pupils blow wide.

When the sound slips inside—not painful exactly but thick enough to burn, smooth enough to glide, heavy and cold enough to shock—Clark’s hips buck up; only the warning glare from Bruce stops him. His eyes are wide open, he’s never had so much sensation concentrated in one place before. It drives a moaning whine out of his lips.

Bruce studies him with hot eyes, pulls the sound up slowly then releases it and watches with Clark as it sinks back into his cock. He pushes it deeper then repeats the sequence again.

Oh god…

Clark sucks air in convulsively. White flashes behind his eyes; his thighs quiver and the echo of
his own voice comes back at him from the corners of the room. Bruce steps in, both hands working
him and takes his mouth, tongue pushing inside, demanding.

That maddening rhythm; pulling until the very end is nudged into the tip of his swollen flesh, the
slow inevitable drop of the sound settling deeper, the press of Bruce rocking it snugly then pulling
it up again. Another vector of sensation—there’s a design of some sort, midway up the sound and
it rubs and devils at Clark until he’s half crazy with it. The feeling is like coals and glacier water; it
zips through his nervous system in jagged percussion.

“I-harder,” he pleads, and now he trembles, the ripple and surge of heat rising, agonizing and
slow. It’s so good, he’s going to… he has to…

“There is no harder,” Bruce says between kisses. “Just this… Nice... And slow…” Another
punishing drag out, another gut-wrenching plumb down inside him and a strand of thread pops
with a vibrating ping. Clark gasps, bites into his lip and the wood under him creaks rhythmically. The
water droplets running down his legs etch into his senses. It’s just out of reach; climax so close. So
so close that Clark can taste it on his tongue with the taste of Bruce, electrifying.

He’ll go insane if Bruce doesn’t…

He’s going to break…

It’s so…

He groans. “You’re so good,” Elated. “It’s so good, Bruce, it hurts… let me - nngh—”

His toes curl hard into the rug under Bruce’s desk. Clark teeters on the edge, nerves firing unfamiliar signals, hair raising all over his body. Bruce’s hand around him is just a little too loose, his strokes just a little too teasing to be comfortable. Clark can’t get there; it goes on and on. Bruce’s grip gets progressively slicker every few pumps; Clark’s system is primed. He’s ready—god, he’s ready, but it isn’t up to him; he’s given that over to Bruce for now.

He doesn’t want it to stop. Needing to come, not being able to come—it all mixes together, a sharp, sweet, raw ache.

The burn spreads, grows deeper, hooks claws into Clark’s stomach and pulls. Clark knows he’s
shaking, shaking so hard that he’s vibrating against Bruce. Sobbing and begging incoherently and
Bruce kisses him with abandon and torments him ruthlessly.

“So sensitive. Normally you would have come for me by now.” Bruce sounds clinical, tone low
and detached. A stroke to his balls, drawn up tight against Clark’s body makes him whimper.
“Yes?” A teasing stroke. “No?” Another, just skimming Clark’s aching skin. “Stop?” Bruce
mouths at his jaw, inhales in his ear, and Clark can barely speak. Bruce’s irises are thin bands of
brown, look almost black in his lust. There isn’t much that turns Clark on more than knowing his
collar’s pleased, than knowing Bruce is pleased—

Yes, he says, or he would, if the consonants didn’t run together, if he weren’t trying desperately to
maintain his control, if he could stop the hitching noise in the room, the sound that must be coming
from him. “Y-yeh-yeh-” Speech is hard and imperfect, so, so difficult.

It doesn’t matter. “How big is the world, Kansas?” Bruce low in his ear, edged words private from
even his own devices. Small, the world is small; it’s down to just the edges of Clark’s vision, just
the outline of Bruce. All he hears is the liquid sound of Bruce’s hands working him, the cadence of
blood and air. The hardwood against the backs of his thighs, the beaded sweat at B’s hairline, the
taste of arousal—it shouldn’t be possible, but Clark hardens even more.

Another four strokes of the sound has Clark gasping and flooding Bruce’s shirt with hot tears. He
doesn’t need his control, not here and not now, so he gives it; he gives it all to B. Bruce flips his
thumb and Clark blinks down to see a small ring being fastened under the head of his cock. Bruce
strokes him again, long and fucking finally firm, from root to tip this time and rubs his thumb up
the underside. He pulls the sound up on its newly leashed ring and releases it. “Go ahead, kid-
come for me.”

That voice, what it does to Clark—

He can’t control it; he tries to warn, tries to turn away, ends up closing his eyes when it washes
over him. Distantly, he hears Bruce grunt as if surprised. Clark groans, feels the heat pulse out of
himself helplessly and sags back against the desk as Bruce murmurs “Good… good, Kansas.
That’s right,” and milks him, not missing a stroke.

The metal slips out of him with a gush of liquid. When he opens his eyes, Bruce’s are heavy-lidded
and satisfied. He’d write it off as a mistake—Bruce looks completely composed—but for three
things: the high spots of color on Bruce’s cheeks, the disheveled mess of his hair and the fact that
Clark’s scent isn’t the only one on the air. Bruce looks nothing like a man who’s just come in his
pants.

The sound is set in the bowl, Bruce licks his fingers absently, wipes his hands and runs them all
over Clark again. Kisses Clark again when he twists a finger in the maze of threads and pulls
sharply. They snap and Bruce runs his hands down over Clark’s arms and hands. It’s not something
he needs to do, they both know that, but it seems to satisfy him to do, and it’s soothing.

“Thank… Thankyou,” Words garble together because his tongue feels thick and stupid, but Bruce
touches his face like he knows, he understands and approves.

“Not necessary.” He touches Clark as if Clark has the right to feel this way, to be this free.
Clark appreciates it as much as all the rest.
Chapter Ten: Consume

Chapter Summary

Not every leap of faith comes with flight.

But some do.

Chapter Notes

pains

(pains) plural: trouble, care, or effort taken to accomplish something

Chapter Ten: Consume

“The process of dissociation is an elegant mechanism built into the human psychological system as a form of escape from (sometimes literally) going crazy.” —Alexandra Katehakis, Mirror of Intimacy: Daily Reflections on Emotional and Erotic Intelligence

It takes time, to set up what Clark’s asked for. A week of height and weight measurements, another week that Bruce spends predominantly buried in alloy research. A third week spent machining and smoothing, all of them wrapped around the realities of daylight business, evening society and patrol at nightfall. An additional week to confer with hardwood specialists and sculptors. Clark hadn’t realized how much work would go into this—he’d become so used to the idea, the faith that Bruce could create anything, that he’d forgotten the cost.

Alfred approaches him finally, says they need to speak ‘man to man’, quietly expresses his belief that Clark is well aware that he’s more than a butler or valet. Clark can’t honestly imagine that anyone is ever stupid enough to look at Bruce and Alfred and think otherwise; there’s a word for it, in his ancestors’ tongue. Heart-son sneaks at the back of Clark’s mind while Alfred just as quietly explains that he’ll be taking a ‘short sabbatical’ and that if Clark hurts his family, he will no longer be dealing with Bruce. Clark understands completely; he has no illusions about what Alfred is willing to do to keep Bruce safe. Clark’s been called on the carpet before, but never in a study the size of Alfred’s, and never in such a dry, military fashion. Alfred stares at him until he stands at his full height. Alfred, he realizes, isn’t set at ease by Clark pretending to be less than he is.

“Mister Kent, I do not believe in second chances, let alone a third. I consider that you have done us
a grave service, by putting an end to what may well have been our latest and final world war. However, do not mistake this for forgiveness for your responsibility in engaging Master Bruce’s involvement in that fiasco to begin with. I have done everything in my power to assure his advance,” Alfred says to him, “and if you cannot or will not do the same, then it would be wise to not be present, when I return.” His eyes are cold slate grey, Clark notices. Watchful, deadly eyes that look at Clark more critically than any eyes ever have. He wonder what he would have been, if he’d been raised by Alfred. Some things are probably better left untouched, he decides.

“I want him safe too, Mr. Pennyworth.” Clark does, but he can’t tell if the man believes him. Alfred nods with a neutral hum, not as if he’s agreeing, but as if he’s acknowledging only, Clark’s words. For a moment, Clark wonders if he’ll have to avoid a punch. He tries his best to look harmless. “Please, call me Clark.”

Alfred snorts in cultured disdain and brushes pointedly past him. “We shall see, Mr. Kent.”

“I’m not a threat,” Clark says, shoulders back. He resists adjusting his glasses, looks Alfred in the eye and a touch of frostiness leaches from the older man.

“If he’s truly convinced you that’s a reality, then you should definitely leave.” There’s the same implacable hardness in his eyes as when he comes up with the smell of Bruce’s blood and medical equipment on him; the same as when Clark knows he’s been stitching Bruce up. “If you are in fact sane, then I bid you goodnight, and try to convince Master Bruce to keep your affairs behind closed doors, Mr. Kent.”

He leaves Clark in the study, feeling as if he’s done a terrible wrong. He says nothing about the conversation or the threats to Bruce—there’s already been enough upheaval on his account and he doesn’t want to be the cause of more trouble.

Several times, Clark thinks to retract his request, but Bruce brushes him off, determined to see the task done. Clark wonders how he can live like this—he only ever seems to sleep an hour at a time, and even Clark enjoys a few hours of sleep every once in awhile.

There is a flurry of unannounced contractors in the house one day; a three-man crew who don’t step one line further than they’ve been told and don’t speak to anyone but Alfred. They come and they go all day, loud mechanical sounds blare from the work area and unlike any other construction job Clark has ever seen, when these men go, they leave everything spotless behind them. Clark wonders how much they’ve been paid and how much they’ll talk about what they’ve done and seen. Just to be on the safe side, he makes sure none of them see him at all. He wonders what Alfred thinks of all of this, and that thought is enough to keep him downstairs for the rest of the day.

After they go, Bruce spends a long time upstairs. Alfred, luggage and hat in hand, silently lets himself out of the house and there is a discreet but solid click that echoes from every door on the outer wall. Clark’s heart starts beating faster. Another moment, and the sound of the Bentley pulls away outside. There’s the faint shush of windows closing, furniture being relocated, the soft scuff of wood on wood and the hushed whisper of quality linen. Clark dithers at the bottom of the stairs.

When Bruce is finished, when he calls Clark up to the second-floor room he’s chosen, Clark is unprepared for the sight of Bruce standing tall beside the massive four-poster monstrosity, higher than his waist. X-ray vision tells him that the frame of the immense bed is made of reinforced titanium and steel—strong enough to take his movements without sacrificing mobility. He’s observed silently as he approaches it; Bruce looks fresh in from a meeting. The mattress and sheets are like nothing Clark’s ever seen before, material soft and cool, the slightest sheen to the easy folds. On the inside, there’s some type of metallic mesh running through the flax fibers and the fill, and he pokes it, testing with a finger. He pokes it again, harder and looks at Bruce, impressed.
These won’t stand up to any serious abuse, of course, but Clark won’t be ripping them unless he intends to.

“Adequate?” Bruce asks, as if he couldn’t care less one way or the other. Clark ducks his head slightly, bites his lips in an unsuccessful attempt to hide his smile. It isn’t that Bruce designed the bed for him; it isn’t that Bruce modeled the wood-grain posters and the light-toned slats obviously with his taste in mind. It isn’t that Bruce somehow had it all done within a month and a half, from concept to product—it’s that even with all of that to worry about, Bruce still found the time to focus on a minute detail like the weave of his sheets. It’s perfect. Clark swallows.

“It’s passable,” he allows, teasing. He’s fooling absolutely no one.

“Passable.” Bruce intones flatly, but he’s closing the door smoothly; rolling his sleeves up slowly, as though to keep Clark from bolting. He pulls his tie off with a few practiced tugs of one hand; drops a thousand dollars worth of silk in a heap on the settee and flicks the switch that activates the privacy glass. Clark is riveted by the gap in Bruce’s collar. He watches Bruce’s throat bob as he speaks. “I think we can do better than that, Kansas,” Bruce promises, darkly.

No wonder, that Bruce gets the drop on so many criminals, if they’re all as busy watching him move as Clark is; he’s pressing Clark back in two long gliding steps.

It comes to light pretty soon that the surface of the bed is not only higher than Clark’s waist, it’s also precisely the right height for Bruce to bend him over comfortably while standing. Perfect.

True to his word, Bruce doesn’t just take what he wants.

He spends time, so much time, licking into Clark. Eating him out while Clark babbles and sighs and moans into the sheets, until he’s shaking the entire reinforced frame of the bed with his tremors and he’s wrecked and desperate for more; until tears are pressing at the backs of Clark’s eyes, Clark’s cock is throbbing and weeping between his thighs and he’s damn near crying for it.

And it’s still, so still; so quiet. Bruce touches and strokes him, breathes down his spine, bites at his ass. Existence is down to the sounds in this room. He can smell himself; musky-sweet, honeysuckle and ozone. He can hear the orderly clipped breathing behind him, he can hear the trip-hammer of his own heartbeat and feel white-hot plasma heavy in his bones. The sheets are rumpled under his cheek, soaked under his hips; he’s gasping for air—heaving for it in great ungainly sobs. The liquid sound of lube being spread, a light mesmeric circling of his opening with slicked fingers; a testing press, quickly withdrawn.

The sound of buttons popped; no zippers here, not now. Not tonight.

Blunt pressure teasing against him there, a bracing hand on his hip, and he’s ready. He’s ready, but Bruce stills again. Clark closes his eyes… and nothing happens.

“Beg for it, if that’s what it takes, because if Bruce has reconsidered he’ll combust —”
A firm hand clasps the back of Clark’s neck and yes; every part of him melts into the mattress underneath. He doesn’t have to worry anymore, Bruce has him.

“Yes, no, stop, Clark.” Impersonal, dispassionate; an agreed upon method of communication. Something hot squirming in Clark’s gut and in his chest, to be treated so mundanely, as if there’s nothing special about him at all. As if this is something Clark gets to have; like he’s anyone. As if Bruce is completely assured that Clark won’t tear him limb from limb for what he’s doing. Or while he’s doing it.

He’s right.

The noise ekes out of Clark—part moan, part whimper, entirely pure gnawing need. “Yes, Bruce.” And his breath is freezing the sheet, Bruce is pushing, pushing in with a muttered curse, and Clark’s indestructible, but he isn’t numb. He’s shuddering, coming again before Bruce has even made it fully inside him; whining low in his throat while snapping electricity traces its way up his spine. God.

“Yes—” he chokes out. It can’t be comfortable, he thinks, his muscles are dense—they fight Bruce, even though Clark wants this with everything in him. He concentrates on how much he wants this. Slowly, Clark’s body yields then, oh, then Bruce slides home with a brilliant twist of his hips that drives his entire length into Clark. He’s full; so full. Stretched out thin as crepe under Bruce, panting and unbalanced by the unfamiliar burn. Clark’s hands scrabble and fist at the sheets, Bruce’s hand tightens slightly and all Clark wants to do is give over.

So he does. Bruce rocks him into a pocket of his own slippery warmth, bearing down.

The slick sounds of lubricant and skin, the thick burn of Bruce’s cock dragging out and driving back in like the sea; waves crashing into Clark again and again. He doesn’t wait for Clark to regroup; he presses in, slides a palm around under Clark’s stomach, starched cuffs scraping at Clark’s skin, fingers set just so, and presses with his hand. Clark’s sixth orgasm blinds him; blindsides him. Liquefies his spine and Clark shudders and lets himself slump, lax. Over his own whimpering, Bruce murmurs,

“That’s it, son. Good, settle in; get wet for me,” and bites the back of his neck. Clark makes a mortifying high-pitched sound as everything outside the locus herenow goes blurry.

He drifts back to consciousness on a rough wave of euphoria, and only then realizes that he’d passed out. The bed doesn’t squeak, but it does make the tiniest creaking sound, loud and flagrant to Clark’s ears. He can’t stop the sounds in; his mouth running on autopilot. It occurs to him through the haze of another shattering peak, that Bruce is deliberately prolonging, slowing down to speed up again; stopping entirely to rock and mouth at Clark’s neck, murmuring obscenities, only to drive in hard and deep, refusing to come. It goes on for what feels like forever, until Clark is boneless, whining and unraveled; all his words ground down to broken cries. The hands running over his skin, the lips on his shoulders and heat at his back, the press and the sway, the coarse graze of woolen twill, the thread of approval in Bruce’s voice; devastating. Too much, and Clark loves every second.

But it must not be good enough for Bruce, because far too soon he pulls out and the world flips; Bruce pins him down on top of that substantial wet spot.

That’s— god, he hadn’t realized—— it wasn’t the armored Batsuit, it was never the suit; Bruce’s strength is his own and Clark’s forgotten just how strong Bruce really is. A bolt of pure lust flares through him when it happens—he’s never known anyone so strong. Bruce is broad and big and looming, and out of the blue Clark feels smaller beneath his bulk, not weak but slight; feels like
Bruce is a buffer; shelter.

He’s never known anyone like Bruce.

B smells heated though—looks angry, and it takes Clark a second to realize that Bruce is anything but; that rage is the only framework Clark has for that fierce expression. Bruce isn’t angry; he’s hungry, and that look just might be Clark’s new favorite thing. He slides back in easily, pushing another torrent of inarticulate nonsense out of Clark, presses Clark’s wrists to the mattress, hikes his hips up onto Bruce’s thighs and bends his legs around Bruce’s waist. That’s when Clark realizes that Bruce hasn’t even bothered to undo his belt—it drives a shocked little cry out of him, that Bruce—his shirt is still tucked in; he’s utterly unconcerned with the come already staining his clothing courtesy of Clark. “Stay,” he commands, one corner of his mouth compressed into a stern curl.

He hooks one of Clark’s legs in the bend of an arm, presses down until Clark’s legs spread, aching cock trapped between two sets of hard muscle, against that ridiculously high thread-count, then Bruce starts to move; silk-blend masked abdominals rubbing Clark’s cock while he grinds in. The change in position causes him rub up against something, hit a place deep in Clark—and it’s not quite a prostate, but it’s damn close enough—and thinking goes out the window. Clark rocks guardedly, feels raw and exposed; hides his burning face against his arm, can’t resist looking again, eyes lidded. Bruce presses him down, presses deep into him, hands tightening over Clark’s spattered skin; still doesn’t look at him—which is fine—and fucks him right into his own humid wet spot. He’s all over Clark, making a mess, making him messy and that is even finer. Fucking Clark like a Boston banker with his waistcoat on and his pants open, like he’s supervising, and Clark hears ‘Don’t I own you?’ —

“Oh good god,” is all Clark can muster in his own defense, cheeks hot, before he has to close his eyes, twitching wildly all over, and the world implodes behind his eyelids again. Bruce doesn’t dress like this casually; this is for Clark. This entire scenario is for Clark… but it makes his blood rush to think that any part of this is what Bruce likes as well.

All Clark has to do is lay there and take what Bruce gives him.

He bites down on the words that want to escape.

It’s perfect.

Bruce isn’t completely silent; he grits out half words and lost phrases; eats at Clark’s mouth and palms his ass while he growls filth about how pretty Clark is, how tight he is, how well he takes Bruce, how sensitive he is. He holds Clark’s wrists in one large hand and pins him, and Clark doesn’t even consider trying to get loose, grateful and loose-limbed with praise. It’s just for show; for Clark, just to help Clark—he knows that, but it feels as real as Clark wishes it was.

He kisses Bruce back as sincerely as he’s ever kissed, grips onto his own hands to keep them occupied, lets Bruce manhandle him, lets himself be taken in hand. Clark’s too busy having the best sex of his life to even worry about what’s coming out of his own mouth; bitten-off whimpers and moans all he can manage beyond a stream of please Bruce, give it to me, yesyesyesyes-please. Bruce can say whatever he damn well likes as long as he doesn’t stop.

He doesn’t. He rides Clark hard and steady until Clark is fighting tears, until his body is one throbbing vibrating nova-hot wire and he stills, deep, and spurts jets of heat into Clark, strokes him steadfastly while staring into the middle distance. Clark spasms, toes curling and comes again, a cramping fiery burst, just from that.
“So good, Kansas,” Bruce sighs into his hair. Clark inhales him, desperately wishing for things he shouldn’t.

It’s everything Clark’s ever wanted, and when it’s over and he’s drenched in Bruce’s sweat and spit and come, all Clark wants is to do it again as soon as possible, as much as possible. He takes back every shitty thing he ever thought about Bruce’s clothing choices.

*Good Lord.*

When Bruce peels himself off of Clark, tucks himself in and heads out with an absent sliding tug to Clark’s hair, he knows he’s in trouble. He knows he’s in the wrong and he knows that none of that matters now, because it’s far too late to protect himself from Bruce.

He finds the tie half-spilled onto the floorboards the next morning, the ghost of cologne and sweat clinging to its weave. Guiltily, he pulls the sheets from the bed before the maid arrives.
Constancy

Chapter Summary

The ability to experience pain is essential for protection from injury, and recognition of the presence of injury.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for the wait. I've been wrestling this chapter for a while now, between betas.

All remaining mistakes are totally mine.

This chapter leads directly into *Position Awareness.*

Chapter Eleven: Constancy

~“They call it obsession, but I prefer the word love.”~ -Anonymous

The sun is high and small in the sky.

He brings Clark fresh peach cobbler and coconut custard; warm cider while the snow falls. Foods he won’t allow himself to eat. Sits at his tall desk reviewing expense reports and sipping his hot tea with lemon while Clark rests, reading on the thick rug at his feet. Slides a hand down, absently caresses and strokes Clark’s nude shoulders and too-long hair until the sweets are all gone and he sets his reports aside and licks the taste of fruit and cream from Clark’s tongue. Tells Clark that he tastes like honey. Tells him how well he’s doing; it’s a good day.

Nothing goes as planned. Clark barely keeps himself from leaping into the sky; Alfred calls him Master Kal, convinces him to watch the monitors, then leaves him there. Alfred lies when he says it’s because old men need sleep—Clark is excellent at telling bold-faced lies from the truth and Alfred, he must know that, but Clark won’t call him on it.

Clark had known what this entailed, but he’s only *seen* it once, and he’d been distracted with his own fight at the time.

He’s never seen *this*: the way Bruce hurls himself off of crumbling rooftops forty stories high, drops ten before arcing through empty space. The way he glides between the streets like a dark ghost.
So graceful.

Clark knows that Bruce isn’t really flying; he can see the lines, but they look whisper-thin. He’s captivated by Bruce’s absolute trust in his own hardware as he drops like a hawk onto his prey. Clark watches him cut a swath through the Gotham night for hours. It’s heart-stoppingly terrible. It’s the most amazing sight. He keeps watch, solitary, as Bruce picks his way stealthily across the muggy stretch of the Warehouse District, injured and furious.

The moon hasn’t finished its circuit and the night has teeth. He brings Clark his despair and violence; stormy ferocity while police sirens split the dark.

A manhunt is underway. The fog off the Liberty tries to eat its own.

He ignores the trickle of blood, a cut from a knife that managed to get not through but between two plates of armor while pinning Clark down on the hard edge of a medical cot. Grabs and yanks at him, rampantly presses Clark’s face down and pulls at his hair until the intensity bursts and he curses as he pours himself out onto Clark’s skin. Jerks him off with savage intent, and grinds out how good Clark is; it’s a bad night.

Afterward, Batman tells Clark not to push his luck, but Bruce still lets Clark peel him out of his armor and bind up the sluggishly bleeding shallow wound.

~

So much of life is troubling now.

Bruce still acts as if he believes he’s above the law, and it troubles Clark that he’s beginning to believe in the necessity of it as well.

It’s more than just that weighing on Clark’s conscience: good people are living in fear, but for the most part, the fear that they live in is the day to day grind of Gotham running them down. Their fear is out in the open, it isn’t some deep secret or conspiracy, like Clark assumed (like everyone assumes). Their fear of not being able to find work or make rent, not being able to feed their kids or themselves, not being able to afford any number of a thousand small conveniences that people move to the city for--things that Clark, everyone Clark knows take for granted--like clean food, roofs that don’t leak, policemen they can trust, reliable hot water and working pipes that take the sewage away from the buildings instead of dump it into the courtyards. These fears are stronger than any they might have of a masked man in the dark.

Clark has always done his best to follow both the letter and the rule of law, but Bruce is not bound by the same constraints. He thinks nothing of tapping into a Senator’s phone line; he’s sanguine as he explains about his datamining for a particular shipment of unspoken “goods” which he claims is meant for him, or for one of his many subsidiaries, or perhaps one of the ‘friends’ Bruce mentions occasionally but who never seem to materialize.

He’s lawless. He acts untouchable, and for all Clark understands about the way this town works, Bruce might just be right about that. He’s a rogue fighting an uphill battle with the same tools that Clark knows are used by career criminals the world over, even if Bruce’s resources give his tech and methods an advantage.
In spite of all of it: all of Bruce’s methods that make Clark uneasy, all of his interrogation techniques that make Clark cringe internally, for all Bruce’s silences and secrets and pretense, Bruce is doing good in this world.

There is no convincing Bruce that his methods are flawed; he won’t hear it from Clark. What troubles Clark is that if Bruce is right, if Gotham itself—not the people, not the crime—is the cancer, then Batman, Bruce, may as well be Gotham’s immune system.

There is no convincing Bruce that his methods are flawed, because Bruce’s methods work. It’s jarring, the impression of disconnect, the feeling that he’s missed something vital. The world barely makes sense any longer; law and order are turned inside out. Contempt turned to respect, hatred turned to…

Something new.

But Gotham is old. It’s roots run deep and it leaves a scab of filth on everything it touches.

Even Clark, apparently.

Immune systems can be compromised. Bruce has been compromised; he was when Clark first met him, and the echoes of it are everywhere, even as Bruce slowly becomes something... someone more, to Clark.

Retroactively, Clark looks at his first privileged visit to Gotham with a healthy amount of self-derision. He’d acted like a gullible fool.

He’d chased a story about a vigilante, straight past door-less hallways and wide-open tenements, unkempt children and stoic-faced elderly folk sleeping out on the sidewalk curb. He’d gone sweeping into South Gotham, into the heart of the slums in his clean new clothes, flashing his press pass and expecting… What? That someone would jump at the chance to rat out the dangerous, violent antagonist that the Gotham PD claimed Bruce to be.

It wasn’t a lie: Bruce was a deliberate antagonist. He is viciously dangerous, brilliant in his violence, but he’s also the only person of means between South Gotham and Uptown who seemed to give a damn what happened to those who couldn’t protect themselves when the chips were down at night.

Clark had been assigned the story and he’d pursued it; it was his job, but there was a difference between making all reasonable effort and running around one of the roughest, most densely populated sub-cities on the eastern seaboard looking like the world’s most unconvincing narc.

To be fair, Clark wasn’t naive—he knew what went on in the darker parts of most cities. He wasn’t innocent, but the sight of so much suffering did something to him.

He’d been morose at the time, granted. Closed off and suspicious. He’d had doubts about his own place and his worth, and it hadn’t taken much to transfer that doubt onto the nearest acceptable target.

What troubles Clark, is that he’s spent the better part of a year in Bruce’s care and home, the better part of six months in the sheets of a man who he’s doubted from the very first.

Bruce had tried to hurt him, kill him. Had wanted to see him bleed, and he’d gotten his wish. Now Clark isn’t sure what Bruce wants, and Bruce, as he finds, isn’t a man to explain what he thinks should be obvious.
Clark's been bleeding all over him ever since, far as he can tell, and B’s been gruff with him, true. (It’s impossible to ignore that Bruce has also accepted Clark’s mistrust as if it’s what he expects and deserves.)

What troubles Clark the most though, is how difficult it is to stop doubting Bruce. They’ll never be a team if they can’t trust each other.

*But team isn’t the word that springs to mind; no, ‘team’ isn’t what Clark wants them to be at all.*

~

The amount of information Bruce can pull together on people is...formidable. The ethics of it, just as intimidating.

“So do you steal something from everyone you meet?”

Bruce pauses, a look of deep thought crossing his face. “Define ‘steal’.” Clark frowns at him in bemusement.

“Really?”

Really?

“Well, stealing would be taking anything that doesn't presently belong to me, but that doesn’t necessarily exclude things that will or should belong to me. What if I take things that I’m about to own, or are in the process of acquiring the ownership of? Logistically, of course. It’s complex.”

It isn't complex.

Clark frowns at him. “I don’t think it is. Taking something that doesn’t belong to you is stealing. These people don't know you. They don't know anything about you. What you’re saying, things you will own or might own or should own… I don’t think that's a legal definition.”

“They'll get over it. I fail to see how you can expect me to provide a solid proof when your own definition and clause are flawed, Clark.”

Clark twists his head to look at Bruce. “*Really?*”

“Sounds like you're calling me a liar.” The cadence is even, but the raised eyebrows are a danger sign.

Clark folds his arms across his chest and stares back, uncowed. "I'm calling you on your bullshit. Not calling you a liar."

The eyebrows come down, then further before the expression clears away into neutrality. "Mm." The corner of Bruce’s mouth twitches upward slightly. "I borrowed the conduit from STAR Labs. What Oliver doesn’t know won’t hurt him, in this instance. You have a problem with my intel, you take it up with Google. Don’t tell me you’ve been telling the truth to the world for thirty years.”

Clark waits for the barb, but none seems forthcoming. *Is that it?* Commentary on how Clark kept
himself and his family from getting kidnapped and sliced open for experiments?

"It’s hardly the same."

*It’s different, what Clark lies about and what Bruce lies about—isn’t it?*

“Barry,” Bruce says, waving Clark's words away. “He’s fast. This guy, Victor Stone, he has massive non-terrestrial bio-mechanical alterations to his entire body. Comes in handy for anything digital or complex machine-related. I don't know what else just yet. This one.” Bruce pauses and taps the image of the pale-eyed man thoughtfully.

“Arthur Curry.” Clark reads the name.

*It isn’t the same.*

“Moves water around a lot. Talks to fish. You’ll like him. He’s very into pitchforks. And privacy.”

*Is it?*

Clark raises his eyebrows and grins at the profile of the man beside him, but Bruce pays him no mind outwardly, already moving on to the next sheet.

*He’s confounding.*

Clark thinks very carefully about reaching across the desk, touching Bruce to feel, to *know.*

He keeps his hands to himself.

The grin stays. So does the tiny quirk at the corner of Bruce's lips.

Bruce lives in a glass house.

He lives in a glass house and he threw the biggest stone he could find to bring Clark’s life tumbling down. The hypocrite.

But he isn’t the only one, because hadn’t Clark raced across the Bay, full to the brim with righteousness and blame for masked vigilantism, determined to stop the Bat’s dastardly plans without a badge to his name?

It shouldn’t be funny. It isn’t funny—not really, but the truth hurts so much that it all curdles into a hard twisted amusement in the pit of Clark’s ribs. It’s reassuring actually—Clark is just as Human as the next man; Bruce and he are of a kind.

Some differences are foundation-deep and some are only cosmetic. It’s difficult to identify which differences fit which category, though.

Bruce has always held power, in his relationships and in the world. Expecting him to relinquish it at this stage of his life is just as foolish as expecting that he’ll sell off all his stock on a whim. Clark has his pride as well, even if the parts of himself he takes pride in aren’t the same as those qualities Bruce extols.
It becomes a dance: Clark advances and Bruce evades, Clark reaches and Bruce deflects. Literally and figuratively, it becomes clear that Bruce may concede to Clark lying beside him, but he won’t allow Clark to hold him. It takes weeks to realize - he’s pushing too hard; Bruce won’t yield.

But Clark doesn’t want Bruce to yield. He wants equilibrium, he wants to understand, and be understood in turn. Easier imagined than achieved.

Still, there is a rhythm and sway to their exchanges that Clark isn’t entirely sure whether Bruce is guiding. The man holds his cards too close to his chest.

There is a tell. A minor, inconsequential thing: at times, when B’s hands are on him, Clark feels… a spark. Like tiny wings beating under his skin, like a thousand pinhead prickles up his spine.

The spark is vague, but never wrong--Bruce’s words often don’t match his body language. His body language rarely matches his emotions. The discrepancies between what Clark knows to look for and what he can see are stimulating, the lapses akin to seeing the edge of a cunningly formed yet flimsy mask.

It’s useless to try to divine exactly how B’s feeling from just those clues, but there is a certain warmth that spreads concurrent with a particular gleam of intent in Bruce’s eyes. It’s the only thing worth paying attention to when they come together, Clark thinks.

The look, the warmth-- they perhaps aren’t the truth, but they seem as close to a truth as he’ll get.

B lives to be contentious; he responds to pressure by trying to make Clark mad enough to spit. He learns to avoid the pitfalls, he learns when to press and when to hold, when to simmer and allow Bruce to measure out his responses. It isn’t easy, not for someone with a reaction time like Clark.

Impulsive, Bruce calls him. Clark isn’t to blame for his boost-charged reflexes, but Bruce’s words and reactions make him reconsider whether he's truly done all he can to think before he acts.

A dark night, a lone streetlamp, a crushed semi. A corn field, an oil refinery, a petroleum silo in flames.

And then there’s all the rest.

Clark can’t change the past. He can affect his future, and he’s beginning to believe that he can, that he has an effect on Bruce, as well.

In order to put Bruce at ease, Clark lets him lead, both their social dance and their more intimate one.
When he’d said that he wanted to see the City, he hadn’t exactly meant this.

“Icarus, report.” The communicator bud in his ear is far too quiet for anyone else to hear, unless they’re scanning frequencies.

He’d promised no flying; offered as part disguise and part training session. Camouflage is new; stealth is a skill he’s never needed. It’d be cheating, he supposes, to let himself glide instead of what he’s doing now: small careful steps, avoiding all the detritus and accumulated trash from years of god-knows-what atop these buildings. He doesn’t feel stealthy; he feels like exactly what he is: a Kansas boy stuck out like a sore thumb against the city night, creeping up on hapless gargoyles and stone angels on some poor soul’s roof.

Maybe it’s just to keep him out of B’s way, but this is good, too.
Clark looks across the expanse of rooftop behind him, then angles his body along the same line as the edge he’s peering over. Camouflage is new; stealth is a skill he’s never needed. He’s trying not to feel amused by B’s insistence on creeping and keeping low. He shouldn’t be amused; B’s right to tell him to be careful. Clark can’t dodge what he doesn’t see coming, and the people around him could get hurt in ways that he won’t; the thought’s sobering.

He eyes the line of shadows and shifts slightly to the left; *there*. Better.

“**Icarus.**”

B’s codename for Clark feels like an encouragement and a warning wrapped up together in warm stone. There’s no Bruce, no room for Bruce Wayne in the harsh efficiency of Batman’s tone.

“I’m here,” Clark breathes. The crunch of gravel underfoot is bracing, the sensation of it prickling Clark’s senses.

*Any opportunity to learn new skills is a gift.*

It’s true, he believes it but believing doesn’t make him better at it. Clark frowns down at a piece of glass and carefully maneuvers around it, trying to stay out of sight-line from the street below.

The dark has its own texture in Gotham, the grit and smog in the air tastes of car oil, rotten wood and crumbling lime— the mortar here that smells so different from Metropolis—prevalent among strong and squalid, less savory odors.

There’s so much information bombarding him. The mask (wings yes, but not a bat, thank god) covering half his face is an unfamiliar novelty, but one he’s coming to appreciate. Clark touches the alien smoothness of it again, as light on his cheekbones as the stylized feathers he outlines with his fingertips.

Clark isn’t even sure why he needs a codename or a mask—fat lot of good any search for his face would turn up, but B was insistent, and without the accessories, it was obvious that Clark wouldn’t be tagging along.

*Helping. He’s helping, not ‘tagging along’.*

It’s been, well… Not *nice* , but fun, so far. Clark’s knees don’t get tired, his back doesn’t get sore; it’s exciting to perch and watch B work below. He’s eager to join him, but not so eager as to jump in before B’s ready for him to.

This is nothing like what Superman does.

*Icarus.*

He feels how it’s warmed, adhered to his skin, how it moves with him. His heart lurches and he stills. There is a Shadow in the shadows.

B is standing there—*right there*—staring at him through the white lenses of his cowl. “Stop touching it.” Lower, under his breath, B mutters, “Rookies.”

Clark grins and feels the flex as the mask stretches.
Below, there’s a cry of pain and alarm.

"Down. Now." Bruce drops from the worn edge of the roof like a stone. Clark focuses— _herenow_ —and follows.

It should be easy.

Clark sees the twitch, the flicker of fine musculature responding to electrical signals. He zeroes in on the movement; he has to stop it. Time expands, fluid and mutable. He hears the whisper of tendons stretching and he moves. A deflection, _gentle._

*The crack of propulsion from the barrel.*

A flat-palmed push—_gentle—to the out-stretched arm attached to the gun. A single light one-fingered tap to the tiny bones of the wrist and the gun falls. Clark catches it, and breathes. Time wrenches back to rights and the mugger screams and bends over his broken wrist. Excitement thrums in Clark’s veins.

He’d done it. He’d saved someone, someone he meant to. A _stranger._ Clark looks from the gun in his hands to the would-be victim. Then he blinks.

Batman lowers his armored cape from in front of the terrified woman’s face. Clark can feel the glare, but he can’t see what B is looking at, not with the lenses and the lead-lined cowl. He blinks again, his mind replays the sequence of events and he sees it: the bullet that shoots out and bounces off of Clark’s arm, right towards the woman that B is shielding.

The mugger takes one look at B and faints on the spot.

Bruce steps around the woman who’s trying to fit the contents of her purse back inside it. He advances on Clark, silent and foreboding. “Give me your hand,” he rasps.

“B—”

“Give me. Your _hand._”

Clark can see the woman’s tiny scared glances in his direction. He can only imagine what she sees. He puts his hand out, and B drops a tiny piece of metal into his palm. “Take this souvenir and secure the next block.”

Batman doesn’t speak a word to Clark as he gets the shaken woman on her way and ties up the perp. It isn’t until the echo of her heels on brick and stone fade and she’s gone that his voice scalds the air between them.

“The innocent come first. Learn the lesson. _Focus._ You got off easy.”

Clark bows his head and doesn’t argue. He was; he did. _It’s fair._ It doesn’t feel as if it is, but it _is_ fair. He’d made a mistake; all he can do is try not to make it again. “I’m sorry,” he says as sincerely as he can. “It won’t happen again.”

B grunts. “Don’t be sorry, Icarus. Be _better._” Clark looks up at the rustle of cloth and wind, but he’s already moving. Flying in his own way, exactly the way that Clark’s sworn not to.

The mask suddenly seems much heavier.
Clark firms his resolve. There are different ways to be useful. There are different ways to help; there is no hierarchy to compassion. He’ll get better.

If he really wants to do this, help people, he has to.

For a month, Clark is Icarus. He goes where he’s needed, he saves lives quietly and humbly. He doesn’t soar in to save the day; he slips out and saves the night.

But later, Bruce takes away the gleaming winged mask, he takes back the skin-hugging uniform and the thick customized jacket with its multitude of pockets and tools. He takes back his permission and his patrol.

“This isn’t you. This is all wrong. You don’t deserve it.” B says.

Clark understands that, intellectually. It’s true: he doesn’t belong, not here, not anywhere. It is wrong, after everything that he’s done, for him to think that he can just put on a mask and be someone else, that he has the right to be someone else.

He just doesn’t understand how Bruce could say it to his face.

~

He gives a coarse shout. His vision blurs hazy. Bruce presses close, sweeps hair back from Clark’s brow while he shudders, strokes through it in a guarded fashion before palming the back of his neck and pressing down between the wide breadth of his shoulder-blades. Clark folds easily, face wet against the soft sheets.

Slick fingers pressing, massaging in and again.

A spark...

Bruce eases in cautiously; he always does, like it’s the first time, like he isn’t quite sure yet if he’s allowed. His breath is strained when he kisses behind Clark’s ear and covers him.

He doesn’t want it to end, not any of it.

“Don’t stop. Please don’t stop,” bursts out, all in a rush. Then, despite Clark’s best intentions, “Bruce… please,” he demands.

Bruce takes him hard, moving at a frantic pace. If Clark didn’t know better, he’d think Bruce was hungry for more than just touch—that Bruce wanted him, not just an outlet for his frustrations. But, “Kansas,” not his name, is what comes out of Bruce’s mouth when he goes, backbone stiff as he jerks behind Clark, hands tight and avaricious.

Clark buries his face in the coverlet. Hates hoping for the impossible, so he files his undoubtedly Smallville fantasies under ‘implausible’; regardless of what Bruce calls him, country doesn’t mean naive and it decidedly doesn’t mean stupid. It never occurs to Clark that Kansas might be a
Another offering made to order for him. The alligator clip is made from hardened high-grade steel; the sharp points of it would cripple any other man, and though it can’t bite into Clark, he can feel the razor edge of the teeth trying to compress his skin. The sensation: not pain as he understands it, but targeted, on skin that usually takes the brunt of an impact evenly.

It strips him down.

It’s a hellish sort of pleasant, a spreading pinprick of pressure heat sharp that makes his breaths noisy, makes his body forget that he’s safe, makes him harder. And there is one to go, still in Bruce’s hand.

“Please don’t,” Clark stammers. “Please please don’t—”

Assessing eyes flick over his twitching form, dark as oak. “Yes, no, stop, Kansas.” Bruce looks on, calm. Cool. Nothing like what Clark’s tiny eternity of urgency and dishabille feels. Moisture-no, Clark has to honest, it isn’t moisture—it’s tears. Tears boil up and over, cascading down. He wants it, to be reduced to a place where he can exist outside his mind.

“I don’t know.” It’s too close to ‘stop’. Bruce is shaking his head, taking a step back, then another. Moving away from Clark’s need, to set the remaining clip aside and no, it isn’t enough yet, he can’t, he can’t—

“Yes. No. Stop.” And Bruce still seems cool, though now there’s an eager light to his eyes that Clark knows well by this point. This isn’t just for Clark—it’s for him. It’s for him, but Clark is the one who can make this end; the one with the power. Clark grins, wild and open.

A flare, a surge of white-knuckled want; Bruce wants just this; wants him to wear these. “Yes!” It echoes off the plaster, but he can’t find it in him to be embarrassed anymore just now. “Come on then...alright. Okay, yes Bruce.” He’ll do—not anything, but many things, to keep that light alive.

This is how it works: Clark gets hard at a whiff from Bruce, at the drop of a hat. Bruce on the other hand, is more than capable of being aroused and not hard. It takes him time and attentiveness at his age, and the whole while he seems to enjoy nothing more than making Clark leak like a faucet. It works like this; Bruce takes longer to get there, but once he has, he can keep going for hours; keep Clark boiling for hours without a hitch. Clark knows what he gets out of their new system of touch and response; how it drives him, how the more he has, the more he craves. What he doesn’t know, what Bruce won’t say, is what Bruce gets out of it, beyond a hot willing body.

It’s been a hellish night.

It’s late for them, five a.m., just post-patrol. Batman’s spent too long debriefing Commissioner
Gordon’s replacement; the sun barely misses touching the battle-scarred bulk of the Car. Bruce comes up from HQ with his pale skin scrubbed pink, hair still damp and steaming from the shower below. A butterfly bandage slashes under one cheekbone and his bottom lip is split; the mask doesn’t always protect B’s face.

When Clark comes to him, needing to see that Bruce is undamaged with his own eyes, with his own hands, B shies away, arms crossed, body carefully angled as an obstacle.

“I’m fine.”

“They flipped the Car--”

“Comes with the job, and I’m fine, Clark.” Bruce relents finally, turns his center towards Clark, and it’s not an invitation but he’s no longer closed-off.

“Are you?” Clark drifts closer, kisses B, full and slow, as deeply as he’s been envisioning. He wouldn’t normally push, but he’s just had to watch an hour of Bruce drag-racing through the slums after an East Ender gang with a penchant for selling street-kids and an arsenal of anti-aircraft weapons.

He’d just had to watch the Car get flipped, not once, but twice. He’d had to watch Bruce in the Car, sliding under a collapsing pier-mount and only the knowledge of the Car’s specialized armor and his own word had kept Clark to his seat. He hates watching.

He hates watching.

He kisses Bruce again, because he’s alive and here, because Clark wants to, and Bruce sighs against him. “Comes with the job.” He coaxes Bruce away from his screens and into Clark’s bed. Bruce’s hand covers his, when Clark rucks up the hem of his undershirt to slip a hand beneath. “Hey. We’ll both end up disappointed.” Clark doesn’t lift the shirt. He looks through it, then up at Bruce’s resigned expression.

Bruce’s torso is covered in marks; he’s one big bruise from his collarbones down. In the light from the recessed panels in the walls, it’s easy to see the fatigue in his eyes. Clark leaves his hand where it is, snugged up tight against the bottom jut of B’s ribs, palm flat and warm on the most vulnerable skin Bruce has, waits to be told no, and when nothing else comes, Clark folds down and lays his head on B’s shoulder.

He closes his eyes, draws himself in and up beside the other man and waits in absolute silence—for the inevitable push, for Bruce to get up, for him to walk away.

A hand at the back of his head.

Fingers sifting through his hair.

Bruce’s breathing evening out into deep measured breaths.

Clark opens his eyes in the stillness of Bruce’s slumber, watches starlight streak across the day-lit sky and listens to the heavy tread of Bruce’s heart. Eventually, the lull of rhythm and the lure of true rest is too strong; he slips into sleep between one beat and the next. When he wakes, it’s no surprise to find he’s alone. The afternoon sun stretches out across his empty bed.
However, there is a warm tray beside it. The sheets are cool, but there's a binder laid on them with a list of warehouses across the eastern seaboard to check out.

*Sincerest apologies,* reads the fold of paper beside the tray.

He isn’t sure what to make of it--the careful wording nor the polished vagueness. On the surface, it seems to be an apology for a lack of sex, which is disturbing in of itself. On the other hand, knowing Bruce, it's just as likely an apology for breaking some rule by sleeping in Clark's bed. Or for going through Clark’s things while he was asleep. Or for buying out another company, or bank.

*Or for something completely different, which he’ll refuse to discuss.*

Clark blows out air, regards the note and shakes his head, then goes to clean up for the day.

~

The leaves have grown, but the wind is as biting post-Spring as it is in the Autumn. The muggy heat makes up for it, out in the city.

Fingers twining into Clark’s, as he’s rocked and plumbed. Bruce presses in deep, deeper than seems possible, bruises his hipbones full-flush against Clark, then in an enviably limber twist, he heaves backwards. He uses his own leverage and momentum to roll Clark with him until Bruce is lying supine. Clark’s moan slides up a register as he’s impaled firmly, all of his weight bringing him down hard into the cradle of Bruce’s hips. He blinks wildly, mouth open in shock for a second. A corner of Bruce’s mouth curls upward, smug. He untangles their fingers, runs his tantalizingly up Clark’s hands, wraps long elegant fingers around both of Clark’s wrists and pins them lightly to the bed. Clark’s gasping, shaking with surprise and need and *how in the world*—?

“Breathe, Clark.” Rough gravel. Bruce, voice soft and calm while his eyes blaze ferally. Hair matted and damp from exertion. Pale skin gleaming and streaked with sweat. Fingers stroking the inside of Clark’s wrists, like wires connected right to the base of his skull, lighting him up. “Yes, no, stop.”

Clark’s never, of course he’s never, but he’s *dreamed* about this, he’s spent long hours fantasizing about just this. He’s straddling Bruce, settled astride Bruce. It’s even more intimate than Bruce taking him face to face, more intimate than Bruce’s sweat at his back or mouth at his. It's *trust*—Bruce’s trust—and it’s been so long that that alone is enough to make Clark’s vision blur.

“Clark.” Bruce isn’t moving, pressure easing gradually from Clark’s wrists.

“No!” And Bruce is drawing his hands away, mouth a flat line, and *no*—that’s not what he *wants.*

“Don’t! Don’t stop! I… yes.”

But Bruce’s hand is on his face, Bruce’s thumb is at his lips, lightly stroking. “Clarify for me. *Focus.* Yes, you want this or yes, you want to please me?” Clark will never get tired of the rough drawl that takes over Bruce when he’s being well fucked.

“Yes.” It’s the only answer he can give. Clark shakes his head, tongue useless. Bruce’s gaze flits over his face opaquey. He licks his kiss-reddened lips then in another quick move, Clark’s hands are pinned tightly again. Secure.
“Go on then, son. Ride. Slowly.”

Clark shifts his hips, tentatively at first, unsure. After a bit, he finds a rhythm and starts to rock in earnest, bunched thigh muscles straining and flexing. It’s the first time Clark has assumed the position, but it’s far from his first rodeo. He moves, rolls his hips and remembers learning his paces.

Walk.

Short huffed breaths from Bruce, the sound he makes when he isn't quite willing to admit that he's affected, that he's about to start panting, and Clark so wants to hear him.

Trot.

Faster now, fluid and if he could brace, if he could use his hands he could go even faster--

Clark lets his head drop back, lets everything trip right out of his head and off his tongue and knows he’s saying ludicrous nonsense. He does his best to show Bruce, to make love, to make him see. Rides until the man below him is gritting his teeth grimly, hard grunts and unintelligible growls jostling out of him, then more, just to hear Bruce be unable to hide his pleasure. Rides until Bruce grabs his hips and snaps up, not at all out of control, unerringly driving into Clark’s sweet spot with every rock and grind of his body.

There’s nothing tender about it.

More.

The rising swell of heat and want, the steady urging of Bruce’s hands—one on his hip, fingers digging in, tingling; the other tight on the muscle at Clark’s waist. The flighty caress of his gaze, never where Clark's is.

He can't catch him, he knows B's looking, he must be looking and Clark can't catch him.

Canter.

His breath is coming in gasps and pants now; he’s too excited, too worked up. Canter, and he lets his head fall back, locks his knees to Bruce’s hips. Not wild, not careless, focused.

Lets his muscles go loose and has to put a hand above his head to push the ceiling away. Bounces once with Bruce when they hit the mattress again and B looks determined.

Fixated on the corner over Clark's shoulder.

No.

The sound of his own harsh gasps. The energetic rut of their bodies moving together, the sharp sweet pressure building.

“Fuh—” He can barely see straight.

“That’s right,” Bruce agrees, hips rolling until Clark lets out an ungainly squawk and freezes, shuddering uncontrollably. He has to stay still.

"Up." One alarming gymnastic roll later, Clark can only groan softly, laid out on his stomach with
his head pillowed on his arms, Bruce pressed to him from calves to shoulders, corkscrewing into
him with languid, methodical thrusts as if he has all the time in the world.

“That’s it...there you are. Come on, Kansas,” B murmurs. “Good.” He stalls, nuzzling and licking
fire into the nape of Clark’s neck the entire time, grinding out his usual mixture of refined praise
and obscene appreciation as if there’s a secret number of orgasms that he has to inflict on Clark in
order to be satisfied.

Clark, in the moments when he can think, supposes that must be true; Bruce has so many secrets, it
wouldn’t surprise him at all.

The bed clatters, the musk thick as nectar in his mouth, the press and the pleasure yank Clark
under. Bruce mouthing at the tendon just under his jaw, Bruce’s breaths gusting in Clark’s ear. The
way he bears down on Clark, arms hard and firm, one palm splayed out, caressing Clark’s chest
and slipping lower.

His weight.

His scents.

Bruce’s grip, where a strong thumb relentlessly presses and kneads the tip of Clark’s cock, strong
fingers wrapped tight, jacking him, toying with his foreskin and teasing his glans until he’s arching
and pressing back into every deep slide. Bruce hisses behind him, against his hair, head pressed to
Clark’s. His hand tightens.

Clark has to stay still.

He loses himself for a while.

The sheets are a lost cause; drenched. The world is an indistinct hum of babble beneath the pulsing
thump of Bruce’s heart. Bliss. Bruce idly toys with the slick leavings; traces shimmers across the
cut brawn of Clark’s back while he takes his customary ten-minute bask before retiring to his own
space.

Clark finds himself panting afterward, actually panting, completely undone. Ten minutes turns into
forty so easily. Bruce stares at the blur of the distant city through the privacy glass for the last
fifteen, but he makes no move to leave. Neither of them says a word, and when B finally does roll
out of the bed and to his feet, it’s with the familiar hair-tug and an unfamiliar, intent brush of the
lips that could very much be considered a goodnight kiss. Neither of them say a word about that,
either.

Clark lays there, feeling the sun’s approach and watches the sky lighten; it might be blue today, an
escape from the endless gray of the NorthEastern vista.

He wishes Bruce would stay, he wishes things were different. He wishes this was real.

~

One day when the leaves are turning again, fighting the late frost-and it always seemed to be either
snowing, raining or muggy with smog in Gotham—Clark waits after Bruce’s return, but Bruce doesn’t come to him. Part of Clark has already prepared for this day, this moment, and he isn’t as surprised or put-out as he could be, but it burns.

*The shine must have worn off.*

He doesn’t sleep at all that morning, doesn’t eat the breakfast Alfred leaves conscientiously covered in his usual place at the dining table. He spends a good deal of the day wandering the property, wondering what he did this time, that he can’t even maintain something as banal as whatever the thing is between he and Bruce. Wondering how utterly boring he has to be, how gauche, if Bruce will just push him aside without a word, without even an announcement that he’s retiring the ‘benefits’ part of ‘friends-with-benefits’ (if they even are friends).

*Are* they even friends? Have they ever been, or has it all been obsession and exotica? He overanalyzes every word and deed and comes up with nothing but shadows.

Clark goes to the library, to the sitting room, he walks the entire house. *Such a big, empty house,* he thinks sadly, without knowing if he feels sad for himself or for Bruce. He can hear Bruce, reading in his study; the one place Clark has avoided, because as much as Bruce claims that ‘desperate’ is a good look on Clark, right now he’s not feeling it. Instead, he goes back out to the sun-deck and watches the smooth water and the lightning bugs dancing over it. He hovers, closes his eyes in worn-in jeans and a t-shirt, lets the air support him as it always has.

*Bruce.*

He doesn’t want this to end. He isn’t ready for the world, not yet. Clark has just about made up his mind to lay down right out here and rest where the sun can find him, when he hears a muffled grunt. There’s a soft curse from inside, a strange shuffling sort of step. It sounds almost like Bruce… if Bruce were limping. Clark is inside and on the stairs before Bruce can regroup, supporting his weight with one arm.

“Dammit, Clark.” Bruce doesn’t look pleased to see him at all. “What are you doing lurking down here?” He’s obviously trying to hide an injury, forcing himself to stand up tall. Clark touches the shirt over his side gently, feels the wrap of compression bandages, hand jerking back at B’s hiss. He scans quickly, sees the blood pooling and the fracture and oh.

*Oh.* That changed things.

“Lurking out in the open, on the deck, in the moonlight you mean?” He’s too relieved to pay any attention to Bruce’s animosity.

*“Lurking.”* Bruce insists, then, “I can do it. Myself.”

Clark nods agreeably, while taking most of Bruce’s weight off his injured ribs. “I know. You’re Batman. Bedroom?”

Bruce growls, but his destination is clear. He’d been waiting for Clark to be distracted, had been *counting* on it, Clark is sure. “B, I can… can I, just…” Clark makes the universal gesture for flying, one hand gliding flat through the air.

“Don’t you dare.” Bruce growls. “Don’t you *dare.*” Clark sighs and eyes the remaining eighteen steps.

“Alright, but this won’t be pretty.”
“Clark.” Bruce states, faultlessly smooth, one hard-gripping hand tightly belying his words, “I don’t need your help. If you’re going to insist on giving it, be considerate enough to shut. Up.” His face goes completely blank as the last words, as if all the emotion has run out of him.

He didn’t push Clark away though. *He’s in pain.*

“Cranky.” Clark decides audibly, and purposefully takes three steps at a time, *because he can,* supporting Bruce’s body. Bruce makes an outraged noise that would fit better in an episode of Wild America than his elegant modernist home and wrenches himself away from Clark as soon as they crest the top stair.

“I won’t forget this,” he says stiffly, and Clark smells blood. It isn’t clear if Bruce is thanking him or threatening him.

He can feel the goofy smile spreading anyway. “Any time, B. Is there… can I do something else for you?” *Anything,* he thinks.

“No. Go to bed, Clark.” Bruce begins to close his bedroom door, then he stops.

He looks at Clark begrudgingly, then lifts a hand and strokes his thumb lightly over Clark’s cheekbone. It feels like a kiss. “Thank you. Now go to bed.”

It takes six weeks for the cracked ribs Bruce has to heal; it takes four days before Bruce is ready to patrol again and one week before Alfred agrees that he’s *cleared* to patrol. It only takes three days for Bruce to seek Clark out, push him into the hush of the library with demanding kisses and order him to come for Bruce.

He wants it, he wants it all; every moment, from here to eternity—every shining glimmer of dust, every inhale, every sleepless night, every heartbeat. He’s aloft before he can over think it, sprinting, *soaring* over white capped waves and wide open air.

*Faster. Higher.*

His heart is so full he can’t contain the joy, the pure lightness of being, and he laughs into the clouds as he streams upward into the black.

The world is beautiful.

~

“Dammit, please,” Clark demands, tosses his head.

He can’t take it: the slow glide, the control Bruce has, the fire licking at his nerves.

*Too slow. Too much. Too good.*

He shakes his head again, tears pressing their way out between his lashes, feels Bruce’s mouth on his, coaxing, possessing. The sob breaks out of his chest, ragged and anguishsed, and he feels Bruce *pulse* in response.
“Please,” he moans into Bruce’s mouth. The leisurely, slick glide continues, flashes a frenzied thrill through him. Bruce strokes him while he thrusts, easy and indolent, hand caught between them. Clark’s too tight, too tender and it feels as if Bruce has been at him for hours.

It isn’t pain; it’s the intensity of his own nerves that’s agonizing—it’s fear at his own self-indulgence. Fear that he’ll fail, that he’ll cave the wrong way. Bruce has to know, Bruce has to see how dangerous this is. He shakes, he babbles, he fractures under the onslaught of Bruce’s parody of tenderness. “Dammit, hurt me,” he gasps, desperate and disbelieving.

“I am,” Bruce murmurs, shameless, right before he rocks in again, just as smooth, just as deep and gently, and the truth is like a spear. Clark flushes, and it’s not in remorse, no—it’s craving. White-hot arcs up his spine, Clark’s mouth goes slack with pleasure and it doesn’t matter how many times he’s already spilled, how sore and overstimulated his cock is or how crazy he thinks he’ll go if he does one more time—he’s going to do it again, right now.

Right now.

“Come on, K—Kansas - let me hear it.” Bruce’s voice cracks, his mouth pulls away just as Clark does as he’s told. Clark doesn’t look—he already knows Bruce won’t be looking back.

Clark shudders and shoots milky-white and wet, damn near wails with the effort of holding himself still; comes with Bruce inside him but feeling totally alone. Bruce doesn’t tip Clark’s head back; his sigh is loud, thrusts sharper and more determined now. He knows by now, once he gets Clark going, he can do what he likes—Clark won’t stop coming until Bruce doesn’t have anything left for him. He smears Clark’s spend around between them; gets it everywhere, driving Clark like he drives his cars, forces him through another wracking shudder.

Bruce is going to kill him. He’s survived what was supposed to be his doomsday, Luthor and Zod both, but it’s Bruce’s cock that will be the death of him.

Clark wants to touch, wants to feel. Knows that if he does the results are unpredictable. Twists his fingers together, as tightly as he can into brightly colored red and blue silk filaments without breaking them.

Bruce mutters a string of numbers against his jaw and he hear milliliters, realizes that Bruce is cataloging, measuring how much and how many, and it makes him white-out again, spurting and red-faced. The room reeks of sex, of semen, musk and sweat. He’s filthy; they both are, the scent and wet sounds of it, the feel of it, dripping down his sides, dribbling over Bruce’s fingers where his hands eclipse Clark’s waist, even smearing around the base of Bruce’s cock where he rocks in and out of Clark. The taste of it, when Bruce dips his head to suck out at a glistening track oozing down Clark’s chest and feeds it to him with his tongue. Mingled together so Clark can’t tell where Bruce’s sweat ends and his essence begins and yes.

"Yes..." It's his voice, his words, but Clark is above it all.

“Mm… dirty boy,” Bruce murmurs into his ear, pistoning faster.

Against his neck, Clark feels that domineering tilt to Bruce’s mouth that’s one step away from a sneer. Bruce licks out and tastes his skin. His breath catches, his lower abdominals cramp and he's unnerved because he can’t do it again, he can’t, he can’t—

Dimly Clark hears his own voice, strained, panicking. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t-I can’t—”

“One more, easy. You can.” Bruce bites him, scrapes his ravenous teeth on Clark’s skin and his
hair is moving like in a wind, but there is no wind, it’s Clark. Clark is the wind, and Bruce is the sun. “Follow me, Kansas.” This time, when it hits him, hot and low, balls throbbing tortuously, cock vainly jumping to pump the few meager drops he has left, everything goes grey.

Devotion knocks Clark sideways; he feels moved. His breath arrests, he tries to regain mental ground, but all he can feel and taste and hear is Bruce, and Clark feels touched and raw.

There is no fall; it simply suddenly and fiercely is, with all the heated surety that he feels every other emotion.

To his consternation, that raw feeling doesn’t only last for the moment; it persists and seems impossible to shake off. Months pass and he’s constantly wanting, always ready for Bruce.

He isn’t alone, he knows.

Bruce carries on as if all of this is natural and sensible, as if by ignoring the elephant in the room he can negate its existence entirely. They argue and they disagree on tactics and target handling, but none of the arguments stop them from crashing together again for long; none of the relatively minor sparks make Clark or Bruce stop.

The other spark, the spark, only gets brighter.

Then Clark realizes—he never wants to stop. He wants this, this life with Bruce. He wants to wake up with Bruce and eat with B, he wants to train and learn and help people with B. He’s…

He feels…

Clark feels hope. He feels whole.

He’ll find the right moment to say the words; he will.

[1] Superman in Action Comics

Issue 775

Written by Joe Kelly

Superman: I'm not an idiot, Black. I know there are bad men in power and the world is not an equitable place—but you can't throw morality in the garbage just because life's tough.

Works inspired by this Exteroception by manicmea

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!