**Accretion**

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**Accretion**

by Holdt

**Summary**

Bruce's PoV/Remix

If speaking of the truth is too radical an abuse, then be charitable with your adversary, and at least tell half the truth.

**Notes**

Best read after Exteroception. Readers are warned that some parts will not make sense if read in chronological instead of publish order. Some concepts will not be re-introduced, simply taken as fact.

Series Time-Tag: Bruce's PoV beginning directly post BvS:DoJ

I'd hoped to begin posting this part of the series before Justice League came out but ah well. As usual all mistakes are my own, comments are welcome and if my Bruce is not your Bruce, apologies and I hope you find what you're looking for somewhere on the archive. :)
Fanmix: https://open.spotify.com/user/holdtvids/playlist/7nfRgA490p45IYBhq635xu

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.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One: Hindsight’s a Wonderful Thing

~“Where's a good place to begin;
Let's start with the truth cause it gets you in the end.”~ -Bastille

The funeral is a quiet affair, the dry scent of flowers and corn husks overwhelming. The plain pine casket is an insult to Clark Kent, Bruce thinks, but then again, so is the gleaming black and silver coffin that the U.S. government provided for Superman. His hands itch with the need to do, the pall overhead is palpable but he holds himself stiff and still. He watches Martha Kent’s stolid strength, Lois Lane’s sorrowful vigil. His eyes are dry, and the taste of failure is heavy in the back of his throat.

He deserves to feel this, it’s what he’s due for his part in all this. He should have known better. He should have done better, been better. He’s here to pay his respects, to offer what assistance he can, and his comfort is irrelevant. He tells Diana Prince that men are still good, and realizes as he says it that for the first time in years he actually believes it. He has no right to be here, at the service of a man whom he’s tried multiple times to kill, whom he has killed through his actions, but he does have an obligation, and so he touches a hand to the soil when they’ve all gone. It’s warmer than the surrounding ground, most likely due to the friction of movement. He doesn’t permit himself the luxury of imagination.

He heads back towards the small local airport, then at the crossroad he turns right instead of left. It isn’t a whim or a hunch; Martha Kent had been dry-eyed and upright as well, surrounded by loved ones and completely alone. Bruce has been there—he knows. He knows this isn’t his right, either; perhaps she’ll run him out or strike him, but he deserves that too. This is the price for his loss of control. He deserves every ounce of pain that is to come, so that it keeps him from ever making such a feckless, unwise choice again. He looks up at the light shining from the windows of the lower level of the Kent family farm, then leaves the car without allowing himself another moment of procrastination. It’s time to do what’s right. He looks for a doorbell, then in a moment of self-reproach, steps back from the door.

He shouldn’t be here.

When he’s halfway down the porch steps, the door opens. “I know you’re out there, so whatever it is you want, it had better be good.” She doesn’t sound afraid or timid, all alone out here in a quiet field at night, but then she wouldn’t. Not a woman who could raise the man that Bruce met, the man who he had the honor of watching give a sacrifice he hadn’t expected. A man he’d lowered down in his arms, who hadn’t flinched once from doing what was needed. Bruce moves obliquely, hands clasped, makes himself less of a target, and sees the shotgun in her hands before he sees her resigned expression. His world narrows to the yawning dark eye of the bore aimed at him. He watches her eyes instead.
Twelve-gauge, his mind whispers, double-barreled. Break-away, side-by-side configuration. Rifled for increased bullet stability and accuracy. If she fires, he’ll be able to avoid most of the first blast (possibly), but he’s not sanguine about his chances without armor.

“Well, go on,” she says. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“Mrs. Kent,” Bruce is careful not to move. “I’m.” He breathes out through his nose, silently. Repeats the words. “A friend of your son’s.”

To her credit, Martha Kent doesn’t startle. Instead she calmly engages the safety on the shotgun and sets it out of sight beside the door, then opens it wider. “I’d wondered if you’d come. You’re Bruce Wayne, aren’t you?” She looks expectant, but not overly impressed with him, and Bruce really can’t blame her.

“Yes ma’am, I suppose I am.” He still doesn’t move, lets her look her fill of him and make her judgments, from his perfectly styled Uptown haircut to the points of his gleaming understated Testoni Oxfords.

“Oh,” she continues after a moment of intense staring. “I suppose you’d best come in then, young man. It’s not cape weather.” With that, she leaves the door open and drifts further into the house. Bruce takes a careful glance around the perimeter, presses a quick sequence of buttons on his watch to alert the pilot that this is a planned-for layover, then steps into the smell of baking and sorrow.

He lingers by the closed door, unwilling to intrude further. The smell reminds him of lazy holiday mornings as a child, sitting propped on a stool in the kitchen; in Alfred’s space, as food miraculously emerged from his hands and the oven. The space around Bruce is like few he’s known, neither lavish nor strictly utilitarian. The small rifle rack in the corner by the door has, of all things, flying geese engraved into it. Bright, soft fabrics and cleanly hewn light wood-grain on every surface. Rustic and intimate. It isn’t quaint; the handmade quilt on the back of the sofa has obviously been lovingly repaired many times.

The large rectangular block coffee table in the… is it a front room? A living room?

The large rectangular block coffee table in the first room is aged but visibly durable and will likely last for decades longer. The fruit in the wooden bowl on the table is real, the notches in the wood wall where someone has measured a child’s incredible growth are real. Everything has an aura of use and potential about it, nothing looks staged or counterfeit. Bruce shifts, light on the balls of his feet, then stills again. His eyes are caught by a framed photograph on the mantel, where a grinning man and woman dressed in denim and plaid stand, windblown, with a familiar dark-haired young man. Clark’s hair is longer in the frame, curled at ends; he’s dressed like something out of Country Living magazine and the smile on his face is radiant. Bruce imprints it into his memory.

She calls out from deeper in the house and Bruce cautiously follows the sound of her voice. “I hope you like lemon chess and custard pie, Mr. Wayne - they’re Clark’s favorites.” She stops for a moment, puts the back of a flour-covered hand to her forehead, bent over. Bruce steps carefully into the airy kitchen, averts his eyes from the woman curled into the shape of pain. He’d promised to look out for Clark Kent’s mother. Pies cover the surface of the wide wooden slab table in the center of the room. “They were his favorites,” Mrs. Kent says firmly, closing her oven. Bruce eyes the pastries and lowers his eyes to the floor. He’s a terrible person.

“Mrs. Kent. Bruce, please,” he murmurs, because the idea that she would give him any sort of title under her roof is just plain wrong on so many levels that it hurts. She owes him nothing, and he can’t take any more from her. He’s here to give help. She shoots him a short probing look and
shakes her head, straightening at his voice. She jerks a chin in an unmistakable gesture to the seat opposite her preparations while she washes her hands. Bruce slides onto it, hunched in his heavy winter coat, fully aware of how ridiculous he looks.

“Used to getting your way, aren’t you? No, no—you don’t need to answer that. Mr. Wayne, you may be a friend of Clark’s, but I don’t call strangers by name.” Bruce is silent, unsure of how to reply. She sighs again, a weary wisp of a breath, wipes her palms roughly on the apron across her lap. “The church will be more than happy to take these off of my hands come Sunday, I think. Somebody ought to enjoy them. Alright, Mr. Wayne - I suppose we’ll have to get acquainted, then.”

“Have you known Clark long?” is how she begins.

“Not long,” he says, “-but I know he was a good man.”

“He was,” she agrees. “With everything you get up to in Gotham, are you?” Bruce freezes. “A good man,” she clarifies.

He steels himself and meets her eyes. “No,” he replies truthfully. “But I’m trying to be better.” Martha Kent (née Clark, his mind whispers) takes this in for a moment, then her expression changes and Bruce is at a loss. He knows that emotion, though it’s rarely aimed at him: sympathy.

“Well,” she hums, blowing her hair out of her eyes as she pats his arm companionably. “Nobody’s perfect.”

Bruce stares at her hand on his arm, feeling a curious numbness. “I’m sorry,” he blurts as evenly as he can. “That I didn’t bring your boy home.”

“Oh, Bruce,” she sighs sadly, and slides a pie in front of him. “Have some pie and tell me about Gotham.” He knows he shouldn’t. He does it anyway. He leaves with four pies riding in the passenger seat, and can’t bring himself to give them away.

Kansas is a wide and kind heart, real forgiveness. Pragmatic solutions and pure intentions.

He returns to Kansas often, when the weight of the city and his own demons drag him down. Mrs. Kent is an admirable woman. She shares first, stories he shouldn’t hear, then pictures he should never have seen. Bruce should politely decline; he doesn’t. Bruce is a terrible person, because instead of doing the correct thing, instead of leaving a childless widow to her grief and some possible closure, he becomes friends with her.

Slices of hours he scavenges from his duties in order to make it on time (because Martha Kent should never wait for Bruce again) to breakfasts where Bruce does his best to be well-mannered and still stick to his diet. Solid rancher dinners followed by family movies that Bruce should never have watched. Richly decadent desserts that he always has to work three times as hard to burn off, once he’s gone back to glass and gargoyles. He makes stilted-feeling jokes that he should not share; gains memories that he doesn’t deserve. He learns the impossible: that Superman was raised here, in the heartland; that his mother is a woman from the same social circles as Bruce’s mother; that she’s trustworthy.

He assures reasonable diligence on improvements to the farm’s infrastructure, that he signs off on without asking, so that he can accept her furious censure in silence until she sighs and lets him in the door. Eats pies that he can never tell Alfred that he’s eaten; that he can’t share are just as good as those made in his own kitchen, but in a completely different way. Repairs the combine and the snowplow for the truck and does what he thinks is minor maintenance before the frost comes in,
only to be reprimanded for not asking permission again. Bruce is stubborn too, though—she can’t send back work that’s already been done, and when she sees that he’s biting his tongue, in the face of her tirade, she laughs at him, and suddenly the small yard and house don’t feel as if they’re pressing in on him anymore.

She hands him an itemized list of necessary repairs the very next week, smiles and pats his arm fondly as though she *knows* what a kindness she’s doing him. Doesn’t offend his abilities or his means by doing him the disservice of thanking him for doing what needs to be done. Segues into a rousing conversation about the rising instances of Meta-related incidents in major cities and how the current judicial precedents being set are overly punitive.

She’s a straight shooter—it’s been a long time since he’s spoken to anyone who didn’t already know him, who wasn’t afraid of him on some level. They discuss it over lunch, of course—she seems to think it’s a sin to have him here without setting a plate in front of him. Bruce finds that their core values aren’t as different as he’d surmised. Mrs. Kent is an *exceptionally* admirable woman.

Correction: she’s an admirable woman and an ethically complex one, as well. It’s fortifying; even though he doesn’t deserve her trust and the weight of it staggers him, he’s not discourteous enough to reject it. Bruce attends personally to the contractors with minimal interference.

He thinks about well-meaning neighbors who drop in without announcement, about potential enemies with the ability to strike now, while Clark is no longer able to protect his family, and government surveillance—Bruce has seen the DOD footage of Clark’s brief incarceration for the crime of being too powerful to be trustworthy. It’s not much of a leap to surmise who’s been harassing Martha Kent enough for her to open her door packing heat. It nags at him, a hook in his mind when he considers his own actions in that light.

He doesn’t *hide* what he’s doing to keep it from Mrs. Kent; he simply never mentions the bullet-proof barn and home doors, the biometrics on the storage units and handles of every door or the various detectors installed in the new fencing: the motion-sensors, the CO2 and water sensors in the sweetwater well, the networked cameras (both night-vision and infrared) all connected to Bruce’s personal surveillance interface.

After due consideration, he replaces her shotgun with a auto-locking shortgun taser of his own design; with detaching leads and at 50 million volts (and 4.7 milliamps), it should be enough to handle any unexpected visitors. He’s proud of his workmanship—it’s a model that requires her voice, distinctive finger, palm-print and hand geometry before the safety can be disengaged. With further consideration, he uses the voice sample from the recorder in his watch—from when he was the one at the end of her barrel—to be sure the gun won’t fire if there’s a hint that she is being forced to use it under duress.

The old Kent shotgun he unloads, hiding his distaste, and stores in the lock-box in the barn. He’s certain that Mrs. Kent is aware of these things, but she never says a word to Bruce regarding overstepping his bounds when it comes to security. He wonders if she’ll let him get away with installing bullet-proof glass in the kitchen windows; one can never be too safe, after all.

She invites him back when the repairs are done and gives him a glass of something refreshingly icy and disgustingly sweet. He forces himself to swallow the first mouthful and the taste lingers, cloying. It’s revolting.

“Interesting,” is what he settles on. Bruce uses a great deal of concentration to repress his shudder,
keeps his expression clear and holds the rest in hand until Mrs. Kent gently takes it from him and replaces it with a mug of strong unsweetened black tea. He sips it with a speed that’s just the right side of decent while she pats his arm comfortably.

“No sweet-tea, then?” He can hear the smile.

“No,” Bruce agrees, eyes on the repaired ceiling. The work is above par; he’ll make sure to employ the same company again in the future. Mrs. Kent is tolerant of most of his eccentricities; those that she isn’t tolerant of, she draws a hard line at and informs him exactly when he steps over. Satisfying, reliable. Bruce shouldn’t let his guard down; he does.

In time, it becomes a another of his rituals: fund modernism and compassionate assistance; keep WayneTech plugging ahead at the forefront of the possible; research the Others; fight and train and bleed for his city, then in the spaces when he feels insubstantial: visit Kansas.

Jonathan Kent, Bruce learns, was an uncomplicated man. Uncomplicated, but not a simple man. He’d enjoyed days in the field and pastures, harvest-time cider, his insular family, draft beer and NASCAR. He was a farmer’s son by birth, a farmer by trade, a homesteader by tradition and he’d married a city woman from the East Coast. Martha’s family had all but disowned her for marrying Jonathan Kent; they hadn’t understood what she’d seen in him. Bruce saw it; he understood: Jonathan Kent had been a good neighbor, a man of conviction, a stalwart protector and a loving husband. He’d also been an extremely pragmatic and calculating man; excellent at advanced maths and chemistry, which is where he’d met young Martha Kent (then Martha Clark), as she’d studied for her letters in Law. Jonathan hadn’t hidden his concerns about the intentions of the people who’d sent Clark to them; he hadn’t quibbled for a moment about whether government agency involvement was appropriate (hell no).

Once Jonathan had made the decision that Martha was right and Clark was theirs, their boy, he’d known how people would react to their son. He’d known what to do: lie, lie, lie some more, then lie with a smile.

Birth records were easy to acquire; babies were born in the dead of winter in Kansas every year with no doctors or L&D ward present. It would have been an easy sell: keep the baby at home and put a birth notice in the Smallville Ledger; file a request for a Delayed Certificate of Birth and pay off a notary for the signed records—with the Kent’s townie connections, facilely done. Keep the child home-schooled until he knew how to act normal enough. Done. Socialize him, but keep him away from other children’s cruelties as much as possible. Done (as much as possible). Make sure that Clark feared exposure more than he feared any authority figure, monster in the dark or scary movie. Obviously, done.

Over time, from the bits and pieces that Martha lets slip, Bruce concludes that Jonathan had never done any of it for the ease of life of his son or for their happiness—he’d always believed, she said, that there was more at stake, that Clark’s coming meant that the world was to be tested at some point soon. That Clark would be needed; that he would have to make a choice, and he could not be allowed to think only of himself or only of his family.

That, Bruce thinks sardonically, had worked out spectacularly well.
One is naturally tempted to say that if a pain is not being felt by its owner then it does not exist.

Once, Bruce would have said the same.

~

It’s simpler than it should be, to slip into the Kryptonian ship in the aftermath of the disaster and acquire the main data core. The AI aboard doesn’t want to be erased any more than a human would have in its place. It shows Bruce how to disable the onboard flight systems and remove the data core with little loyalty to its former masters; Bruce files it away for careful consideration at a future time. There’s no time to manually sift through the massive library revealed, so he takes everything: every data crystal and memory cube he can find. He makes sure to copy and remove traces of all language and medical data as well, then grudgingly brings the AI’s storage with him, unsure what he’ll do with the gritty-feeling data stick but unwilling to leave it behind for less capable hands. He’ll have to figure out a way to contain it.

He returns to his city with no one the wiser.

Chapter End Notes


"One is naturally tempted to say that if a pain is not being felt by its owner then it does not exist. "


Diamond Absolutes

Chapter Summary

Attention can act like a set of blinders, making it possible for stimuli to pass, undetected, right in front of our eyes.

Chapter Two: Diamond Absolutes

~”The world is spinning like a weathervane. Fragile and composed, I am breaking down again.”~ - Fleurie

Bruce gets the drop on the assailant, literally. Whips downward through the air with an acrobatic flip, weighted cape adding heft; braces his legs and drives the thug through six inches of plaster and faulty Restoration-grade insulation. Hopefully breaks both the crook’s legs doing so, not that Bruce is overly concerned—just means the asshole will stay off the streets for a bit longer, is all. The side of the building crumbles inward, spilling the whip-thin man into a filthy tenement. Bruce can tell from the way the perp’s eyes widen that he’s feeling now, not thinking. Good. One nerve strike to the arm swinging the knife, one more to the shoulder to immobilize. Jerk’s too mean to quit; he lifts the other arm. Stupid. When he catches the oily gleam of metal, Bruce’s hand snaps out, batarang flying through the air to slice through the man’s metacarpals and pins that errant hand right to the fucking floorboards. The goon snarls. He’s lucky Bruce didn’t put it through his eye, but Bruce is trying, god help him, to be a better man.

Bruce uncoils from his crouch, lets the moonlight and the shadows do most of his work for him and he glares through white lenses. He ignores the flood of my hand, my fuckin’ hand that echoes off the bricks.

“How?” the guy spits at him, thrashing as he cuts his free hand trying to pull razor-edged metal out of the floor, nowhere near getting free.

“Because,” he grinds out, “I’m Batman, and you’re just some punk.” He’s spent too much time knocking heads open; rusty at the verbal intimidation game and painfully conscious of it. Probability is high that the batarang and the puncture wound will still be enough to convince the nuisance to talk about The Bat—Bruce needs all the fear he can garner these days. He confiscates the pig-sticker and the gun. Zipties the perp. Checks vitals on the vics—a couple of contusions, one sprained wrist; a bruised neck with a shallow, clotted nick. They’re more scared of the Bat than the crook who would have sliced them open. Fucking kids, stupid in that out-of-town way. They got off easy.

Fucking stupid kids, getting themselves hurt. Getting themselves killed, in his city. Bruce doesn’t let himself rage at them or tear them down for all the reasons that he should; he doesn’t let himself react at all, other than to tell the crying young trio to go home and stay there, of nights. “Next time, I won’t be here,” he says. He doesn’t even pretend that the warning will be heeded. Of course they
run from him instead of saying thank you—the Bat isn’t meant to be thanked. He doesn’t need it.

When they’re gone he eyes the howling man pinned to the floor with distaste and briefly considers knocking him out, just to make things easier. It’s near to the end of patrol though, he’s already busted his knuckles enough and he’ll be rotating out of this sector after tonight; he’s feeling magnanimous. He gags the man then drags him into the street, out of the lee of falling debris from the hole in the sagging wall and ceiling. Cleans and binds the perp’s wound with a pressure bandage in blessed silence. The left tibia is definitely broken; there’s a sixty percent chance that the meniscus on the right knee is torn. Numerous small abrasions from splintered wood and plaster chunks he laid on. Concussion, and he might have a few rough nights at Gotham General. **He’s lucky**, Bruce tells himself; it’s a small price to pay for trying to stab three kids over two soggy tens on Bruce’s watch. He takes the idiot’s cell out of his pocket and calls his location in to GCPD-911 with bruised fingers, then stuffs the phone back in the man’s pocket.

“Stick around,” he rasps. Drama is always effective. The crook’s entire body screams fear and pain. **Good.**

“How did you keep the secret for so long”, he asked, “with a...powered child?”

*Martha laughed. “We didn’t. Bruce, Clark’s gifts didn’t... I guess you’d say, stabilize, until he was almost out of his teens.” She’d smiled, weary eyes on him. “They weren’t reliable. Oh he was always stronger, faster...but he was just a boy, with mostly normal teenage boy problems.” She’d laughed and shaken her head fondly. “Always in trouble of one sort or another.”*

*Bruce lets her words resonate, responds automatically to her conversational prompts, mind buzzing as his entire concept of the Superman is revised.*

The grapple shoots out, sinks into firm brick and Bruce is in motion, flying up then gliding in a controlled fall through the hemmed-in streets, only to float up again on the crest of another grip-line. His all is the rhythm of shoot and release, the thrill that zings through him even now, when he wants it least. The satisfaction of pushing back the tide for another twelve hours—it isn’t enough, there could never be **enough**, but it will hold for now.

He heads towards his armored bike, mounts it with a neat handspring—activating the bio-lock—and takes the bridge at near 100 mph, weaving fluidly in and out of traffic. Gotham is a streak of color and lights in the gap between night and day. The burn of adrenaline and anger compresses into tightly banked coals by the time he’s compiled his reports for the night.

He shouldn’t, but he flips through archived footage of the Battle of Metropolis anyway, then his own footage (the cam retrieved from his destroyed Tumbler) and he sees Clark, face filled with determination, not fury.

He forces his body to hold still under icy water, staring at the marble wall of the shower until his aches, **all of them**, fade.

~
It’s Mrs. Kent, who gives him permission to look through these things. They aren’t his, not precisely. Not ever. They will always be Clark’s. Scrapbooks and pages, pieces and parts of a whole that Bruce is seeking the contours of.

Reading Clark’s journals becomes a secret pleasure, the mind behind the words candid even in the planned-for-print. Clark’s ideals were wide and more inclusive than the basics of his upbringing would suggest, a dizzying mash-up of coastal liberal and bread basket conservatism, his language heartfelt and concise. His literary work is terrible; Clark would have never been a style writer, but he was a hell of an investigative journalist, even as a youth. Years of notes and research, essays, interviews, articles and writing samples; years of multiple drafts and discarded arguments fall under Bruce’s scrutinizing gaze. When he feels partiality well up for that blinding smile, those deeply sincere words and sapphire eyes, growing in him with jagged thorns, it’s not a surprise. He doesn’t root it out—he welcomes it, because it’s safe. He’s free to feel however he pleases; Clark is gone. It’s as safe as anything can ever be.

Bruce isn’t a believer; he doesn’t ascribe to the trust in a higher form of justice.

Three times a week Bruce walks across the stretch of cautiously unkempt land and enters his family mausoleum. Three hours a week, Bruce stands there. Sometimes he kneels. Often, he talks—to himself or to the ghosts in his mind; it’s hard to say which is more true. He goes because it’s where he’ll end up himself eventually—he wants to be comfortable there. He goes because it’s where the rest of his family is; it’s where he’ll be soon. Though Alfred doesn’t know it, if he should die before Bruce then it’s also where the first and last Pennyworth to grace Wayne Manor will be laid to rest (unless Alfred has made other arrangements; he has a son of his own. Bruce tries to forget that fact). Bruce goes and he lights incense to honor his parents; he talks to his mother and his father; he tells them everything. He asks for guidance and for strength.

Bruce isn’t a believer, he doesn’t see purpose in probability, but he believes in something: he believes in being the instrument of justice, even if the eyes of justice are blind.

Bruce isn’t a believer, and yet Bruce can’t help but believe.

“Lovely morning. Clotted cream, Master Bruce?” Alfred was endlessly patient with him, god only knew how. Bruce had been deep into his Kansas-based Kryptonian research for hours past when a more reasonable man would have been abed, he knows. He can’t escape the feeling that he’s missed something, that he’s missing something vital in all this research. He’s looking for Superman, but what he finds is a young man who feels adrift in a huge world, a farmer’s son who sincerely wants to help, even in his darkest moments. Bruce finds a man who feels alone; overlooked. Who has few to no friends and who can’t understand why he has to be so different from everyone else. Clark’s journals don’t express self-pity; instead his writings are filled with musings on how he could help more, if he could understand more. Bruce hears ‘If I wanted it, you’d be dead already,’ and wonders if Clark intended the threat that he’d thought it to be at the time; if perhaps something hadn’t gotten lost in translation.

It wasn’t and it had. It doesn’t matter anymore.
He’s been at it all night again. It’s going to be hell on his back and his schedule. Since Alfred is the one who keeps track of Bruce Wayne’s schedule while Bruce keeps tabs on Batman’s, Bruce is counting himself lucky to get off with the mild tone that nonetheless makes him feel all of ten again, and just run through the parlour in muddy boots. Alfred clears his throat ever so slightly.

Bruce only waves a hand at the side table. Sips his coffee when it’s lowered and is quietly thankful when Alfred doesn’t open the heavy blackout drapes. Ignores his breakfast, as usual. Ignores Alfred’s mouth turned down in disapproval, but not without a pang of conscience, so he decides to force down at least half of the ample spinach omelette on the plate after all. It’ll drag him down, make him off-balance, but he can deal with that during the day. Not the nightmare of sugar and free weights that is the bagel, though; that stuff will kill him.

“That stuff will kill you, Alfred.” He speaks blithely, feigning distraction. He’s tired, but he’s not quite willing to give in yet. Not yet.

“Yes, well, we can’t have you doing anything life-threatening, can we?” Alfred muses, deceptively mild, eyes flitting over the sprawl of pages. Bruce keeps from wincing only with the ease of long practice, keeps his eyes on his papers and takes another sip of coffee. Thinks about the coffee, only the coffee. Hot. (blue eyes) Strong. (sweet smile) Good coffee. (compassionate heart) Shit.

Alfred lifts a journal with a knowing eye, flips idly through Clark’s tight penmanship, then sets it down and fixes Bruce with a Look. “On your list of recent, inadvisable acquired tastes of note, Master Bruce, I do believe this cream rates quite low on the threat scale.”

Huh. Finally, an opinion.

Bruce frowns at his task noncommittally, shoulders set. “That will be all, Alfred.” He knows the look that Alfred is staring into his temple; he’s used it himself often enough, on the streets and in the boardroom. There’s no way he’s getting away with that tone today—he can tell already. Alfred draws himself up in a way that Bruce is all too familiar with.

“Good heavens, let me clear this clutter away for you, Master Bruce—an organized desk is an organized mind; not to say that I am ungrateful for the return of some modicum of common sense to the House of Wayne, and my continued employment, however—”

“Alfred. Leave it.” He doesn’t want to hear any more.

“Master Bruce,” and that is the disappointment he’s become accustomed to hearing. Alfred sighs, a short sharp burst of exasperation. “This will kill you. He was a nice boy, and nice boys die every day just like the rest of us. Not every passion has to be an obsession—”

“Leave it.” Neither of them is talking about the journals anymore. Bruce knows he has a… a problem with honest reporters.

Alfred stands there a moment longer, rearranging a pile of paper with a small reluctant nod of acquiescence. He’s breathing in short, measured bursts—frustrated, Bruce’s training confirms—unnoticeable to most, but Bruce hears his anger clearly. He stares at the page in front of him without seeing it, feels vague guilt and refuses to apologize.

“I am simply suggesting,” Alfred relates with model self-possession, “that perhaps a moment of fresh air on a day as temperate as this, might be more beneficial than months of grief for the writings of a man you did not know.”
Bruce subtly smooths the page he’s crumpled in his hand. “I do know him. I know everything about him.” The pages waft sweetly at him, the musky scent memory of long evenings buried in the stacks of the Manor’s West Library. He wonders if he’s supposed to feel something; shame perhaps, or something other than the numb sense of defeat that blankets him.

That sliding glance again. He’s worrying Alfred. “Bruce,” Alfred steps closer. “Are you feeling quite well?”

“I appreciate your concern. Thank you.” He does; he will be. He is. It’s not what he wants to say, but words are imprecise when he’s this near the darkness beyond exhaustion. What he wants to say is childish and ungallant, and Alfred doesn’t deserve his pique on such a purportedly lovely day. Words are usually inadequate between them.

“Always so stubborn. Very well, I’ll just leave the cream then, shall I. Goodnight, Master Bruce.” Alfred knows him too well, knows his every trick and veil.

Weary dry amusement, because it’s daylight out and it’s a good day when Bruce can stir himself to crack that shell. He mumbles something properly disaffected and indistinct. Alfred isn’t fooled by his demeanor for even half a second. A raised eyebrow shows exactly what he thinks of Bruce’s attempts at seeming indifferent.

He won’t sigh and roll his eyes; he will not. He isn’t sixteen anymore. Bruce slowly lets his lungs fill, makes himself wait an extra breath before replying.

“Goodnight, Alfred.” There. Alfred looks appropriately proud and distressed by him; Bruce is performing to specs. Mission accomplished.

Bruce waits until he’s left the room to dab a finger in the sweet cream and lick a dot up. It’s safe to have a taste, as long as he doesn’t let himself indulge.

~

“It’s Lois, Lois Lane...she is the key!”

Bruce’s nightmares come in the form of people he’s never known, a Meta kid he’s seen all of two seconds, begging him for understanding with the look of a man who’s run out of time. Bruce believes in statistics and eventualities, not nightmares and visions. He’s well trained at lucid dreaming; he knows how to control his subconscious when he’s under.

This dream ends the same no matter what he does. He still wakes up every time, heart pounding, with a hand to his chest, wondering how he could have changed the outcome.

~

He keeps track of many things; current trends, criminal records, evidence, the hierarchy of local politics and the hierarchy of local gang politics; philanthropy, his own accountants, observations. People. Lois Lane is a special case—she’s good at her job. People who are good at their jobs are
either loyal or complacent, Bruce finds; he’d like to know which she is. She thinks that because she got the alien to spill his guts that Bruce will spill his, too. She’s wrong. It’s cold satisfaction to disabuse her of the notion.

No, he won’t be taking interviews. Yes, if she attempts to go to print with anything, with one shred of supposition or libel, his lawyers will have a field day. They don’t mention Clark, she doesn’t mention Clark, when he, unsurprised, personally reviews her exhaustive severance NDA. It isn’t courteous, what Bruce says to her when she tenders her resignation to become a diplomat’s press attache in France, but then she isn’t due his courtesy.

She offends him. She hasn’t visited Mrs. Kent. She hasn’t lifted a finger, paid one cent, hasn’t sat vigil by Clark’s grave and laid oleander and lilies by the too-warm plot so many nights. She hasn’t done the necessary groundwork; hasn’t examined the pieces of what made the man she professed to love what he was. She should be mourning Clark; instead she seems to be mourning the blue Suit and the crimson cape that Bruce has hidden away for safekeeping. She’s buried her grief in her career and moved on. He doesn’t blame her for the sensationalism of her last article—has Perry’s influence all over it—but he does blame her. Nevermind that Clark is the one who flew it; she retrieved the spear—she’s as guilty as the rest of the world.

She writes a flowery expose about the ground-zero death of an icon, and is tellingly silent about the death of the man behind it. It isn’t Bruce’s responsibility or right to share who Clark was with the world—that’s for Mrs. Kent and Clark’s wife to do. Lois might have been Clark’s heart, but she doesn’t comport herself the way Bruce thinks a partner to a man like Clark should. It isn’t her privacy he’s averse to; Bruce has privacy to spare—it’s her freedom. She walks away wounded, but she gets to walk away. Bruce has never walked away from death as unscathed and brazen as Lois Lane, ever.

Uncharitable of him, he knows—nothing she can or should change. He understands her reasons. All the same, it diminishes her and leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Maybe it’s not really her problem (it isn’t); maybe it’s his (it is), that he’s so personally offended by her process—either way, he’s happy to sign papers releasing her from his employ; she isn’t his people, not his responsibility any more.

He knows it’s wrong of him to blame a civilian bystander, he knows there is absolutely no reason in the world why household name Lois Lane’s life should revolve around a man who happened to save hers twice. Bruce has turned his back on people who’ve done a lot more for him.

Miss Lane was the best writer currently on employ with The Daily Planet; she always has been. It’s going to cost good money to replace her, and there isn’t anyone else on the beat with her signature style and general appeal. He calculates a 99.98 percent chance that his distaste with Ms. Lane is fully due to his own compromised emotional status. Irrelevant, regardless. Nothing he can’t handle. Bruce examines the contempt that he feels and then files that away. It really is a shame that they couldn’t come to a more amicable arrangement.

When he visits, Mrs. Kent grips her glass of iced sugar-hell and quietly informs him that Lois Lane is ‘such a nice girl’ and that it’s a understandable that she’d want to put some distance between herself and Clark’s memory.

Bruce bites his tongue again and privately disagrees.
Bruce has a routine. Every morning at five (if he's provided himself with a partner for the previous evening) he rises. He does this to avoid the unlikely event of anyone ever wanting to spend the day with him. The women in his social circles don't get there by being obtuse about decorum—in twenty years, Bruce hasn't once had to ever explain to one of them how this works. They entertain each other, and in the morning, his partners leave; sometimes after a cup of tea, more often as soon as they can get to the car that Bruce always has waiting. It's best this way.

If he’s managed to secure his evening’s goals without a tag-along, then Bruce may allow himself an extra ten minutes of contemplation before moving on to his next goal. He exercises, hard work meant to keep his tendons limber and his muscles conditioned, grueling labor meant to keep his pain tolerance high and his mind centered.

Seven is his meditation hour, one which he moves all the rest around. It isn’t up for debate; eleven sharp will find Bruce, motionless or a calculated smooth sequence, coded over time to flow from one stance to the next, lost in the rise and fall of his chest and the studied movements of his limbs. Often noon finds him hard at study or deep in the stacks. It may find him sweating and in pain, pushing his body beyond the lines of where a more cautious man might pause. Caution has never been his strong suit.

Bruce pushes harder. From exercise to training period, from research to new study, from academic peer-reviewed journals to dossiers on pertinent world news, from conference calls to press releases, he pushes himself. From litigations of litigation, late lunches and Uptown brunches to South Bank meetups and the musty neon-shrouded backrooms of questionable bars, where Bruce manages the flow of information and black market wares in and out of Gotham, he pushes others.

If the night before was particularly terrible, Bruce might sleep until 2pm or even 3pm, but with the exception of business and meetings, his day progresses the same.

Schedules are variable things; at one extreme of wealth, schedules become more a matter of pretension than reality. Bruce has a routine, but he does not have a schedule, beyond patrolling between eleven p.m. and his debriefing at four a.m.

He sleeps when it’s most convenient for his purposes.

~

Bruce studies the technology; inspects the strangely crystalline lattice structure, pulls tiny sections of encoded information from the data core, runs the numbers until the cryptographic outer surface makes sense; finds workarounds and creates code patches to integrate it with his own customized hardware. Spends months lost in the flow of data. He accesses learning modules, learns how to speak with a non-animate AI interface and realizes that it already speaks English, as well as every other Earth language that he knows. He demands that it teach him Kryptonian and is pleasantly surprised when it concedes.

The alien language is exactly like their technology: intended to deliver complex, rigidly compressed blocks of short-burst data. The work is exacting; Kryptonian is the most difficult language he’s ever seen, full of hidden subtext and tonal context, cubic in its dedication to spatial relativism—a true challenge for his mind, a delight to code-break. Some of its sounds are barely
mimic-able for the human tongue, but Bruce begins to be able to read it, and from there, he has a way to establish a baseline of what Kryptonian should sound like in Earth’s atmosphere. From there, he can differentiate glyphs and the obscure half-tone indicators from each other and then his labors become legitimately productive.

The sheer amount of data this knowledge opens to him is stimulating all on its own. He speaks absently to his computer in Kryptonian when he’s alone, hums it under his breath like a song, and grows to prefer the language as a code for his own purposes. Before the year is out, Alfred makes an irritating habit of correcting his tenses by whistling; Bruce frowns and trains himself harder.

It’s easy, from the outside, in retrospect, to think that Clark must have known that he’d survive the planet-killing machine in the sky; that he must have known he’d survive fighting Zod, but Bruce has read the documentation in his gradually improving Kryptonian.

It’s with a sense of deep relief that he reads about the destruction of Krypton. The more he reads, the more he’s unsettled by what seems to be evidence of thousands if not more generations of intense physiological and psychological indoctrination. Science was religion, for Kryptonians, genetic manipulation a cross between high art-form and devout worship. Their conclusions on education and disseminated wealth were at odds with their constraints concerning population management and the control and training of their young. The core of their society was framed in fear of ‘intrusive values’ and the assumption of superiority; it’s nothing Bruce couldn’t have calculated given the representative actions of the invaders as a whole.

With each new layer of coding Bruce finds a new level of data compressed, a new line of inquiry to pursue, so now he knows what being ‘aggressive-combatant-lineage’ means, in part, which is that Zod and every Kryptonian with him was engineered to kill first and question later.

Bruce knows what the ‘planetary-transform-alterant-corrector’ (the AI insists on calling it a ‘World Engine’ in English) was supposed to do; what it should have done. He doesn’t know what it feels like to destroy the only hope a man might have for procreation, but he can imagine it’s… he can imagine it.

This leaves Bruce with the quandary of having to reconcile his memories of Superman with the reality of a personality just as large: Clark Kent. Clark Kent couldn’t have known that he would survive the destruction of the World Engine. Clark Kent had destroyed what Bruce discovered was a scout ship and he’d wrecked the ‘beginning-life-spark-treasure’ (and really, Genesis Chamber? The translations could use some work) without a trace of hesitation. Clark Kent had killed the last remaining member of his own race, to fulfill Jonathan Kent’s vision of his destiny.

_He hadn’t known that Bruce wouldn’t bury that spear in his pretty face and leave Martha to die._

Bruce still isn’t sure how he feels about this whole ‘Superman’ business - it rankles, frankly, but Clark Kent… Now that’s a man who Bruce can relate to.

Clark Kent was a hero.

_Everything is completely contained._

It’s all completely safe, and it stays that way, until he manages to finish decrypting the database from the Kryptonian ship. He stares at the glyphs: _yellow-sun-hibernation-healing_ and _purity-redundancy-cycle-caution._

Precisely one year and five months since Clark Kent died, all hell breaks loose.
The Blood on My Sleeves

Chapter Summary

What we become focused on becomes the center of our world, and it shapes what we can and cannot see.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three: The Blood on My Sleeves

“Can you break my bones; will you tear my skin; can you taste my lust; can you feel my sin?”
-Łund

He doesn’t explain himself, because if he’s wrong, he’ll feel a fool and he’d prefer for it to be without an audience. He’s never taken failure well.

It’s night when Bruce holsters his small UV lantern in Smallville Cemetery, double-checks his custom—made sunblock and starts to dig. The ground fights him, still glossed with thawing snow, but he’s followed the watchman’s schedule——Bruce has the time and he has the right tools. In case of the worst, he has a brace of mild sedative darts hidden in his shirt-cuff. He’s prepared for this moment for the last twelve solid hours—all the time he could justify spending on planning for eventualities.

Once again he tells himself that this is insane; illegal and unwise. Once again he affirms that if there is even a one percent chance that he understood the database correctly, then this is the only right path. Once again he’s thankful for the lack of visitation traffic—there’s no good way to explain what he’s doing right now.

When he breaks past three feet he begins to hear it—a frantic thumping. A knocking, interspersed with periods of animal sounds. There’s no telling how long Clark’s been hammering on his own coffin. Four and a half feet down he can feel it; a steady vibration, a strange lightening of his body that reminds him of zero gravity training. Bruce strains his back to get to the last foot separating them. He can hear Clark screaming.

“I’m here, Clark. I’m coming.” His words are soft; they don’t make it past the wind or his own hard breaths, but the noise below decreases almost instantly. “I know—I’m coming,” he says again. Sweat breaks in the small of his back, at his temples, because this is every one of Bruce’s nightmares come to life. He’s burning up now, hot from the exertion and adrenaline, shirt soaked thin, air puffing out in great white clouds. Part of him expects to wake in the Glasshouse, chill on sweat-streaked skin, heart pounding a timpani in his ribcage like so many times before.

He doesn’t wake up. He is awake, and he’s needed. Bruce sets to with determination. The sound of metal biting ice-crisp soil is oppressive.
“I’m almost there.” He is determination, the aches and sweat fade away into action faster now and then a filth-streaked hand is punching up through the deteriorating pine in front of his eyes and grabbing the shovel-head. Bruce grips it tighter and pulls. Clark comes up spitting out earth and gasping violently.

He’s covered in grime; the suit he’d been buried in is nothing more than disintegrating rags by the time Bruce lets the shovel fall from his hands. Kneels beside the grave to reach down and pull him out and up under a crisp night sky. Clark comes back from hibernation disoriented and shaking, gaze wild, strength diminished but still dangerous. He’s uncoordinated and flails until Bruce ducks an awkward swing, murmurs in his ear that it’s alright, it’s him, don’t be afraid.

Clark struggles harder, blue eyes bright with panic, choking on words that won’t come.

That uncharacteristic weakness in his limbs allows Bruce to get both arms around him, solid. His blood is racing, but intuition tells Bruce this is the right thing to do: he pets Clark on the shoulders lightly. Stares into those feverish eyes under the bright UV and wishes it were daylight so he could see them even better.

Clark squeezes Bruce’s arms hard once with both hands, deep bruises Bruce knows he’ll feel and see for days; gives him a locus of perspective. Clark bruises him, but doesn’t break him, and that means something; the lead-lined container in his pocket isn’t necessary. Bruce forces his hope ruthlessly down, refuses to let the pain show and keeps his voice gentle.

“Clark, it’s alright; easy, son. Clark. Clark.” Bruce says his name like a talisman. He stops fighting immediately.

Names have power, even over the dead.

Something breaks through the terror and Clark goes unexpectedly limp, eyes closing. Bruce catches him before he can do more than sway over. He looks like hell—face pinched in pain even while out cold. He’s a heavy cold weight in Bruce’s arms, his chest doesn’t move; he doesn’t breathe and for a moment Bruce thinks he’s gone, done for, death by shock—he’s seen it before. Then Clark’s eyelids flutter lightly and he turns his face into Bruce’s collar before stilling again. There’s a single solid THUD from inside his chest.

Bruce thinks hard and fast, then he hefts Clark up, notes with detached horror the soil and insects fleeing his hair. Thinks about using the encryption mode on his phone to call Mrs. Kent and Alfred both, then makes himself breathe in. And out. He needs to stop; no—he needs to think, but circumstances warrant quick action and there is no time for contingencies, because this is nothing he’d ever planned for in the first place. The basics, then: no hospitals, no doctors, no strangers. No press.

I have to get him cleaned up before he wakes again.

He doesn’t have the resources here for what’s needed, but he does have them in the lake house. It’s an educated gamble; for all Bruce knows, he’s changed a variable that may cause further injury or death to Clark by interrupting his purity-redundancy-cycle. (Though it’s the caution glyph that’s the most pressing concern.)

Clark may not be in his right mind; he may be blind or addled or injured in some alien way that Bruce can’t see. He may require medical assistance that Bruce can’t provide. Riding hardest underneath all these possibilities is the inescapable thought that Clark might still be gone—he may have come back… damaged.
Bruce has seen it before.

This is why Bruce has dealt with Metas with prejudice or not at all in the past. There’s no telling what will happen if he takes Clark with him, but if he doesn’t get Clark out of this sun-starved freezing field, Clark almost certainly has no chance of defending himself.

It’s surprising, he notes: Clark’s skin is still golden under all the muck; a natural pigmentation, which makes sense on a being who can't possibly be able to have the human cellular reaction of tanning. He’s curiously light for someone who must have incredible molecular density; light even for a human male his size. With his musculature and height, he should be another forty to sixty pounds, easily. Bruce adjusts his hold slightly, tries to gauge if Clark is causing a gravitational anomaly in his inert state, realizes that he’s stalling.

There’s no time for this sort of thinking right now.

Damn it.

There’s no help for it, he has to take Clark home with him, where he’ll be safe and he’ll have to explain himself to Mrs. Kent, but that will be later, once he’s satisfied that Clark isn’t suffering a relapse. He bundles the unconscious Kryptonian onto the seat of his car, detangles Clark’s fingers from his hand with a curse, engages the interior UV and inspects his sunblock coverage once more. He takes a risk, using precious time to fill the grave back in and level the earth as well as he can. Then he slips his shades on and disregards every single speed advisory on the route to the air-strip.

Then Gotham, where Alfred says nothing but pointedly does not prepare any of Bruce’s favorite meals or offer him any respite from his nutritional regimen for six weeks.

Bruce has a new regimen. In the evenings, before he leaves, he brushes Clark’s hair and adjusts his limbs, makes sure the sun-lamps and UV emitters in the med-lab are running at full capacity. When he returns from patrol, he uses a bit of scavenged metal from the Kryptonian ship to carefully shave the new growth from Clark’s high cheekbones and chin. He wipes him down carefully, as respectfully as he can, with warm water and the softest towels he owns. He repeatedly brushes back the stubborn curl on Clark’s forehead that resists any and all attempts at confinement. He doesn’t allow anyone else to do these things; he thinks about what he would want, what the man in the journals would want. He knows, in a deeper part of his mind than is currently using the resources, that Alfred has called Martha Kent; that she’s been to the lakehouse and gone; that she calls every day, but no one disturbs his vigil. No one else is allowed in this room; not now.

~

She was my world, he says, and you took her from me.

The dream is always the same.

~

He calls Lois Lane because that is what needs to be done. Tells her that the NDA (airtight, nearly a
book in its own right) which was sent via courier scant months ago is being extended at the company’s legal option, for an additional ten years, barring bankruptcy. They both know it’ll never come to that. She demands to know why and he knows she’s already started her memoir. He is fiercely glad to be able to tell her calmly and reasonably, that: 

a - her information request has been denied; and 

b - that such information is proprietary WayneTech property; which, 

c - is subject to international corporate espionage charter; and as such, 

d - no longer considered to be within the public sphere.

“How is he?” she asks finally and Bruce pauses his fluid flow of terminology and thinly-veiled threats to consider her question. He’s prepared for this, as well: Lois Lane possesses an intelligent and resourceful mind; she knows enough to put the pieces together, to see at least a part of the whole.

He is not petty enough to deny her query. He is not.

“ He’s well. ” He isn’t well, but telling her so would not help the situation. The last thing Clark needs is someone shackled to him out of pity. He waits a moment and when she says nothing, he frowns. Tilts his head in the direction of the speakerphone. He should have opted for visual communications; Bruce wants to see her eyes. “Would you like to see him.” He says it, carefully not making it a question. The idea of it—anyone seeing Clark in his current state—brings a wash of nerve-static, muscles tightening in preparation for a battle that will never happen. He isn’t dishonorable enough to refuse her, but he wishes for a moment that he were.

She’s quick to demur. “I wouldn't want to… interrupt him,” she says. Quick inhale and marginally longer exhale; she’s smoking.

Lie.

Bruce rests his elbows on the conference table and steeples his fingers slowly. “I’m sure that wouldn’t be the case, Miss Lane,” he says as obliviously as possible. “I can have a jet at the ready in… say, six hours. You’re in Nice for the month, right? Sure, sure—I can have the jet meet you at Côte d’Azur, five, six hours, tops. Short jaunt, no expense spared—you are his fiance’, after all, a long absence, no problem—”

He can have a private jet there in two hours, with a touchdown time at the helipad right outside his window of about eight hours in total if he’s wrong—

“Mr. Wayne,” she breaks in, “I… that’s quite generous of you, but-”

But, Bruce thinks with savage satisfaction at being proven correct.

“But that won’t be possible, sir,” her voice wavers. “You have to understand that, you see, we…I decided not to marry. Him. I can’t marry him.”

“I beg your pardon, Ms. Lane,” Bruce says smoothly. “There was interference. Say again, please.”

Names have power.

“I won’t marry Clark.”

Truth.

This time she sounds firm. Fair enough. He’s has had his turn at the self-same merry-go-round: will they, won’t they, what if they do, what if they don’t.
“You’re sure about that.” Again, not a question. Bruce wants there to be no doubt of coercion or prevarication. He wants usable copy and a clear one, at that.

“I’ve been sure since before the funeral. It’s kind of you to… thank you for asking.”

_Lie._

She isn’t thankful at all, can barely wait to end this conversation. That’s more than acceptable—he has no intention of being _kind._

Bruce lets her statement settle into the silence. She isn’t weak, he’s shadowed her enough to know that. She’s weighed her costs and the benefits and already made her decision. He never _hates_ being right, but it is often a disappointment. Takes a breath and relaxes his shoulders. His tone is businesslike when he continues.

“That is unfortunate, Miss Lane. Being that is the case, WayneTech and Wayne Industries Incorporated will be moving to extend your non-disclosure agreement for an additional sixty years. Now if you’ll turn to page eighty-three, you’ll see the penalties that will be incurred should you disclose any of the informations which you may or may not hold in trust pertaining to certain elements of Wayne Industries’ intellectual properties—”

In many ways, Bruce admires Miss Lane; it isn’t every day a man finds a woman who will walk away from Superman, after all. She’s strong, she’s successfully avoided a possibly lethal association—admittedly, after the fact, but Bruce can’t hold that against her. Her ambition is breathtaking. Yes, he admires her, he understands her, he even _owes her_—for her timely interruption, for not allowing him the moment to drive his weapon into Clark; he does not, however, _like_ her.

Whether he likes her or not isn’t important; it isn’t _professional_ to dwell on. What is important is that Bruce hasn’t taken anything from her; it would offend his honor, he owes her too much. His conscience is clear on that, at least.

It’s not a good day, but he’ll take what he can get.

Anything which could be used against them goes quickly and without fanfare into the small lead-lined room that Bruce and Alfred have jackhammered out by hand, in the bare rock wall of the Batcave. Every item has its own lead-lined, _locked_ case. Every lock is keyed to Bruce or Alfred’s voice.

He tinkers around with an old medical cot and some spare parts for a while, discarding one idea after another until a week later, he’s able to move Clark’s limp form to what Bruce dubs the Solarbay. Now Clark is inundated with full spectrum light, in three-hundred and sixty degrees.

Clark is nude, covered in only the sheerest of transparent linen, wrapped in warm sunlight twenty-four hours a day. Often he hovers in his cocoon of light. He’s breathing now, inhales that take up to a full minute; exhales just as long. He hasn’t moved a muscle since Bruce laid him down. His golden skin flawless, he absorbs the light, seems to glow, his expression sombre.

Bruce doesn’t permit himself to think anything but objective thoughts while he attends to these tasks. Clark was injured due to his negligence, so it’s only fitting that Bruce watch over him. After the sixth day, Alfred stops arguing with Bruce about propriety.

There’s a peculiar quality to the texture of Clark’s skin. Bruce ignores it outwardly, but it grinds on
him; that porcelain-smooth dermis, the thick soft curls of hair trailing down the prone form. Smooth as fresh-glazed pottery. Perfect musculature still as a sculpture, perfect flesh. He’d expected Clark to be hard-skinned, he’d seen a car split around Clark’s motionless form; he expected Clark’s skin to be rigid, like his own armament. No; Clark’s flesh resists any attempts to penetrate it, but it’s warm, living. Yielding ever so slightly under Bruce’s clinical curiosity. Human.

Clark doesn’t open his eyes again for close to three months.

~

Clark wakes in a whoosh of air and panic, hovers and flails in the air, gasping. The lamps around him dim automatically, the holographic dot relaying his heartbeat begins to pulse rapidly.

“Easy, now. Easy, Clark.” Bruce makes himself turn slowly, hands in view. “You are among friends,” he says in the declining tones of informal-clause Kryptonian. “No one here is your enemy,” in English.

Clark remembers everything. “Kal. Not Clark,” he shakes his head violently, and then his voice is a panicked blur. Bruce can barely pick out any individual syllables; can’t hear one word from the next in the whistle-fast slurry of sound flowing from Clark’s mouth any more than he could decipher the wind. Abnormal articulation, but too fast for Bruce to identify satisfactorily. He’ll review the audio later, for now he has to contain the situation.

Eyes on Clark, Bruce reaches out and snags one of the many sheets on the shelf beside him and lets it unfold. He nods, keeping his expression open and neutral as he approaches the babbling man and slowly wraps the sheet around his shuddering shoulders. Not flailing then; fasciculations. Bruce reaches, still nodding absently and takes one of those quivering hands in his; palpates the stone-hard opponens pollicis. Outlines the twitching fingers, flexes them cautiously. Hyper-contractions? He’ll need to run tests, although any type of deep-tendon response system is going to be problematic. He scrapes his nails across Clark’s palm and the fingers curl in, spasming. Close enough for plantar. Some of the tension seeps out of Clark’s frame at the gentle contact.

“Do you remember who I am?” Bruce searches his eyes, noting pupillary response. Tightening at the corners of the eyes when Bruce presses at his fingers. Within acceptable parameters, he supposes. He’s in no position to test normality of ophthalmic reaction. Clark’s eyes are just short of a blur, he seems to be taking in everything—the entire room, almost as if he’s sweeping every inch with his eyes. Five point four seconds, then those bright eyes fix on Bruce’s face. Pupil contraction, then dilation.

The flow of words stops. “Bruce. Batman. Bruce.” And Clark grabs at his arm again, just as he had in the cemetery. His hair falls into his face, but this time he doesn’t squeeze. There had been bruises in the shape of his hands for a little over a month; Bruce watches him steadily, unflinching. He’s so warm. Clark runs shaking hands over the muscle where he’d wounded Bruce. “I hurt you.”

Bruce shrugs, tilts his head to one side. Is it nerve damage? Neurons misfiring? He won’t want Martha to see him this way. “I’ve had worse. It’s fine.” It isn’t his decision. “Do you want me to call someone for you? Your mother? Someone else?” He’ll give Clark whatever he needs.

Clark’s grip firms slightly; he blinks up at Bruce before his face crumples. Bruce sets his other
hand carefully on Clark’s sheet-covered shoulder. “Not yet.” His voice cracks and Bruce wants to look away. Clark’s arms jerk up; he covers his ears with his forearms without releasing his hold. A low, hurt sound squeezes out of him, chest heaving as he pants. “Too big. Too big too big—”

Irregular involuntary movements. A panic attack. Bruce sits carefully on the edge of the bed and speaks quietly to him. He doesn’t log what he says, keeps it calm and steady until Clark’s breathing evens out and his grip loosens. Then Bruce smooths that curl back from Clark’s face, steps away and turns the UV back on. Clark’s limbs tremble; the muscles of his torso ripple ceaselessly. Bruce feels no vindication, no sense of triumph at seeing Clark laid low. He’s seen these signs before, doesn’t look forward to what’s coming.

Too big. What was too big? Bruce thinks on it long and it hits him, scorching him with the implications of a man who could hear the heartbeat of someone he loved in trouble, of a man who could see through anything except lead. He doesn’t envy Clark, not at all.

He readies a pair of heavy-duty crutches. He prepares his mind for the explanations; lays out the symptoms so he can readily recite them without shaming either of them. Ataxia, caused presumably by massive exposure to mineral K by susceptible patient C; hypersensitivity to light and sound, reasons unknown, but probability high that it’s a conditioned response to patient’s lowered natural defenses; possible trauma as a result of incredible mental and physical stressors—the list is extensive, and Bruce has no way to gauge any possible neurological damage.

Bruce doesn’t permit himself to avoid the sight of Clark using the crutches.

~

He sees it in Clark’s eyes the first time Bruce comes towards him with the bit of alien metal held openly in one hand: the way that the man’s head snaps to the side to watch Bruce, how his chin comes up, eyes flaring in a too-familiar way as glares stubbornly. It’s an expression that Bruce knows better than most.

Fear. The same fear he’d encouraged Clark to breathe in, seeping out thick and plain as Joker-green gas. Clark doesn’t speak to him; he just eyes Bruce stoically while his shaking hands turn into fists. Instruments wobble when the gravitational flux begins to build. Despite his condition, he’s still ready to fight.

Bruce quickly stops advancing. “I thought you’d prefer a shave. Just a shave.” He keeps his tone level.

If I wanted it, you’d be dead already. He doesn’t need to throw the words back into Clark’s face; he waits for an operable decision.

Clark stares at him dully, then turns his head to face the open window again. It’s all the permission Bruce gets, but that sense of physics being offset, that uncanny pressure, eases and dissipates.

Bruce shaves the tensed cheeks and clenching jaw, lets the fresh air and woodsong do its work. Strokes patiently at a spasming mandibular joint until Clark relaxes his bite. Keeps his touch simple and nonthreatening despite his inner conflict.

Amazingly, no blood is shed, via blade or anger. No words are exchanged, and yes, Bruce prefers it this way.
Shaving Clark becomes an interlude of meditation and focus, as centering as the maintenance Bruce performs on all his tools, and in every facet of his life. He studies, from first scrunch of blade and hair to the last rinse, Bruce studies the features that he could only recall seeing in extremis before. His attraction doesn’t wane, for all the effort he puts into demystifying Clark’s existence.

In time, Bruce comes to see that the more pragmatic he appears about the shaving situation, the less tension Clark exhibits. In reality, there is no way for Bruce to be anything less than vulnerable in this situation, but he endures it quietly. His patience is rewarded: over the course of months, a change gradually comes.

Eventually the tension in the hard shoulders slips away; eventually Clark leans into Bruce’s attentions and becomes an active participant. He turns his face into Bruce’s hands, he closes his eyes and it's a nasty shock to hear him regulating his breaths to the rhythm of Bruce’s own—too much like memories that Bruce desperately keeps under lock and key. Clark gives Bruce something too fragile to be called trust and too sincere to be anything else, and he does it with an effortless hope that crushes Bruce.

The best of it, the absolute worst of it all, is the dawn when the back of Clark’s head comes to rest, pressed in a backward lean against Bruce’s sternum and he stills, lashes and shadows smudged under his closed eyes. Bruce palms his pulse-point, thumb tracing a line of stubble and he looks up at Bruce, eyes hazy, then settles even more before dark lashes fall again. His skin. The smooth column of his exposed throat, the lax contentment in his posture.

Clark wants to be touched with an eagerness that’s painful to witness; he’s terrified of being touched with equal intensity. Once Bruce sees it, its impossible to dismiss.

\textit{He has no idea.}

It humbles Bruce, to see Clark this way, knowing what he is and what he can do. It infuriates Bruce, to see him floundering and brought low.

\textit{This is what you wanted.} The voice, the darkness inside--it never rests for long.

This is not what Bruce wanted. None of this is any part of what he’d wanted. There is nothing to do now, but push forward as he always has. For this, to mend what Bruce has broken—if such a thing can be done—it’s worth the discomfort.

It’s worth every aching moment of being allowed to touch Clark’s skin and care for him, worth every moment that Bruce chokes down his own failed processes.

~

\textit{The stubborn bastard.}

Clark may be one of the most determined men he’s ever met. He doesn’t want to discuss his possibly irreparable brain damage. He accepts the crutches, but he won’t allow Bruce to provide him with further accommodations. Even though he’s completely capable of hovering for small amounts of time, he refuses to rely on it for travel. He doesn’t seem ashamed, goes at his daily physiotherapy as if he’s geared for battle. He’s one hundred percent sheer red-blooded corn-belt grit and frustrating stubbornness. There’s a candor to his small sounds of exertion that demands Bruce’s respect.
He owes Clark more than this, but this is what he has to give, so he stops providing excuses and he begins to provide council. Clark has healed this far; perhaps his physiology or pigheadedness will allow him to succeed further.

He fights as hard as any student Bruce has ever trained, and he does it without a word of praise from Bruce. Soon he’s dreamily walking icy grass, then jogging the crunching lakehouse path. Soon, he’s running, autumn leaves whirling in his wake, never at night.

Bruce watches him run, joins him in the early mornings when the fog rolls in. Always in the sun.

*La douleur exquise.*

Bruce deserves this, because Bruce had seen how fast Clark can move, how much he disrupted the atmosphere and displaced the objects around him when he worked to his potential. Bruce knew with chilling certainty at least a fraction of what Clark was capable of when roused, and yet during their fight, the worst Clark had done was put a man in heavily reinforced armor through a few walls and body slam him. Bruce had left that battle with bruises and breaks, true, but with his speed and force, Clark could have turned Bruce into a chalky paste with very little effort just by throwing himself at Bruce, kryptonite or not.

Clark had shown mercy; he’d begged Bruce to listen to reason and Bruce had been so blinded by his own helplessness and rage that he’d ignored the very clear evidence of Clark’s unwillingness to harm. That Bruce is making amends now only verifies that he acknowledges his own lapse in judgement.

Clark doesn’t need to explain to Bruce why he won’t speak about his injuries or why he watches Bruce with such intensity. Bruce would do the same or worse, in his place. So yes, Bruce will swallow down his pride and his desire and his untenable wishes and he will accept his earned judgement with grace, as a man of conviction.

It’s the only way he knows how to face the beacon of Clark’s continued existence.

Bruce ends up returning the journals and the articles to Clark, all of them, carefully repackaged and stacked in their original container. As far as he's aware, the box is never opened.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I skipped over a good four+ months of PT. It's something that I have far too much of in my RL to want to write about in my fanfic. I apologize if this makes things move too fast.
What Falls is Fallen

Chapter Summary

When the world throws you too much information, the only way you can stay sane or survive is to look for pattern recognition.
-Douglas Coupland

Chapter Four: What Falls is Fallen

~"The farther I fall, I'm beside you. As lost as I get I will find you."~ -NIN

He’s like a ghost, most days. Bruce makes sure that he’s as comfortable as possible and leaves instructions that Clark is not to be bothered. If Bruce had been injured so grievously, he’d want people to give him privacy to heal, so he provides the same consideration for Clark. Clark doesn’t get better, though; he doesn’t start healing, as far as Bruce can tell.

“You think you can keep me here?” Clark’s words are soft, almost a breath, the way they barely disturb the air of the medical bay, but his voice is changed—he’s speaking through his teeth. The violence implicit in his low tone sends a trickle of ice funneling straight through Bruce’s amygdala. It’s death, winding through Clark’s voice.

“I don’t.” Bruce says carefully. “I’m trying to help.”

A muscle in Clark’s cheek spasms and his nostrils flare. “You’re suicidal.”

And maybe it’s the rough laugh that barks out of Bruce, confusing Clark and keeping him from putting Bruce through the wall, but more likely it's the sheer audacity of what Bruce is doing that stills his hands.

“You should have let me sleep.”

“The world needs you,” Bruce answers.

Clark’s chest rises and falls fitfully, but his voice is low and hard. “You should have left me in peace.”

But you weren't at peace.

There is no decent answer to that. Bruce stills his mind and goes about his routine in silence, waiting for an attack that never comes.

“You’re improving daily,” is what Bruce settles on, as he’s disposing of the washcloths. “I’ll have a proper bed made up.”
“I want to sleep.”

It’s the only sentence Clark will speak to him for days.

It takes the better part of two weeks before he’ll deign to allow Bruce to help him into the light, comfortable pile of clothing Alfred leaves for him each day. His movements are hesitant, his agonized patience seemingly endless. He’s been sheltered, protected in his agri-belt bubble and futurism; Bruce knows it but it’s still a shock: to see a man who can knock billion dollar satellites out of the air as easily as if he’s hitting a fly ball, humbled and worrying at the hems of garments as if he doesn’t know what to do with his body.

He’s reserved; he keeps his limbs close to himself, he doesn’t approach Alfred or Bruce, no longer the war-ready menace Bruce had labelled him (not that he ever truly was). His eyes, in contrast to his still frame, never stop moving. Intelligence and mistrust; hope and fear—they all parade through Clark’s eyes. He’s there, inside, watching them, saying nothing as they move around him. He has all the unremarkable stolidity and watchfulness of a good man done terribly wrong and all the right in the world to be so.

It’s entirely valid, ultimately justifiable for Clark to meet Bruce with such doubt after all the cynicism and hatred that Bruce had shown Clark before his… illness.

There’s an insubstantial quality to his presence, as if Clark is waiting in the wings for his turn onstage. He barely speaks most days. He won’t eat, he can’t be persuaded to eat; he prefers instead to sit on the sun-deck and bask silently, once Bruce convinces him that his freedom isn’t a trick. He won’t fly. He dreams, with his eyes open, staring out at the sky with that terrible sobriety.

Bruce saved him, but he can’t seem to bring him back from the dead.

Clark’s first verbal request is for pillows; Bruce has lived with Alfred’s housekeeping for so long that he’s all but forgotten that most Americans prefer sleeping with them. It’s thoughtless of him to have missed such an important detail—it only stands to reason that in order to fully regain himself, Clark needs comfort. Bruce has never been good at supplying comfort but he tries; Clark gets his bed linens without fanfare: soft flannel pillowcases crossed in blue and white.

Bruce has nightmares, still. Now though, instead of his familiar ghouls and failures, it’s Clark most nights. Clark, with sunlight sliding down his cheekbones like water. Kind, gentle Clark, who tells Bruce from between his rotted lips how Bruce saved his body, but killed his beautiful soul.

Bruce jerks awake, paces. Takes punitively cold showers and forces his clamoring muscles through excruciating training routines. Makes his body work harder, faster, in shrouded darkness; blindfolded and hurting as he spins through the air just above the pommel horse. Below the rings. Across the mats.

He’s trying to be better.

“You say that you want to help people, but you can’t feel their pain… their mortality… it's time you learn what it means to be a man.” Bruce’s own words haunt him. He can see for himself: Clark feels. Clark feels so deeply that he can barely connect to the world around him now, and this is Bruce’s doing.

Bruce dreads the moment when Clark realizes how quickly Lois Lane has moved on, that the supposed love of Clark’s life loved knowing the ‘Man of Steel’s’ secrets more than she loved him.
back. He readies himself for the day that Clark realizes that she used his good heart to make herself feel more important, as desirable to the strongest man on Earth. Bruce readies himself for an explosion that never comes.

*He isn’t jealous of Lois Lane.* Were circumstances different, that might not be the truth, but circumstances are what they are; she no longer has anything for Bruce to be jealous of—he has no right to be jealous.

Envy, however, is another matter.

He doesn’t think that Clark is aware of how he shadows Bruce from room to room, but Bruce is acutely cognizant of his every move. He doesn’t think Clark knows how Bruce can feel him staring through steel and stone, how Bruce can sense the piercing regard raising the hairs on his body even though he knows that Clark is floors away. He radiates heat when he stands near, when he pours unasked-for coffee and initiates Bruce’s begrudging involvement in conversation around his painfully gentle silences.

Clark can sit so still that he seems made of marble; unnatural. He doesn’t smile, not like he did Before. He’s solemn and quiet, he forgets to breathe for hours. The man Bruce has grown to know had a smile like the sun, had an *investment* in being human. It’s wrong; *alien* enough that Bruce has to consciously remind himself that Clark is alive. Talking to him is the only way to keep him from lapsing into that unblinking state of terrible despondent *stillness*. So Bruce responds, he engages; he gives what’s needed.

It’s a sub-Mission that he’s realizing he’s failed to complete, for years. Bruce has failed to make the world better, for all his funding, for all his alliances and his back-alley deals, for all his words and violence and the death that he’s brought to those he loved. For all the good he’s done, it’s always balanced out by some other ill. Clark could be the deciding factor in real change. The world needs good men, needs *Superman*, now more than ever. Clark is Mission-critical.

*He has to make Clark better.*

Eventually, Clark begins to peck at the trays Alfred leaves for him. Eventually he stops staring off into nothingness quite so much, but that thinness, that transparency of self, is still there. Bruce takes him home to his mother, so he can see Clark come alive again, but Clark seems determined to return to Gotham and the dark with him. Clark isn’t looking for life and light; Clark is looking for *purpose* and he wants to find it with Bruce. This is unexpected but tenable; Bruce brings Clark home again. The idea that Bruce wouldn’t want him there is laughable.

That should be enough for Bruce, these tiny mercies, and he works hard to make it so. It should be enough, having Clark close, seeing his calm acceptance, being trusted to touch his perfect face, to trim his perfect hair and to shave a man that Bruce knows is perfectly capable of shaving himself. It should be enough to see faith in basic human kindness return to Clark’s reactions, it should be enough that he wants to be where Bruce is.

*My father’s name is Jor-El. He says my name is Kal,* a single line in one beaten, travel-scuffed journal reads in loping script. Bruce leaves a fresh journal and clean unused pens by Clark’s bedside. They disappear and he ignores the itch to locate them.

Bruce doesn’t have the right to call Clark by that name aloud. It should be enough, but Bruce has never been good at knowing when enough is enough.
Bruce knows sweat. It’s as much a part of his life as the air he breathes; it’s been a part of his life for so long that earlier times of leisure-filled days seem like dreams instead of the memories that they are. He knows sweat—the reek of it, the funk that seeps and settles deep into clothing and hair. How it sticks, clammy on cold flesh and a wretched itch in the heat of summer. He knows its slick and sting on his skin, its roll and its grit on his aching body. During workouts, during patrol—even during his meditations, sweat tells Bruce that he’s done his job properly, that he’s done his best and that his body is performing to his expectations.

Clark doesn’t sweat.

He stays offensively dry, unable to achieve even this smallest of humanity’s disguises. He gives off a scent, a light sweet musk that reminds Bruce of a known pain.

Bruce won’t ever forget the smell of honeysuckle and oleander.

Bruce waits for Clark to realize that he’s free, he waits for a mention of an apartment in the city or a loft in the country but Clark never mentions moving out of Bruce’s home in even an offhanded way. Against his better judgment, Bruce settles into the expectation that Clark is… reliably consistent.

He apologizes for violating Bruce’s privacy. The irony of it only highlights something Bruce can no longer overlook: that deep down, Clark is a decent, good person and apparently, where it ultimately counts, when it counts, Bruce is not.

He sees the way Clark looks at him, and he isn’t immune—who would be? The carefully deferential manner, the stares when Clark thinks he’s preoccupied; Bruce has been stared at with intent his entire life, too often not to know the feeling. There’s something between them. It’s trouble on the wind.

Clark’s impressed by him, which is flattering and disturbing all at once. Farmer’s son, alien; they don’t make sense. They don’t fit. It would be wise if Bruce kept him at arms-length. It would be wise, but it isn’t what happens. What happens, is Clark makes himself a fixture in whatever room Bruce happens to be in. Wisdom would be prying the heartsick Kryptonian out of Bruce’s home, packing him back off to his mother; shuffling him out of Bruce’s life, and giving Clark a chance to find normality. Bruce isn’t wise: allows his presence, speaks to him to keep him close, continues to reward Clark’s despondency with conversation; his blindingly bright smiles with silence and approval. Wisdom would be ignoring him altogether, driving him out, so Bruce tries. But not with any urgency.

It’s his undoing.
Because once Clark is back behind his wall of polite smiles and equanimity, Clark Kent is a whirlwind. He doesn’t sit still; Bruce is certain that Clark blows through his entire library in an afternoon before settling between Bruce’s stacks of neatly catalogued (solved) casefiles and local history. (Bruce can’t prove it, not unquestionably, but the tiny replicated friction marks on a particular inch of each book’s spine are convincing). Clark seldom stays abed past dawn but he’s silent, as silent in his own way as Bruce, though more out of preoccupation than intentional stealth. He cooks his eggs and bacon not at sensible times, but in whatever moment the mood strikes him—the idea of strictly regulated meals seems to be a lost concept.

Clark doesn’t want to be saved from humanity’s ills; he wants to be a part of them. Clark doesn’t want to be a paragon; he wants to live. Clark wants to drown in his humanity so much that it hurts him, and Bruce has known that, on a level that he hasn’t been willing to face. He faces it now: faces the fact that he wants to hurt Clark, that he has always wanted to hurt Clark—for not being where he was needed, when Bruce needed him, for being here now when Bruce doesn’t need him but wants him so desperately. He faces the fact that he wants to hurt Clark badly enough to make Clark love him, and to keep Clark as invested in his humanity (and Bruce’s by extension) as possible.

Bruce faces the fact that they make a rather attractive pair of idiots. Then he considers the possibility that what he wants and what is right may not be mutually exclusive prospects.

Clark talks about civil rights and justice, homesickness and heartache (though thankfully not for long), makes sober observations on local policy and asks questions about Bruce’s actions that give Bruce pause and make him think. Clark listens to answers he doesn’t want to hear and moves his jaw as if he wants to spit Bruce’s explanations out, and he watches, doubtlessly superior mind clicking away behind thoughtful eyes, before he reconstructs Bruce’s convictions with a carefully phrased query.

Antagonizing. Thrilling.

Bruce knows he isn’t supposed to feel this way about the alien under his roof; he’s personally written several instruction manuals on not being distracted by the aliens with whom one is cohabiting, for all the good it’s done. (He should have apologized to Richard years ago.) Bruce reminds himself that this is Martha Kent’s son.

There’s something between them. A tether, an axis of rotation perhaps, a pseudo-force of attraction that presses even as inertia hardens with each step forward. His frame of reference for Clark is unstable, the variables clashing, the rotation of his understanding constantly shifting as Clark’s physical state improves. The constraints of motion between them are unclear, the coordinates of impact unresolved and arbitrary—impossible to say with certainty where and how this or that variation will affect larger events. The closed system of Bruce’s own home should be a simple formula to deconstruct.

Bruce knows how to break events and observations down, how to break numbers and machines and motivations down into solvable, rational pieces to the puzzle of life; it should be simple. It isn’t simple; he fails at calculating the sum of meaning to the looming Unknown.

Bruce doesn’t put a name to it; it’s too nebulous to quantify, its true nature twists away from him time and again as his angle of perception changes with time.

He gets lost.
Bruce has been more terse than usual, he knows. He has a reason: he’s a man surveying his problems. The problem is, if Clark is already going to know when Bruce is having an emotional reaction, then he’d much rather the actual content of that emotion be opaque. The problem is, hindsight is twenty-twenty and Bruce is long past the point where he can uproot Clark’s influence.

The problem is that Bruce has done this before, and every other time he’s felt a sense of family, but Clark isn’t a kid that Bruce can label ‘child’, and by doing so, remove temptation. Clark is intelligent, fierce and determined, for all his soulful looks and troubled brow. Clark is willing to fight Bruce over and for what he believes in; Clark isn’t a blank slate—he’s wonderfully, perilously fascinating.

The real problem is that for better or worse, Bruce is invested in Clark. With Clark.

He cuts short any and all attempts on Clark’s part at framing their association in such a way that suggests Bruce is owed. The last thing he wants is Clark’s obligation, or some twisted, misguided form of payback.

And then Clark smiles at Bruce; wide affectionate smiles that show perfect teeth and perfect humanity. It’s become difficult to see the alien in his eyes; the heterochromia is so human—a micrometer of brown spotting cascade-blue. He’s as careless with those smiles as he is with his goodwill.

Dangerous.

~

There is a difference between the solemn Kal of the journals and this sarcastically brilliant, vanilla Boy Scout. There’s a difference between the man who thought everyone deserved a chance and the man who thinks everything Bruce does is suspect. It doesn’t help that he’s right; that Bruce is suspect, that he’s guilty. It doesn’t help that the best way Bruce has found to control the criminal economy in Gotham is to run it himself. Clark’s more than smart enough to have figured that out by now.

Clark thinks he’s better than Bruce. (He’s right.)

Argumentative, critically questioning, too smart-mouthed for his own damn good. Too damn nosy for his own good.

Kent is a pain in the ass.

That mouth.

~

Obligation.

He’s indebted, morally, to seeing Clark returned to prime condition. No, he owes more than that—he owes the world Superman back, he owes Martha her son back. Bruce is accountable.

He owes Clark something more intangible, so he buries his awe and his anxiety and yes, his fear and he gets to work.
Bruce knows that he shouldn’t be teaching; he’s made so many avoidable mistakes, so many deadly mistakes, that he doesn’t deserve to teach anyone decent. He’s often thought himself cursed, though he knows that isn’t factually so.

However, he’s not teaching Kent to kill; he’s teaching him how to save. He’s teaching Kent how to defend himself and not die, how to avoid damaging the non-Metas that Superman apprehends, how to know which parts are most vulnerable from how Bruce touches him, how to best rip a man apart with his bare hands—

*No*—Bruce isn’t teaching him any of that.

It’s fine. It’s *fine*. Kent is old enough to know the difference between defense and aggression; he’s already a killer—he’s proven that. Bruce can’t change that; Bruce is teaching Clark how *not* to kill.

It’s a different skillset, with different rules, and as soon as Bruce sets that starkly in his mind, everything else flows smoothly and logically from it. The kid is good at this. It’s what Kent needs, structure he craves and it *would* be fine, regardless of how tense Bruce is and how primed he is for something to go horribly wrong, if Kent wasn’t so damned mouthy.

He talks about *everything*. The decor, the mats, the balance beam, the towels, the walls, the recessed lighting, the pommel horse, the rings, his sweat, random sounds and smells, the Mainframe, what people are eating on the Liberty Ferry this morning, the cars—*everything* except what Bruce needs him to concentrate on. Pulled in so many directions that it’s no wonder he can’t focus, he’s worse than… he’s distracted. *Distracting.*

He pulls a petty power-play in the middle of a lesson about torque and leverage, almost sprains Bruce’s arm without noticing and then has the audacity to *argue* with Bruce about it. Not even that—he has the absolute temerity to argue with Bruce about *something completely different*, while he’s holding Bruce’s arm against the turning of the socket, where Bruce had been knuckle-punched in the shoulder just hours earlier.

There is nothing that Bruce says to him that is untrue. *There is nothing that Bruce says to him that is untrue.* Yet, none of it is necessary and very little of it is warranted. Bruce would never have spoken to a younger student the way that he speaks to Clark Kent, and it is unjust of him. It’s *unworthy*. Bruce is too accustomed to working with those who don’t question him, and there is all the proof he requires. He uses Kent’s frustration to drive him away before Bruce can say something truly unforgivable. He has to calm down. This is his fault. *It’s always the teacher’s fault,* no matter what anyone else says.

In the wake of it, Bruce has to admit that Kent, the man he knows, would never do what he did as a power play. He has to admit to himself that Clark in that moment was distracted, bothered by Bruce’s assertion that there might be a proper time to hurt someone who was attacking him. Clark hadn’t meant any of it the way Bruce had taken it; he states his problems plainly, not in the underhanded way that’s second-nature to anyone raised in Gotham.

Bruce is too socialized to seeing the knife in an open hand.

Kent is *Clark* and not someone else. He’s *Kansas*—Bruce needs to remember that. Clark is not a good soldier, not anywhere *near* a soldier. He isn’t habituated to violence, won’t take what Bruce gives him and use it *against* instead of *for*. He is, however, disturbingly green and that cannot be allowed to stand.

Bruce has been dishonorable in his dealings and now he owes the man a debt. He despises being in debt, but they only get paid one way.
He pushes Clark harder—why not? Clark can take it. Instead of taking it hard though, instead of giving up and running back to Kansas with his tail between his legs (as Bruce half-hopes he will, thus taking the onus off of him to act), Clark becomes determined. His smiles become brighter, he practices for hours longer than a human could and still smiles when Bruce puts him down on his back. Clark doesn’t change his style, however; he anticipates, but the necessary element: fear of pain, is missing from his bold blue eyes. His stare is piercing; welcoming. Like a sunflower in the field, the way he turns to Bruce.

Recalculate: he doesn’t think he’s better than Bruce. He’s attracted to Bruce.

Unexpected. Flattering in a purely visceral way, but of little use and less sense. Presumptuous to assume it has more to do with Bruce than the reality that Bruce and Alfred are the only people besides his mother that Clark will let near him these days. It’s nothing.


This will pass; it always works.

He didn’t intend for Kent to enjoy every backhanded cut-down and dart Bruce aims his way, for him to make it a shared joke between them. Doesn’t plan for Kent’s eyes to shine when Bruce calls him outside of his name, when he accentuates their respective stations. Definitely doesn’t plan for or expect the flare in the kid’s eyes when Bruce calls him out loud what he does in his own thoughts. The only level of bastard that seems cold enough to make Kent keep his distance for longer than a few hours is the one that Bruce despises employing in his inner sanctum.

It doesn't pass. This isn’t working.

~“Pain narrows consciousness; pleasure blurs it.”~  -Mason Cooley

Clark. Christ, his mouth.

Bruce spills, biting into his wrist to silence himself. Gives himself exactly sixty seconds of recovery time then swings his legs over the side of the bed and heads for the promise of bitter absolution. He’s better than this.

He isn’t. Flesh is weak; he takes himself in hand in the shower, under the rapids-crisp downpour. It’s not leisure—it’s a means to an end. His body performs better when it isn't distracted by his hind-brain. Bruce’s body is the most trustworthy thing in his existence, he knows every sinew, every millimeter of himself. He’s trained for years to become who and what he is. It isn’t for leisure, so he doesn’t bother with the frills; he thinks of evidence, he thinks of cases to be solved and justice to be rendered as he forces his flesh through its daily ablution.

He thinks of gliding through dim lights and pitch-black shadow, sighs into the sensation and it’s near. He thinks of the impact of muscles and bone, the push and heave and crack of the fight, and he’s on the edge, tipping. Combat, impact, red and blue and blue—blue eyes and a bright, kind
smile and Bruce jerks violently. Hot pulsing spurts and muffled moans against the slick marble wall. *Pleasure.* Frigid water beating at his numb shoulders and dousing his hair. A shiver tries to wriggle free and he shoves it down, one hand braced on the wall. Counts his breaths and curses himself in twelve different languages.

*Fuck.*

Ten years ago Bruce would have identified the look in Clark’s eye, seen the danger and avoided further contact with Clark as a matter of duty and principle. Twenty years ago, he’d have seen the flashing red lights and put the brakes on after slaking his thirst and getting his pleasure from Clark for a night or three. This isn’t then; Bruce is pushing the far side of forty.

Bruce hasn’t made himself a man to be admired. He’s avoided, pushed away and rejected more personal salvation than he cares to recall. He’s trained more heirs—please, let him have trained heirs—than he can manage, in many ways. He’s had to kill, had to watch others die for him; some haven’t been his fault, but most have.

He isn’t meant to be admired; he’s meant to be feared. Respected. Obeyed. Bruce has been out in the cold for so long that he’s forgotten what warmth is; Clark’s sets him ablaze.

~

*You were my world, B,* he mourns, eyes glowing, *and you took that from me.* Bruce wakes tangled in sheets and visions. It can’t be allowed to happen.

The world changes in the blink of an eye.

~

The first time is like this:

Clark, brave in the face of a biological imperative that he can neither side-step nor ignore, placing his faith in Bruce. Bringing Bruce his problem and expecting a rational solution, which is exactly what Bruce excels at more than any other skill. Clark, allowing Bruce to assist him in an endeavor that he has only the smallest of inklings about, believing that Bruce knows the way and will guide him through it. Clark, caught in a snare of situational and hierarchical triggers endemic to Kryptonian survival; struggling with the fear he tries to hide, while he decides if he can trust Bruce enough. If he can trust himself enough. Even as Clark tries to make his decision, Bruce can see that Clark is fixated on him, ill and angry that he has to bring this to Bruce, unable to continue as if unaware of him; Bruce knows the signs.

It shouldn’t make Bruce hard, that Clark looks to *him* for help; it should be exactly as it would be if this were any other disruptive influence or attack on Bruce’s territory. It should be just as off-putting as fear toxin or Joker gas, as disgusting as the idea of any of Ivy’s concoctions taking mind and choice away from either of them, but it isn’t. It isn’t at all like any of those things, for the simple fact that Clark had already been watching, and Bruce knows lust when he sees it.
Bruce is uncomfortable with these facts: Clark deserves better.

He does the necessary research, then does more because there’s no such thing as ‘too prepared’ when dealing with someone whose muscle contractions could relieve one of life and limbs. He learns a staggering amount of information; about the ruling Houses, their sociological mores, their sexist galactic views, their grooming of young adult Kryptonians of ruling guilds to maintain the status quo. Their habit of “fostering” young adults to a more socially experienced partner, to enforce communal bonds. Their reliance on a remnant of biological eccentricity to enforce that maintenance; sensory input that, implausible as it may be, corresponds exactly with touch telepathy.

Bruce doesn’t like this; feeling as if Clark is forced to come to him. He locks the emotion down with everything else irrelevant and irredeemable. Bruce cannot control the parameters of this situation, only his response.

He concludes that this so-called telepathy is more akin to a form of low-level touch empathy, and from his readings it becomes evident that Clark’s ancestors had absolutely no compunctions about using it as a coercion. For a culture whose writings are full of self-congratulatory and sycophantic treatises on why they are superior to other life-forms, Bruce finds their blase attitude towards telepathic meddling troubling. They seemed to believe that having ‘Shokhteh soh-gevzhor tulamteh’; something Bruce translates as ‘the truth of a needy heart’, was psychologically indispensable. Something impossible, they claimed, to be an adult Kryptonian and live without. They had schools of study dedicated to the honing of this sense for the purposes of subduing those who were ill or otherwise unable to control themselves.

It’s important that Clark is still capable of coherent thought; Bruce hates this. Telepathy isn’t in Bruce’s bulwark, but he knows of several ancient world scholars with treatises on similar abilities. When he pulls them, they’re all high-level meditations, meant to assist with those most difficult of assassinations.

He marks it; Clark’s mind is a weapon. No wonder those stupid glasses prove such an effective disguise—no wonder Clark Kent is such a spector on public record; when he wants to be inconspicuous, he blurs the perceptions of others. He makes himself forgettable. And here he is, deep in the heart of Bruce’s support system. Dangerous. What other unseen abilities is he hiding? What else can Clark do, that they haven’t even considered yet?

It’s unbearable; Bruce has to get leverage on him.

There is a small area, roughly three by four inches, Bruce learns; a secondary sexual organ at the posterior of Clark’s spinal column and the sides of his neck that holds more nerve endings than the human male prostate. A hidden vulnerability, a weak point; at some point in Krypton’s prehistory, this area was used to induce ovulation in females. Though rudimentary, the organ was present in males; if Clark’s responses were to be believed, it was far from inactive.

Bruce’s inquest suggests that direct pressure applied to this area disrupts empathic projection and produces perceptible strong sensation, which mirrors the release of the chemical oxytocin in humans. He locks away the implications of that knowledge as well, until he needs use of it. He’ll have to run trials on the validity of this data; take samples and preventative measures; record his findings until he can assure accuracy of his dataset and his effect on Clark’s physiology. Form repeatable procedures until there’s a surety of success without dismemberment.

He knows that Clark doesn’t want to hurt anyone; that he’d rather die again than hurt another living soul. It’s one of many weak points that Bruce has already identified.
Bruce knows how to do this; he’s trained for this. Bruce is qualified for this.

He’s saved Clark once, however one approaches the situation. He’ll do it again, as many times as is necessary to wipe away the stain of his first failure. He’ll do it no matter how tightly it crushes his chest; Clark matters, in ways that Bruce can’t hope to quantify yet. He ignores the indicators telling him that it’s more than that, deeper than that, that Clark matters personally—Bruce can only deal with so many crises at a time.

When it comes to the security of the world and its peoples, Bruce can hold the line, but only Clark can push it back. He has a duty to see Clark through.

(Clark deserves better, but Bruce is selfish).

*Destructive. Self-serving. Reckless. Criminal.* Bruce is a criminal—what he feels is a punishment—or should be— and the knowledge that those feelings will never be reciprocated is more than just recompense for action he’s about to commit to.

He feels it inside, a lightless stain that can’t be scrubbed clean, a shadow that laughs from his depths, because the only way that he can divine to help Clark is to do the very thing that Bruce has so wanted to do for too long.

Bruce spits the sample into an airtight vial, caps it while Clark is still in the throes of his first release.

(One can never be too safe.)
Righting Wrongs For Ghosts

Chapter Summary

"Memory blurs, that's the point. If memory didn't blur you wouldn't have the fool's courage to do things again, again, again, that tear you apart."
- Joyce Carol Oates

Chapter Notes

Paradigm
: a philosophical and theoretical framework of a scientific school or discipline within which theories, laws, and generalizations and the experiments performed in support of them are formulated; a philosophical or theoretical framework of any kind

Paradigm shift
: a fundamental change in basic concepts and ways of functioning that occur when the usual/prevalent way of thinking about or doing something is replaced by a new and different way

Chapter Five: Righting Wrongs For Ghosts

~“Nothing happens quite by chance. It's a question of accretion of information and experience…”~
- Jonas Salk

It isn’t just a matter of the initial treatment. Upon further review, it seems that Bruce has misjudged certain potentials in his rush to alleviate the primary symptoms. The empathic receptors at Clark’s nape that he was so eager to cover with his foolishly bare hands have other, more veritable intimate context than simple emotional constraint.

They also promote the release of particular chemical compounds dedicated to boosting bonding hormones.

Activating the patch of warm skin might have been necessity, but stroking it, putting his tongue to it—he’s stumbled his way through more social and sexual taboos than he can credit. He’s told Clark’s body that Bruce’s touch is safe, and Clark believes it himself.

It isn’t safe, but for all Bruce knows the damage was done the moment he touched Clark’s skin pulling him out of his grave, or the moment he helped Diana lower Clark’s body to level ground, or even earlier: the moment he shook Clark Kent’s hand. The answers to why his touch should be any
different, when hundreds—thousands of people must have touched Clark in his lifetime, elude him. Bruce thinks of Clark Kent as he first saw him, shrinking from casual touches and avoidant of all but the briefest of contacts.

Bruce tries not to think of Clark Kent as he first saw him.

It’s like making love to a sandstorm.

He thinks of kissing Clark while switching mental gears between thinking of more pertinent affairs. He thinks of it during morning coffee, during meet-ups, while affecting playing Poppit during a Marketing meeting, while listening very closely to Lucius Fox’s instructions during a Finance ‘brunch’ where Bruce identifies about a half-dozen security leaks before the entree arrives.

Bruce hasn’t chased a pair of lips so hard since he went to boarding school. He’s made a reputation of being a kiss and tell man, of being a wham-bam, thank you man, of being that guy. The truth is, in all his years on the Town, Bruce can count the number of people he’s kissed on the mouth on two hands.

It isn’t a lack of proficiency—Bruce is more than able to perform, with documentable results. It isn’t a phobia, Bruce has mastered his phobias.

It’s a perimeter. It’s a concern.

Mouth to mouth transfer requires a mental intimacy that Bruce has never been willing to divulge, and while he’s never shirked providing a spectacle, there are lines that he holds true to himself. If pressed, he’s done what needed to be done, but always with a carefully-hidden distaste, a desire to rush things along and a sense of relief at the soonest opportunity to lick or drop to his knees. It’s easiest to control a situation when other parties involved already believe that they have the upper hand; Bruce has convinced many people that they held the upper hand with him. He’s famous for it, and he’s very, very good at it. There has usually been a better way, to get the information or equipment that he needs, than discomfiting himself.

When confronted, Brucie Wayne would seem bored and disaffected, all hard cock and harder head, a sulking, pushy, aristocratic mess, irritated by the ‘vanilla’ in the room and eager to do anything else.

Anything else.

He’s been called everything: a wet-mouthed slut, a sissy, a rake, a manwhore, and all shades between.

Bruce has a lot of reputations. Some of them he’s earned more than others.

~

Clark starts to go out again and save lives. He doesn’t start small, doesn’t seem capable of small in any way. He’s always on edge, always waiting for the next disaster and it comes to Bruce one day, that Clark spends every second of every day blocking out the entire world, that the only time he sees a look of relief on Clark’s face is when he’s lost himself. Bruce makes sure to keep Clark on
his toes, focused on Bruce, whenever possible.

It’s a pleasure to see Clark’s determined face fall open in surprise and joy, an honor to be the man who gives that joy to Clark. There are few things in life which could make these frantic moments better.

Bruce doesn’t believe in coincidences. The discovery that the chemicals in his bodily fluids help calm the progression of Clark’s condition quicker than simple skin to skin contact is an unfortunate and unforeseen fact of biology. It is not a coincidence.

(It is not the answer to any prayers, real or hypothetical, that Bruce has invoked.)

~

It isn’t enough; Clark gets better (or maybe he doesn’t), but he needs more, not less (or maybe he’s infected Bruce as well, somehow). Bruce meters out his time in short plentiful bursts; he sees how Clark’s eyes go hazy when he follows certain criteria.

Clark stares up at him with his wet eyes and his wetter lips, and it occurs to Bruce that Clark isn’t mocking him; that perhaps Clark hasn’t ever done this before. How is it even possible? Clark is thirty-six years old.

“This is your first time.” He’s known it; he knew it. For all Clark’s protestations of not being a virgin—and that’s a quantifier that Bruce has no trouble doing away with; he’s had lovers who blew his mind with nothing more than air and anticipation—he’d known in the back of his mind that Clark hadn’t ventured past certain lines (for very good reasons). His voice remains reasonably level. None of the black rushing want or howling greed makes it through.

Clark’s mouth twitches upward slightly. It’s a defense mechanism, not a smile. “I. I’ve been… rubbed. Before.”

Bruce keeps his expression neutral. Rubbed? “You’ve had handjobs.”

Clark nods, eyes cast aside. He grows steadily more flushed under Bruce’s gaze. “Lois - we tried more than oral, once. I broke the headboard and she was afraid-” Clark swallows. “She was afraid.”

No, he thinks. It wasn’t just Miss Lane who’d been afraid. Clark is still afraid, right here and now. Which means he really has no idea what his body will do with a partner; no one knows what Clark’s body will do, with a partner.

Bruce could know.

This is tantamount to an offense to science; it can’t be allowed to continue. “Kissing is sex. Sexual,” Clark insists into the silence.

Reality is often overly sobering. Bruce takes in a deliberately audible breath, relaxes a few facial muscles. He’s very flexible in these matters; he can salvage this.

“There’s no need for penetration, Clark. We can continue as we’ve been, until you’re recovered. We can find an alternative solution or if you prefer, an alternative partner.” He wants to devour
Clark whole. Instead, he slides his hands lightly up, away from Clark’s hips and towards more neutral ground. Lets his fingers stroke up Clark’s waist and over the deep cut of his obliques. He looks into surprised blue eyes firmly.

“There is nothing you need to do here. This isn’t something you do because you’re forced to; you do this when you’re ready.” No one had told Bruce that. He’d had to find out afterward; after Alfred had pulled a man off of him and broken said man’s jaw. After the family lawyers had gotten involved and monies had to be paid. After Bruce had to explain that no, he’d been the aggressor and Alfred had sharply instructed him to shut his foolish mouth, because he’d been too young to instigate anything in the first place, and the man had known it. Just as Bruce knows that this isn’t an appropriate time to be having this conversation. “I’m not unwilling, but not now.”

“Want you. Want this.”

Bruce concentrates briefly, forces his need away and locks down his lower autonomous functions. Whatever else Clark is, he’s still someone to whom Bruce has pledged protection. Whatever else Bruce might be, he isn’t about to push the line—not with Clark swimming in and out of rational headspace. Not like this.

“You have me,” Bruce agreed reasonably, “but that won’t be happening until you’re interested when you can string a full thought process together.”

Clark makes an affronted noise when Bruce takes his hands and pins them to either side of his head. Bruce’s appeal to reason only seems to make Clark more determined to squirm.

“No, he couldn’t possibly. He won’t.

He tastes sunshine on Clark’s tongue. The inner twist that often happens when he least expects it. “If you do want that,” he murmurs. Anticipation coils tight in his gut, hard like a Gotham goodbye. He’s going to hell when he dies. “You’re a grown boy; you understand what I’d want. You know —” He waits for Clark to laugh at his wording, to hate his guts for presuming. He could be mistaken, he could have misjudged the blushes, the timing, the correlations.

“You’ll f-fuck me—” Clark gasps into his mouth. “Make me blush. Rough me up—” Bruce kisses him to shut him up. That mouth.

“Christ, Kansas. That what you want, to get roughed up? To get fucked? Aren’t you even a little ashamed, kid?” There’s more east-end, more Matches to his tone than he’d like to admit. He’s definitely going to hell. He hasn’t misjudged a damn thing.

“Yes,” slips out of Clark, and then he screws up his face and comes in his pants, just like that. His body is completely proportional; long and thick from root to tip, velvety soft skin and hot iron hardness.

—and Bruce has to kiss him again, because of the drop in his gut and because Clark, Jesus this kid has to know how hot he is—

“Clark. Tell me after.” Bruce needs to stop talking. He needs to stop talking now; it uses up every ounce of control he has to reach down casually and palm himself. It doesn’t take much—watching Clark come is, in Bruce’s estimation, better than Swedish porn. Having dated numerous Swedes
who happened to moonlight in ‘art films’, Bruce feels qualified to judge, case closed. After hours of self-denial and that little show, it only takes the one good stroke before he’s pumping out over his hand and Clark’s tensing stomach.

He slides his hand down the loose band of Clark’s sweats, swirls fingers through Clark’s spend as well and lifts them up. Clark blinks up at him, sucks his sticky-stained fingers in with a muffled groan and laps it all up. He wants to go after it, Bruce can tell, but that would lead them to a situation that Bruce is not yet prepared for, so he makes eye contact. Pushes Clark flat with one hand on his chest, yanks his hair back the way he’s learned Clark likes. Kisses him to distract him while he scoops up another double finger-full to feed into those swollen lips. Strokes rough fingers across a tongue like hot wet velvet over durasteel.

“Good, son,” he says, just to watch how Clark shudders. “Good boy.”

Feeds him as much as he can, then kisses him until Clark’s heart-rate slows and his limbs stop shaking. There.

It’s just as difficult to force his heavy body up and out of Clark’s orbit as it always is. Difficult, but necessary. Bruce is out of line. He’s so out of line that he can’t see the boundaries anymore. One of these days his Clark is going to wake up with a clear head; it’s prudent for everyone involved if Bruce isn’t within reach when that happens.

*His Clark?*

Bruce lets silky strands slip between his fingers and levers himself up.

He has planning to do.

~

He’s going to be the death of Bruce.

Clark seems to be on a near-constant state of arousal, both sexually and emotionally. Meeting his body’s demands is a pursuit of epic proportions.

Bruce doesn’t complain. He’ll be damned if he’ll admit that he isn’t up to a task, especially this task. It isn’t just the sex that’s taxing on top of all of Bruce’s other physical duties, it’s the effort involved in driving Clark to that place where his stress hormones can dissipate.

*Clark’s quiet place.*

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that Clark refuses to come to Bruce when he’s in need, necessitating that Bruce seek him out instead. Admittedly, Clark makes himself imminently available.

Clark’s mask is almost as well-worn as Bruce’s, but instead of casual indifference, his mask is made up of quiet smiles and deceitful serenity. He’s too well-mannered to ask, won’t bow or beg unless Bruce drives him to it, and when Bruce does, there’s a force to Clark’s pleas that belies his apparent meekness. Perfection doesn’t exist—Clark is just as flawed in his own ways as most of humanity, Bruce can see that now—but Bruce would be hard-pressed to find anyone who exhibited that quality more than Clark.
Every challenge has a solution, and every solution requires the correct tools.

Bruce has to up his game.

~

Clark’s labored, panting breaths.

The way he grinds his teeth together as he shakes, then gives his mouth over to be tasted.

How he arches his back within the limits of the frail threads binding his arms, how his knees come together to press at Bruce’s hips even as he begs.

The bow of his head and the shudder when he submits to Bruce’s will. He’s at the end of his control.

Bruce doesn’t let himself lapse; he doesn’t allow his hands to quicken, no matter how much he might enjoy the fantasy. He wants to hurt Clark; not injure him.

This: Clark pouring out his pain while Bruce leads him through it, Clark giving him everything and hiding nothing. In the meridian between day and night, he’s Bruce’s, as much Bruce’s as he can be. This is what makes Bruce harder than he’s been in decades. The low throbbing of his cock, trapped and constrained in his tailored trousers, is a distant ache.

Static and ions on his tongue, a charge building in the air like the front of a storm. Bruce watches and forces patience.

The tiny hitches of Clark’s hips, the rhythmic pressure of his knees, the fact that Clark’s ass is no longer on the desk, if it ever was. No, he’s midair, pressed up tight against Bruce’s ruthless grip on the base of his fat cock, so much so that Bruce has to use his own weight to balance them out.

The anticipation is inebriating, and he can see in the unthinking animal movements that Clark can’t help but make, how drunk Clark looks on the air between them as well. The sound is barreled well, weight even and solid, metal polished to a wicked shine, the action tight but smooth. Clark convulses, a tiny aborted twitch away then back towards Bruce. Bruce keeps his eyes on the business at hand, but he smiles tightly as he listens, not just to Clark’s quiet sobs, but to the messages of Clark’s body.

There it is, there: the moment when Clark’s control finally does run out, and he hands it, wholesale, over to Bruce for keeping. Clark’s pupils swallow up the blue until they might as well be black, soft and soothing as the live-feed from Bruce’s favorite satellite. The panting, sweating acceptance that descends on Clark as his body stops fighting to get away from Bruce’s hands and he simply shudders and takes it is uplifting.

Purifying.

Seeing Clark surrender calms Bruce as well, turns the gnawing urge to grab and take into the need to appreciate and enjoy. There is no rush—Bruce had made sure of that, in his plans. There is absolutely no reason that seems imperative at the moment, not to enjoy this, not to allow this to touch him and move him.
It transports him.

He’s amazed, he always is, at how easily this seems to come to Clark. The pleading, the tears (and Clark is by far one of the prettiest criers that Bruce has had). It makes him hungry, no—ravenous, to know how Clark will take a standard-gauge rod, if this is how he reacts to the smallest dilator in Bruce’s kit.

He’d finished his baseline review of Clark’s performance metrics days ago. It amuses him, makes him thirsty, to watch the kid squirm while Bruce teases him and hurts his pretty dick. He uses every sense, takes in Clark’s expression in tiny measured flashes. He’s enthralled.

In awe, from watching Clark take the darkness inside Bruce and transmute it into something beautiful to see.

And when Clark begs *for more…*

A detonation below consciousness. A jolt to the balls like liquid lightning, a burst of charge too sharp for the poor insulators of Bruce’s nervous system. A peak, a clear sight from the top of a mountain that no one else has set foot on.

Possession, bright and shining as a bushfire.

Clark, pressed against him, the world’s most arcane electrical conductor, the positive to Bruce’s negative, the discharge coming evident in the tight velvet of Clark’s sack and his trembling limbs. Lust and pain lighting him up and irradiating the both of them.

Clark, caught between foreign extremes, unable to come, unwilling to make Bruce stop. Helpless at Bruce’s pleasure.

Willfully, deliciously helpless and not making a move to do one thing about it.

This is the flight that Bruce is capable of.

Bravery like this deserves a reward. Bruce is stroking before he thinks twice, murmuring encouragement almost in the same breath. Once, root to tip, drawing the tight foreskin sheathing Clark’s cock up over the rosy-pink glans and back down in a fluid twist. Up twice, while the training rod sinks down and Clark sucks in air until it seems as if he can’t possibly inhale any more.

He pinches the kid on the third upstroke, fingers pressing into damp frenulum and foreskin both.

It’s possible that Bruce holds his breath as well, teeth clenched when the moment comes, possible that the sight of it short-circuits something vital. It certainly feels like it, even though he could relate every creeping second if asked.

He’s proud, when Clark obeys him. When Clark trusts him enough to let go and know that Bruce has everything under control. He’s…

*Jesus.*

Bruce isn’t a Kryptonian, he’s no Superman; he can’t live off sunlight, desserts and fresh spunk. He can’t keep up with Clark that way and he’d be a fool to try, but this. This he can do, and if it works, as seems to be the case, then there might be a path in all this that doesn’t end with Clark growing tired of him.
Boredom is not an obstacle that Bruce intends to encounter.

His cock gives a nagging twitch even so, when Clark’s forehead presses into his collar and he pumps out hot and plentiful all over Bruce’s hands.

Beautiful.

As always, the scent is indefinable: mammalian, musky, metallic. He’s stopped with his fingers already on his tongue, but it’s too late; if there’s a biological component here that’s affecting Bruce too, then its done it's job well.

As much as Bruce has studied and researched, he hasn’t yet found a reference to anyone but the primary patient of a ‘healing-redundancy-cycle’ being affected by treatment.

The lack of proven data does not equal a lack of relevant facts.

But Clark is shaking still, eyes misted and dilated, and Bruce is capable of more than one stream of thought at a time.

He keeps his reservations and observations to himself, he tends to Clark, he ignores the fact that he’s stained his trousers like some punk kid fresh to the Red District.

He’s got to get his head together. There is no ‘later’, there is no potential for Clark to become bored.

This will end soon and some form of normalcy will resume— any of a number of scenarios that Bruce has already considered and accepted as karmic debt that he will pay, and that will be the end of that.

The world will move on, and so will Bruce, however he has to.

~

The hollows get deeper under Clark’s eyes.

It would be easier to fight the wind than to fight the sense of urgency Bruce feels.

He isn’t even sure that it will work, but there is a series of personal notes in the Kryptonian database that comes to mind, barely a set of coherent thoughts arranged in an excitable way, a record that Bruce had skimmed and passed without further notice until now—a young attempt at an ancient poetry style that took decades to master even tens of thousands of years ago.

The aspiring art styling of the writer notwithstanding, it was a passage detailing a ‘time of needing’. Within it, the young author lamented about a lack of bodily awareness, a passing of the Kryptonian hour standard during which no hunger or thirst was acknowledged, and how comforted and grateful they were, for ‘those who were wiser than they’.

It’s a thin lead, but Bruce takes it. He adds to the routine: a daily feeding and he takes it upon himself to do it by hand, since Clark gladly ignores the food that’s set for him.

Bruce thinks of it as a duty, doesn’t realize the potential of the situation until he’s in the midst of it. He’s unprepared for the pervading warmth that soaks him, when Clark eyes his hand, scans Bruce’s face thoughtfully, then deliberately bends his neck to first nibble at the scones, then lightly
at Bruce’s palm.

He sucks every trace of crumbs from Bruce’s fingers.

*On further consideration, this development was most likely due to the incorporation of bad data.*

It isn’t as if Clark actually *needs* the calories after all: according to the database, as long as Clark is steeped in the radiation of a yellow star, he can go indefinitely without eating. However, Clark *enjoys* eating; Bruce knows this. If he’s too distracted to partake in the small things that he enjoys, it can only increase Clark’s stress, which in the end, will only make Bruce’s purpose more difficult.

There are most likely a wide variety of other ways to get sustenance into Clark—some more unpleasant than others, but Bruce finds that he doesn’t give a damn. This way is *their* way; this way is beneficial.

*If this is what it takes for Clark to eat, he thinks, then this is what it takes.*

It’s easy to rationalize his own enjoyment.

It always has been.

~

The first time is like this:

As far as Bruce can tell, Clark is in his right mind finally, regardless of his remaining sensitivity to particular environmental stimuli.

Exhibit: Bruce.

Clark is ill through no fault of his own, he needs what he’ll evidently never ask for, and he and Bruce are *compatible*. The pheromone Bruce is emitting that’s causing him to sniff Bruce and moan, that’s sheer biology at work.

Even after everything Bruce has done, Clark still responds to him; perhaps even *because* of what Bruce has done—he’ll most likely never know. Clark’s condition won’t go away; it won’t get better, it’s only getting worse every day. Bruce isn’t sure how to approach him, so he comes to Kal as he is.


There was never a question of whether Bruce would give him this or not. Bruce couldn’t keep himself from promising Clark he’d save his mother; he hadn’t been able to resist those brimming eyes then, and he’s no closer to resisting Clark now.

Alfred looks at Bruce, tutts chidingly and shakes his head as if Bruce is signing his own death warrant; maybe he is.

Bruce is a man of habit, and he’s been trained to consider repeated activities as routine and to identify and separate such routines. Once he’s fallen into the pattern of thinking of those hours
post-patrol and pre-research as ‘Kal’s hours’, it’s a difficult groove to break free of. Even when, or perhaps especially when those hours amount to nothing more strenuous than the sensation of Kal’s hair under his palm, or when the time slips away under the low buzz of engines turning endlessly left and the near-silent din of an announcer somewhere deep in Dixie, volume turned down low so as not to disturb Bruce’s research.

Even when there’s no time for more salacious intimacies and the best Bruce can give is a perch at his feet and a hand at the back of Kal’s neck, the few words they share while cross-indexing information, or a brush of fingertips on heated skin, the time becomes inextricably tied to Kal, in Bruce’s mind.

*The hours are not ‘Kal’s’; they’re Bruce’s time; they belong to Bruce, as they always have.*

It’s a fight he cedes almost as soon as he begins to debate it. There’s only so much self-delusion that Bruce is capable of, after all.

--

His mother taught him well; Bruce will give him that.

Clark sidles into his HQ, while Bruce is deep in the backlog of his research on the lineage of the Ibanescu line, looking for the purported heir to the fortune. Looking for the link to a string of seemingly unrelated robberies that nonetheless have put his hackles up. He knows the answer is in the files he has open, but with over 300,000 words to process and interlink, and four times as many words to run through his keyword algorithm, it’s taking some time.

A sandwich (not one of Alfred’s—Bruce can tell) gets slipped onto Bruce’s desk and he eats it without comment. Generally speaking, people who bring him freshly made sandwiches are not threats.

He wants to convince Bruce to accompany him to several hospitals—burn wards, around town. He talks about it, around it, until Bruce represses a sigh and closes down his work. After another few minutes spent listening to Clark’s hesitant queries, Bruce realizes that Clark words aren’t as circuitous as they sound at all.

Something has deeply disturbed Clark. He’s hushed, saddened and solemn, telling Bruce in low tones about dark children’s wards and unequipped trauma response units around the city. (The very same response units to whom Bruce sent out memos regarding Doomsday Protocols weeks ago.) But he doesn’t want Bruce to send more money; he wants Bruce to visit, *in person*, and he somehow thinks this will be boosting for hospital morale in any sense other than financial.

*There are certain truths about the world that Clark is not willing to face.*

Clark isn’t the type of man to try and lead Bruce around by his dick, although for this, Bruce would be swayed regardless of what type of man Clark was.

It deserves more of an answer, *Clark* deserves more of an answer than Bruce’s standard line.

Bruce frowns, grabs a bundle of documents from the pile and puts it into Clark’s gesturing hand. "Tell me what you see missing from this report. All discrepancies: vehicles, equipment, personnel." He goes back to his research.
From the corner of his eye, he sees Clark look at the binder in his hands dubiously: it seems small for a report of this magnitude, Bruce knows, small for the task at hand. He sees the frustrated compression of Clark’s upper lip and the rippling flare of nostril; his dander is up.

Bruce waits, types a bit, then a bit more, and hears Clark’s quiet sigh moments later.

*The sound of paper, pages being turned just a little too quickly for someone who is calm.*

When the fast flipping stops and the spine of the binder creaks lightly, Bruce returns his full attention to his work.

He already knows what Clark sees.

The lines of print and demarcated indexes march down the pages. This isn’t a report; it’s a filing guide to an assortment of collected and collated batches of information. Hospital records, casualty reports, EMS records, gas slips, insurance payments, legal fee accounting and specialist’s orders fill the boxes surrounding Bruce’s desk.

Superspeed has its advantages; Clark zips from one filing cabinet to another. Bruce notes that he’s careful to keep his wake contained tight to his body, with some satisfaction.

All of the assorted hardcopy files in one way or another have to do with managerial coordination and oversight of the current high-risk emergency zones within locality.

Namely, Metropolis, Gotham and parts between.

There are damage assessments.

There are contracts with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

There are lists of typed messages and calls from contractors asking questions about cleanup and rebuilding efforts.

There’s the detailed dossier outlining the efforts of Metropolis and Gotham’s official Emergency Management Directors (with B’s impatient scrawling corrections) to coordinate all disaster-related efforts with public safety personnel, elected officials, nonprofits, community organizations and state and federal agencies, as well as blunt observations about the likelihood of those officials’ successes.

There are future emergency plans and suggestions for response training and enhanced civil communications via various Wayne-owned satellites.

There’s the “all-volunteer” scramble-team that Bruce has (anonymously) hand-picked to oversee Wayne Industries’ response efforts, manage certain non-terrestrial Hazardous Materials, prioritize actions, conduct rescue missions, establish shelters, and make recommendations related to evacuations.

There are the water, food, cots, tarps, blue roofing sheeting and blankets—the same emergency supplies Clark sees in the city when he goes out to help. There are the donation funds and slush funds set up in Wayne subsidiaries names, for Consumable medical supplies, sign language services, interpreters, infant and toddler products, generators, petrol, cargo vans, cleanup services, pet sitters, caregivers, geriatric services…

Bruce is aware that the lists are dauntingly thorough. His people have been working with teams
around the world since day zero.

The message is just as transparent, he hopes. There are few things more valuable than Bruce’s time—his presence not being one of them. He’s already spending all he can afford.

Either way, a potential argument is defused. Bruce wants Clark’s opinions, but he only expects perfection from himself.

Clark isn’t perfect, but he does his best. He learns from his mistakes; he makes Bruce a better man, just by being with him.

Bruce doesn’t need a Robin; he doesn’t need a lieutenant or a second in command—what he needs is a partner.

Bruce is fucked. Completely and utterly *fucked.*

He experiences what feels like a brief period of pure blinding insanity where he considers calling Martha and confessing everything. For what, advice, counsel, warning, censoring, Bruce isn’t certain. In the end he does call, but small talk, truly meaningful, non-goal-based social intercourse is not one of Bruce’s skills.

Martha, thankfully, is not one to mince words either. She puts up with approximately ninety seconds of Bruce’s failure to commit to any useful communication. As he’s preparing to bid her goodnight, uncomfortably aware that he’s wasting her time and his own, Martha interrupts him gently.

“Why don’t you boys come down to the farm for Thanksgiving?”

There is little in this world that causes Bruce Wayne to freeze up, but Martha Kent, she finds the chinks in his defenses as if she put them there herself.

*She knows Bruce.* As well as anyone by now other than Alfred, he supposes, and that… That thought will take some getting accustomed to.

After an embarrassing period of total silence which he spends weighing potential disappointment and interpersonal matrix damage versus potential criminal activity on the day in question, Bruce quietly agrees to the date.

*Thanksgiving in Gotham isn't anything that can't be handled by the people who get paid to do their jobs.*

There isn’t anything he wants to say that’s suitable for long-distance conversation.

He thanks her, and hangs up feeling the same way he always does after Martha: vaguely chastened and faintly ridiculed, but warmed.

*Perhaps that’s Martha’s super power.*

Bruce’s problems have just multiplied.
He’s known what’s waiting for him for years now, even before. He’s done his best to insulate everyone that he cares to from that eventuality.

‘The future’ will not be a surprise, when it comes; only the method and manner is a variable worth noting. The future is a grey plain with only one certain end, and with the exception of those circumstances which can effectively be planned and readied for, Bruce has trained himself to pay as little attention to what other people conceive as ‘the future’, as possible.

*When there was nothing that he wouldn’t sacrifice, there was nothing that could be taken from him.*

But now the thoughts are back.

They creep in, when he disregards the habit of decades to feed Clark his tongue, so he can know what the inside of Clark’s mouth tastes like.

He thinks of it, when he’s licking his way across that faultless scape of skin, and later, when he’s confident and tongue-deep in Clark’s ass.

Bruce thinks of it, when he buys out a high-class New England shoppe for his own purposes—a hand-crafted gag and gear leather specialist’s—out-city.

He imagines it, when he trains Clark to keep his jaw open when he comes, when he teaches him how to hold his throat open, when Clark learns how to be still and accept.

He breathes it, when he trains Clark’s body to relax and take his fingers, and later still, more.

Bruce thinks of the future all the time, now. It isn’t grey—it’s soaring blue, free as *Larvivora cyane*.

Yes, robin-bright as a spring day.

There are bigger things, more important things at stake than happiness. There are absolutes, there are finalities, there are things that must be.

But maybe that’s the wrong way to think about it. Perhaps there are things that involve more people, things that are more important *for more people*, but there is nothing bigger for Bruce than what is happening right now, between them.

Perhaps Bruce has been wrong about a number of things, all along.

Clark's a grass-fire, a blazing pillar of opinion and conviction, and it shouldn’t excite Bruce to fuck with Clark… but it does.

There is nothing barring a good fight, that’s quite as satisfying in its way as casually letting slip something that he knows will put Clark’s back up, just for the brief moment of diamond-sharp clarity in those eyes. There’s nothing quite like Clark leaning in and telling Bruce where he can go, or what to do when he gets there.

There's nothing, no one else in the world who could utter the kind of obviously noble political
insanities that Clark does while draped nude over Bruce leather settee. There's no one else in the world who would refuse to back down when arguing with Bruce for any extended period of time. Clark makes statements about how the world *should* work, and he isn't wrong. It's probably unwise to be aroused by his Truth and Justice shtick, but damn if he doesn't make it look good.

Sometimes Bruce argues with him just for the sake of seeing him ruffled.

There’s nothing like Clark dropping his masks and feeling safe enough to tussle in the dirt verbally with Bruce, even on the most trivial matters.

(The more trivial, the better.)

The argument over whether waffles or pancakes were better was perhaps the most entertaining fifteen minutes Bruce can recall that didn’t involve children underfoot. That’s most likely the day when Clark realizes what Bruce has been doing; after that point, there's always a split-moment of processing when Bruce goads him.

Clark learns games quickly.

It’s Bruce's own fault that he lets it mean something more than it should to him.

~

Bruce tries to be honest. Not with the public and not with his enemies to be sure, but with himself, always.

Honesty tells him that he’s only one man. Honesty tells him that he couldn’t possibly have foiled collusion between Poison Ivy, Joker and the Clock King by himself, with no Robin on-duty and time a precious commodity being counted against him. Bruce knows he couldn’t have done it without Clark, but Clark doesn’t care about his own contributions. He doesn't care that it was his speed that got them to the tower at the right moment of distraction; he’s effusive with the press about how amazing Bruce’s mundane deductions were.

Clark doesn't seem to realize that his inhuman reflexes are what kept Bruce from getting shot point-blank; he’s far too fascinated by how Bruce’s quick cross-wiring prevented the timer from reaching its mark. Clark doesn’t care that it took his strength to open the vault door; he’s too agog over the way Bruce disarms the sonic bomb in the bank’s basement that was meant to disable Clark.

He doesn’t care, even when Bruce gets him into a situation where K is involved, because Bruce breaks out of the handcuffs they’ve been so disappointingly bound with and caps the evening off with a spectacular beat-down of the wanna-be of the week (though Clark does stop him… Eventually).

Honesty tells Bruce that Clark is the worst judge of his own effectiveness possible. He’s too willing to throw his own accomplishments under the bus.
Honesty says that Bruce has made a terrible mistake and that the only way to avoid worse mistakes is to muddle through.

(No, that isn’t honesty; it may wear the voice of Alfred in his mind, but that isn’t honesty at all.)

Bruce sends Alfred away, sets the Glasshouse on lock-down for twenty-four hours and engages certain emergency plans to initiate, if his heart-rate stops. He takes his first hot shower in months—a long shower, allows himself to enjoy it. It might be his last for some time; for all he knows Clark will put him in traction, but better him than some innocent out on the streets.

He has a plan.

Initially, Bruce has no intention of kissing the kid during the act; this is strictly a one-way transfer. Kissing is and has always been a distraction. He’d much rather get the job done, get out and move on. It’s not a new thing; his distaste for mouth to mouth fluid transfer is well-documented, but Bruce finds that he has an urge. He wants to know what that smart mouth really tastes like. Just one taste, for science; just one and his curiosity can be satisfied and buried.

Any attempt at objectivity Bruce intended gets pushed aside as soon as he touches Clark. Bruce expects him to be shy and fumbling; his dissembling and evasiveness about his all too pressing medical problem seem to correlate with evidence of a lack of experience or experimentation. Bruce is more than satisfied to be wrong in this hypothesis: Clark doesn’t blush for him because he’s shy; it isn’t inexperience that pinks his cheeks.

Clark blushes because he’s so eager for reprieve, so hot-blooded for someone else to take charge that he can’t help it. Clark’s mouth is confident, then melts into a restless, quivering wreck.

*It’s just pheromones*, Bruce reminds himself. It has nothing to do with him at all.

Objectively, Bruce accepted the AI’s assertion of their compatibility—now he *knows it*.

Subjectively, Clark is delicious. Bruce expects Clark's frustration to exhibit as violence; throughout it all, regardless of how hard Bruce goads him, his touch remains gentle and measured. He follows Bruce’s lead seamlessly; barely indents the mattress as he defies gravity, pressing up to Bruce, taking Bruce’s entire weight and angling for more. He’s heavy and thick, arching and eager in Bruce’s hand when he strokes. The hungry little noises he makes and the way he curses when he loses control.

There is a marked difference between acting disaffected and *being* disaffected; hiding his arousal would make Clark even more ashamed than he already is. Bruce is done acting, on this score.

Clark doesn’t reach for him, doesn’t try to touch him or help him through his own release, just stares up at him hungrily with darkened eyes and sex-slack lips, flushed flesh pressing up to Bruce and allows him to finish. Bruce swallows down his self-derision (and what had he expected, that the peak of evolutionary conditioning would be pleased to see him lose control?) and resolves to keep things professional. Compartmentalizes his day from his night fourfold, and gives Clark what he needs. This isn’t about Bruce. This cannot be about Bruce.

He refuses to permit himself to make this situation about him. He’s compromised so thoroughly that even to himself, his rationalizations ring false.

There’s no way this is acceptable; will *ever* be acceptable. He won’t be forgiven; he isn’t *fixable* and he’s made his peace with that. Clark won’t want much to do with him after this, won’t want his
friendship or anything else of his, and that is more than fitting. The least he can do is make it memorable.

Clark Kent is wholesome and honest and kind; he is brave and selfless; he is thoughtful and humble, but he is not by any stretch of the imagination, vanilla. He gets rock-hard with minimal provocation—a beautiful, wondrous thing—and spurs like Bruce invented orgasms and Clark is buying up his stock. The sheer amount of ejaculate he produces is astonishing; it’s no wonder Kryptonians made the move to genetic engineering early on, if Clark’s state is any indication of their natural fertility. He likes to be held down and roughed up; loves to give himself over to Bruce.

Bruce imagines that he’s the only one Clark’s submitted to this way and permits himself the rush of possessive lust the thought brings. Yes; only Bruce.

Clark’s skin—hot. His mouth (that perfect mouth)—hot. He kisses sweetly, with a hint of trembling, like he can’t believe that anyone would kiss him and it’s hot. He kisses longingly, like now is the only moment he has, all sincere attention and single-minded purpose—again, hot. His groans and wrent out obscenities when he shoots; his bright-eyed smile when Bruce fucks against him however he likes. All of him, everything, every sinew and rock-hard line of him makes the word resound in Bruce’s mind like a kettledrum: hot hot fucking hot. He’ll ruin Bruce, utterly ruin him.

Bruce watches him in his periphery, kisses the taste of honey from a mouth that smells a little like resin, a hint of ionized air; exotic. He chases the morsel. He can have a taste, as long as he doesn’t indulge, but oh, how Bruce wants to indulge.

Bruce has masturbated twice a day, dutifully, whether he’d had a sexual partner at the time or not, for over two decades now. He does what he needs to do, and he does it expeditiously, to keep his animal urges at bay. The payout is that he can dispense with the nonsensical social aspect to concentrate on more important things; Bruce is a physical being by nature and there’s a reason he gained the reputation that he’s coasted on for ten years. His orgasms are as blinding and perfunctory as the shower-head above him, most days.

Today is not most days. Today he’s tasting another world and moving on skin so smooth it’s like a dream. Today he may not be filling Clark Kent, but he’s definitely going to fuck him.

And then Kal tells Bruce that he wants him. He wants him.

Bruce smothers the cascading greed that demands attention; crushes it down into a tight knot in his belly. Bruce has known about his proclivities since he was a boy. He’s known the words for what he is ever since the sweltering day in his early teens that Alfred had sat him down with a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (page marked) and a thick book of articles and anecdotes from thousands of willing participants—it’s why he keeps his truly personal affairs neatly segmented from his life.

Bruce remembers his own embarrassment and shame with excruciating clarity during that conversation while he scoured his father’s heavy dictionary, refusing to let Alfred explain words like “algolagnic”, and “dacryphilia”; how Alfred’s solemn and unshakeable assurance that it in no way made Bruce mentally ill—rubbish, he’d called the notion—was all that kept him from running from the room. He remembers clearly how convinced he’d been that he was wrong—that he was destined to be locked away in Arkham for his deviance, before Alfred stoically explained the
The concept of consent.

He’d barely been able to look Alfred in the eye for weeks afterward. Bruce didn’t know what his parents would have thought of his development, but he had to trust in Alfred’s belief that his need for control would not have shamed them, or his family name. Sadism, Alfred had told him that stuffy summer afternoon, had its uses, and he’d been right.

Kal can’t realize how his mannerisms and actions translate—doesn’t even know what he’s asking for, Bruce thinks; doesn’t know about Bruce’s appetites. Bruce highly doubts that Kal wants what he thinks he wants; he can’t really want Bruce to hold him down and hurt him. At most, he might concede, and revulsion washes through Bruce when he thinks of Clark accommodating him. No, he won’t let Bruce do that and enjoy it; won’t cooperate and come back for more, won’t beg for more the way everything in Bruce wants him to.

But Kal is stubborn; he’s headstrong. Persistent in a outspoken deferential manner that enflames Bruce, however little Bruce allows it to show. Kal won’t let it rest. He comes to Bruce on a day when Bruce is feeling disinclined to deny himself; feeling every second of his years and his old injuries bitch, bitter as the weather. He takes those ridiculous glasses off and blinds Bruce with his incredibly honest sincerity. Clark is willing. He lays his trust out for Bruce, and Bruce may be Batman, but he’s still just a man. He should disregard Clark’s request entirely; he doesn’t.

There’s a purpose to Bruce’s reticence in taking what he wants, despite Clark’s claim to want ‘whatever Bruce likes’. For one, it simply is implausible in the extreme; secondly, it’s untidy. Unprepared, to rush in without knowing the limits of Clark’s control and aptitude.

He’s never had a partner without the need for prophylactic protection, never had the pleasure of it (in his right mind); there isn’t anyone else whose word he’s ever trusted on this matter. There’s never been a clear framework for what Bruce enjoys best; there’s no template he can lay down in front of Clark and get a blanket yes or no on—he knows, he’s searched for more years than he cares to count. As usual, he’ll have to construct his own solution. That’s more than fine; Bruce makes spreadsheets: reaction time, auditory stimulus, affection matrixes and erogenous zone diagrams. He studies his subject. He pushes Kal harder than he’s ever pushed a lover and finds the pattern. There, the look of relief brightening unearthly blue eyes, the sudden dip in the gravity well surrounding Clark when he gets excited, the fuck-drunk babble that pours out of him when something hits him where he lives—Bruce observes it all.

He deciphers what he’s found and Kal proves to him that his gentleness isn’t a learned quality—it’s an integral part of who Clark Kent is. In a righteous world, Bruce wouldn’t merit any of it—not Clark’s goodness nor his gentleness, and definitely not his trust. But this is not a righteous world. This is the world where madness capers down back streets and children fight a never ending war. This is the world where gods come down from the sky with poisoned hands and businessmen set monsters loose on public roads. It’s their world, Bruce’s world, and he might not deserve what he wants, but if there’s anyone who does deserve to have their desires fulfilled, it’s Clark Kent.

Bruce intends to exceed his every expectation.

*Passable*, he says. It doesn’t take long for that cocky smirk to break apart. Bruce can’t wait to get inside him.

Then he’s stuck; he can’t move back without conceding a battlefield he’s barely begun to survey;
he can’t move forward without Clark knowing that Bruce wants to breach him raw. He can’t speak; can only lick and count his exhalations against the long line of that golden spine. He makes himself wait, until he sees realization of what he intends to do flash across those hazy eyes, until Clark arches his back and begs wordlessly.

He’s the hottest, the tightest Bruce has ever had; his slick smooth walls cling to Bruce’s cock as if Kal was custom-made to fit. Bruce presses and Clark whines and clenches, shudders all over and surrenders himself. Too soon, but Bruce knows he’s never done this before, that this is virgin territory in more ways than one. He reaches to check, to make sure, masks his disappointment and readies himself to pull out and Clark wheezes open-mouthed and begs and clenches around him again, head turned to the side, face transformed.

It’s almost impossible to think of him like that: as mundane, meek Clark, after Bruce has seen who he turns into in these moments. Kal wants it exactly how Bruce imagined it, when he’s allowed himself to imagine this; he wants Bruce to overwhelm him; he wants to lose himself and follow Bruce down into the deeps. Kal might even need it as much as Bruce does.

“That’s it, son,” he encourages. “Good.” Bruce’s chest tightens. He licks his lips, counts his breaths with care and lets the darkness rise. Pushes back at the delicious crackling lighting up his brain and reins himself in. Spurts land, slippery hot on Bruce’s wrist. The possibilities play out before him in a dizzying array of choices. He makes a decision, secures his grip; he wants to see more.

“Settle in,” rasps out of him, along with whatever filth the moment spawns. He chooses more.

The sounds Kal makes; almost musical, the vibrato in his moans—he’s perfect. The only things better than them are the naked looks he tries to hide when Bruce strokes his cheek, when he slides his palm over the slightly different textured skin at the back of Kal’s neck. The way he screams and loses all composure when Bruce bites him there; he’s perfect.

“Ungh dammit! Fuh… Bruce… oh bastard… pleease—” That magnificent fucking mouth. Part of him laughs darkly that this is what it takes to finally hear Kal spout an honest opinion of him.

He collapses and Bruce molds to his spine, slides down with him, feels Kal’s back arch and the way he snugs that tight little ass right back onto Bruce, the way those incredible muscles churn and wriggle on his cock. His moans devolve further with each roll of Bruce’s hips, sound punching out of him thin and desperate into raw, ragged cries, like he could care less who might hear or what Bruce might think. Bruce can hardly think straight with all the noise coming out of that mouth. Kal’s shameless and he blushes so prettily when Bruce points it out. He’s the best, the absolute best Bruce will ever have; he’s perfect, of course he is, how could Bruce have thought any differently?

Bruce shakes the sweat out of his eyes with a brisk snap of his head; he won’t miss one second of this.

Bruce enjoys engineering for its own sake, for the sheer thrill of accomplishment, and he’s built his foundations well this time: there’s no response Kal’s body knows how to make but this; there’s nowhere for Kal to go except through the bed’s surface or right back onto Bruce.

Kal doesn’t protest, not verbally, not physically—not once; he loves it. He loves it. He cracks right open, gives it all up for Bruce so sweetly there’s no way in hell Bruce will ever be content with a taste. Not as long as he can control this; not as long as he can watch Kal convulse around his flesh endlessly with wide dark eyes and a dazed grin; not as long as this is an option.
Bruce knows how the world works—he has to have as much as he can before it’s taken away. *Everything*, Clark said, *anything*, but this doesn’t mean the same to him that it does to Bruce. Bruce does it all with Kal, won’t look at him; loath to see the second when those eyes cloud in disgust.

Later, he looks away because if he watches, if he *keeps* watching, he’ll blow. If he watches, he won’t last long enough to satisfy Kal (though he won’t lie to himself by pretending that this is all for Kal, anymore).

He can’t get enough... And when he can, Bruce can’t get enough of *him.*

*Luminous.*

Bruce kisses him deliberately, lets himself plunge into the mystery of what makes Kal tick, so he can decode it all and lay it out plain.

*He’s a fool.*

He runs his hands over the rippling definition of Kal’s musculature, the economical beauty of his perfect lines.

*Such a fool.*

Kal’s sweet; between his lips and between his thighs, ozone-honey on Bruce’s tongue. He’s thirsty for Bruce; sucks him down and slurps at him like he’d rather have a hot load than air. *This kid.*

Bruce lets him take what he wants, but he makes Kal work for it. The burn twists between his vertebrae and sinks into his marrow, hot and wide.

Nothing strokes the ego quite as well as having the most powerful being on the planet bent to Bruce’s will, fat tears sliding down his face. Gasping and spurting helplessly as he pleads for more of Bruce’s cock.

“Bruce,” he keeps whining, soft and sweet. “Bruce. *Bruce.*” Like he’s meditating, like Bruce’s name is his *mantra*; he’s the most beautiful thing, the most beautiful man Bruce has ever seen, when he comes. He deserves pleasure—whatever gives him pleasure. Bruce can’t possibly deny him; Bruce bites the inside of his cheek until iron floods his mouth. It centers him. He’s ready, now.

Clark’s hands fisted tight in the shiny nanomesh-alloy sheets. Clark’s choked moans and the low light reflected on his face.

*Ham-sah.* He fucks Kal single-mindedly until Clark gets pushed under; fucks him until Kal has no-mind and comes dry. Until everything is sucking tight flesh; pulsing into hot welcoming depths,
blue eyes and the incredible swell of pleasure fusing Bruce’s spine straight. Until Kal, always and only Clark, is everything he wants closest to him.

It isn’t enough. It’s not near enough and it’s less than a fraction of what Clark deserves.

Alfred is right: Bruce doesn’t learn from his mistakes; he just finds new and increasingly inventive ways to make the same old mistakes.

~

He doesn’t decide to change position for efficiency; he does it because he can’t stand hearing Clark and not being able to see him. He’s so compromised, Jesus fucking Christ, Bruce would kick his own ass if he could.

He pulls back slow, leans back through the incredible wet heat and muscles rippling around him until his cock is wedged. He pulls back until the crown of his cock catches on the rim of Clark’s hole, and breathes. And breathes.

Then he grabs Clark by one bicep, leans back on his heels and throws him onto his back. No finesse, too much; he’s too rough but Clark just blinks up at him, no complaint, no fear. Two-hundred and twenty-one pounds, his mind supplies helpfully, about eighteen more than the two-hundred Clark’s frame says he should be. Given alien physiology, give or take a few—Bruce is—He’s…

He’s had less distracting scenarios, that’s for certain. Those flat planes of hard muscle, that soft, open mouth. Bruce has to kiss his smile, has to taste him as those long legs cradle his body. Has to get back inside him now.

Goddamn Clark for being so difficult. Goddamn him for being so fucking beautiful, and damn Bruce for not letting him go when such a perfect chance landed in his lap. He won’t let go, can’t make himself let go; not yet.

Bruce pushes back in, all the way into the grip of that passage, slaps a hand under his ass and hoists him up, until his hips smack up against Clark with a solid thwap and Clark’s low, soft moan hiccups and hitches into something raw. There; target acquired.

He can’t move Clark up the mattress, even as diligently as he’s striving to; the sheets ruck up around them in a silvery billow of nanomesh and reflected heat. Clark’s heel presses against the spur of Bruce’s shoulder-blade, and fuck, that’s—

It’s a good thing they’re not against the wall, because Bruce isn’t near enough in control of himself to keep property damage to a minimum. He could fuck Clark right through a wall. Christ, he could fuck Clark through the wall.

He can’t help the glance down, catches the sight of himself sliding in again, rim of Clark’s hole stretched tight around his cock, and—

He jerks his gaze up, stares over Clark’s shoulder, concentrates on counting—the windows panes, the brushed-alloy slats of the headboard, the loops of thread holding the pillowcase’s end together — anything, anything else to avoid looking down at where Clark is taking him in. He refuses to come first, refuses to shoot at all if he can help it; he wants to stay right here, for as long as he can
bear the amazing reality of Clark in his arms.

The structure of his surrender, the helpless gasps and endless flexing sweetness of Clark, the way he stares up as if Bruce is his moon and presses his forehead against Bruce as if there isn’t anything else, as if Bruce is worthy—

Too much to ask Bruce to stop driving forward, to end the glassy freedom in Clark’s eyes.

Yes, good. So good. He’s inspired by Clark—he doesn’t want to hurt him.

The best liars always tell the truth.

There’s nothing else in Bruce’s experience that can compare to that arch of spine, that long pale column of throat, those wide darkened eyes shutting out the entire world just for Bruce. He’d fight off the entire world too for just this, if he had to.

Bruce grits his teeth and thrusts until the world shatters apart into fractals.

He searches Clark’s eyes, and there is nothing there that makes Bruce believe that he should stay and no words. No request, no inkling of a preference.

He rests for a span of breaths, and when Clark makes no move to cuddle closer or to initiate new contact, he makes himself leave Clark’s bed. The gentlemanly thing to do is express his appreciation for the entertainment and go.

What he wants to do is irrelevant. Bruce is an old hand at not outstaying his welcome.
No One Stays Good in This World

Chapter Summary

There is no clarity like that after violence.

Chapter Notes

I bring angst.

Happy Holidays to all who celebrate!

Chapter Six: No One Stays Good in This World

"The fluidity of time is simply the connection of constant transformations."

-Daoist Time and Cosmology in Light of Modern Physics

If Bruce were the type of person who thought a tumble in the sheets would change the air of tension between he and Clark, he’d have been sorely disabused of that notion by week’s end. If anything, Clark challenges him more. One week falls into another and somehow, the center holds.

He’s drinking less these past few months. The fog of his former routine is gone; in its place a newness that urges Bruce on with new vigor each day. Time is too precious a commodity to spend without the ability to fully inhabit each moment. It isn’t (just) the sex that brightens his days—it’s something deeper warming Bruce, though he strives to keep it concealed and ignore it whenever possible.

Bruce grows accustomed to Clark leaning against his chair and over his shoulder, to the thin polite smile and flicker-fast frown that means Clark disagrees completely with him, to the sight of Clark tilting his head slightly at silent air, to the cheerful smirk of Clark’s humor. The richness and depth of his voice, the quick mind behind the flawless face.

The warmth in his eyes.

He becomes so attuned to Clark’s presence in his space, he’s stopped tracking him. He’s no longer surprised, not by the firm touch of his hand, pulling Bruce away from too many hours spent straining his eyes, or by Clark’s solid tread on the floorboards. He doesn’t resent Clark’s silent hovering skim over them, either.

It seems there are diamond absolutes left still, only waiting for Bruce to see them and hold to them.
Clark chooses his moment well; the last patrol was three nights ago. Bruce is rested and halfway through his second cup of coffee. “There’s something I need to tell you.” Steadfast—if Bruce had to define the quality of Clark’s tone, steadfast would be his first response.

*It’s time, then.*

Bruce settles his nerves, relaxes quickly tight muscles and lowers the Times. He hasn’t looked forward to this day.

Clark’s face wavers, shifts from lensing to hopeful and back again. “I’m not sick anymore.” His mouth is set, a tight line of displeasure.

“No,” Bruce agrees, eyes fixed to Clark’s. The newspaper, he sets aside. He waits for the rest, waits to hear ‘so there’s no need’, for ‘we have to stop’, even for ‘how dare you’. Neither of them speak.

The seconds spin out while he refuses to break the stare. Clark’s gaze flashes down to Bruce’s tightly steepled fingers. Bruce wishes fiercely for footage of this moment, for the leisure to scan and decipher Clark’s flicker-flare micro-expressions. Swiftly, Clark’s brow smooths out. He smiles at Bruce, dimples and all.

“Well, alright then. So. Twelfth and Kensington, last week—was that a smile I saw?”

*Clark isn’t going to say the words.* Bruce blinks once, deliberately. Pushes the affection pricking him down until it’s manageable. Rearranges his expression into bland boredom and replies, “I have no idea what you mean.” He does. Twelfth and Kensington, B&E without casualties, not counting the terrified eleven year old hiding under the bathroom sink.

“Right.” Clark taps his hand on the table twice, smile spreading into a grin. Briefly Bruce thinks the kid might reach across, might reach out to him. “It was a good rescue, still.” Clark stays on his side of the table.

Bruce raises his paper midway, and stares at the print. “You rescued a dog, Kansas.”

“It was a nice dog.”

*Warmth.* It had been. The child on the scene had been frantic about the animal, the parents only marginally less so. “It was,” he allows. Bruce lifts the paper and feels Clark’s stare on him anyway.

*Relief.* He has more time. It’s surreal; Clark playing house and Bruce following suit because to do anything else would be intolerable.

~

When they return from the (mid-week) three-day layover of Thanksgiving, their tenuous equilibrium feels almost stable. *The illusion of stability is a lie,* he reminds himself.

Waiting for the axe to fall gives him no peace; Bruce’s anger roils near constantly now. It’s the realization of his own stupidity that brings everything to a head, eventually.
He stiffens under Bruce, the lines of his face going taut and strained, and Bruce has to—he wants to shake Clark, shake him up out of his body—hurt Clark, wake him.

He shakes him, shakes him down to his bones. Brings him down out of his careless haze, chases the mist out of Kal’s eyes until he can see Clark again. Bruce is sick with himself.

Giving more seems crucial. Getting closer, imperative.

He sees it now, the place where their trajectories meet: a locked point, fixed and set, with one line leading to a sure end.

*How long will Clark live? How much longer does Bruce have?*

Math doesn’t lie.

He’d never planned to let Clark go, not this way.

It isn’t a plan; it’s rank green panic that floods Bruce when Kal gasps out his declaration.

Bruce feels the light, unthinkably gentle caress of Kal’s fingers on his, more intimate, more open than all the rest combined and he recoils and comes in self-defense. Taps out as quickly as he humanly can. His contingencies for this event no longer suit his intentions; his backup plans and fallback plans are all useless—he has no plan left.

He’s factoring the odds at about ninety-eight point four percent that Kal will laugh, roll his shoulders; grin up at him like the debauched farm-boy he is, and give Bruce a convenient barb. A reason to step close after he’s so hastily retreated, to run his fingers through that hair Bruce can’t stop touching. That smile Bruce can’t stop kissing.

It doesn’t escape him that Kal’s just given him a singular solution to all the Superman-related problems constantly churning in his head. He needed a key, an *in*, and now he has full access, crushing responsibility, carte blanche, and he finds he doesn’t want it at all.

*Bruce* is the key.

And as if seeing through that obstacle has opened every other closed door, Bruce sees.

He sees how he wants to see Clark smile. He sees how he wants to rest beside Clark and hear his bullshit theories and bleeding heart political stances. Bruce doesn’t hate Clark’s smart mouth—how can he hate it, when he wants it all the time?

*He fucking loves Clark’s mouth.*

*He fucking loves…*

Oh.

Clark doesn’t smile.

Instead he gives Bruce a sour, defensive scowl. He looks as if he’d rather be anywhere else. His shoulders hunch, his lips press together in a thin line and Bruce realizes that he still hasn’t answered Clark.

*Clark deserves an answer.*
He has no intention of answering and wouldn’t know what to say if he did, nor how to say it. *What right does Bruce have, to even attempt a response?*

Clark is Superman—he’s extraordinary, incomparable; Bruce is another rich man with a grudge to grind, doing what he does because he doesn’t know any other way anymore. Clark helps because he *wants to*, while Bruce does what he *has to*, what no one else will do, what those with better moral compasses than himself can’t bring themselves to do.

He resists saying anything that could be construed as a preference or request. Does everything in his power to not look as though he’s fleeing the scene.

*Consider this mercy.*

He flees the scene. In a move that definitely *does not* come from untold generations of noble and well-bred Waynes, Bruce runs from the man who offers him everything. He doesn’t go back, even though it compounds his failure. He does it even though he knows better, he's known since the very first time, that Clark isn't himself at these moments, that he goes under deep, that Bruce shouldn't leave Clark alone after making l—

—after being with him.

He can’t bring himself to return, because he is utterly bereft of words.

In retrospect, Clark doesn’t actually over-react.

It was inevitable that Clark would see what Bruce is and leave him. He tells himself that, as he watches the impossible on a screen; a man flying brightly away in a flurry of hurt and confusion. Foolish to ever assume that Bruce could *keep* anything he wanted—even *this* thing.

Especially this.

He forces himself to shake it off, ignores the sharpness of his own pain as he has so many times before, and pulls up the last month of mooring records from the Island Dock.

He’s cursed; of course Kal leaves him. Everyone does.

He’s failed.

*Inevitable.*

“I miss you when I can't sleep, or right after coffee, or right when I can't eat.” -GNASH

*He should be ashamed.*

Bruce doesn’t deceive himself; looking at the situation coldly, analytically, what he’s done is shameful. He’s entered into what is unquestionably a relationship, with a man who’s gone through immense recent trauma. He’s bent a biologically fraught imperative to his own ends, for his own pleasure. He’s managed to scare the one man in the world who’s better, *brighter*, than all the rest of them combined. He’s abused Clark’s trust. He’s abused *Clark*, hurt him in a way that Clark had never agreed to.
Bruce isn’t controlling his demons; he’s let them off the leash. He’s let himself become an animal. He wishes he was a monster, that would at least be an excuse—Bruce is just a man. When Clark returns (if he returns), Bruce won’t fight him. He’ll be strong one more time and let Clark have his due.

It’s the only thing Bruce has left to give him. He’d wanted to make Clark stronger, to have some of that indefinable brightness of being for himself. Perhaps all Bruce has really managed is letting Clark see the extent of how damaged he is and how willing he is to damage Clark in the bargain.

This is the pain that comes from living on hope instead of practicality. This is the price of walking around with his head in the clouds. This is what comes of being too proud to admit that he’s as lost as anyone else.

He should be ashamed, so he breaks down the engine on the Tank even though he’s so tired that the edges of the room are softening. He forces his body into usefulness. He’s going to need to balance the bottom end out again after the beating the frame took last night. The outer plating could use reinforcement. The integrity of the electrical system is compromised after his encounter on the East docks. The intake manifold has been giving him problems for miles. The shock tolerance for the bearings he’s been using are, after due consideration, shit; the custom bearings he’s machined to get through the coming winter have been sitting on the bench for at least nine days—he has no excuse. There’s never an excuse for being unprepared; he doesn’t get to make excuses.

Perhaps it’s a good thing that Kal’s left him now, when Bruce obviously needs to be more aware of his surroundings. Bruce shouldn’t be attached. *Maybe it’s what’s best.* The thought drives a hard metallic taste into Bruce’s mouth; his lip hurts and he licks the blood off of his teeth. He feels it now: the shredding ache that tells him when he’s done something unethical, something *wrong*. Savagery flares up in him. He has to get a handle on himself; but once the switch is flipped he finds he can’t turn it back. Shame is too subdued a word for what scrabbles and gnaws at the center of Bruce’s gut.

He’d wanted to make Kal feel *safe* while Bruce kept himself barricaded, and yet now he’s hurt Kal, and he’s made the man fear what Bruce would do to hurt him more. What kind of hero can he be, when Bruce can’t even protect those he cares for from himself?

He breaks it all down; *all* of it: the cams, the crankshaft, pistons; the blocky crumple panels and the exterior lights, the retainers and rings—rips everything out down to the valve seals, until the anatomy of his armor is spread out across the floor like an enormous jigsaw puzzle and he’s shaking against the frame, streaked with grease and stale sweat. The room is a smear.

He isn’t allowed to *mourn* a relationship that only exists in his mind. He deserves this: Bruce has been careless, with himself and with others.

Now he has no choice but to figure out how it all fits back together.

He wakes with a pounding skull, surrounded by the wreckage of a partially-reconstructed vehicle, startles up at the slow thready click of a swivel-socket being wound.

“*Clark.*”

The scent of particularly-blended coffee hits him first, the smell of bacon and maple in quick succession turns his stomach. He relaxes his muscles so they can’t betray him by shaking, opens burning eyes and breathes deeply. Not Clark.
Alfred. It’s just Alfred.

Who else would it be?

He doesn’t ask where Clark is; Alfred can probably tell that Bruce has fucked up just from the set of his shoulders. Bruce tries to relax his bunched muscles again, to no avail.

“No point in that—you’ve pulled it right good, haven’t you?” Alfred doesn’t spare him a glance, eyes on the conduit and connecting frame-panel he’s putting back together, his mouth set in an uncompromising line. Bruce grimaces tightly, but Alfred is relentless.

“Will Master Clark be rejoining us?”

No.

“I don’t know,” Bruce admits quietly.

Alfred nods in short, distracted fashion, then he lays down his wrench and he’s reaching down to give Bruce a hand up from the floor. “Well then: done is done, Master Bruce.” His tone is regretful but businesslike. “That’s enough time spent feeling sorry for yourself. Up you go; time you get washed up and straighten your spine—plenty of meetings and handshaking to do today. Chin up, lad. Time to be a gentleman.” Alfred has never had much tolerance for Bruce’s theatrics when it comes to this subject. He’s brisk and pointedly nonchalant as he steps over the mess Bruce has made of his vehicle. It’s a microcosm of Bruce’s entire life. Alfred tsks over the state of Bruce’s untended wounds and shoots him a glare at his bruised knuckles and general disarray.

“Master Bruce,” he says firmly. “This is hardly fitting.” He’s right. He’s always right. Rage and pain are still two sides of the same coin, but Bruce has a job to do, so he does it.

He lets himself be prodded and moved into action. Makes himself shower at Alfred’s disappointed insistence, before dropping into his bed. Makes himself get up after only an hour barely skimming sleep, and put on a suit his father would have been proud to see him wear. Forces himself to go into the boardroom by day and undo all the damage he’s done to his reputation in the evenings.

It takes him two weeks to admit that the feeling, the unbearable shame, isn’t passing. It only seems to get worse each day, and Bruce gets sloppier each night. Five weeks of lower caloric intake, heightened sensitivity to aggravation and danger; two weeks of trying to ignore how closely Alfred is watching him.

The Mission doesn’t wait for Bruce, any more than it ever has.

He dreams.

You were my world, Clark spits angrily. They took you from me. Buildings fall from the sky and cities burn. No, Clark.

“Nnn—” Bruce wakes to the taste of negation and ashes. Spends the week speaking Clark’s name in increasingly random intervals, hoping he’ll hear. Hoping he’ll come.

Clark doesn’t come.
The first time Bruce sees Clark afterward, it stops him. Coffee cup stilled at his lips, eyes locked on his monitor’s screen as the news rolls. Superman twists through the air as if it’s water, darker blue blur in the hazy confusion of an earthquake in Myanmar—cape arcing around him like great scarlet wings. It’s been four months.

He’s beautiful. Bruce watches the entirety of the footage. He watches, then slows down the footage. Re- watches Superman zip back and forth, saving lives through the dust-fog around rubble of buildings.

He sees the way people flail back from Superman, the way they clutch at him then can’t seem to get far enough away from him once their feet are back on the ground. He sees how they touch their savior: as if he's untouchable, as if he's a god. Bruce sees the dazzling, pained smile and how quickly Superman leaves the scene once EMS arrives. No camera is close enough to see Superman’s eyes—they’ve never once caught a decent shot of his face after all this time; every digital recording has random artifacts obscuring the finer details—but Bruce can still see them in his mind’s eye just the same.

“The problem with checking out so thoroughly is that it can leave us feeling dead inside, with little or no ability to feel our feelings in our bodies.” —Alexandra Katehakis, *Mirror of Intimacy: Daily Reflections on Emotional and Erotic Intelligence*

“I don’t mean to be problematic,” Clark murmurs, kneeling there defenseless as he can be, at Bruce’s feet. He presses his temple to Bruce’s leg, his cheek to Bruce’s hand in his rush to prove his sincerity. How can Bruce explain, how can he pull the words to show Clark that he isn’t a problem; that it’s Bruce’s privilege to have Clark with him? Covering Clark’s face, cloaking him—it’s a privilege that Bruce hasn’t earned, a mark that makes Clark less than he is. Clark doesn’t deserve to be in Bruce’s shadow.

“This isn’t you,” Bruce says to him. “You don’t deserve it.”

The words come out wrong, as they always do.

It’s later, much later, afterward, when Bruce realizes that he’s mis-filed the memory—he’d said those word to Clark much earlier—and how what he’d said in anger at himself might have been misinterpreted. He sifts through almost a year and a half of interactions with the distance of true objectivity and each memory only drives home how poorly he’s performed.

He’d known Superman didn’t know how to defend himself. Superman believed that he couldn’t be abused.

Clark Kent, believes he can’t be abused.

Bruce sifts through again, more thoroughly.

*Had he abused Clark?*

He hadn’t meant to, he’d intended consensual relations, but what had he actually done? It keeps him awake, wondering whether he’s failed more than he can see.
Fire and breakout at a high-security prison for high-stakes prisoners; out of Batman’s territory technically, but he’s gearing up to head in anyway. He can provide support, line-of-fire relief, apprehend those who won’t go back to their cells quietly. He’s part-way across the bay when his proximity alarms start pinging; an incoming object running at missile-like speeds intersecting his location. Headed for the prison. He runs through several possibilities, engages anti-aircraft defenses before a glance up through the windshield shows a glimpse of red streaking past.

Bruce wants to pull a floating 180 at the end of the bridge and head back into Gotham. There are others, much closer, in need. His input isn’t required, and Superman doesn’t need backup.

He does nothing of the sort.

Batman floors the pedal, weaving through dense evening traffic like smoke. He’s up and moving before the Tank is completely stopped, up through the hatch and aloft. Perching above the unnaturally quiet thoroughfare.

From the west comes the sound of cursing and struggling—not at street level, above it. Superman. Batman narrows his eyes at a orange-draped portly figure inching by beneath. Gotcha.

There are ten escapees. Six runners, four fighters. Air support takes the runners and Bruce, he’s more than happy to deal with what’s left.

They don’t stand a chance.

The sight of the escapees, bundled up and tied tight, is satisfying. Ignoring the sensation of Clark’s stare, less so. By the sound of it, he has less than twenty seconds before they’ll have uniformed, armed company. It’s not the right place and if there ever will be a right time, this is definitely not it.

He retrieves his last batarang, waits for the split-second of Clark’s inattention, and slips away. He isn’t followed.

He tries to regain himself the old way.

She’s 26, petite, with chestnut hair and brown eyes. It’s her first gallery exhibition; she’s hit the newsstands running and now she’s like a doe on a freeway in the midst of Gotham’s best, riding the supermodel high. Her perfume is light and citrus-y, playful—something that probably has a name like “TruHeart” or “Joyride”. Her name is Cassie; Brucie calls her Connie anyway. She laughs as if he’s the funniest thing she’s ever heard. She barely picks at her food, stars in her eyes
from the glitz and the ceaseless glamor.

She spends most of her time trying to engage Bruce in her rolling commentary on fashion and clothing. Of course she does, he’s dressed like a damn peacock. Bruce gives her lazy smiles and half-mocking salutes with his flute, charms her with heated glances and little touches until they’re alone. Acts the ass he’s meant to. She puts her hands on him, under his jacket, in the coat vestibule, all star-struck warmth and soft crush. Her lipstick doesn’t smear when she makes for his mouth and he turns aside. Her air tastes of chocolate and petroleum.

Bruce feels nothing. He grins and nuzzles into her ear and excuses himself, saying he’ll be right back. He takes the back stairwell and exits through the employee entrance.

Hanna’s 32, athletic, stunning and quick-witted. She’s single and wealthy, with shining gold hair and her new playmate at the art auction is about ten years younger. The young man in question stares at Bruce… until Bruce looks him in the eyes. He’s doing the kid a favor, honestly, if anything in Hanna’s history is an M.O.

He expects to be turned down, doesn’t intend to do anything more than ruffle feathers in proper Brucie fashion. Instead, she accepts Bruce’s invitation to dinner, no doubt well aware of what plans the evening might hold.

Her companion comes with, though she fails to introduce him to Bruce. It’s familiar; it takes him few minutes to put his finger on exactly why.

When the bill has been paid, she lays a hand on his shoulder to make a small point, and Bruce feels another hand, under the table, on his thigh; he says nothing. He wants to want her. *Them.*

He supposes this is a rather eventful way to be seduced, but he’s cold; it does nothing for him now.

Bruce lets an enticing smile creep onto his face anyway. He excuses himself without providing a tangible excuse, walks to the restroom and cuts a fast right into the hallways headed for the loading dock.

He’s 32, or thereabouts— hair dark enough to pass for black. Hard eyes the color of pale river-stones. Strong jaw. Big muscles. Practiced smile. Bruce picks him up cruising the south side of Uptown, in one of the more nondescript cars and eyes his artful sprawl in the passenger seat. He doesn’t ask the hustler his name, but the young man is as visually appealing as all the other dozen people Bruce has tried to pick up. He fills the car with the smell of mint-sugar and sweat.

Bruce doesn’t even manage to get a hand on him before he’s emptying his wallet to shove bills at the kid and pushing the door open to get him the hell out of Bruce’s car.

*He’s not Clark.*

None of them are.

It gets worse.
Bruce has always been surrounded by beautiful, clean, well-draped people; he's always been able to find at least one that he desired, to calm his demons in meaningless pleasure for at least a few moments. He sees to himself under the fall of water and realizes something fundamental, something *absolute*, has changed. He doesn't want them, not any of them. Not anymore.

This development requires acclimation--Bruce disciplines his mind, only to find that relieving his body's demands has become a massive undertaking when he isn't thinking of Clark.

Eventually, he bows to time constraints and lets his mind go where it will. Completion rocks through him, merciless and cold, thoughts of Clark's laugh and kisses haunting him.

Perhaps it's more merciful than the alternative, but the bitter aftertaste of regret lingers and feeds Bruce's fury at himself.

~

Dust and ruin. Chains and darkness.

Bruce has to wake up.

“I was your world, Bruce. You took that from us.” Superman’s mouth is hotter than the violent light from his eyes. His hands are hard, his kiss is brutal.

Bruce has to wake up *now*.

“You have to listen to me... You had to know I would find you.” He kisses Bruce forever.

“Consider this mercy,” he whispers with Kal’s voice before a force like a hammer hits Bruce in the chest.

Bruce’s rib cage splits open.

He screams and wakes to the absolute stillness of his third and only remaining home. His jaw is locked; the scream, thankfully, only in his mind. Bruce rubs his chest in the darkness and wills his pulse to slow. It takes him twenty seconds longer to calm his heart rate than it should; he makes a note to train an extra thirty minutes each day until he’s back at peak.

It’s too late to go back to sleep and too early to dawdle if he wants to get anything accomplished before patrol. There’s a dull ache settling into his hip and leg; a storm system hangs sullenly over the state, flashing silent lightning intermittently. Experience has taught him that in an hour or two there’ll be rain coming in, heavy and fast; he feels the energy of it now. If the window were open, he could smell it. It doesn’t matter—he’ll smell it soon enough.

Bruce rolls fluidly off the bed to his feet and as always, looks out at the spires and towers of his city.

Any other night that would be enough for Bruce, but his memory gnaws; he reaches for a thought
that won’t come, a sore wriggling nub of an echo he can’t let go. The dreams are, if anything, growing more vivid regardless of what technique Bruce uses to encourage a more lucid REM period.

Bruce doesn’t believe in clairvoyance or visions, he believes in science. He believes in empirical evidence and clinical observation and he does not believe in portents and fate.

Except when he does.

~

The knife sliding into the meat of his thigh is a surprise, but not as much as the forty seconds he spends getting beat down in a stinking alleyway that drips grey rain. The ashy downpour is every bit as freezing and miserable as Bruce predicted. He counts himself lucky, as he feels the hot rush every time wood thuds into his body, that he can still feel the leg. He has to curb his first instinct, to pull the knife out: this might take a while.

It’s been years since anyone has used an actual bat against his ribs—years since anyone has made contact, anyway—but these guys; they’re hungry for him. One of them even gives him a glancing knock upside the head; the world goes black and white.

Feels like coming home.

“Kal,” slips out.

Wooziness and general nausea are the first signs that he’s fucked up. He can’t let his be the way it goes down—Batman beat to death behind a run-down strip mall by a bunch of no-name Pink District bruisers; he owes more to Alfred, to Gotham; to Clark.

He comes up swinging, feels the snap when his uppercut connects, burning all down his side. One less problem. Time gets elastic; he counts his inhalations, fixes the numbers in his head and holds them tight—he needs them.

Sixty seconds. There are flashes; face, fists. One hundred seconds. Wood, rain, snarls. One hundred and ten seconds. Grab the barrel, spin the stock, whack a mole. Two minutes. Silence and the sound of his own harsh breaths.

A flash. Twenty-nine steps to preliminary safety. Three minutes; he’s running out of time. One hundred and ninety-two seconds. He staggers into a hard familiar surface that he feels more than he can see.

He’s running out of time, and Clark isn’t coming. When all else fails, training kicks in: Batman makes it back to the parked car; and then Bruce passes out, emergency beacon clenched tight in his throbbing palm, hanging halfway out of the Batmobile.

Pain.
Regaining consciousness is not so much a relief as an obligation to which he eventually decides to concede. It comes with all the familiar markers of his bad decisions: a lancing in his temples, blurry corners to everything and a numb sense of resignation.

Sanitizer and iodine. Sharp, cold scents. Smooth, firm surface under his back. Neck support. Low light. The hum of the medical suite. He opens his eyes, rasps out a command to the monitor over the bed he’s in. There are certain situations where using low-tech materials are practical; this is not one of them.

Bruce isn’t sure how he’d made it home, but the feed from the forward dashcam shows him that all his fangs haven’t been pulled just yet, and the burning layers of sutures and stitching he can feel deep in the flesh of his leg, among other places, tell their own tale.

Even worse, now he can feel the ice-packs strapped to him; the cold bracing fire through his nerves. No morphine, Christ, he really shouldn’t have tried to move.

A raspy groan bounces off the wall and he immediately locks his jaw. It doesn’t matter, the door opens before he can regroup enough to push the telescoping desk-arm away and pretend to be asleep.

Alfred comes in, jacket cast aside, shirt impeccably white as the bandages on Bruce’s hands. He comes right to Bruce, tray in hand, ignoring the assembled machines surrounding the bed. He’s quiet as he settles the tray over Bruce’s lap, then gives a soft satisfied hum after peering into Bruce’s eyes.

“Good morning, Master Wayne! I hope that was a pleasant nap. Your heart’s doing fine.”

The smooth reflected red of the portable urinal tucked beside his hip mirrors the pulsing in Bruce's head. He hates it--the cheap tacky plastic, the mundanity, the way he knows it will feel in his hand, the helplessness of pissing on his back like a sick dog. He lets his eyes slide over Alfred and registers the guarded eyes, the frown lines deepening in Alfred’s face. The tension in his jawline.

Alfred’s pissed at him. Bruce hates that too.

“How’s the pain?”

It’s impossible to pretend that he doesn’t feel the agony spiking through his system. Bruce swallows, tries to shrug and instantly regrets it. "Better than the fall I took at Zermatt."

His memory of the fight’s finale is incomplete and fragmented. He remembers the blows and the minutia, but not how it all ended. Not how he’d gotten back. He has no way of knowing how far he’s gone, what he’s done—

Pain is secondary. What has he done?

Bruce’s fingers twitch.

Alfred pulls the morning’s paper from his inner waistcoat and sets it down pointedly, police blotter face-up, with the report of five battered men being admitted centered over Bruce’s cutlery.

Subtle.

He carefully does not hover as Bruce scowls at his broken fingers.

“How bad is the damage?”
Alfred makes a noise, that Bruce supposes is meant to be a laugh, but sounds nothing like one. “Better than Chalet Zermatt.” He sighs. “Perhaps a short rest is in order, Master Bruce.”

From where he’s sitting, propped up by an improbable mound of supportive pillows, rib bracing and medical gauze, with what feels like at least two previously-dislocated limbs, Bruce can’t rightfully argue. He can say that he hasn’t killed again; he didn’t cross the line, but he hasn’t the right to argue, not with Alfred. Not now.

“Thank you, Alfred,” he says instead, humbly. He can’t; no—he doesn’t want to meet his mentor’s eyes.

“I trust you’ll forgive the inquiry, but I was wondering whether you’d like the west bedroom turned and closed up or if you might prefer to leave it open.” Alfred’s tone is bland. “In case of eventualities,” he adds, shifting the newspaper to the side now that he knows Bruce has seen it. “Should someone...drop in, as it were?”

He doesn’t want to answer that question. “You don’t know what I did.” Bruce knows it will hurt; he does it anyway. He lifts a mug—not his favorite mug, this one is both lighter and thicker—in both hands and balances it carefully as he takes a sip. Tea: ginger, rosehips, basil, mint. He does his best to ignore the coddling; if he can ignore it, then he can ignore the need for it, as well. He accepts the pain, lets his body do its job while his mind shuffles through potentialities.

The sandwich, simple watercress and cucumber, light cream cheese, no crust. It's nothing special. Only what Bruce has asked for when he's feeling ill or under the weather since he was a child. Cut into quarters of what Alfred would usually serve him. Cut to be manageable, for someone who can't do it for themselves. Arranged cheerfully, amid bright and slender slices of pear.

Bruce ignores them.

He’d definitely dislocated his right shoulder. He’d wrenched something in his lower back and his left knee; four of his toes were broken. Three fingers. Too many ribs. The there was the throbbing head and the vascular damage. Too extensive a set of injuries for anything as banal as an extreme sports injury, even for an adrenaline junkie of Brucie’s caliber. He isn’t interested in entertaining the type of stories he’d have to tell or the amount of favors he’d have to pull in, to disappear for long enough for the worst of these to pass. No; for long enough to make up for his lapse of rational thought. He isn’t interested in seeing a mirror at the moment, either.

Alfred chuckles slightly and clucks under his breath about stupid boys as he systematically checks over his work and removes the ice packs. Bruce follows Alfred’s hands to the IV line delivering fluids into his arm with a surge of dizziness. Shit. Alfred checks the bag and the line, then he glares at Bruce. It most likely is the twenty to fiftieth time he’s done so since he washed Bruce’s blood off his hands.

The simplicity of the query throws him. “Do I need to put you on watch, Bruce?” Alfred sounds very calm. His eyes, the exact shade of steel as his tie, are a riot of suppressed emotion.

Bruce would never do that to Alfred again. He raises his eyes and looks at his Guardian with every bit of conviction he has. “This was an ambush; I made a mistake.”

"Ah. Mistake, was it? You must have taken a harder hit to the head than I thought.” Alfred peers into his eyes with an unseemly amount of concern and Bruce chooses not to comment on it, though this is precisely why he makes a habit of not justifying himself. He keeps his mouth shut, jaw locked as Alfred probes his head injury with a adept touch.
Alfred tsk again. “Hmph. What good are all these muscles when you don’t bother to use the ones between your ears and in your chest, hey? You carry on like some calf-eyed boy, you don’t eat, you refuse to sleep; and this is the type of excuse you come home with.”

The crash of tubing and sterile gauze into the medical waste bin clatters off the metal surfaces. Bruce stays still, because he owes Alfred this. “You made a mistake.” Alfred pulls up the medibay stool and sits finally, staring at Bruce while Bruce steadfastly refuses to meet his gaze, then Alfred sighs tiredly. “Which you will not make again.”

Bruce concentrates on forcing his hands to allow him another sip from his mug and keeps his mouth shut.

“There is very little you could do, that would surprise me at this point. Sometimes, Master Bruce, it isn’t about what you’ve done. Sometimes, dear boy, it’s about faith, and what you intend to do.” What would be a slur from anyone else is comfort in the dark from Alfred. “Go on,” he insists, watching. “Best you drink it before I set the rest of those.” He pulls on a fresh set of thin nitrile gloves and readies what Bruce desperately hopes is a shot of lidocaine.

Alfred presses air out of the syringe and raises his eyebrows. "Morphine now, or after?"

God bless Alfred.

Bruce chooses after.

He doesn’t complain, not one word, not one sound, as Alfred sets his hands. He lets the pain teach him.

Alfred sighs, binding the last finger, eyes Bruce's tight jaw and perspiring face, and pauses, Bruce's hand in both of his. "This won't do, Bruce," he says, tone gentled as if he's doing victim intake statements. "This...wallowing in your mistakes until you get hurt, or worse... You told me once, you wanted to beat the darkness back. All I see is a man beating himself to death. I am worried about you. I'm terrified for you." Alfred looks him in the eyes and this time it's more effort than Bruce can muster to look aside. He makes himself meet that gaze. "You can force the world to make sense all you like, Bruce." Alfred is quiet, his voice miles away from calm. "But this--" He lifts Bruce's finger lightly to make his point. "This, has got to end."

He dips his head in silent assent. The last thing Bruce wants is another argument, now.

It does have to end. It will.

The morphine seethes in his stomach, turns his gut and lifts him up away from the sore bickering between his frame and the bed's. He can breathe.

Bruce has to get a handle on this entire situation; he has to find Clark.

~

‘You’re Bruce Wayne, aren’t you?’
He sees it coming; he is who he is. He doesn’t think for a second to try and block the open-handed smack; he would never hurt Martha Kent—he’d rather cut his own arm off first. The pop of her hand against his cheek is flat. It doesn’t echo; the sound gets swallowed up by wood and plains air.

The air swirls skyward around them in a dizzying circle of earth and grey. It doesn’t hurt him, does damage to no vital organs, but Bruce suppresses a flinch all the same. He resists looking up.

He shouldn’t be here.

‘—raised that boy, you think I can’t tell the difference between the truth and a lie? Used to getting your way.’ She slaps him again.

‘Are you a good man? Are you, Bruce Wayne?’ Another slap.

“I’m not Bruce Wayne,” Bruce protests, but the wind flings his words away, distorted.

‘I don’t want to hear your filth!’

It’s not right; something is off, if he could just find the source—

This is what he brings to everyone he cares for, eventually. This is what happens when Bruce loses control; he deserves this. She swings at him again; he ducks back, sees her startled face—she’s more surprised than he is.

Even as he thinks it, Bruce knows he’s wrong; she isn’t looking at him, she’s looking behind him, and he can’t turn into the source of the gale, he can’t face what’s— who is behind him.

Bruce has to turn and face him.

Red and blue, red in blue. Devastation.

The horizon disappears under a wave of darkness in the squeaking furred shape of Bruce’s fear.

And that’s it: Bruce is out, he knows he’s dreaming. He knows he can wake up. He knows this isn’t real. It gives him no relief; Brue knows his own mind. This doesn’t change the facts.

He’s got the city like a sickness; a virus in his blood and everyone who’s worth a damn can see it’s stain.

Bruce wakes, hand clenching over his chest. His heart thuds dully in his ears. His sheets are cool; his bed is empty. His city glows like cheap neon and cold glitter in the distance.

The silence is oppressive.

All his careful planning and plotting is pointless; all useless. Bruce doesn’t know how to handle someone who he can’t control, and the truth is as it’s always been—Bruce cannot control Clark. There is no controlling Clark; not without Clark’s consent.

He’s made the same mistake all over again, not seeing what was right in front of his face. Refusing to see Clark’s intentions through the fog of his own expectations and fears. Clark hasn’t judged him--Bruce had done that all on his own.

Once again, events which should have had statistically reliable results have failed to deliver the expected gains. Bruce needs a better plan.
First though, he has debts to pay.
"From far away you see the pattern, the connections, and the thing as whole, see all the islands and the routes between them. Up close it all dissolves into texture and incoherence and immersion, like a face going out of focus just before a kiss.”
— Rebecca Solnit, The Faraway Nearby

(As usual all mistakes are my own - if you see one, feel free to point it out.)

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seven: All Those Circuses Back East

~“Perhaps it's impossible to wear an identity without becoming what you pretend to be.”~ -Orson Scott Card

Healing, Bruce reflects tiredly, is as wrought with thankless effort as it is with exhaustion. The bandages get cycled down to skin in two weeks, finger splints come off in three and a half weeks; the ribs take another four. He’s fortunate not to have a punctured lung or skull fracture to contend with in the bargain.

The feel of the silk in his hands, the crest raised a scant millimeter above the surface of the weighty sounding rod, the sharp teeth of the steel clamps, the cool lead-weighted leather of the blindfold - they all remind him of what he can no longer call his own. They give him no pleasure - they mean nothing, without context.

He packs them away in his wardrobe.

The gym is empty but for the sound of his own exertion. Electrolyte-laden water and canapés on trays that appear when he’s busiest and disappear as soon as he’s re-engaged with the exercise equipment.

He’s working too hard, pushing his body too fast, he knows. It’s fine; challenges are made to be overcome. He hates the fatigue, the debilitating slowness of his healing limbs.

The day the splints come off, he spends two hours at the bags. The heavy bag first then when his hands feel cumbersome, he attacks the speed bag until he’s soaked - until he’s so far past the Wall
that he can’t see it. He punches until the world is pared down to the weight of his limbs, the violence in his blows, the crack, the snarl, the yell of pain bursting out of him into chill air.

~

“Proximity is where objects that are close together are associated.”

He doesn’t call. It’s... lacking, graceless, to do this sort of thing without meeting face to face.

When Martha opens the door, she smiles. “Bruce, my word - I wasn’t expecting you two!” She’s pleased to see him, and she looks past him into the blowing wind then back, her eyebrows drawing in slightly. Puzzled. She holds the door open for him. “You look terrible. Where’s Clark?”

Bruce forces his lips into something resembling a pleasantry. Be polite. “Thank you.” He doesn’t allow himself to step into that welcoming doorway. He forms the words carefully in his mind before he allows them to escape. “Clark. Isn’t with me. I was hoping he’d be here, actually.”

He isn’t there, but Martha asks Bruce to come in anyway.

“It’s too dark out there to be driving this time of night, Bruce, no matter what’s going on between you and Clark. You know the roads this time of year - I insist.”

Tired as he suddenly is, Bruce manages to dredge up some manner of ill grace and thank her, for her hospitality. “Mrs. Kent... Martha. I’m sorry.”

She gives him a look a great deal more scrutinizing than the one she’d answered the door with, questions in her eyes. He knows this look; he sees now where Clark learned it. Then she blows a strand of hair from her eyes. “Well come in, then. You picked a bad time to wander. Pick a room - storm’s coming.”

Bruce steps inside. “I know.”

Alfred receives the news of his layover without surprise.

The storm comes in overnight, claws of ice and teeth of sub-zero wind-chill. From the downstairs guest room, Bruce can hear the snow clumping on the eaves as the house settles into its foundation. The shadows press in. He doesn’t sleep.

At five, he layers up, grabs a few tools, pulls on his gear and goes out into the gale. In the darkness before dawn, the blasts of air rushing past him are wickedly brisk. His hands and nose go numb almost immediately.

It’s comforting, the pattern of break, scoop, heave. Restful, the way the calm and the quiet sink into him with the frigid air. Reassuring, the heft and pull of laboring muscles, the blanketing of frost alleviating the need for his attention to danger.

He spirals into the rhythm, matches respiration to action, movement to will.

She finds him at six seventeen a.m., shoveling January snow from the front drive. She stands there
watching him fog a cloud of condensation and haul powder for some time. “Bruce,” she says, kindly but with an acerbic edge, “What in the hell are you doing?”

Language, he thinks tiredly, before the displeasure in her tone stops him. He looks around, puffs out steam, sinews warmed now.

The long porch and walkway are shoveled, swept and salted. The stairs are cleared and safe for passage. The cars sit near-spotless - windshields clean, door handles de-iced. A dig-out to the road already begun to meet the snow plow.

There is no problem here; it’s obviously a rhetorical question.

He bends to scoop again.

“Bruce!” Rings out, eerily reminiscent of home, pausing him just long enough for her to get a firm handle on the shovel grip. “Goodness sakes man, stop being dramatic and get in the house!”

Bruce opens his mouth to reply, but she’s staring at him, hair wisping about her face in the cold wind, scarf whipping and feet planted firmly on the ground. Reddened cheeks and eyes. Watching him with obvious disapproval.

“It’s cold, Bruce.”

An eddy, a tiny twisting snake of wind and white blows past their boots. The environmental caution sensor on his watch is keeping time with his heart. Thirty-five below.

He blinks shards of ice from his lashes. It’s cold, yes.

*It’s cold, dangerously cold, and Martha Kent is stood out in it, once again waiting on Bruce.*

Awareness of his body's complaints is as sudden as it is unwelcome.

The sun is up - the yard brightened, the shadows gone. Bruce releases the shovel.

“Yes, ma’am.”

There’s hot coffee in the kitchen, once the boots are stomped, the heater is turned up and the coats are hung to dry.

There’s warmth at the table, but precious little comfort — just the quiet clink of ceramic on saucers. Martha pours them both a cup, sets Bruce’s down with a brief pat to his arm and sits. She settles into her chair, spoon in hand and prepares her own without a sign of anger or blame.

“So you don't have to tell me.” And he doesn’t comprehend how she can sound so understanding, how she can even look at him this way. “You don't have to say a thing if you don't want to, but… What happened? What’s happening, Bruce?”

He’s so grateful that what she says isn’t ‘what did you do’, it takes him a moment (and a sip of coffee) to speak.

“I made a mistake. I can’t say more.” It shouldn't be this difficult to swallow.

*Ha. Yes, of course. I’ve always said what this house needs is more secrets.* There’s no acrimony in her voice, only wry comprehension. She drinks her coffee – cream, no sugar - and turns her gaze
to the window, calmly watching the activity in the now-heated chicken-run. It’s too quiet.

Clark isn't here and it's too damn quiet.

Bruce sits his cup down and folds his hands. “I did not… React well.”

“And so you’re chasing ‘round behind him because…?”

He focuses on the mathematically perfect curve of the porcelain before him. Smooth and unblemished. Unsullied by hesitation or doubt, the pottery doesn't question. The glossy patina doesn't fear, it only reflects fear. The clay held fire yet didn't burn.

As Bruce wishes he could.

The words catch, almost choke him on their way out. “I don't understand.” Bruce frowns at the cup and she sighs. Shakes her head.

Mutters, “Oh Lord have mercy,” under her breath and fixes him with an uncomfortably knowing look before she shoots him a quick humorless smile.

“Bruce, Clark comes back in his own time, when he’s upset. He doesn’t like to be managed – he’s been that way since the grass was green.”

She glances out at the winter landscape again. “Well… Anyway.” Martha smooths her slacks absently. “This isn’t the city, Bruce, and neither is Clark. You’ll have to wait for him to come ‘round.”

Not an experience he’s had much call to accustom himself to. Not an easy thing to ask of Bruce, to wait. But perhaps there is something to that as well - Clark’s never cared about Bruce’s cameras except where it came to surveillance. Security cameras everywhere were acceptable; surveillance cameras earned Bruce a particularly sour strain of shade.

She makes a simple breakfast: toast and the ever-popular eggs over easy. Bruce shoves three forkfuls down before nausea hits. He can't. He lays his utensil down, lines them parallel to the plate, perpendicular to the wall. Stares at his own meaningless arrangement. Is thankful, grateful when Martha takes it away.

“It gets easier,” she says softly, back to him at the sink. Bruce supposes she of all people would know. He thinks she must be watching the skies.

It isn’t too quiet; its mercifully quiet, in Martha's home. Mercifully kind, for her to accept Bruce's presence.

But he still has no solution, pragmatic or otherwise.
“Similarity is where objects that are similar are seen as associated.”

“Master Wayne.”

“No, Alfred.”

“Beg pardon, sir, but I cannot in good conscience comply with this ill-advised absurdity.”

“I’m telling you no.”

“Yes, I daresay you are. And yet there seems to be some confusion.”

“I forbid it. You have no right.”

“I do apologize for the inconvenience, Master Bruce, but I have every right in the world to invite those boys into their own home, as you well know. The confusion here is your own. If this is unacceptable to you, then may I suggest a hot bath and some healthy rest? Perhaps sir would appreciate a glass of warm milk as well?”

There are deserts that are not half as dry as Alfred’s scathing wit. Bruce narrows his eyes and stares him down mutinous, but Alfred doesn’t flinch.

Silently, Bruce turns and walks away. It isn’t an argument he’s going to win, and in truth Alfred’s logic is indisputable. No child raised under Bruce’s roof will ever be turned away, regardless of what Bruce’s wishes are, full stop. It’s the end of the argument, but the disagreement thickens the air between them.

~

Alfred calls the boys, even though Bruce explicitly states that he doesn’t want their lives interrupted. It’s the promise he’d made, to them and to himself, to give Timothy and Richard some form of normalcy. Being who they were, of course they’d taken normalcy to mean ‘move to the nearest urban center and become masked vigilantes’, but Bruce can’t deny that Bludhaven has a certain sense of style and safety these days that it never achieved before.

Property values are up, major crime is down, and violent crime is quickly becoming a rarity. The boys even kept the Bat, running Bruce’s symbol on their chests and their faces—whether to needle Bruce or to honor him by adding to the legend was up for debate, though it was probably a bit of both.

Gotham needs good hands, and Bruce has put himself on leave for at least three months; someone has to take up the slack.

He avoids them when they pile into the too-small lakehouse which had been perfectly spacious just the hour earlier. They know better than to try to pry him out of his funk before he’s ready. They’re probably thankful for the opportunity to relax and enjoy Alfred’s company without Bruce there to
ruin the good mood.

There was never going to be any hiding this, and perhaps that’s just as well. Bruce is, was far too comfortable hiding Clark behind his walls; as comfortable as he is hiding everything else in his life away. He’s aware of the disconnect — as he tries to be, of all his flaws.

He should never have read page one of those journals.

By now, Alfred’s seen his locked files, about Bruce’s intimate research on Clark, in the Mainframe’s database; that is unquestionable. Alfred’s no slouch at coding himself. Yes, Bruce had locked them, but not with any extreme metric that he and Alfred weren’t already using to encrypt files. He hadn’t hidden the information, exactly; he simply hasn’t volunteered it. He is aware they imply a significant time investment and a proportionately high priority in his life.

Since Bruce categorically refuses to discuss all matters Clark-related with him, Alfred gets his revenge in the manner he is most accustomed to: forcing Bruce to eat whatever food he feels is appropriate until he’s satisfied that he’s made his point. Perhaps it isn’t actual force as such, more that Alfred prepares foods and Bruce is too accustomed to not fending for himself to ward off the deluge.

This time, naturally, it’s a shame parade of cherries. Cherry pie or perhaps a Black Forest trifle Bruce could have excused — no, there’s cherried oats; there is the lovely Barbary duck with sour cherries, the venison Carpaccio with golden cherries, the clafoutis (delicate flan almost enough to take the sting of the cherries embedded in it away), there are cherry tarts and cherry buns, cherry gelato and cherried cream.

There’s the evening that Alfred brings out lightly steaming bowls of savory cherry soup for Bruce and Richard, the last of which causes Bruce to make the urgent acquisition of delivery or takeout a mission-critical goal before the morning. Alfred isn’t the boss of him; this is private.

He stalks back into the dining area just in time to hear Tim murmuring in appreciation over his meal. “I didn’t even know you could make a soup like this, Alfred. It’s wonderful.”

It’s outrageous. Unreasonable.

“Indeed, Master Timothy,” Alfred sniffs, not looking in Bruce’s direction. “Master Bruce has always had an affinity for cherries.” He continues to collect Bruce’s silverware, as Bruce tries unsuccessfully to swallow his consternation and Tim elbows Dick in the ribs pointedly.

Alfred has evidently decided that subtlety is lost on Bruce. He obviously isn’t the only one.

“Are you finished yet?” Bruce asks dryly.

“Well, Master Bruce, that would depend on whether sir happens to have a moment to speak with me during the drive to sir’s meeting today. I shall most happily await sir’s convenience. Or perhaps sir would enjoy further servings of crow pie.”

For fuck’s sake. He’s trained them all far too well.
“Continuity is where the perceptual system tries to disambiguate which segments fit together into continuous lines.“

He expects to see more of Clark’s musings about the world, and the journal is full of those: the angle of the sun across the lake water, the number of geese and the probabilities of a flock-habitable area nearby, the sounds of the land surrounding the lakehouse and the people in it. The beauty of Bruce’s land, the peace of the lake and the river beyond.

There are also pages of descriptions and analysis of Bruce’s behaviors, of Alfred’s, darker passages about loneliness and betrayal. Entire chapters about the terrible things Clark hears and sees, about how noisy and filthy the city is (even from forty miles away), about how remote Bruce is, about how much Clark misses Lois Lane. The last isn’t a surprise, but it cuts just the same.

If that were all, Bruce might think he’d be forgiven yet, he might think there was some hope to be had in the lightless place where he’s found himself. But no; there are the lists:

Today I will look at them.

I want my moth a pillow. I’m going to say so.

What does he want?

Brown, not white. Brown.

I didn’t don’t want to hurt anyone.

They said it was over.

My name is Clark Kent???

My name is Kal

I remember everything.

and

1. I am free from the wrongdoings of others.
2. I am unaffected by their behavior.
3. I trust in the goodwill of others.
4. I know that kindness will prevail.
5. I trust the people in my life fully.
6. I have faith that they act with respect and genuine intentions towards me.
7. I can take a leap of faith. I will take a leap of faith.
8. The trust comes later. Maybe.
9. Revenge perpetuates bad faith.
10. I am not alone.
11. I am not alone.
I am not alone.

There are more, more than one, more than ten. Lists of affirmations and small monthly goals. Lists of daily, simpler goals such as venturing out of his room, sitting outside after dark, remembering to eat and drink and pretend to need more rest than he does, so as not to discomfit his host.

*Christ, Clark.* Bruce closes the book and rests his hand on the worn binding, then, helplessly, he lays his head against the journal too. He doesn’t cover his eyes; he’s been staring into Clark’s light long enough. In its absence, everything is dark, including Bruce’s thoughts.

He can’t afford to be blind, anymore.

~

Another banquet, another fundraiser. Another function that Bruce is required to attend. He goes, though he’s made a small habit of being a no-show these months, though his ribs still creak and his hip still aches. He goes, because this is the Work, *his* work, not play.

He goes because the Foundation needs the money. He rubs elbows, he shakes hands, he pats backs, smiles, and says small clever things seemingly by accident that make others smile at him.

You don’t get money out of these guests by asking for it—this is the tip-most top of Gotham’s elite. You get money out of these people only by spending money, and telling them concisely why you have spent it. You get money from these people only by showing them that money means nothing to you.

The banquet is held on one of his properties. He leaves about eighty percent of Brucie at the door—those beyond won’t be impressed by his drinking or his prowess at seduction tonight, they won’t care to hear fictions about where he summered or what he ate this week (as if he could remember). He can discuss economics and trade law here; he doesn’t need to prove himself to them. He doesn’t need to get their attention.

His name is his proof. His pedigree gets him every eye in the house. They support him; they *back* him.

It’s less satisfying than it’s ever been.

~

“Closure is where the brain tends to perceive forms and figures in their complete appearance despite the absence of one or more of their parts, either hidden or totally absent.”

“What do *you* think, Alfred? About all this.”
“Master Bruce, when we become aware of a loved one's shortcomings, we give support; we do not rub their faces in it as if they are a wayward pup... However, there are limits.”

Bruce breathes. This seems monumentally unjust. “All my life, you’ve told me to be aware of my own prejudices. Of my weak points.”

Alfred gives him an unimpressed glare. “And now you are irrevocably aware of every triviality, and I wish it were not so,” he says. “Bruce... All your life you have heard what you most wished to hear, predominantly from yourself. I do trust you will take the time to listen to me this once, beyond learning how best to get what you want. Entertain the probability of how your actions may have affected someone other than yourself, without your particular... Resiliency. It is easiest to assume that one has all the answers when one cannot see the whole of the problem.”

“I’ve come too far now, Alfred. I can’t change for someone.”

Alfred parks the car carefully then meets Bruce’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “One does not change for someone else, Master Bruce. One changes for oneself.”

He has to consider that Alfred might have a point.

At an underwhelming Kinsey of three point four, gender in of itself isn’t a concern that’s ever weighed in Bruce’s decision to lie with anyone. He accepts the conservative upbringing he was given and he accepts its mores in polite society, for the most part.

Bruce is one of the Privileged, and one of the privileges of power—for a man like Bruce, a man deemed indispensable—has always been a significant degree of insulation from the consequences of his own actions.

Certain things are simply not done; certain others are rather more acceptable, though not to be spoken of. Bruce accepts that he has to make compromises in order to shore up the areas where he cannot afford to compromise; he will fuck as many It Girls as he has to, to achieve his gains.

If some of those It Girls haven’t exactly been girls over the years, it’s never been anyone else’s business to know so. Especially in his role as a prime purveyor of goods for Gotham’s underworld, pretty and useful has always mattered more than anatomy. Aside from Alfred, no one close to Bruce has ever required that particular clearance of information.

The idea of it, of everyone knowing a truth he’s taken so many pains to keep confidential: that not only does he enjoy the company of his own sex, but that he’d dare prefer it - the dismantling of his decades-long web of misdirections and false romantic endeavors; it’s chilling.

It doesn’t matter that Bruce is just as attracted to women as he’s ever been; it won’t matter that he’s just as capable of seduction, just as capable of bringing a partner to pleasure — the moment he allows himself to be seen this way, with another man — any man — in a committed relationship, he will forever change the way the world looks at him and by extension, everything Wayne Industries touches.

As unjust as that is, as wrong as Bruce knows it is, he doesn’t have the luxury (like some Boy Scouts) of living in a fantasy world where he can imagine something like this won’t blow back spectacularly in his face. It isn’t a question merely of what Bruce wants, or how he...

How he feels.

It’s a question of what his investors and what the market will tolerate, in a man of Bruce’s stature. It’s a question of his employees’ job safety and productivity. It’s a question of whether he’s the
weak link, it’s a question of legacy, of what he’s willing to put up with in order to have what he wants and still remain effective.

Too many questions.

He understands what Alfred is driving at: if Bruce intends to commit, it cannot be piecemeal, or half-hearted. He can’t string the Man of Steel along like some press attaché; he can’t treat wholesome, generous, sincere Clark as if he’s a passing affection. And he is an affection, for all that Bruce has hidden and denied it, for all that he’s cursed himself and Clark for it, Bruce feels for Clark.

He feels what he’s prayed to never feel again, and it’s just as life-wrenching and terrifying as he’s always known it would be, if he ever allowed himself this.

He loves Clark Kent.

He shouldn’t and it might kill him, but he loves Kal.

There is no world where it would be just, for Bruce to keep that fact from Clark and no world where he has the right to inflict that truth on Clark. There is no way that Bruce can make the ends justify the means after seeing the hope fade in Kal’s eyes.

There is no reality where it is justice that Clark should return to him, that Clark should take Bruce back into his confidence, his life and his body.

Clark is better than him; Clark has always been better than him. What Bruce is trying to wrestle — what he’s struggling with — is whether Clark is more important than Bruce’s Mission. Is Clark’s happiness worth making Bruce’s life, his self-appointed Mission, more difficult?

~

Water. Orange horizon. The Manor stands, just as it always should. As it always has.

*The sun, blinding.*

He’s in the lake below. A warm, humid summer day.

*It’s June, June 18th.*


Bruce draws in a breath and breathes out delicious pleasure when slick heated suction draws him in.

An eager, hot tongue lapping at Bruce. Steady ing hands—known hands—firm and secure at his hips. A nose buried against him, distinctive throat muscles working, a lush offering of pure silver sensation in Bruce’s spine.

A string of pulsating swallows, the slightest hint of vibration and Bruce is close - so, so close, floating on air, on Kal’s touch, on a wave of pure delight.

Kal licks. Long, syrupy, thigh-twitching curls of that tongue, dragging across Bruce’s flesh, worshipping his flesh. Worshipping *Bruce*, because *he is worthy*. 
Consuming Bruce, caressing him, teasing and searing him - this restless lapping and nuzzling, Jesus – gobbling him up. Revving his system down and his spirit up. Enough, for the riot of humming in Bruce’s bones to subside.

Until Kal sucks him in again.

That brilliant mouth.

“Yes.” Bruce tips his head back, turns his face into the heat, the unutterable warmth of the sun above.

Clark.

Bruce looks down, and he’s there, under the surface, eyes smiling, lips wrapped around Bruce’s cock. His hair is a cloud of ink when he moves. His eyes are the same shade as the sky above. He laughs, bubbles escaping the corners of his mouth.

I have to kiss him.

Bruce reaches down, but the water is… wrong. Too viscous, too thick. Clark releases him with another laugh and moves around Bruce. Not swimming - flight.

The bird chatter stops. The quiet lap of water against the banks, of wind brushing the trees stops as well.

He struggles to free himself. Even the sound of Bruce’s own breath, his own racing heartbeat, is silent.

A white-striped pink swirl, a murky fluttering and moving below the waterline. A slimy, disquieting mass of lifeless carnation petals against Bruce’s skin. They boil up from below, becoming caught in the gelatinous ooze surrounding Bruce.

They ripple and glow around Clark. “I think we have a lot in common, Bruce. Your regard is my foundation.” He smiles again, that smile - that same slightly ashamed hurt smile. The petals swirl when Clark twists in the water.

The Manor trembles.

Wait.

Every stroke he takes further from where Bruce is, the light dims. With every long-limbed kick, another stone falls from the base of the mansion above, another shocking rivulet of dust and mortar collapsing in on itself.

I don’t want to be left in the dark. The words make no sound coming from Bruce’s lips - not one noise breaks the terrible silent air. Wait, he tries to say.

But Kal turns his back to Bruce and the water is dark and filled with leviathans. Clark turns his eyes away and the horizon is filled with old blood. He leaves, and the world fades to monochrome.

It’s almost a relief when something grabs Bruce’s ankles and yanks his head under.

Silence. Stark lines and familiar shadows. Bruce sits at the edge of his bed, chest heaving. The clock tells him he’s managed to sleep two hours – he won’t be getting any rest tonight.
When the rush of adrenaline subsides, he goes down to the gym and the Mainframe.

"Connectedness is when we see connections in disjointed objects."

There are reasons Bruce hasn’t tried to restore the Manor to glory, reasons beyond the sorrow, beyond the ashen taste of failure, beyond even the chest-squeezing anxiety that hounds Bruce just looking at the ruin. He’d lost more than a house in that fire.

There’s the sense of unspeakable loss, the sense of having squandered something invaluable. The certainty that he is the reason his family name will fade, that Bruce is the weak link in the long line of illustrious Waynes.

He can see the Manor house still, exactly where every timber and wall stood, in his mind. The fine-grained mahogany foyer, thirty feet of calm beauty and breezy symmetry, wrapped in open windows and always fragrant with the scent of roses, lavender and lilac. The long, sweeping black walnut staircase and bannister.

The stunning, bold cicada-green paneled walls of the forty-foot drawing room, with its flared Venetian arches and two-story-high ceiling, that Bruce could only enter by invitation if occupied, where guests often congregated on hardwood floors for his parents’ many hosted dinner parties.

The modest twenty by sixteen-foot Regency room with its triple-wide north-facing window, robin-blue trappings and crisp French Provençal crown molding, where Bruce had been born. The wide airy marble balconies and high terraces, where Bruce had taught himself to perch unsteadily, then to run along the roof’s edge.

Prussian blue, the small parlor under the servants’ stairs, where he would sit with Alfred, reading and having his afternoon tea while the man mended under the elaborate bas-relief of a colonial crest, in open defiance of the propriety and rules separating their stations.

The reading window, bowed out in hand-blown glass where Bruce often sat watching the many avian species which visited his mother’s garden.

The garden acreage, where Bruce and Alfred spent months identifying and cataloging taxonomy of the flora under the boughs in addition to tending them; because as beautiful as the flowers were, in the end it was cultivation of young Bruce’s mind that was the only way for him to escape despair.

The bedrock-deep foundations, the tall shielding garden walls, the cool shade trees and the endless security.

Bruce kept his ancestral home as his parents had: a conservatory, a collection. A quiet exhibition of pride, the successes and succession of his bloodline on display. The numerous portraits. The coat-of-arms. The Wayne Crest adorning the cornices of every room.

The ghosts of his family alive, within unchanging walls of guardianship.

There were rooms in the Manor which hadn’t been refitted since 1887, decadent curtains drawn to
keep acidic sunlight from fading an inch of vibrant color, furnishings which hadn’t been disturbed in decades - the treasures and accumulations of wealth, multiple lifetimes, closed up safe against modernity’s savages.

Every stone and fabric in Wayne Manor had been carefully chosen, scrupulously passed down from hand to hand. Every piece of art a generational investment in the family’s future. Every hand-worked centimeter of cabinetry lovingly commissioned from master craftsmen long gone. Every light fixture a work in stewardship.

*Bruce’s memories. Bruce’s home.*

None of it was replaceable. None of it was salvageable.

It was best not to dwell on, an inconceivable bereavement to consider in light of the other damages he’d sustained since the Manor’s fall.

In Clark’s absence, the lakehouse serving as both armory and barracks is no longer a home to Bruce. It’s a place for tools, a place to plan, a beachhead to wage war from, but he finds that it’s no longer a place he wishes to live.

There are things which have not been lost.

The magnificent views of the Liberty and Gotham Rivers, memories of golden limbs breaking summer warm waters. The Delaware shoreline to the north of the ancestral estate. The boundless green of pastoral fields and the woods beyond to the east, explosive energy, a blur of motion disrupting autumn-red leaves and undergrowth. The thick stands of black walnut, oak and pine gracing the land, snow on dark hair littered with evergreen needles.

Laughing eyes. Kind smiles. The elegance of the manor foundations. Bruce thinks of momentum, countering force with grace. Of tea on the mantel and harmony, of push and give, connection, balance.

Peace.

It isn’t a loss. It’s an *opportunity.*

Bruce pulls the blueprints out again, and pins them down on his spare drafting table.

Alfred finds him that way, bent over the table with his sleeves pushed up and sets a supper tray down on the sideboard. His eyes brighten; there is a certain gravity with which he hands Bruce his tea that Bruce hasn’t seen since his father still walked the Manor.

“I do believe we’re on the mend, Master Wayne.” His hand is proud on Bruce’s shoulder and he leans in and points to the prints of the lower quarters. “Always terribly drafty. Structurally sound, but could use a bit of work. And that back staircase!”

Bruce smiles, slow. Tentative. Stares at the blueprints and taps where Alfred is pointing. “That bad,
hm? You never said.” He sips his tea and makes an appropriately pleased sound.

“I would not wish to shock your delicate ears, sir. Oh very nice, a new library and perhaps a sitting room... Just here? It’s a bit close to—”

Alfred’s hand stays on his shoulder.

They work through the early morning.

Perhaps something can be salvaged after all.

~

He thinks about what he wants to say, and writes the words for days until they make sense - line after line in patience and concentration until the words flow smoothly and are exactly what he means to express. The ink sinks into the thick cream of parchment with a heaviness that gives weight to each stroke of his pen.

He thinks about what he wants, what he needs to say, and Bruce makes calls. He buys the flowers from specialty retailers, from heirloom hothouses, in pots and in planter-boxes, roots and all because he needs them alive, vibrant. Bruce is done giving Clark approximations of life.

White anemones, because he means this message with everything in him. Lavender, to express how despite his worst intentions Bruce found himself unable to be unfaithful. Gardenias and white sprigs of oleander, to acknowledge the dangerous secret of their connection, of his own emotions. Hyacinths, as richly purple as Bruce can find, because he’s ashamed and because he can’t stop himself from begging Clark's forgiveness.

Bruce sends them to the address he’s found, the nondescript apartment block he’s seen by satellite.

335A, floorplan B.

He waits, doesn't allow hope one way or the other.

Which turns out to be a good thing, when no answer comes.
Bouquet: white anemones (sincere), lavender (Faithful), gardenias (secret love), purple Hyacinth: (I'm sorry; Please forgive me), white/pink oleander: (dangerous love)

The Gestalt principles of perception govern the way we group different objects. (Proximity, Similarity, Continuity, Closure, and Connectedness)
Older Now Than My Father Ever Was

Chapter Summary

Time is a mirror.

Chapter Notes

I would have liked to have been able to release this chapter in November, but again, wish in one hand and fic in the other - see which comes true first. ;)

Enjoy the roses. Thanks to every one of you, for reading, commenting and for sticking with this story.

(Also, yes I know DCU Nightwing doesn't actually fly the Bat - of course it's a Robin, on his chest. But this is DCEU and the Nightwing movie isn't even close to being in post-production yet, so I'll just deal with getting Jossed when it happens.)

Chapter Eight: Older Now Than My Father Ever Was

*-----00-----*

Time slips away into convention. Clark’s been regenerated for six months when Thanksgiving comes around, and with it the assumption they would be dining as a couple and with family. Alfred begs off, claiming he’s made plans ‘on the Continent’.

Their flight plan gets delayed due to an early blizzard. The roads are a mess. Ten miles out from the farm, an ominous knocking from under the hood.

Clark’s the first one to mention it, low and worried. "That doesn’t sound good."

Bruce keeps his eyes on the road, skirts a bumper of ice and grime before pulling over. Curses silently to himself for two seconds before answering, "It isn’t."

"Huh... Why are we stopping? Did the battery die?"

He counts to five seconds this time. "Kansas. Get the toolbox. And the serpentine belt."

Clark looks as if something is amusing about all this. “I could just give us a lift there...? Plenty of space to land in the fields now that harvest is done.”

Grunting, lips tight, eyes narrowed, Bruce is already leaving the warmth of the cabin. “Luggage,” he shoots back succinctly.
Clark rubs the back of his head, an apologetic expression on his face. “Uh... I meant, take the whole car...”

*How is this his life?* Bruce eyes the frozen flat landscape, resists hunching against the terrible openness of the plains. Sighs through his nose silently in defeat.

——~00~——

“The Sullivans are on the move and it’s bad enough in Midtown without a gang war. Which—”

He watches Clark reach for a hen, then another, startling them away. Admires the curve of his glutes as he stalks after the chickens bent from the hips. Feathers ruffled, a hen takes exception to Bruce's boot and gives it a vicious peck. Bruce shifts on his feet.

It’s cold.

"Clark...? Why are you chasing the birds?"

"Not the birds I'm after; checkin' for eggs." Another slow sweep at an offended hen and Clark comes up with two in hand.

"Where are the egg collectors?"

Clark laughs. "The layin’ boxes? They're in there. See if these girls care, though." Clark’s diction relaxing is just another pearl of discord on a mountain of senselessness.

The place could use more natural lighting, trim back those trees. Dedicated feed storage space in waterproof bins would be a good investment. Raising the nesting boxes to avoid bending at awkward angles; basic ergonomic theory. Some tall shrubs across the way to act as a windbreak...

*Something*, to avoid... this: Clark’s crazy assed free-range chicken stalking intensity, dust from husks and yard-hay in his hair, grinning like a lunatic.

*He’s going stir-crazy:* Bruce knows the signs. Lack of the blaring ever-present Gotham soundscape is eating at him. The quiet and the calm are getting to him.

“Well, someone burned down their last safe house six nights ago - they can’t start a war without weapons. They’re gonna have to wait for that shipment that went missing from the GenCo contract, right?” Clark seems to inquire of yet another chicken's butt.

Thirty-four degrees Fahrenheit in the barn; Bruce is wearing all-weather gear with a warm windbreaker, like a sensible person; Clark is not. Clark’s wearing heavy-duty jeans that do amazing things to his legs and a thin flannel shirt, not bothering to pretend this far past the property line. Bruce watches Clark’s muscles ripple as he leans to peek behind metal pails. The kid bends over, ass in the air, to check under the rusted-out old truck in the back, and athletically bounces around the stack of hay bales on either side of the barn. It’s indecently, *offensively* perky.

Clark brings his basket over and gently places five eggs into the low pan of water.
“That was my first instinct, yes...” Bruce rubs his chin, glances down at the water. “But the new deal the Sullivans have with the Amico Gang might push back a few deadlines—” He stares. “What are you doing?” Plumes of white air puff in front of his face and he rolls his shoulders impatiently. It’s damn cold.

Setting the last of the eggs in the water, Clark waits and then carefully begins plucking as eggs bob to the surface. “Checking the eggs. These new hens are tricky.” He puts two eggs to the side and scoops another. “See, the good eggs stay at the bottom, n’the rotten ones float.”

Bruce frowns. It’s fucking freezing out here. “Can’t you just smell the bad ones?” He shifts, trying to keep blood circulating.

A grin and a self-conscious shrug. “Well, sure. This is more relaxing though, in’nit?”

A long silence.

Bruce clears his throat. “The Amico Gang armory has a bad street rep. Could be trouble.”

Smiling slightly, Clark shakes his head. He busies himself transferring the viable eggs back to his basket, holding it against himself. “Do you want to run back to Gotham just to review transport records right now, B?”

Trying to keep the eggs warm, Bruce realizes. He can think of fifteen better ways to warm the barn within the next five minutes. He shifts again then forces himself to stillness.

Clark looks up at Bruce’s silence. “Then don’t. We can deal with the city when we get back to the city.”

“It’s not that easy, Clark.”

A squinting grin at him. “Could be.”

It was exactly that easy.

——~00~0——

“Oh!” Martha’s laugh belies the distress in her tone. She wipes her hands on the apron hanging from one of the dining chairs. “Well, there we go. It’s official - I knew I’d forgotten something! I’ll be a couple hours. You boys’ll be fine while I go pick up from in town, won’t you?”

He’s well aware that there’s no reason a trip into town and back should take any longer than forty minutes at worst, but Bruce thinks they’ll be just fine with a little privacy.

Clark jumps up before Martha can finish slipping on her boots. “What do you need? We’ll go. Right, B?” His eyes dilate and shift in a way that Bruce hasn’t completely managed to examine yet and Bruce knows he’s looking through the wall. “Condensed milk and vanilla, is that all?”

“Well, yes, but I thought I might look for a few other things. We could use some more cranberries and flour, another jug of milk, butter—”
“I don’t mind.” Clark’s smiling as he winds his scarf, making himself look as bundled up as everyone else this time of year. “Be back soon.” He’s pulling on his coat already.

The Kents look at each other, smiling, and Bruce has to look away.

He moves to keep up, glances from Clark and Martha’s silent conversation to the snow-shrouded car outside. He smiles too, a small one, when he looks back at them. “Sure. We’ll go; you stay warm. We’ll be back soon.” It can't be worse than Madison Avenue this time of year.

Clark takes quilted shopping bags with them, and climbs into the truck. Bruce wonders where in the small cab they will fit the groceries... Surely not in the dust-covered bed of the truck? That's just not sanitary.

After interminable jostling over tractor-etched grooves in the asphalt, they finally park by a barber shop. Through the large front window it is easy to see tools in an untidy pile on a counter, the barber wrapping the traditional bib around a new customer even though previously cut hair still clings to it. Not sanitary!

Town is, unfortunately, busier than Bruce expected. These people don’t hide when it gets cold; apparently, what they do in Smallville is gather in the town square to chat, drink cocoa, trade hot cider recipes and gossip in between running errands back and forth.

Apparently, this is what Clark and Bruce are doing as well.

They attempt to cross the street, only to stop short and allow a tractor to putter past hauling some sort of animal trailer. Clark takes the opportunity to chat and exchange cheery Midwest pleasantries in the freezing cold with other waiting pedestrians. Suspicious liquids slowly drip from under the door of the trailer. Bruce shudders in revulsion and delicately steps over the wet stains on the street.

Finding a person in need of someone stronger to carry their packages to a vehicle seems as if it would be a hard task, but Clark manages to find someone in need right away. He beams as he carries parcels, first this way, then that. Clark laughs, shakes his head with windswept hair and bright eyes when one of his elderly rescues offers him a handful of crumpled dollar bills. Bruce watches them chat back and forth for several minutes until Clark gives a defeated but good-natured shrug.

He comes back to Bruce with two paper cups, the same paper cups everyone else seems to have. The scent of chocolate on crisp air is mouth-watering.

Ridiculous.

The cocoa is velvety and hot. New people smile cheerfully at Clark and come right up to him. They clap him on the shoulders and they give him the sort of full-on fond hugs that only feature in television holiday specials and theatre work, in Bruce’s experience.

They ask how Clark is, they tell him ‘it’s so good’ to see him and ask him how ‘the city life’ is treating him.

They ask ‘who’s your friend’ and tell Clark what a great job he’s doing, ‘out in the world’.

Bruce’s blood runs cold.

Clark smiles and ducks his head modestly and aw-shucks his way out of every compliment. He talks town gossip and trades stories, asks about their crop year and their families while they sip
their drinks and Bruce carefully tries to call as little attention to himself as possible.

They all ask Clark to tell ‘his ma’ so-and-so said hi. They all give Bruce’s attire nearly identical scanning looks when Clark nonchalantly takes a sip from Bruce’s cocoa, before they shake Bruce’s hand and wish the two of them a happy holiday. Clark grins after them.

There's a bakery run out of a retrofitted barn — barn cat and all sitting on the windowsill, bare meters away from where the dough is being kneaded. *Unsanitary!*

Clark buys four loaves, hot from the oven, with fresh, site-churned butter and a six-rack of thick honest-to-goodness-glass milk bottles. *Hand-filled, by the look of them, dear god—*

Bruce firmly stifes the part of his mind that wants to escape and thinks of Venice. In France, the bakers had made their dough shirtless. He'd eaten it. In Tibet, they’d made their dough with frost-damaged, half-turned rice flour. He'd eaten it. There was no way in hell Bruce was going to do any less now, in Smallville.

Everything goes into the back of the pickup. Clark grins at Bruce’s suggestion to move bags into the cab, unrolls a sturdy fabric pickup top, and attaches it to the bed of the truck. “No problem. Do this all the time.”

Bruce raises a finger to reply. The day becomes somewhat more surreal when Clark waves to a small group of townsfolk walking past and says something that sounds very much like, “Hey, y’all! Happy Thanksgivin’!”

Their next destination is the 'ready store'. It has a sign out front proclaiming it to be "Dewitt's" — though it is difficult to read, obscured as it is by one of the most eccentric wind chime collections Bruce has ever seen. As they walk through the store he steels himself to not react as Clark picks a rack of cans from the thick layer of dust on the shelves, focusing instead on the distant rambling of the store clerk whose inexhaustible knowledge of town gossip would make him an excellent resource if organized crime ever tried to take root here.

Bruce watches a pallet of barn supplies being restocked... Pig feed? Possibly. Huge plumes of particulates billow out as each fifty kilogram sack is thumped down and suddenly it makes more sense that the store is not clean. The entire town shows signs of consistent back-breaking labor, people too busy doing real work to cater to appearances, not indications of negligence or lack of basic knowledge of hygiene.

Reality is hijacked again: new people. *Strangers.* Only, they aren’t strangers to Clark, are they? They’re his neighbors.

Before he knows it, Clark is pushing a plastic cup of hot cider into his hands. Bruce stands under a tree nursing his newly acquired drink, letting the tide of cheerful chatter pass without comment. He hears and categorizes the conversation by relevance and importance to the current mission - namely, acquisition and dispensation of culinary supplies to one Martha K. It’s cold as *balls.*

It’s also nothing relevant to the whole point of leaving the warm shelter of the Kent home.
Bruce catches a whispered, “People will say anything, but he sure is fancy, Clark!” and concentrates on the taste of cinnamon, orange and nutmeg until the dull flush fades. He’s wearing the most inexpensive kit he has.

_Fancy._ Crumples the empty cup abruptly and smiles, a bright empty Brucie smile. “Why, thank you - aren’t you a gem! Clark said I needed something rugged.” Flashes his teeth and raises the hood on his duster. “Are we done? It’s a little nippy, isn’t it? Don’t want the milk to freeze.”

Clark’s expression flickers. He smiles quickly at them and makes very long-winded, perky excuses.

“Apologies,” Bruce smiles, lying. “I guess we just don’t have weather like this back east.”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” is what Clark finally says once they’re back on the road.

Bruce frowns. “Wouldn’t what?”

“Be him.”

Bruce lets himself breathe, lets the words inside float away. Sits in the silence until everything inside is still again. Clasps his hands tightly together.

“Sorry.” Clark sounds slightly flustered now. “Newcomers are big news. Folks ‘round here aren’t used to—” He starts again. “They just don’t know how to act around— Uh...” Clark’s shoulders are tight.

_Around city people? Well-off people? Around gay people?_ None seem like an appropriate subject to call on at the moment.

“I gather.” Bruce lets his hand brush Clark’s, casually. The tension eases, slowly. “It’s fine, Kansas.” He looks out the window. “They seem like nice people.”

New evidence is crowding Bruce. The probability is high that they are very nice people indeed.

As they bump along the miles back to the Kent farm, there’s a lingering discomfort at the possible contamination of the food they’re about to consume, but it is overshadowed by a quiet sort of admiration for honest hard work.

There is something else though, something elusive at the edge of Bruce's thoughts.

"Clark," Bruce interrupts the silence with some alarm.

A content questioning hum from the driver’s seat.

"Did you pay?"

Clark chuckles. “Country credit.”

A gamut of conflicting emotions: anger, surprise, the stirrings of outrage. Perhaps he’s misunderstood. “You let them pay you?”

Clark takes his attention from the double-lane to shoot Bruce a look that’s one part irritation and two parts plain bewilderment. There’s nothing wrong with his non-regional dialect when he speaks this time. Every word is crisp and clipped. “Everyone gets a tab from the general store in the
winter, B. We settle up after the thaw.”

Bruce stares out at the snow. *Oh.*

Clark continues to stare at his profile.

“The road.” Bruce sits back slowly. “Watch the road.”

“I’m sorry,” he says finally into the silence.

Clark’s eyes return to the windshield.

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They say grace.

That is, the Kents say their prayers, Martha aloud. Clark with a silent ferocity, brow furrowed. Bruce bows his head and promises his parents that he’ll visit as soon as he returns home. It’s difficult, more difficult than he thought it could still be after all these years, to share a holiday—a family day—with others.

The 50-year-old bottle of Glenglassaugh that Bruce picked from the cellar sits on Martha’s counter, in the crystal decanter he’d gifted her earlier in the year. He is not partaking, but enjoys the surprised pleasure on Martha’s face as she tastes it.

He’s thankful to be here. A glance around the table tells him he’s not alone, in many ways.

Ninety percent of the food on the table is a direct infraction of his nutritional regimen. He’s considering the optimal portion size to satisfy both manners and the Mission, when Clark begins to pile servings onto a plate.

He stares in horrified bemusement as the overladen plate is set in front of him. The edges of the plate are barely visible beyond the food.

There’s turkey, roast venison, smoked mussels, fried catfish, cabbage with deer sausage, steamed green beans, a mountain of mashed potatoes with three types of gravy, homemade biscuits and (of course) a platter of golden buttery corn. The hideously neon-red ‘cranberry sauce’ wiggles wetly from its cut up tin can shape; Bruce would rather not remember the sickening squelch as it oozed out of the can. Various pies and puddings wait on the sideboard — including the Mittwochskuchen Alfred sent with his regards.

Strangely, there’s also a large bowl of what looks like lumpy white paste with butter and cream swirled into it... Porridge, likely.

Martha takes pity on Bruce after a look at his expression and calmly takes the plate away, giving him a clean dish.

“Try the catfish, Bruce. Clark doesn’t eat seafood.”

It’s been so long since he’s served himself, but he manages not to make a complete mess of things.
The Kents look curiously on as Bruce dots his (newly revised) plate with tiny portions of seafood, steamed vegetables, and a single spoonful of mashed potatoes — all meticulously separated.

Clark smiles sheepishly, and slides Bruce’s former plate beside his own. He inhales everything except the seafood. He massacres the bowl of what Martha laughingly tells Bruce is grits.

Savoring, Bruce eats slowly. “I’ve heard of grits,” he says over their repressed grins. “I’m just not familiar with it.” They don’t buy it.

Warm, fragrant air wafts in from the kitchen even as they dine. The easy smiles and camaraderie warm Bruce as well. It’s the first time he doesn’t have to coax Clark into eating more than a few bites.

After, there’s some sort of sporting event on television; Clark and Martha watch, cheer and loudly boo the screen while Bruce catches up on his engineering journals.

Football, he sees when he glances up at a particularly loud whoop from Martha. American football. The rugby rip-off. Grown men playing rugby with mattresses strapped to their delicate shoulders. Alfred’s influence on this matter is absolute.

Bruce’s earlier missteps seem forgiven - Clark unceremoniously drapes a soft blanket around himself and Bruce on the couch and snuggles into his side, still encouraging and heckling the teams on TV.

The meal catches up to Bruce about an hour later; he has to set his reading aside and just enjoy the sensation of being full of good food. There’s eggnog, though Bruce only takes a small measure of whiskey in his.

Training will be torture in the morning, whatever time of day ‘morning’ comes for him tomorrow —though knowing the Kent’s roosters, that kind of thinking is just a set-up for disappointment— but it will be worth it.

Once the overwhelming fullness subsides, he’s warm and comfy. He knows the walls are strong because he had them refit himself, he knows the location is secure - he’s checked the feeds on his watch and the perimeter alarm is armed, its light blinking reassuringly at him from his wrist. He’s relaxed.

His fingers, under the blanket, are tangled in Clark’s. The excitement in Clark’s eyes, the enthusiasm with which he good-naturedly berates his team, the laid-back way Clark leans in and kisses him —a quick, sweet brush of lips— when his team scores.

Bruce thinks he could get accustomed to Thanksgiving football (even if it is American).

He meets Martha’s eyes during a commercial break, when Clark goes for another beer. He waits for the miniscule indications of aversion and doesn’t find them, not in the lines of her face or her gaze. She smiles at him, heartfelt - happy, and Bruce feels...

He feels...

It feels familiar though it isn’t, like something that Bruce should have, something he could have if only he knew how to safeguard it. Familiar, familial.

The cold stings his eyes. A pain in his chest, a warm glowing tenderness that transfixes Bruce even as it thaws him.
Martha gives an exaggerated yawn as Clark walks back in and stretches. “You boys put the lights out when you turn in? Whoo - I am pooped! See you in the morning. Happy Thanksgiving, honey.” She hugs Clark, then the world makes no sense because Martha hugs him, too. “Night, boys!” She goes straight up and directly to the master bedroom.

The game announcer rambles on from behind her closed door.

It’s gentle, less awkward than it should be and far sweeter than Bruce will admit, the way Clark leans subtly into Bruce’s side, the weight of his head heavy on Bruce’s shoulder. The way he noses at Bruce’s collarbone before brushing his lips across Bruce’s skin.

The way Clark presses in, temple warm and close, seeking skin to skin contact. As if he’s unwise enough that he can’t bear not to be touched by Bruce, and Bruce is just as foolish; he can’t bear not to touch Clark.

He skims his hands over Clark. Down the long line of his ribs, down his side. Up the tensed tendons and knots of his arms, over the tight knuckled grip and the gentle hands.

Clark comes to him so easily, bounding across the inches between them as though they’re nothing.

They lie there, in the impromptu nest of the soft homey sofa, in the flicker of light from the television, and Bruce can’t identify the feeling at first, because it isn’t an emotion he’s known often.

It drifts to him while he’s musing, stroking through sleek dark hair, one hand firm and constant, massaging the back of Clark’s neck:

(Contentment.

It takes only a two-degree turn to bring their mouths into alignment. Bruce’s ears are pricked, alert to the sound of floorboards or a door opening.

It’s disgraceful, _disreputable_ what he wants to do here, under _this_ roof. This is not Bruce’s territory; it’s not anywhere within his domain and there are things one does not do to a man in front of that man’s mother.

But Clark lifts his head, turns into him readily, mouth seeking his, whispering. “Yes.”

_Thank you._

Provoked at just the intimation of a touch, given permissions both expected and unexpected, Bruce follows the arousal down. He allows himself to be seduced. More - he endorses it, every part of Bruce in full support.

He’s hard, when their tongues slide -fiercely and _ruthlessly_ hard- when Clark sighs against him, relaxing into the cushions. Bruce takes control of the kiss, pulls Clark’s hair in a steady grip and moves against him, unhurried, on the battered Kent sofa. He finds the sliver of skin between shirt
hem and waistband with his other hand, traces his thumb back and forth across the ridge of hip bone.

He closes his eyes against the stroboscopic flashing of the television. Breathes deeply through the ebullient babble of a newscaster yelling into a microphone, a distant crowd roaring in the heights of delirium.

Slow, rising, insistent arousal.

Through intent that feels illicit even though Bruce has been completely forthright, he kneels above Clark. Gets his teeth and craving into that narrow strip of flesh and works his way back up, pushing fabric out of the way as he goes.

Whispers his appreciation of warm skin, pliant limbs accommodating Bruce's demands. Memorizes the texture of Kal's nipple between his teeth. Kal's subdued moans vibrating through his lips.

"Bruce... Ah, god, yes..."

Feast-day.

Bruce doesn't strategize - he concentrates, works his way by taste and feel. He staggers from contact to caress, from grope to graze. Feels clarity creep in on him, fresh composure, the deeper Kal drops.

The sounds.

He gorges; he gluts himself with the music, the marvel of Kal halfway to drunk on sensitivity. Tests, nipping at unbreakable skin, thumbs at the line of springy hair cresting the open stud-button.

Mouths at Kal’s ear — Heat— tells him how damned amazing he is. Brings his thigh up hard into the join of Kal’s legs — Pressure— strips the shirt off with Kal’s help and shoves it aside. Combustion.

There’s no creak from above, no opening of any door. The blare from the TV is insignificant. This moment feels untouchable, as removed from the world as Bruce feels removed from himself.

“Yes,” Kal gasps, and “Bruce.”

It's the only thing he needs to hear. The only objective he needs to achieve is right in front of him.

He presses a line of kisses, fragmentary promises and praises across Kal’s chest. Curls his tongue around the other nub, sucks hard and rides the squirming hips under his with a muted hum of approval and a rolling grind.

Bruce brushes a hand down Kal’s arm lightly, strokes the pulse-point in his wrist with a gentle thumb. Grinds his thigh harder.

Has to take a brief detour, to suck down the soft gasps, to devour the hushed pleas. He doesn’t need
to tie Kal down here - this place, this is where Kal is rooted; he goes under easy, smile curving into Bruce’s kiss. Hips pressing up, hardness pressing to match.

Two tall, big men on too-small a seat for this. Cramped quarters, but they make do; neither of them moves to leave the sofa. Kal, heavy and solid under him, twisting to throw a leg over the back of the sofa, making room for Bruce without being asked—

Yes. Please, yes.

Kal’s hot pant of amusement, when their tussling knocks the remote to the floor. His distinctly unchaste smirk. His hands, roaming Bruce’s shoulders, pulling at Bruce’s shirt, under his shirt, on Bruce’s skin.

Over Bruce’s heart.

“Kansas.” He can’t help it; it slips out against Kal’s stomach as Bruce licks and nips his way back down.

Palms cupping his shoulders, restless fingers sliding in Bruce’s hair. Kal holding him close. His low, delighted hums and eager grins.

Thank you.

Nectar on his tongue. The scent of baking and joy.

Thank you.

The heat of Kal’s unwavering regard.

Thanksgiving.

*——~00~——* 

“—and then we came—” Home. “—back here.” Bruce finishes his account (debriefing), sips his tea, rolls the creampuff in his hand and sets it back down uneaten.
“Let me get this straight,” Dick pauses, eyes wide. Hands in the air as if he’s counting reasons why he should never have begun this conversation. “You went to Smallville on holiday, got to fly in a car, went shopping, met some nice people, ate things you might need vaccines for, and had a home cooked Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Yes.” He’d carefully edited this debriefing.

Just as he carefully edits out the clear sound of Dick mumbling “Glad Alfred thought to invite us,” under his breath. Of course Alfred had invited them - Bruce and Alfred invite the boys every year, but it’s been some time since any of them have stooped to speaking with Bruce.

He presses his fingers together deliberately, pad to pad. Smiles internally when the Robin in Richard picks up on the work-mode body cue.

“So, okay.” Dick paces some more. “You had a good time. And then you...?”

“Had a falling out, yes.” Bruce inhales.

“You botched it up, huh?” Richard is a pacer, a walker. He doesn’t solve problems by sitting still; he’s never been able to. Wisps of hair pull from his ponytail as he works himself into a grand three-ring walking stride. So dramatic. There are times like now—watching the polished movements of the hale, broad-shouldered man in front of him—when Bruce can still see the lithe, acrobatic boy he’d raised.

“Richard.”

A quick, playfully unpentant grin. “Alfred says you’re rebuilding.”

Children. Bruce takes another sip. “It’s time.” It’s overdue, Bruce knows, though Dick is far too kind-hearted to say so.

Another playful look, heralding trouble as always. “So he’s like... A for-real alien, huh?”

Bruce closes his eyes and marshals his strength. “Yes, Dick.”

“Funny.” Innocent whistling. The sounds of Richard dropping onto the chair opposite him. When he opens his eyes, he isn’t surprised to see the crossed arms and narrowed eyes, but as soon as Bruce looks, the anger is gone. Swept away under a wide smiling mask, while Richard does his own calculations.


Richard stares at him, longer than five minutes. Longer than ten, and Bruce knows what his son is doing. The tactic is basic, older than ancient.

The thing is, the tactic works. After fifteen minutes, Bruce faces him. Dick immediately begins to speak.

“You didn’t ‘ask’ me here. Alfred called and told us you were in trouble, Bruce. That’s why we’re here. No other reason.”

Bruce nods, slow enough for his reeling head to catch up. “Understood. I appreciate your honesty, Richard.”
“You’re a liar,” Dick announces pleasantly.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re a liar, Bruce. And mostly... That’s okay. We all are, when it comes down it. It’s not okay, but there are extenuating circumstances, you know? But this...” He whistles, high-pitched and carny loud. “You’re a piece of work.”

“Richard—”

"Stop this pity party. Right now, Bruce." The words are a slap. "You fucked up."

“Language. ” He should be moving, leaving. He should be walking away already, letting Richard’s anger dash uselessly against his back until the boy was even-tempered again. But Dick is no longer a child. He doesn’t react well to scolding or being ignored — not that he ever has.

Dick takes out his wallet and slaps a wad of bills on the table between them. “Put it in the swear jar. You fucked up! Now you've chained yourself to the monument you've built to this idea of failure. Burn that motherfucker down already.”

He throws his hands up, a gesture sharpened by maturity that had lost none of its grace. “I’ve never had any doubt that you knew about me and Roy. You never said anything and I always assumed it was because you had bigger things on your mind. Now?” Dick looks pained. Young. “I’m starting to think it was because you just didn’t want to acknowledge how alike we are. This self-flagellation is getting in the way of you doing the only thing you're actually supposed to do. The only thing that matters — helping the people you love and fighting for the things you believe in.” He sighs. "For god's sake, Bruce, the Mission is not just about fighting for Gotham it's about why you believe Gotham is worth fighting for."

Dick's eyes bore into his, and yet Bruce remains silent under the onslaught.

In a much gentler tone, Dick continues to berate him. "You love him. You're in love with him, Bruce. And honestly, none of us are judging you for it. He is literally Superman - even Alfred doesn't have a thing to say against it.”

Fury.

They've been talking, meddling, behind his back. Bruce is the one who handles household affairs. He is the one that bears the weight of decisions — so that they won’t have to. “Why did you come home, again?”

Dick looks at him as if he’s insane. “Because whether you like it or not, we’re family. And family takes care of each other. We take care of each other.”

Bruce keeps his mouth closed, because he isn't sure what might come out if he allows himself to start speaking again. He keeps his eyes dry by focusing on Richard face, on his spring-sky eyes and the smile missing from his son’s face.

**His son should not be comforting Bruce — Bruce should be comforting Dick, for his own failures as a father.**

“I can tell you one thing. You go to him talking about your Mission, your super-secret mission-club —yes, of course we know about it, Jesus!— and how you want him to join up? You might as well not waste your time.” Dick shot him a wan smile. “Don’t do the ‘you’ thing, Bruce. Try something different.”
“Richard,” It rasps out of him, rough and low. Bruce doesn’t know what he’ll do, what he’ll say. He just knows that he can’t let Richard walk away in silence, not after how he’s spoken to the boy.

Dick peers into Bruce’s face.

“The Manor was your home, too. Is your home. It’s not— It isn’t just for me.”

Richard stands and awkwardly, slowly lays his hand on Bruce’s shoulder, the opposite to the one Alfred had clasped days prior. "It never is,” and he squeezes slightly, and it means Dad, Bruce knows. He concentrates on not blinking.

Dick sighs. “Look, the patrol schedules are synchronized and Alfred’s taking point on navs, so... Fix. Your. Shit.”

Arms, embracing his shoulders. Dick... Hugging him?

Bruce concentrates on the rapid beat of his pulse against the side of his neck. Focuses on letting his limbs relax, on slowing his heart, on the pain in his chest and the prickling, freezing panic. Breathes and breathes again. Stress is not his friend. He is here, now. He knows he is breathing in. He knows he is breathing out. He sits as still as possible.

Dick walks out, leaving Bruce with the inescapable knowledge that it is up to him, and him alone, to make reparations for hurting someone that loved him...

Someone Bruce loves.

He goes hunting.

~

So many dreams begin this way.

It’s the worst possible ending to a night like this. His informant is dead. Some of those he came to rescue have already succumbed to their injuries. Some of them might never heal from them. Most of the little group of ‘fetches’ he’s pulled in are smart enough to keep their mouths shut. Not this guy.

“Whattaya gonna do, Bats? Out in the Quarter, bringin’ new meat out for a guy like me?” The traffickers laugh; they think their boss is high entertainment. The zip ties and busted faces are minor inconveniences to this crew. “Especially after what happened to the last one! Lookit your boy, Bats - he’s gonna drop a nut!”

Bruce doesn’t look at Clark - at Icarus; he can see him well enough on the edge of his field of view. Icarus looks thunderous. Furious and sick with it, eyes dark in the holes of his mask.

Bruce’s heart lurches. He makes himself stop. He should break this crook. It’s what the sleaze deserves, and Bruce would dearly love to give it to him. Justice, vengeance… they’re all the same in this situation, to Bruce. But Clark is here, and Clark is better than him, better than that, so Bruce
keeps his face still. Unfists his hands.

“Enjoy the Penitentiary,” is what he allows himself.

He’s unprepared for Clark’s low, thoughtful tone. “You know, guys like you sicken me.” And Bruce turns his head just in time to see Icarus -Clark- flick the pimp with just the tip of his index finger.

The man crashes into the wall behind them and falls to the ground unconscious. No one laughs.

Bruce checks his pulse, eyes on Clark, who stands there unrepentant, arms crossed.

It’s what the guy deserves. *Better* than what he deserves, for what he’s done. Less than he deserves for all the terrible things he was going to do, and now will be too terrified to consider.

For a moment, there’s more Icarus and Gotham than Clark in the alley with Bruce.

It’s ugly.

And this is no dream.

~

He meditates on sheets of silver-grey.

Clark’s glasses sit where he’d last left them, on the nightstand reflecting moonlight.

Purposeless.

He stumbles to the headstones.

“I swear to you, I won’t leave the work.” Falls to his knees in the dark, eyes burning. "I won’t. *Please,* Mom… Dad. Let me have this."

The Shadow answers him.

He can’t afford the price, but he’ll pay anyway.

~~~~00~~~~

He psyches himself up.

“I am fear.” He has so much to lose.

“I am the night.” But Clark is blinding day.
“I am shadow.” He can no longer refuse to see.

“I am a wraith.” He’s more alive than he’s ever been.

Riding the adrenaline edge of his resolve he finally exits the Prius —the least pretentious car in his garage— and stands sentry with line-of-sight on Clark's usual approach.
What You Do That Defines You

Chapter Summary

It's easy to ignore, but not to forget.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nine: What You Do That Defines You

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“Every night, I dream you're still here; The ghost by my side, so perfectly clear.” –Digital Daggers

He doesn’t wait idly. Just as he’d worked Clark to exhaustion, he works himself each day.

Bruce’s input is still required. The paperwork of rebuilding never ends, nor should it, as far as Bruce is concerned. There are building plans to be approved and footage to scour, there are leeched conversations to skim. There are checks to be signed and just measures to be dealt.

The Manor, the twin cities, the harbor, the Bay. Mid-city. His relationship with certain old acquaintances in the illegal business of supra-legal forgery. His relationships with Alfred, with Richard and with an inscrutable and suspicious Tim who has yet to say a word to Bruce.

More still – Bruce’s plans are aggressive. Possibly over-ambitious. Unprecedented, according to Alfred and ‘batshit insane’, by Dick’s word. He listens to them, hears out their reasons and their warnings. He thanks them for their trust and their council.

Then Bruce does as he’d intended to from the start.

The mouse pointer hovers over the SEND button.

There are reasons Bruce hasn’t contacted Diana, Princess of Themyscira. She’s his strongest ally - she should have been his first call. She’s trustworthy, to a point.

She’s a meta, for certain. A hero, to be sure. A warrior - he has no doubt. Bruce doesn’t actually believe she’s the Goddess of Love - he believes that she believes herself to be the Goddess of Love. But he’s spoken with her enough to know Diana also has a better compass than him, that she’s outspoken and frank about her views. That she has a… an angle on reality and truth—in an inexplicable, horrifying way—Bruce assuredly does not share, and that he hasn’t wanted to hear. Looking deeper, he knows the why of that as well.
But she also thinks—no, knows—she’s better than about 7.5 billion other people on the planet. She isn’t a person to Bruce so much as a force of nature, inviolate and absolute.

What it all comes down to is this: Bruce hasn’t contacted Diana, because he doesn’t want to hear that what he’s done is wrong. He doesn’t want to know what he feels is wrong, and he does not want to be made to see what he’s doing now as wrong.

What he is doing—what they are doing together, isn’t wrong.

The rest of Luthor’s files lay open on, on his monitor and under his hands.

Bruce presses the SEND button.

And in the wake of Superman’s return to regular feats of impossibility, comes a growing schism of dissent in the general population.

He makes some calls to Legal and PR. They all matter. And then he makes a call that matters in a different way.

There’s no middleman sitting Amanda Waller’s line. That it’s answered at all is a sort of victory.

There’s the blat of what sounds very much like small-round munitions, then she casually says, “Ten-thirteen. The Willows.”

The Willows is an appropriately ‘Fine’ dining establishment, but it isn’t in Gotham. The jockeying has already begun. It’s a six hour slog north through the tunnels by car… Or a forty minute helo jump. An easy concession: with a single slide of a finger, Bruce clears his schedule.

“I look forward to it.”

A quiet click is her answer, masking a subtler one.

He can smell eggs. There’s nothing else he’d like to eat less, frankly. The thought of them, sunny yolks staring at him, turned his stomach.

Bruce breezes into the open kitchen and heads straight for the demitasse on the counter at Alfred’s back, his shoes silent on the polished wood.

“Good morning, Master Wayne.”

*Dammit.*

“Neither NASA nor the International Space Alliance have claimed the Kryptonian engine. Rather short-sighted, if you ask me.” Alfred turns from the range, plates two dishes with brisk efficiency and pointedly pushes one in front of Bruce along with a manila folder. “Not that anyone ever does.”
Bruce takes the paperwork with a nod of thanks, hot espresso already at his lips. He props the paper up against his laptop as he reads. “That’s the best news I’ve had all day.”

“It’s barely six.”

Bruce raises his eyebrows, and Alfred snorts in shared amusement. A muscle in Bruce’s face tugs at the side of his mouth. He reads on.

Permits… Land grants… “Waste reclamation?” It isn’t trash, floating above the Incident Zones.

“They will fight you on this. They may not know what to do with it, but hell waits for the man who tries to claim the damned thing.”

Bruce takes another long sip, rolls the bitter sweetness on his tongue before he answers. “It wouldn’t be the first time.” He glances up at Alfred, then away quickly.

“No, and not the last time, either I suspect.”

It’s never the last time. Bruce suspects he might die of shock if the world ever becomes easy. “Call Mika for me - I need a bird tonight.”

“With all respect due, sir, you need to eat.”

“I should check up on the legality of their counter-claims first—“ He grabs a piece of toast and turns to leave the room, papers in hand—

And Alfred is in his path. “Please sit,” Alfred says firmly. Bruce weighs his options, glances from Alfred’s eyes to the breakfast plate.

He re-aligns his tie and clip as he sits nonchalantly back into his chair. His head is tipped up, dominant posturing, he’s aware. Alfred looks as he always does: solid, unmovable. Certain.

“Thank you, Master Wayne.” He sets a glass of juice beside the plate, then sits at the table, opposite Bruce with his own paperwork and a pen. He slides his reading spectacles on. “Master Timothy is tending to those documents you requested. I have this matter well in hand with Legal. When I require your further assessment of the construction efforts on the Manor, I will of course consult you.”

Tend to your business, and I’ll tend to mine. Alfred doesn’t say it, but it’s clear from his tone and the calm gravity of his words what he means.

Bruce hunches over the plate, shakes out his napkin and lays it over his lap. He frowns down at the mass on his plate beside his toast. “What is this?” Scrambled eggs?

A page turns. Alfred writes, then looks up. “Breakfast, Master Bruce.”

And he finds that he has a bit of an appetite, after all.

That doesn’t stop it from coming back up later, after Alfred has left him to his own devices. And to be fair, he thinks, he doesn’t need the extra calories.

He’s not quite delusional enough to think Alfred fails to notice – lunch is soup, clear and faultless. It tastes of…

He smells the herbs: basil, celery, garlic.
It has a taste, Bruce is certain. But it runs over his tongue and pushes energy to his limbs, and he doesn’t really register it much at all.

From above, Gotham is a diamond of light studding the black waters of Liberty Bay - it’s support bridges and overpass ramps, a shimmer-refracting net of connections reaching outward. A jewel in a grimed setting, shining brightly despite the encroaching darkness.

The place is still just as stuffy and dim as always; another concession, perhaps, but the both of them are more comfortable this way. The unvarnished and ugly truth is the only light they need at this table. He isn’t fooled by the elegant candles or the quiet hum of conversation; he knows what he’s walked into the moment he enters the restaurant. The duty pistols and all the silent posture markers of career servicemen and women surround him. The entire place is full with them.

“Mr. Wayne. It’s been awhile.” Waller’s claimed a seat far from the door and under the arch near the tastefully covered emergency exit. Of course. She’s left the seat facing the room free. She doesn’t stand to greet him.

He acknowledges her gaze, once it comes – inclines his head slightly in a modified bow, and sits at her inviting gesture.

Her no-nonsense fringe-cut bobs when she nods back, eyes amused.

He isn’t here to play games.

“Mrs. Waller.” Bruce smooths his suit jacket, demeanor friendly. “I keep busy.”

“As I see. How can I help you?”

The lull as the waitstaff quickly takes his drink order—ginger-ale, no lemon—gives him time to decide how he’d like to approach the problem.

Head on.

“I want you—all of you—to back off.” Calmly, smoothly. “Stop following Martha Kent. Stop chasing him.”

Anyone else might be asked why she should help, but there’s no need for such subterfuge between them. They both have the same demons riding them; they both already know what trump cards the other is holding. They both already are facing the reality of perhaps one day being imprisoned in the same institutions they’ve helped build.

Waller knows what Bruce is, who he is. What he does. Just as Bruce knows that her supposedly-secret hit-squads, Belle Reve and Waller’s personal attack dogs all require Dr. Van Kriss’ research to function. Van Kriss Laboratories (and Dr. Kriss’ patents, by extension) belong to Wayne Enterprises.

“Give me a reason,” she says. “Make it good.” And she takes a longbean meticulously onto her fork and eats it, eyebrows raised in his direction.
Bruce narrows his eyes. “He has powerful friends.”

“He is a powerful friend.”

“He’s kind of a nice guy,” Bruce says, not bothering with his customarily clueless smile.

She snorts once. Cuts another thin slice of her filet and places it in her mouth. Chews it, a pointed gesture, before speaking again. She’s a carnivore; she wants him to remember it - fine. Bruce smiles pleasantly.

“Can I get that on tape?” She pats at her mouth, also smiling.

He’s tired of the pretense. When he leans forward, slowly, his smile is long gone. His voice is the definition of ease. “Sure. You can hear it during my PR release tonight, along with everybody else.”

Her answering chuckle makes his body work to stay loose. “Superman, huh?” She waves her fork at him, indicating his suit and self. “You’ve got balls, I’ll give you that. But you’re playing with fire. Metas always mess up eventually, don’t they.”

Bruce says nothing. She sighs at his expression and begins to cut another precise strip of meat.

“I don’t make a habit of favors.” Her tone is dismissive, but her body language is anything but.

“This isn’t a favor.” Her eyes don’t follow the folder he sets lightly on the edge of the tablecloth. “I’m told Dr. Van Kriss will recover, given time and a structured environment.” Waller’s expression freezes into neutrality. “My people were injured. You know by whom, and this is owed. Now I’m collecting.”

Dark eyes, weighing his words. Weighing his resolve. Tension straightens Bruce’s spine. He watches as she flips idly through, before she closes the folder and slides it into her waiting briefcase. She puts her elbows on the table - a negotiating tactic. “Supply and use of Van Kriss’ research for ten years.”

“Two. Limited supply only, no research.”

“Three, and I’ll see what I can do.”

He’s furious - that he’s here, that he’s co-signed on yet another dirty-Ops alliance based on indentured servitude. That she’s got him by the balls and she knows it, because Bruce’s name may be powerful, but this woman - she has a way of inspiring people to work against their own best interests, just as she’s doing now. He stands, keeping an eye on both staff and the other supposed ‘patrons’. “Three and they are off limits. No excuses. No forgiveness.”

“The worst animal attacks are always from ferals. It’s important to keep a good hold on the leash.” She’s good. Better than good - he can’t tell if she believes what she’s saying or not and at the moment he couldn’t care less.

“Don’t.” It’s not a time for Batman, but he can hear it in his voice and he knows it’s obvious to her as well. He manages to keep his voice level when he continues, “I appreciate your cooperation.”

“Mr. Wayne.” Her voice stops him and he turns back. “We’ve done each other a lot of good over the years. Are you sure you want to throw that away?” A lot of good, and a hell of a lot more bad.

“We had a good ride, didn’t we?” He won’t be supplying any others, persons of interest - besides
himself – or additional nano-bombs. And the Agency will fall; after this, it will crumble, even if it takes the rest of Bruce’s life to do it. “I will shut you down,” he warns. Then, because in spite of this (because of this), he has a hard sort of respect for her, “Stay safe, Amanda.”

She doesn’t sound concerned, but she doesn’t mock him, either. “One day, perhaps. Goodbye, Bruce.”

He’s glad, that Bruce Wayne’s smile doesn’t actually require him to unclench his jaw. He leaves his drink untouched and her to her meal.

Bruce doesn’t pause at the flicker of refraction in the smooth handle of his phone.

“I’d planned to turn in, but if you’re going to stand in the dark for another hour, I can wait, Tim.”

There’s a deliberate scuff of shoe on wood when Tim steps out of the shadows by Bruce’s window. His eyes glint; his expression neutral. Professional.

“You almost killed Superman.”

Bruce nods gamely. “I’m aware.”

Tim stares. “You tried to kill Superman.”

“I was wrong. I live with it and so can you.”

The young man slipped closer to him. “You went too far, old man. I’m watching you.”

Thank god someone is.

He doesn’t smile. “Good. You keep doing that.”

Tim takes another step and stops again. He’s poised. Ready.

“Did you get the info you were looking for? Was it magnetics? What did you do to him?”

He doesn’t have to feign the surprise at all. The anger, either when it comes bubbling up. “Whatever you’ve pulled, put it back where you got it. End of discussion.” He focuses on the relevant: closes his folder. Shuts down his laptop. Checks the perimeter grid. Keeps himself from shaking Tim by the scruff of his skinny neck by the thinnest of margins.

“Don’t ignore me, Bruce - I know what I saw.”

“No,” he says. “You don’t.”

“So that wasn’t an interrogation? That wasn’t—” Tim’s mouth closes. He pales. “That was… That was sex?”

“End. Of discussion. Use the Lab computers; stay off mine. Next time, you can just hand your key
to Alfred and see yourself out.” There was a time when Bruce would never have said ‘next time’. He can see it reflected in Tim’s eyes - the guilty flinch and angry brow.

“Wait - where are you going?”

“Out.”

“I don’t know if that’s—”

Bruce stands and looks him in the eye. “Try and stop me.”

Tim moves aside.

The quiet nights are worst, the nights when the hours—Kal’s hours—press hardest. Bruce’s time is best spent on his feet, in the lab, at the forge and under various heavy machineries. He keeps his mind and hands busy. He performs drills—both physical and mental, he practices his Kryptonian, grimly pushing away unwanted emotion until the tonal fricatives roll as smoothly as any of his grapple-takedowns.

Bound. Because Clark esteems him. Clark esteems him and Bruce is responsible for him now. And Bruce hasn’t yet answered—whether yes or no.

And how arrogant could he be, how stupidly selfish can Bruce be, to have found himself in this situation now?

There’s a need like an itch. It goes straight through him, down to the bottom of what makes Bruce. He can scrape himself raw trying to scratch it. He’ll never reach it, because that itch…

It’s below the surface. Underneath.

And just like in all the best fairy tales, it can only be scratched from the inside.

Bruce hasn’t been out in weeks – he can’t wait anymore. It’s not a night for warnings; seven on one is warning enough.

He twists through air, lands in a crouch. Lashes out, straight-palm to a knee. Drives his fist upward into a cry of pain and throws number one right into nearest buddy. The baton snaps out with a flick of his wrist; Bruce spins. Blocks the first incoming blow with the baton braced to his forearm; hears bone break and narrows his eyes.

A hard shoulder-lunge and he drops his elbow hard into number two’s solar plexus. Cracks the baton out again, across two sets of femurs and once again, just to hear them scream.

Easy.

Bruce uncoils, and sidesteps the attack at his back neatly. Twists sideways, raps the baton across
the bar-wielding arm. Groans and yelling all around, egging each other on to ‘get him’. *They never learn.*

The scrape of sole on pavement behind him is the vic running for shelter. Bruce smiles, a feral slash against the midnight of his cowl. “Alright then,”

They break ranks - four come for him and three are on the move, running.

A knife coming for his face; he dodges, parries the arm and rams his knee into a soft gut. Drags another attacker in and breaks the wrist in his hold, then one of the legs attached to the rest of it.

They’re on him. Bruce doesn’t catalog the moments; he’s in the eye of his own storm. He’s calm. He’s centered. He’s in complete control.

*He’s going to make them all wish they’d run.*

Palm-strike to a jaw and one goes down.

He takes them; he takes all four down. Every one of them goes the hard way. Every icy-calm breath is a victory.

From the corner of his eye, a flutter. Bruce narrows his eyes, focuses. The lenses read pupil dilation and zoom in, night-vision clear and crisp.

He runs. The recoil of the grapple-gun, and he’s gliding, *flying*, trajectory sure as calculus and aimed ahead of his quarry.

There - a lean ball of kinetic malevolence, *Tim*, staff spinning. Masked face a snarl. The kid is merciless. He doesn’t give them a chance to stop running; he makes sure they all run right into the swinging end of his staff. Then he clubs them all once more another one for good measure. He’s efficient and quiet as he zip ties them. He takes out his cellphone and types a quick message.

“Gotham PD usually has someone on desk checking their twitter about now. Saves time.” Tim shrugs, a grin on his face that doesn’t reach his eyes.

One of the perps groans and Tim knocks him out again without hesitation. Bruce eyes him.

“Mid-town?” Bruce offers after a moment’s scan of the ground and perimeter. *Site secured.*

Tim’s staff collapses into itself and he stows it with his customary precise efficiency. He looks out across the city too, instead of at Bruce. “I apologize for earlier. I…”

“It’s been a long few years. Didn’t know you were a fan.”

The whisper-creak of leather in Tim’s clenched gloves. “Yeah. Who isn’t?” Tim scans the view below, impatience in the set of his jaw.

The nightlife ebbs in the streets – the usual mix of cursing, laughter, club music and semi-public alleyway assignations. It’s not all legal business, but Bruce can’t see any hard drugs or battery. In the aftermath, it’s quiet, for this sector.

*Keep watching me, Robin.*

Tim nods into the stillness. “Mid-town, sure.”
It doesn’t take long, for the fallout of complacency to hit - the GenCo arms deal shipment starts showing up in Gotham. Armed robberies, organized crime and parade funerals featuring black-banded GCPD uniforms skyrocket.

Gotham’s criminal element regulates itself at a fairly high frequency; no deeds go unpunished. The backlash in police presence in the streets puts pressure on the wallets of both those who run the Narrows and the corrupt politicians who give them access.

As a result, Bruce’s informants in Oldtown and parts south report that the Sullivans have either gone to ground or been ground out.

It’s not difficult to find the missing GenCo cargo – all one has to do is follow the trail of bodies as people get either paid off or laid low. The latest bank heist hits pay-dirt. The first crate of GenCo ammunition Batman finds, though, have terrible modifications. He growls, voice loud in Bruce’s earpiece, furious under the moonlight as he holds a single oily-green tinged bullet up for inspection.

“Hollow-points… Armor-piercing… We have a problem.”

“Copy that, Batman.” Bruce, manning Ops for the night, watches Dick’s progress and already knows—not suspects—knows what they are. *Yes, they have a problem.* He presses his lips together over the snarl underneath.

*Kryptonite.*

And even so, Bruce could be wrong, but the results of his later ballistics examination report are inarguable.

*Kryptonite bullets in lead-lined crates.*

‘*They’re nice flowers, Bruce,*’ reads the card from Martha. ‘*Try harder.*’

And what is there to say to that?

Bruce is silent, phone gripped in hand. It’s ten digits—ten muscle extensions, a laughably tiny series of movements—to dial Kansas. Eventually, he puts it back down on his desk and retreats to his notes and research.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone still reading, and to everyone new to the story, for following, leaving comments and kudos. I appreciate every one of them!
Beacon

Chapter Summary

"You would think Batman would know better. You would think he, of all people, would understand how potentially unsafe it is to be surrounded by people you love."
-Gotham Knights

Chapter Notes

I don't have many pithy quotes for you for this chapter - I just needed to get it out there. I think it would be asinine to hold it back just for trimmings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Ten: Beacon

“I'm so afraid to love you, but more afraid to lose, clinging to a past that doesn't let me choose. Once there was a darkness, deep and endless night; You gave me everything you had, oh you gave me light.” -Sarah McLachlan

He is who he is, *what* he is, because of all he's lost, that he thought he could not live without. He's learned to accept loss. He's alive, without Clark. He can move, and breathe, speak and make decisions. He can act human.

He's *alive*. But Bruce, he's not living. He looks at the world, in all its ugly hard vastness, in all its death and Bruce doesn't flinch.

He never flinches.

*He's tired.* Not in his body; that he knows how to mend. No, Bruce is tired *in his spirit*. Tired of hardness and ugliness. Tired of *losing*.

*No loss is acceptable.*

Bruce’s parents taught him; there are two kinds of beauty, just as there are two kinds of power.
There is the surface of understanding, and there are the depths of comprehension.

His father taught him, one kind of beauty is that of the flesh: the skin, the hair, the eyes and glowing smile; a deeper beauty is that of generosity, of truth and compassion, of intelligence and integrity.

His mother taught him, one kind of power is gained by fear: of punishment or reprisal, fear of pain or hardship pressed into others until they work one’s will. Then there is the power that comes with love, the power of openness and belonging, the power of hope and inspiring others to do their best and in so doing being inspired yourself to greater heights.

His parents taught him about beauty and power, but Bruce learned about understanding on his own. Bruce sees them all in his mind, light and dark, spinning equally. He doesn’t know if he has a right to the light, after so long spent honing his darkness. He no longer merely understands Clark; he comprehends his goodness, his basic fucking decency, his honest simplicity of heart. His openness.

*It’s for the best.*

Bruce doesn’t know if he has that capacity any longer—to let others in, to be comfortable in the knowledge that he is known and loved. He owes Clark more than what he is; he owes his family more that what he’s allowed them to be.

A house is not a home, Alfred has said, and Bruce had ignored him for years. Bruce had decided that once the house, his parent’s home, was gone, every other house was transitory. It had lost him his boys. It had lost him their company and their regard. Now he wonders if his refusal to allow anyone to make a home for him has lost him Clark as well.

It hits him on the drive through the Gotham-Metro Tunnel, and Bruce presses his fingertips into the steering wheel tightly and concentrates on achieving a measure of calm through the anger and denial that sweeps through him.

*It isn’t for the best.*

This isn’t Bruce avoiding compromise by standing firm by his work ethic and values. This is Bruce pushing away a person he can have real connection to, someone who intimately understands his drive, his goals and ambitions. Someone who won’t hesitate to stop him if—when, he thinks with dogged weariness—Bruce steps over the line again.

There are other considerations, as well, though. Considerations such as the discrepancies in their rates of aging, the prospect of leaving a bereaved love behind and the breakdown in discipline likely to occur from such a union (and it would be a union—Bruce wouldn’t accept anything less), the future of growing old—of growing incapable, while Clark stays young and vibrant, the understanding that no matter what Clark chooses, Bruce is making a profoundly selfish choice himself—they all matter.

He has to learn how to live with Kal and with himself. Success is not promised to him.

Bruce was taught that his desires are an illusion, and he’d be the first to admit that he hasn’t had a stellar showing of it in times past; his flame burns hot and quick, always turned cold before he can turn the page. Desire’s been a distraction, a lie Bruce has used to his own ends in pursuit of his true goals. His goal has always been the Mission, more important than any tie of flesh or the feelings intruding on his peace, but it couldn’t be further from the truth when it concerns Clark.
A goal is a stopping point, and Bruce is still on the journey; he needs steps. One motion, one movement to flow into the next--one act, to set an entire series of acts into effect. What he's thinking, what he's proposing to do is impossible.

*But everything's impossible, until someone does it.*

The lot is a littered expanse of sidewalk and un-sodded soil. He hasn’t slept in over seventy hours – now that he’s committed to a course of action, Bruce doesn’t think he’ll be able to ever sleep right if he doesn’t see it through.

He knows it the moment that Clark sees him standing outside his apartment building. The man’s spine straightens, his steps pause before he walks past Bruce. He puts his key to the lock, eyes Bruce without looking in his direction, opens the door... and waits, staring into the small cramped space between the front entrance and the callbox with a fixed glare.

Bruce steps inside, brushes past his immovable bulk, and waits for him to open the next set of doors.

The mid-century elevator is covered in caution tape and graffiti-laden warning signs. Bruce frowns.

It’s a three-floor walk-up, following Clark up a cramped dark stairwell. The stinking stains —urine, blood and other, less identifiable, muck— and mold marking the wall are extensive. A racket of conflicting noises assault them as they pass each floor: blaring music, shouted arguments, children squealing. That thick scent marking the walls mixes with the smell of a hundred dinners being prepared, extensive and fragrant. Bruce breathes through his mouth, doing his best to ignore the funk.

*How much worse is it, for Clark?*

An amalgamation of at least ten different languages, coming through the thin walls.

The junction box in the poorly-lit hallway has no lock on the metal casing; substandard wiring spiders out down the hall, held to peeling paint with what looks like electrical tape, splices a spray of multicolored lead wires outside the junction box - hot wires nubbed over with makeshift caps, lying against dried-up lathe and too-combustible plaster. A firetrap.

The building is packed with people and Health Code violations. Multiple dwelling violations. Fire Code violations. Numerous Electrical Code violations. Chronic, long-established property and safety code violations. Not just under-staffed or low on maintenance — this place is neglected. The frown already on Bruce’s face deepens.

A dump. A *deathtrap*. He holds his coat a bit tighter to his body and watches his step so as not to slip; he would hate to catch himself against *these* walls, or fall on *these* floors.

Clark throws his outer jacket carelessly onto his beaten-up couch as he enters his small apartment. He walks away from the open entrance, doesn’t look even when Bruce follows behind him and closes his apartment door. It’s quieter, and more importantly, cleaner. *But it still isn’t right.*

Bruce catalogues the contents of the room and can’t find a single piece in good repair. This isn't *livable*. His blood boils at the thought of someone *precious* to him, making his home in this hellhole.
Clark pops a tab on a can of Budweiser Light, raises his eyebrows inquiringly. At Bruce’s silent head shake, he gives a slight shrug. From what Bruce can see of the refrigerator framing him, beer is the only thing in his icebox. Bruce's blood pressure rises instantly. It's not just the building that's been neglected.

Clark eyes Bruce openly, suspiciously, takes a long swig, throat bobbing before he drinks it down and unerringly flings the can into the trashcan without looking. “Can I help you?”

This apartment building is just stacked coffins, for the walking wounded and dead who just haven't realized they're dead yet. Bruce breathes through the anger, makes himself overlook the narrow space and the jumble of mismatched furniture. The thick stubble on Clark’s face. The general aura of dilapidation. He steps further into the room and pointedly sits on the couch.

“I came to settle my country credit.”

Clark laughs. Not a particularly nice laugh. Not a mild laugh. “Oh, I don’t know, B. Is it thaw season, now?” The line between his brows is a deep furrow.

“Winter hides a multitude of sins,” Bruce says, quiet. “But it doesn't last forever; eventually we have to face Spring and we are forced to grow.” Bruce knows he looks the same, sounds the same. Appears the same.

Appearances are deceiving.

“Ain’t that the truth.” A shake of the head and Clark opens the fridge again.

There’s a feeling, sliding along the outskirts of Bruce’s awareness. It creeps the edges of the room, slinks in the shadowed mess of this downtown apartment; it runs in the sad rays of late-winter sun sliding down the wall. It chases the cut of Clark’s eyes away from Bruce. It chases Bruce, claws at his stomach and chest:

Fear.

He takes another, obvious scan of the place. Newsprint and headlines everywhere.

Clark sets the can down with a loud clunk on the counter. Dust scatters and smears under the metal of the can, but Bruce doesn’t see any joy or contentment in hard work, here. He sees torment, and desperation.

When he looks up from his study of the condensation, Bruce’s skin crawls; the urge to escape these dismal surroundings is insistent. He has to remind himself that he’s seen worse than this, much worse than this, many nights. It’s different, the sensation of disconnection and revulsion, because those nights had all been cases. Justice. Work.

This is personal.

Focus. Focus on what’s important.

“How do you feel about Italian? I know a nice place in the area.” He would shrug, if this was work - to seem vulnerable - to put Clark at ease. He doesn’t. He simply looks at Clark, as sincerely and attentively as he can.

“I’m not hungry.” Tone worn flat, Clark seems to be concentrating on the window again. Bruce has a brief, visceral vision of him stepping outside that window, out onto empty air and gliding away.
“Alright,” he agrees smoothly. “There are fifteen places that deliver within a…” Bruce checks his phone before slipping it back into his pocket. “Five block radius. I’ll order for when you are. What do you want – Ukrainian? Kosher? Burgers? Something simple?”

“Don’t tell me what to eat.” Words like bullets, hard and inarguable, threaded in the unmistakable low growl he remembers. Tone telling Bruce to be wary—be careful—of the man in front of him. Bruce straightens his posture, meets Clark’s glare and refuses to tense up. And then he forces himself to drop his shoulders even farther, while he maintains eye contact – he isn’t fucking with Clark - isn’t playing with him now. He leans back, projects as much non-aggression as he can with the black fury pounding in his head.

As the head of his House and household since age ten, he has made a lot of choices, for himself and for others. Bruce is accustomed to it, he’s trained to do it — the protection and management of those under his care has always been paramount. It’s a fundamental part of who he is, and generally Bruce gets his way.

Clark is a different matter. “You don’t get to come in here and tell me what to do. You don’t tell me what to drink, you don’t tell me what to eat—” His voice is a whip.

Bruce raises his head slightly. “Clark—”

“When to eat, how to eat! You don’t tell me how to live!” The clatter of a lone dish vibrating against the rim in the metal sink sings harmony to Clark’s fury.

It’s a wretched feeling, being on the receiving end of Clark’s displeasure after so much time devoid of his presence. Still, there’s some relief to be had in Clark’s anger, in his display of anger - it means Clark hasn’t decided to close Bruce out. He’s engaging; he hasn’t decided that Bruce is a nonentity. If he had, all Bruce would be seeing would be deceptively mild words and painstakingly gentle Midwest manners.

Still glaring, Clark props a foot against a two foot high pile of ink-smudged newspapers and begins attacking his shoelaces. His eyes are accusing, shadowed underneath. His hair is too-wild and greasy, he’s burly in flannel under the faded longshoreman coat.

“Clearly.” Bruce shifts, eyes raking the mess of a living space again. “I’m sorry,” Bruce’s words are low under the thud of Clark’s heavy workboots hitting the corner of the wall and the deeper sound of Clark snorting.

“I don’t need you telling me what to do.”

“I realize—“

“I don’t need you, Bruce!” The puff of condensed moisture from Clark’s shout hangs in the air. He shoots Bruce another sidelong glare and pushes off the counter.

Bruce closes his mouth on the words and stares at the patch of uninspiring carpet between where he sits and Clark’s socked feet. It sounds like anger - looks like anger, but there are too many signs telling him differently. “I know.” He breathes. “I know you don’t need me. I’m here anyway. If you don’t want me here, I’ll go.” He catches the tiny twitch of Clark’s head towards the window and stands quickly. Outwardly calm, he shucks his coat. Takes a small measured step. “But at least let me do something about—” He casts for a reason. “The beard.”

Clark stares at him. Through him. Focuses slowly, gaze lighting on Bruce’s face before darting about the room as if he’s seeing it anew. The anger drains out of his expression.
Bruce takes another step. A wary, numb look from Clark before he turns and walks into what Bruce assumes is the bedroom; it’s the only door in the place other than the entrance.

He gives Clark a moment to process, gives himself a moment too — makes himself stop and slow his mind, unclasps his watch and sets his phone to roll all but urgent calls. *Control what he can; adapt to what he cannot.*

He goes to the thermostat and turns it on, checks the heater himself just to be sure the damn thing won’t explode on them—in this part of the city, it wouldn’t be unheard of. It’s up to code thankfully, modernized; immediately warm air begins to circulate through the apartment. A welcome surprise, he hopes.

He goes through the front room, inspects it as if it’s a case. No bio-trash but the beer cans and a few bits of toast ends. *Clark hasn’t been eating.* Bruce considers the neighborhood: poverty-stricken, full of working poor, full of families with young children. That answers the question of where Clark’s food is.

Bruce can navigate the dim apartment, as lacking in furniture as it is, but with one bulb and no heat on, it’s unlikely that Clark would have been expecting company. Clark’s movements entering the place had been indicative of a reflexive routine. *Clark hasn’t been spending much time around people.*

The choice of beer, Budweiser Light; it was standard fare around bars in Smallville. Comforting. Familiar. *Clark is homesick. Lonely.* The thick mud and concrete grit stuck to his boots. *Manual labor.*

He’s all but built himself a prison... or perhaps it’s more a fortress, Bruce thinks. There’s no personality to the room, just a jumble of irregular goods and the sounds and smells of other people living their lives.

There’s water running beyond the bedroom door, a rhythmic patter. *Good.* Clark is running on routine – stuck in an unknown pattern, but on a familiar rut. Bruce knows—partially—what to do.

Centering himself is rarely this difficult; and there’s the fear tumbling underneath all this, that Clark will tell him to get out or worse yet, go out a window and disappear again. Bruce makes himself take the time. He can’t afford to fuck this up.

When he enters the room, he stops. The bed is fully made and tucked, but the sheets, coarse cotton, are bundled and lumped strangely with the soft blue blanket. Someone made this bed, then slept on top of the sheets, not in them. Clark. *Clark sleeps on top of them. Without heat.*

Anger twists in his stomach. Shaking self-recrimination away for the moment, Bruce closes the bedroom door behind him. The window, wide enough for serious burglary concerns were it ground-floor (and if Clark had anything worth stealing) is naked, the intermittent light from the faulty streetlamps out front beating Morse code on the opposite wall.

Bruce can see halfway down the block from this window; there isn’t even a question of whether they can be seen, from street level or any of the buildings nearby. *How many people have watched Clark?* They’ve seen him come in; they’ve watched him undress, watched him come into this room from the shower. They’ve watched him sleep.

Beside the window, a small shelf built into the wall gathers dust. Clark’s heavy work-clothes, strewn across the bed and carpet, covered in a layer of particulate dust and residue. Thinly-slatted accordion doors stand open on a tiny closet with a jumble of fabric inside. The shaving kit is on the
floor, pushed into the furthest corner from the bed in a pile of other toiletries.

When Clark comes into his bedroom twenty minutes later, a towel slung ’round his hips and a
resigned frown on his face, his bed is properly made. His sheets are smooth and as inviting as
Bruce can manage. The filthy clothes are bundled into the small closet with the other laundry, the
doors wedged closed. His personal effects are neatly lined on the clean knickknack shelf. The
offending window is covered, blocking the view to and from outside.

On the bed is a towel and lying atop that, is Clark’s razor and shaving cream.

Clark stares at the re-ordered room, eyes darting to Bruce, then his mouth twists and he sits
heavily. He hasn’t bothered to cover himself up beyond a small thin towel; in the heat spreading
through the chilly room, his bare skin steams. He makes no effort at false modesty. Astringent soap
and the unmistakable scent that is purely Clark. It does something to Bruce, that scent, makes his
chest pull and ache.

He takes his shirt off, strives for casual without making it tawdry, because it’s either that or risk
ruining it. He’s dealt with worse temperature drops before and the room is warming quickly now.
He feels Clark look at him, a flash of heat on his back. He watches Clark stare at the wall, or
perhaps through it, while he grabs the towel off the bed and gets it situated over his shoulder.

For a moment, Bruce thinks he might not be able to do it: throw every assumption he’s been
working under away, start fresh, do more, be a better man. He might not be capable of this: being
just Bruce.

Being a real person.

This isn’t about Bruce, though. This is about Clark’s needs. This is for Clark, and for Clark...
Bruce thinks he could convince himself to do anything.

He starts where he can be seen. The first run of the blade, Clark shudders. Slipping a hand near his
cheek, Bruce waits. Breathes, and waits. When Clark leans into his hand, he cups that jaw, tilts his
head with steady pressure. Ignores the soft hitch in Clark’s breathing when he caresses Clark’s
cheekbone with his thumb.

Once he begins, it’s as if they’ve never stopped.

He takes his time. The differences are inconsequential: this ‘cream’ smells nothing like the shaving
butter Bruce used months past, but the blade is just as keen. The sounds are not the quiet reflection
of Bruce’s estate, but the shadows seem softer, the air more forgiving.

No birds sing at this hour, just the jangle of music from above and below, the sound of traffic on
the road, the murmur of partial conversations, children’s screeching, families arguing and loving.
It’s not a terrible neighborhood, he thinks, it just needs a little care. Financial guidance. Oversight.
Proper management.

Love.

He files it for consideration, though he already knows what he’ll do. It takes a second longer to
bring his thoughts back than it should; when he looks up from the blade, Clark’s gaze jerks away.
He regards the wall behind Bruce sadly.

“Is this... For now?” All anger gone from his voice, Clark sounds... Tired.

Bruce lets his expression soften. “For as long as you’ll allow.” He means it, he’s sincere, but it
sounds flippant even to him.

“So what happens now?” Drained, as if Clark’s asking only because it’s the polite thing to do.

*What do you want to happen, Kal?* Bruce lets the silence pull out, sneaks in strokes and smooths Clark’s hair. Shaves the travesty of negligence off Clark’s face. Breathes into the quiet until he hears Clark breathing steadily with him.

He’s almost done, when Clark finally lets himself lean into Bruce. He gives over and allows Bruce to take care of him, and Bruce feels a weight lifted from him as he gladly accepts the burden.

“This is going to sound crazy.” He wipes the shaving cream away slowly. “But I was thinking that now, we should use this bed. In the morning, coffee. Then... Ideally, you give me the opportunity to apologize properly. Re-negotiation would be— Nice.”

Clark’s hand moves faster than Bruce’s eyes track. He’s gripping Bruce’s wrist tightly, eyes half-fogged and rapidly becoming less so. “You think sex is going to help this mess?”

Bruce drops the blade to the bed; there’s no breaking that grip — he leans into Clark’s hold, lets himself trust, lets himself *know* that Clark won’t hurt him. “I think sleep will help both of us.” He leans in further, overbalancing. If Clark drops him, he’ll at least be able to break his fall. Uses the bound hand to stroke Clark’s face again, watches hesitant hope creep back into his eyes. “Or we could argue more now if you like.”

Clark eyes him. The corners of his eyes tighten and he gently releases Bruce’s arm. “No.” He picks up the blade and sets it in its case. Looks up mildly at Bruce and takes in the sight of him before a guilty wince crosses his face.

“Why, Bruce?”

*Because it wasn’t safe. It isn’t safe.*

Forcing himself to speak the truth has seldom been more arduous. “Fear.” Bruce ignores his urge to deflect.

Something raw breaks through the weariness on Clark’s face. “You’re afraid of me.” Bruce sees it: the tiny series of contractions that pulls Clark’s arms in close to his body, the way his shoulders begin to tense and rise.

He could keep silent. He could *manage* this conversation, he could *conquer* in this moment, crush Clark, refuse to show weakness, win himself back as he was, evade, *escape*.

*But I have not been wise, sincere, benevolent or brave. I’ve stumbled. Seven times* seven times, he’s stumbled, and Bruce refuses to allow himself to make it an eighth.

He thinks carefully about what he’s about to do, weighs the odds, the cost, the effect to come on Bruce’s vigilantly tended boundaries and fortifications.

And then Bruce throws it all aside – the calculations, the equivocations, his own urge towards self-destruction.

*He refuses to be a coward.*
Duty defines him, but it is not the only thing that defines Bruce.

He doesn’t go for the weak point; he exposes his own. Bruce lays his hands on those shoulders, lightly over the thick crests of trapezius harder than diamonds. “Kal.” He strokes, thumbs smoothing warmed skin and compacted muscle. Keeps his voice even and unassuming. “I was afraid of us.” And the line of Clark’s back softens, he breathes under Bruce’s hands.

“And now?”

Bruce feels his lips turn up at that. “Terrified,” he says blandly. He continues to stroke meditatively across the line of neck to shoulder granted him.

Clark chuckles, sounds surprised at himself when he says, “Yeah. Me too.”

*Which is exactly why they need to talk.* But now is not the time – he feels it in his bones, he knows it in every breath. The moment is too fragile. Too raw.

He can only keep his expression open for so long – after a certain subset of iterations, an organism is irrevocably changed by pressure. Bruce is irrevocably changed, and without the barriers holding Bruce in and everything else out… “I’m not ready, yet… To talk about how I feel, Clark.” Bruce swallows around the ache in his chest. Concentrates on the tangible – the floor under his feet, the damp silk of Clark’s hair. The down-curve of Clark’s lips.

“Will you come back?” Back home, back to Bruce – but he can’t bring himself to say that, either.

“I’m not ready yet, to live with someone who can’t tell me how they feel about me.”

And Bruce laughs – a single huff of pained amusement. *A pair of idiots,* yes. “Is it over, then?”

He doesn’t see the movement. One moment, his hands are on Clark’s shoulders; in the next, Clark’s face is pressed against him. Arms like steel bands circle Bruce’s waist. *It’s not an attack.* If not for the unescapable strength of those limbs, Bruce might hardly be held at all. It isn’t demanding – Clark’s arms barely brush Bruce’s skin.

*Supplication.*

The pattern of it breaks in Bruce’s mind, blowing the tension away. Not once has Clark moved away from him during their exchange, except when Bruce asked it of him. Clark isn’t trying to end them – he isn’t pushing Bruce away. There’s an expectation here, somewhere underneath all of this that reminds Bruce of a dark night, of raised voices. Of Alfred urging him back to his room, the glimpse of Thomas Wayne’s reassuring smile at his son, as the man closed the door.

An argument, Bruce thinks, one much the same as those many couples had, he’s aware. It surprises him only because over the years, many details have been ground down to smears of sense-memory and emotion, but most of what Bruce remembers is good.

There had been flowers, so many lush and varied fresh flowers, and maybe the memory of his mother’s face, radiant as she accepted and arranged them, was the only reason Bruce could remember this short interlude now. *This is normal.* Normal people have arguments. Normal people make bad choices. Normal people can talk about them.
Bruce isn’t, he knows - he isn’t a normal person. He’s never been a normal person, and he doesn’t think, it doesn’t sound as if Clark is asking him to be. It’s fair, for Clark to set his boundaries as firmly as Bruce has set his own. It’s fair, Bruce thinks.

He doesn’t see a cocky Superman – not anymore. He barely sees Kal. There is no perfection in either of them here, of truth or fantasy – all he can see is Clark Kent: the core of him, stripped down to substratum. The truth of Clark, glowing like pearls on dark asphalt.

*Clark wants to be normal.*

He puts his arms carefully around Clark, calms his own response. Relief is like cool water, streaming down from above.

Clark’s arms close on him, unshakeable. Soul-deep silence, resounding in Bruce’s mind. Under his ribs, a shard of emotion as close as Bruce may ever come to perfection. It’s rapturous and it hurts… and Bruce is glad in that moment - fiercely glad.

The pain is a sign.

*Let me convince you.*

“Alright,” Bruce says. The land is depreciated; he can get it rock bottom, most likely. The neighborhood is on the edge of the disaster zone – it wasn’t always this way. It’s fixable; this is all solvable. “Alright, yes. We’ll work on it.”

“Did you,” Clark asks against his stomach after a moment, “Just put my dirty clothes on top of my clean pile?”

Bruce purses his lips. “Clean pile.” He hopes that’s all he has to say to express exactly what he thinks about *that* sort of nonsense. Then he reconsiders the actual question. “Possibly.”

There’s another shudder in the arms around him; Bruce looks down and… Clark isn’t shuddering—he’s laughing. Quietly, tiredly, but *laughing*, his breath gusting warm through Bruce’s shirt.

“Probably,” Bruce says, a touch more thoughtfully, just so Clark doesn’t have to stop.

Somewhere between nudging closer and keeping the tenuous silence, Bruce finds himself leaning down into the embrace. Somewhere between contentment and terror, exhaustion finally catches up with him.

There are no dreams, only the velvet-black crush of welcoming relief.

*Chapter End Notes*

Thanks again for sticking with me through this far, folks! I appreciate you all.

The story is not over...
A Pit, A Pearl, a Clenched Fist

Chapter Summary

Symbioses may be *obligate*, in which case the relationship between the two species is so interdependent, that each of the organisms is unable to survive without the other, or *facultative*, in which the two species engage in a symbiotic partnership through choice, and can survive individually.

Chapter Notes

Jagged balls of shrapnel find the one position they can rest on—the balance to reach an even distribution of weight.
Thanks to my wonderful betas and everyone still with me. All remaining mistakes are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven: A Pit, A Pearl, a Clenched Fist

“Even if it hurts, even if it makes me bleed,
I’m gonna carry you, pushing through the dirt on my sleeves.” –Sam Tinnesz

It’s the scent of coffee, rich and pungent, that wakes Bruce. There’s a moment of muzzy confusion; his arm is pinned, a warm weight on his midsection. His feet are bare. He keeps his eyes closed, listens instead. Voices, outside the walls of where he is. Traffic and birds. Someone else is breathing, beside him. The weight is alive.

He’s holding someone… Bruce breathes in, slowly. Sweet, sharp and fresh: ozone.

He’s holding Clark. He’s with Clark.

Bruce opens his eyes.

There’s a mottled water-stain on the scalloped plaster ceiling. Pervading heat, sinking in all along his left side and hip. Soft hair shifting under one palm, over-warm skin flexing beneath the other. Relative coolness—his shirt is rucked up. Clark, shifting into Bruce, his face turned away, his head resting solidly atop Bruce’s stomach. A slight hint of must to the air, mold most likely. In spite of it, in spite of all of it, it’s the best damn wakeup call Bruce has had since December.

He’s careful, as he adjusts his hold, not to disturb the man using him as a pillow. He breathes in. He breathes out. *He knows he is here.*
The pressure isn’t kind on his bladder, but discomfort is faint for the moment, buried below the storm of conflicting impulses.

*Get up; get up now.*

He should quietly remove himself from the bed; no—he should remove himself, and wait for Clark to awaken. He should wake Clark; he should let him sleep. Bruce should hold him closer; he should keep his distance.

*Stop. Focus.*

The familiar rhythm of deep-breathing leads Bruce into stillness instead, and he does his best to soak it in, this entire moment. *This now.*

It’s inside him again. *Contentment,* trickling through the cracks of remorse. Guilt, for feeling any pleasure in this situation. Fear, not of the conversation to come, but of what losses might come of it. Bruce thinks on what concessions might be required of him, to keep the flicker of hope inside him from turning into dust. On that, and on what *necessities* might be required—Mission-compromising concessions that might cause him to choose between the future he can see and the life he’s known until now.

He thinks of a child who grew up learning to apologize for things he’d never done, a child who was taught to stand up only when he had no other choice; who was taught to stand up only for others and never for himself. An empathic child, deprived of touch he needed by the society around him.

Clark finally did stand up for himself, and is once again leaving himself vulnerable for Bruce. The ‘leap of faith’ Clark has made for him—is making for him—is considerable. Bruce can’t let himself be deceived as to its truth, because he’s seen it for himself in Clark’s own handwriting: to Clark, trust comes later, if at all.

“Morning.” Clark’s voice is hushed. “This feels nice,” he adds, shifting again, chest rumbling against Bruce’s hip. His breath is light against Bruce’s skin; his hands tighten. The golden curve of him, nude and curled around Bruce. Nice is a considerable understatement.

“Hello.” Bruce is just as quiet. Just as unwilling to break the careful quality of peace they’ve managed to make. With regret, he strokes through Clark’s hair again, then gently urges him over to the side. “Bathroom,” he says in answer to the wordless press of cheek against his hand.

*He’s out of his depth.*

He leaves the adjoining door open, refuses to entertain *why* he’s so loath to have a barrier between them. Springs creak gently from the bedroom, but there’s no sound from the floorboards.

There’s no bulb in the cubicle-like bathroom. One tiny high window, casting sun over old tile. The sound of his stream hitting the porcelain and the subsequent flush, is loud. He wonders how many times this toilet’s even been used since Clark moved in.

*Zero,* he thinks. How many times has Clark needed an electric light, to see by? *Zero times.* No toilet paper. No toothbrush. No pillow. The smallest physical mercy? *Zerotimeszerotimes.* Bruce doesn’t resent the hairs raising on his skin, the gaze he can feel through cheap wood and plaster, like heat—like a touch, on his face.

*I’m completely out of my depth.*
It doesn’t matter. What matters is Clark. What matters is not losing Clark anymore—it’s about not losing Clark to this creeping darkness.

There’s no handsoap, not on the tub’s edge, not under the sink. And there’s the anger Bruce has been trying to circumvent. It’s a small pretense – the smallest thing, the pettiest part of all of this Bruce has seen yet other than the fucking lightbulb issue, and maybe that’s why it hits him the way it does.

(And who’d told Clark, demanded that he stop pretending?)

The water’s cold, smells faintly of metal when Bruce washes his face and hands. He rinses his mouth with it anyway—it’s city water; normally he’d never touch it, but now is hardly the time to show indecision. The taste, like metal, earth and stone in his mouth, the smell of must and mildew. For a moment, all Bruce sees is black. He grips the sink.

Like the bottom of a well. Like a pit.

(because Bruce hadn’t meant this—)

The tap, running. The sprinkle-splash of cold water bouncing off the ceramic, onto his knuckles. A dog’s barking, echoing off pavement outside. The clink of dishes on a countertop, nearby. The thump of his own heartbeat, sudden and loud.

Breathe.

He splashes his face blindly until the dizziness recedes.

Pushing down rising urgency again, Bruce slicks the water into his hair in lieu of a towel. Eyes his reflection critically and decides it’s good enough. He goes out to face Clark.

Worn jogging pants ride low on Clark’s hips. He’s topless, hair still bed-tousled, busily rinsing a second mug at the sink, when Bruce makes his way out of the bedroom.

Both his phone and his watch are blinking, a steady red dot in the dimness of the place. His shoes, he sees, are lined neatly by the door, despite the paper clutter still littering the carpet. He leaves them for the moment. Moves across the floor silently to watch the carefully careless attention that Clark pays to every step of pouring an all-too-fragile cup of coffee.

“Daily Planet special. Not the best, but it’s something to get you started. If it’s not beneath you.” Clark’s voice is quietly casual. A gesture directs Bruce to the chipped mug steaming on the edge of the kitchen-nook counter.

The stuff smells evil, the closer Bruce gets to it. All the same—manners.

“Train’s running late today.” Keep it light.

A nod from Clark. “Yeah. Figured I’d stay in and… Work this out.”

“I’m sure your coffee’s good enough for me.” He takes it with a nod of thanks, steels himself and sips it. Then he shakes his head with (only slightly) exaggerated regret. “Daily Planet, huh. You poor bastards.” Keep it easy.

Clark leans a shoulder into the wall beside him, watching. One dark eyebrow goes up when Bruce
ignores the acidic scrape on his tastebuds and takes a deeper sip.

“You know, the Planet *had* a coffee account.” He soldiers through another.

“Sorry,” Clark’s embarrassed, Bruce sees—an odd cast to his gaze. “You don’t have to drink that - I can go out and—“

The coffee is shit, simultaneously too weak and too many sifts down the grade line to be anything but bracingly bitter. Actually worse than the rocket fuel the Commissioner drinks. Worse, even, than the sludge that accumulates at the bottom of Bruce’s thermos at the end of a long patrol.

*More penance, as if all these archival copies of Daily Planet rags isn’t bad enough.*

“It’s fine,” Bruce says calmly as he takes another sip.

There’s a crash, somewhere in the building – a dropped dish perhaps, a glass. Footsteps and indistinguishable voices; conversation in the hall. It's strangely fitting, for this early-morning tête-à-tête.

Hesitantly, Clark tips his own mug, drinks down what looks to be about half the thing, near-boiling, then refills it.

When Bruce breaks away from the counter, to sit on the couch, Clark follows. And under the pressure of Clark's unmoving and increasingly pensive eyeing, it feels like Bruce is going to need a hell of a lot more shit coffee.

Companionable silence. Elsewhere in the building, a television is blaring. The coffee doesn’t get better. Clark shifts forward finally, elbows propped on his knees. He tilts his head, unsmiling.

“So are we going to talk about this or sit here like teenagers?”

Bruce opens his mouth, frowns, then takes yet another sip of terrible coffee. “Yes.”

“Okaaay... Questions, then. What is this? What’s *this*?”

He thinks for a moment. “Us.”

“Are we getting back together here?”

“Are we apart?” The question is genuine.

*It doesn’t feel as if they are, but perhaps that’s part of the entire problem to begin with.*

Clark’s arm sweeps, a wide movement encompassing the surrounding space.

“Well, most people don’t take four month vacations in the middle of a relationship. And definitely not in a place like this. And most people… *definitely* don’t have romantic rendezvous in a place like this.” He sighs. “So is this a last fling?” Clark’s hand jerks in the air between them. “Or are we
going to do this?”

“Is there—” Bruce clears his throat. “Is there going to be a fling?” *Don’t sound so fucking cocky about it.* He looks for a safe place to put the mug down. He hadn’t taken into consideration the possibility of physical intimacy sans emotional strings, and though it isn’t what he wants (and isn’t truly possible, in any case), Bruce could be persuaded to make exceptions.

*Give a starving man a bone and he’ll make a stew to feast on.*

A starving man—that’s what Bruce is now, scrabbling to scratch a big enough taste together that he can get fed; a cur, looking for scraps when he’s already disdained the haunch; a wolf, sniffing for blood, for weakness, searching for the perfect point to sink his teeth in—

*No.* He pushes the darkness back, pushes the lies and the… yes, the *hurt* down.

*This isn’t a test – it isn’t a trick. Don’t be a child.*

Noting the absence of available surfaces, Bruce sets his mug on the carpet beside the couch for lack of anywhere else. A gust of displaced air across Bruce’s face, and both chipped mug and mate are back on the counter, Clark’s hair even more unkempt.

“Is it yes or no, Bruce? Just one solid answer. *Please.*”

”I'm here, Kal.”

A horn blares out on the street, a sling of profanity and response in kind. They both stop, Bruce with an ear tilted. Clark’s gaze isn’t really on Bruce anymore; he’s looking past Bruce—looking through him, actually, down to street below.

Bruce clears his throat.

“Everything alright?”

In a blink, Clark’s focused on him again. “Yeah, we’re good.”

“Good,” Bruce says, relieved. “Fling notwithstanding, I’ve lost my taste for temporary assignations. So, yes, I want us to do this.” His eyes search across Clark's face, his hand twitches as if to reach for him. “Unequivocally, completely ‘yes’,” he adds, meeting Clark's stare.

“So then, how do you want to do this?” His voice quieted, head tilted slightly as he listens to whatever frequency it is that makes Kal smile that way… Bruce’s pulse jumps.

“Let me take you to brunch.”

“And then?”

“Let me take you to dinner,” Bruce says.

Clark’s voice lowers even more. “And then?”

*Then let me take you. Then you’ll tell me what you want. Then we—*
The unspoken lies between them. Bruce glances at the window—it’s just past eight, by the sun. He wonders how much it will cost him—in negotiation time, not money, never money—to convince someone to prep and serve a decent brunch to an address in this neighborhood. Not that it matters; he’ll spend it regardless. Time, money, energy... All of it.

And he knows precisely why he’s spending.

Worth it. *Clark is worth so much more.*

Clark bows his head; he sighs heavily, shoulders slumping. “Despite you *being* here, it still doesn't answer the question of whether we are together or apart. I can see you came here to make the effort - I'm just not sure what the effort is, Bruce.”

It isn’t surprise, frothing inside Bruce. It’s…

“No,” Clark continues, resolute. “No, we can’t talk about this later, after one meal leads to another. No, I can’t just... Go along. *No*. I’m not going to be your secret; I won’t be your… Your… *Rentboy.*” He bites the word out. “*No*, Bruce. I don’t want that. *I don’t want it.* We talk about it now. Or… or we close the book.”

It’s *satisfaction*. Bruce raises his eyes. There is no option, no hesitation in him, not with words like these. He nods.

*Finally.*

“We’ll talk now.”

Clark has learned to say no, he thinks. And not only that, but *Clark has learned how to say ‘no’ to Bruce.* If he didn’t care, if this weren’t so damn precarious, he would test... push. Probe, to see where this new resolve ends, where the breaking point needing reinforcement could be. He’s looking for it now without even having made the decision, searching Clark’s features for the hairline of doubt.

He doesn’t find it.

“You were never that. Not to me.”

A huff, and Clark’s shaking his head again. Smiling slightly, as if everything is fine. Smiling, as though Bruce doesn’t *know better*. A cordial wall, muted disbelief in his posture.

He chooses his words carefully. “I know I was… Crass. It’s alright to be angry with me.” Sharp eyes snap to Bruce, though Clark doesn’t move. “I hurt you. I broke your trust.”

“But?”

"No. No 'buts'. If you—" He resists the urge to approach. "I would be desperately grateful, if you could forgive me." Bruce stops short of asking, because he knows even Clark’s patience isn’t limitless. Even Clark might be insulted by the idea that Bruce has a right to ask forgiveness.

Clark takes in a sharp breath, chest rising and falling quickly before he rolls his shoulders and closes his eyes.

“And what if I don’t forgive you?” He opens his eyes, hands closing on air into tight fists. “What if
I can’t?” He’s more than agitated; he’s thrumming, hovering, naked feet planted flat on an inch of empty air, though Bruce sees no snarl on his lips.

He’s given it a fair amount of thought, actually. It is very possible that his apologies will no longer ring true to Clark; will never again be accepted as guarantees that the future will in fact be better. It hurts to think his sincere apologies now sound like lies. It cuts to think, in this way, Clark can no longer trust Bruce. Living with the constant reminder of that pain is a price Bruce is willing to pay, if it will give him a chance to earn back whatever Clark is willing to give.

Begging for scraps.

“Forgive me when I give you a reason to, then.” He shrugs, resigned. “Faith is easy, right? Trust has to be earned.” Bruce presses his lips together, both to keep himself from speaking further and to quell whatever expression it is trying to break free. No.

He pushes it down. All of it. Focuses on the quantifiable—the sensation of his own teeth against the inside of his lip, the inside of his cheek between his molars. The faint taste of copper.

“Re-earned.” He corrects himself, swallows and chances a direct glance at his sitting companion.

Clark’s fingers fiddle intently at the nearest seam of the cushion between them. “I don’t know if there’s anything you could say that wouldn’t sound like you just telling me what I want to hear at this point. And we both know how qualified you are, to do that,” Clark says, rubbing at his face. “Which is sad. It really is, because I want to believe you’re here for me, not for you.”

Bruce looks at him and sees it’s true—Clark does want to believe. Shifting, Bruce gathers his thoughts.

Somewhere in the depths of mourning his parents, in his deepest self, Bruce had decided that the safety of those he cared for was best assured by him maintaining his distance from others. If no one could see him, then no one could see his allegiances. Let people get this close and no farther. Kept himself at a remove, built a shell to look at the world so he didn’t have to let it touch him. A safe place.

So he didn’t have to let the world hurt him.

He’d clung to that nascent belief, wrapped himself in it until it became a part of his skin. Until it became so entwined with who and why he was, it could not be undone without undoing Bruce in the bargain.

And it isn’t the first time, nor the twentieth, that Bruce has had it made shockingly apparent to him that this barricade works bi-directionally. It’s not the first time he’s felt his own failure to connect so desperately.

But connecting with people, engaging with them instead of at them—it puts them in danger.


End it, he’s always told himself. End it before your enemies end it for you.

These compulsions, they’ve driven him to push harder, to lay out hard words and harder truths. To
keep them at bay, to make them see what he is. To make them fear him.

Because…

If he allowed them to love him, if he allowed himself to acknowledge, to soften… When he’s allowed himself to soften, disaster always follows.

But there is no way he can put Clark in any more danger than the man already lives with, day in and out.

“My middle name is Thomas,” he says. “My safeword is pearl.” The mid-morning lull absorbs his words. Slowly, Clark’s head comes up.

He doesn’t ask what Bruce said, or if Bruce said what he’s said. He stares, instead, and Bruce can just catch the blur of dark lashes.

“Clark. There are two choices. I have to leave soon, either way, but the decision on whether I’m welcome to come back is yours. To hell with what anyone else has to say.”

“Am I supposed to roll over for that?”

This, Bruce thinks, is how he’d made Clark feel. Unwanted. Used. Disposable. Nonessential. Expendable.

Bruce nods once, slow. Failure… aches.

It isn’t Clark’s fault, that Bruce hasn’t given him enough foundation to build from.

“I do. Care.” It’s inadequate; words are inadequate. Humiliatingly so.

“You’re shit at showing it, Bruce.”

Crushing weight.

“Yes,” he says, keeping his voice level. “I know.” There’s no shame in admitting to a known weakness. Clark doesn’t answer him.

Bruce stands, body tingling with adrenaline, and quietly steps past the couch. He’s outstayed his welcome. He doesn’t look, leaves Clark sitting there, while he goes back into the small bedroom.

First things first. Bruce stalks to the opposite of the room, walls pressing in, fighting to remain calm. The shirt is wrinkled, but manageable—with coat over top, it won’t attract much notice. The slacks are creased, but a quick enough step will camouflage the worst. He’s wasting time. He’s wasting time. His stride back into the living area is slightly spoiled by bare feet, and there’s no good dignified way to don socks and shoes while standing, but he’s damned if he’ll sit again. Not while Clark stares at him with that same cool gaze.

“I’m not asking you to roll over, but the hospitality is appreciated.” And Clark still says nothing. “Alright,” Bruce says, turning to the door. No.
“No, it isn’t alright.” He stops. “I made my mistakes, I won’t deny it. But you.”

Clark’s head pops up. “Me?”

“You. You left. You disappear for four months, and not one word. Avoided me for the past two. You ran from me.”

“You know why I left—“

At the dismissive hand gesture, Bruce turns fully back to face him. Blood pumping loud in his ears; his mouth dry. “You worried your mother,” he says, voice hard. “Not one word. You could have been dead.”

Eyes widening, Clark finally looks less than composed. To his credit, he doesn’t make excuses. He doesn’t deny Bruce’s words, either. Those words, they knock the last of the lazy morning warmth from between them.

“No, sir,” Clark sits forward, face firming. “No, I don’t think so - you don’t speak for her. Is she —” His expression hardens. “I would have heard something. Is she angry?”

“I don’t speak for her - find out for yourself. Apparently this is a regular occurrence.”

Clark’s eyes narrow and Bruce has to stop himself, has to take a step back both mentally and physically, God—because he’s furious again and there’s a thin line between anger and attack for Bruce on the best of days. Stop.

“Wait.” Breathe. “She’s… fine. She’s fine, Clark.”

De-escalate. Yes, the shoulders lowering, the hard line of lips and jaw softening. The relaxation of the muscles in Clark’s face in response. “My point stands.” Confirm message received.

Clark… His frown is back, his expression slowly morphing into faint surprise.

“Mom’s fine. So I worried you.” His head cocks to the side, his eyes focused in the uncanny way that raises prickles all over Bruce’s skin. “Are you blaming me for leaving?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. Pay attention!”

When had he moved?

Clark’s less than a foot from Bruce now. A wondering confusion in his eyes. His expression is intent, his gaze drops to Bruce’s sternum. An almost physical weight, the lancing stare sliding up, up to Bruce’s carotid artery. A jolt, his heart pumping hard once, when Clark’s eyes meet his again. Clark’s lips quirk.

Easy.

“I can hear you,” Clark says. He’s watchful, as he lays his palm flat against the middle of Bruce’s chest. “You didn’t come here to talk about my Ma. And… You’re worried now, I think.” Heat, Clark’s heat, radiating out of him and warming the air around them.

Danger.

“Clark.” He’s tense. Every muscle ready for battle.
“You wanted me to pay attention to you. Are we no longer in a relationship where it’s appropriate —?”

Bitter, so bitter, how the words flow.

Slapping his hand over Clark’s, Bruce presses both close. “Kansas, stop. Focus.” He closes his eyes. “Yes, I’m concerned. Yes, I was wrong. Yes - I need you to pay attention.”

I don’t blame you. I don’t blame you.

He knows what needs to be done. The wave of emotion scourges Bruce when he lets himself sink into it. Feeling it, breathing it, letting it wash up and over him before he chokes it back down.

Kal.

Clark jerks, pupils contracting; his hand curls into Bruce’s shirt. He’s breathing too fast—if he were anyone else, Bruce would have serious concerns about hyperventilation. He strokes the back of Clark’s wrist rhythmically with his thumb, waits out the indecision while Clark stares at their entwined hands. And the echoed caress of the offending digit.

Feel me, Clark.

“You can’t.” It’s a gasp, almost a plea the way Clark breathes the words. “You can’t come here and just expect me to—”

“I know,” Bruce says again, voice a murmur beside Clark’s ear. “I know. You don’t have to forgive me. Tell me you’ve moved on. Hell, knock me through another wall. Or decide. Agree that there’s something here worth the salvaging. Worth making better. Either way, I’ll back you.”

I’d never blame you; not for that.

Clark’s arm trembles. His mouth works for a moment, before he groans. “Damn you, Bruce.”

He can’t think of what else to do, what else he could be doing, but running a soothing hand up into Clark’s hair. “Yeah. I know, kid.”

“I can feel you. Say it.”

“I want you.” I can’t imagine a world without you.

“You asshole.” Clark pushes—one step forward, and Bruce shifts—one step, pivots slightly to keep his other arm braced between them. He doesn’t move away after; Clark’s grip on Bruce’s shirt tightens. “You arrogant, high-handed—“

“Bastard. I know.”

Another micrometer of well-sewn fabric wound into that fist. The pop and bounce of thick square mother of pearl buttons, skittering off under the couch. The thin flicker of rainbow across the wall, reflected iridescence more a flash than a sighting.
“How are you lying to me?” The gleam of red, of embers glowing in deep blue.

Bruce’s system clamors at him to take action, to avoid, to attack—to do anything but stand and wait for what’s coming. His body tells him—

*It’s a grapple; it’s an exploit. Shake him off!*

It isn’t.

*It isn’t.*

He doesn’t fight. Doesn’t reach for the lead-lined vial in his pocket or the emergency beacon on his cuff.

“It’s true.”

“Lies.” Clark’s head turns slightly, ear facing Bruce. “Why… *How*?” He leans in a touch more, fingers flexing in cloth. “Your heart’s beating *so* fast.”

Ignoring the faint but distinct sound of fabric tearing, Bruce goes loose. Lets himself sway with the tremors running through Clark. Lets his other hand drop finally from dark hair to a bare shoulder and squeezes lightly.

“You tell me.”

“Tell the truth! You just want Superman.”

“Anybody can get Superman. I want you. I don’t give a damn what you call yourself. I don’t give a damn what *they* call you, understand? I’m here for you.”

Not tremors; Clark’s shaking. “I went to… A place I have. I thought…” His hand loosens; the heat coming off him lessens. He shakes his head, nose skimming Bruce’s neck. Bruce distinctly feels Clark sniff him. “Nothing made sense. And I was… You said. I thought you’d left me. You wanted me to think that. What did you *think* would happen, Bruce?” He makes a noise that sounds a bit like choking. “Now you come with—You know. Is that it? Is that all? You know, so it’s okay? You know, so ‘sorry Clark, expect disappointment’?”

Clark’s voice cracks slightly on the last syllable, and Bruce can’t take it, can’t *stand* to have his eyes closed, to be blind again with Clark so damn close…

*This will never happen again,* ” he says. *Orders* himself, in the same tone he’d use to order an attack. “I swear to you. On my honor.”

*Every scrap I have left.*

"I don't trust you. I can’t trust you.” Not a whisper, but close enough. “Not like this. Not to be available to me.”

*Incomprehensible. Isn’t he here? Hasn’t he chased, followed, begged, repented? Bared himself? What is he missing? What has he missed?* It feels like an eternity, getting his face under control.

Clark makes a noise of frustration at Bruce’s change in expression. His voice raises. “*Emotionally*
available, Bruce. And… I don’t think I can be… Who you want me to be.”

Bruce nods, through the pain in his chest. "What I want you to—I want you to be you." It isn’t that way at all. It’s Clark, who demands that Bruce change. Numbness creeps at the edge of Bruce’s pain. He can barely hear his own voice over the sound of his heart hammering.


“And how soon till we’re right back here? Or worse? I don’t want to fight you, Bruce. What kind of world do you live in up there? I don’t accept that—I won’t live like that. Not again.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Bruce says. “If my attentions are unwanted, I won’t—”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then it can be better. More. We can be more.” Despite his words, inside he’s steeling himself up to go. “We will be.” Railing against it, dreading it.

Clark. Please. I can learn.

“If you can’t say it, then show me.” The hand in his shirt is loosening abruptly. Shifting. Bruce catches Clark’s elbow reflexively, but he can’t stop the slow slide downward.

Clark slides to his knees there, dust motes shining in the air above his head, hand still plastered over Bruce’s heart.

“Kal—”

“Show me.” He’s shaking against Bruce’s leg, shaking apart just as he did before, only now Bruce is the one whose eyes sting. He’s the one faltering suddenly, as the pieces fall together in his mind.

So Bruce sinks down with him; he can’t let Clark fall alone. Not this time.

Not again.

“I am.” Cupping Clark’s jaw, Bruce turns his face upward and looks into eyes bright as sunlight. “Breathe, Clark.”

When he opens his mouth instead, Bruce strokes his thumb sideways across Clark’s lips to forestall any words. He holds the stare, forces his own breaths to steady.

“T’m showing you. Breathe.” The shaking, jostling Bruce as much as Clark is tensed, trying to hold it in. Bruce remembers his study, dark nights with too much whiskey. A confession Bruce would rather have kept silent. The same physiological reaction from Clark, the same expression of bewildered pain.

Hypersensitivity shock. Negative empathic resonance.

The reason Bruce began limiting his alcohol intake again: not because he’d hurt himself (though that was true), but because his drunken rant had hurt Clark.
“Breathe.” Just like Clark, Bruce has done what he’d had to do; what he’d thought he had to do. And just like Clark, he hadn’t enjoyed it.

“Don’t—I didn’t mean…”

Bruce doesn’t think; he moves. Closer, into the aura of warmth. Releasing Clark’s hand, he moves his own on Clark, as he used to.

“We’re talking, just talking. If you want me, I’m here to stay.” Well, not ‘here’ here. He lets his fingers press and massage rock-like muscle, sweeps his palms over Clark’s shoulders and neck. “Focus, Clark.”

Under his fingers, Clark’s breathing, his lips silently repeating the word. Focus.

The pulse, beating strong and hummingbird-rapid under his touch. Evening out into something more baseline human.

“Good… That’s right,” Bruce murmurs. Strokes through wild curls of dark hair. Soothes Clark’s clenched jaw. Runs reclaiming thumbs over his collarbones. “It’s alright. Good.”

Clark breathes with him; the full-body quaking begins to ease. Bruce waits him out, until the broad chest heaves and Clark takes in one deep breath, then another.

Bruce scans his lowered face with concern, keeping his own expression as neutral and non-judgemental as possible. He’s conflicted; it’s obvious in the way Clark’s hands grip even while his braced arm keeps them separated. His red-rimmed eyes—and when had he cried? How had he hidden it?

It’s in the light of hope and defiance shining in Clark’s eyes. Shining too, the incisive watchfulness always beneath—the one indicator of his Kryptonian ancestry Clark doesn’t ever quite hide.

He wants me to stay. Kal wants… What does he want—justice? Revenge? He wants to see me hurt, as hurt as he is. He wants proof.

Of course he does. Bruce knows how his mind works, partially—how Clark takes the most value from experiential knowledge. He doesn’t work on what he’s told, Clark works on what he’s seen and felt.

Bruce gives a slightly firmer squeeze and peers into Clark’s eyes, looking for anything familiar.


“I—I appreciate that sentiment.” Nodding slowly, Bruce reaches for something appropriate… something—what do normal people say?—and tries again. “You’re… welcome to it. At any time.” Which gets him a long, frustrated and considering look.

“I’m trying, Clark. Christ, Kansas I’m trying.

And people say Bruce is suave. Yes, in public, in dealing with business associates and people whose opinions he either disregards or disbelieves, Bruce is the very image of suavity. But in this, conflict with those close to his… close to him, Bruce is jagged. Too abrasive, too much. It’s easy,
keeping people on the outside at a cool reserve conversationally. Those on the inside of Bruce’s defenses though, are a different sort of danger. One he’s never been well-equipped to manage, judging by previous events. And since he isn’t sure what might provoke another outburst, Bruce stills himself instead.

What’s required here is not action; it’s patience.

Clark shifts. “It’s a sorta strange, isn’t it? To be in this position and not be—” Clark falls silent again with a shrug. And not be?

Not be fucking, Bruce realizes. Not be all over each other without a word of permanence or intent. Not be Bruce, taking Clark under and then leaving him to his nightmares.

“I should have given you more,” Bruce says in muted sadness, fingers still coiled and smoothing in deceptively silken hair. “I should have—” He swallows. “Been better. You’re right. It was ill-done. Ill-bred, of me. But I will show you,” he says, low under the thrum of daylight activity from the street.

“Then why did you do it?” There’s no escaping Clark’s gaze now, not this close. There never has been; not this close. Cold settles in the pit of Bruce’s stomach. Coldness, and the anxious stirrings of inevitability. Worst of all, the sensation of terrible smallness.

Could he…?

“I knew what you wanted,” Bruce says with careful dignity. “But I didn’t know that I could.” His… everything clenches. He stares, refusing to blink.

Clark’s gaze flickers—downward, darting across Bruce’s torso. Up his face, over his chest and throat. Pupils dilated uncannily, eyes unearthly—inhumanly bright, a distant mask that’s almost the face of a stranger.

Then abruptly, Clark’s face relaxes. His eyes approach a less troubling shade, a much more normative shade of blue.

“I wouldn’t mind getting up off the floor if we’re done down here, either,” Bruce says carefully.

Clark grip is strong, when he lifts the both of them up. His eyes are clear and aware, as he sets Bruce on his feet just the same as any other man would pick up a child.

“You don’t want me to forgive you. You don’t want me to trust you.”

“Won’t ask,” Bruce corrects gently.

Clark’s expression is guarded and watchful. “Because of your pride. Is that why?”

Bruce smiles slightly, gives another half-assed one-shouldered shrug. “No. There are some things a man should not have to say, Clark.”

Bullshit. Clark says in a perfectly reasonable tone of voice while the vein in his forehead pulses. “You don’t think you should have to apologize?” No longer infuriated, Clark sounds baffled.

“I,” Bruce walks carefully and slowly back to the ratted-out sofa. “Think you want proof, not
apologies. I.” He sits. “Don’t think you should have to choose trust or forgiveness. And I do not want you saying either to me. Not emptily. On the other hand, I could beg. Would you like that? Me, on my knees for once?”

“No!” Clark’s denial is as vehement as his flinch.

“So then,” He spreads his hands between them. “Here we are. For what it’s worth, I do regret my actions. But you know that. You’ve known that for… Some time, I’m sure. At least two weeks.”

Clark doesn’t speak, but he does glide just the slightest bit closer, back towards the center of the room. Back towards Bruce.

“Did you enjoy the bouquet?”

Clark glides another foot closer, close enough to almost reach out and touch. Still staring silently, face still. Unreadable. Alien.

“I would have gotten you delphiniums; I know how much you love the water. But I didn’t want to lie.”

“This time,” Clark whispers.

With a small quirk of his mouth, Bruce concedes the point. “This time, yes. And… I thought the scent might be disruptive, without an anchor.”

Except Bruce doesn’t say ‘anchor’. He says synth.

“I’m not—” And Clark is there, hovering, bent over with his face in Bruce’s.

There is nothing at all threatening about his posture or the tension in his limbs. He’s searching Bruce’s face or perhaps his very brain, for something.

“Am I a part of your thravezht?” Is he Bruce’s house, is he Bruce’s tribe? Still, there is that remote curiosity, that sense of being intimately studied in ways Bruce may never be aware of.

He pushes down a shiver.

The intricacies of Kryptonian family-bonds are extreme and mired in the baggage of so much tradition some of the positional titles don't correlate to any human relationships. But Bruce knows this much: that he took Clark in when he was injured. That he brought him through the sickness of empathic withdrawal once. That Clark may not have liked him, but the reactions caused by Bruce's emotions toward his...ward? Patient? Lover? Are not an optional part of Kryptonian neurophysiology.

“Yes,” Bruce says, in full confidence. “Most definitely.”

“I need a moment.” Clark, examining his expression, eyes flickering in however many half-lifes of a second his visual frame-rate is, before he straightens, still hovering above Bruce. He drifts to the door leading to the bedroom with a preoccupied frown. “You’ll wait?” He doesn’t look at Bruce when he speaks.

Of course he’ll wait. “Yes.” Bruce says.
He’s ready when Clark comes back into the front room.

"I need you to leave," Clark’s voice is calm. Quiet.

Bruce stands, pulling his coat around him. The few steps to the door seem insurmountable. His hand on the knob is a shock; it glints golden—smooth and cool under his fingers. And for a moment, Bruce is settled. Still, in the sure knowledge and regret of his future. Comforted, by the fact that Clark could snap him where he stands, and yet wouldn’t think to. Ashamed all over again, down to his bones.

I was not prepared.

And he wishes he could break past the barrier, break through and just—

"I'll—"

"Come back, I hope," Clark continues behind him. “But on my day off.”

Inhale.

Bruce breathes out, holds himself tightly against showing any sign of victory. "Which day is that?"

He turns just across the door-sill, in time to see Clark blink out of existence next to the couch and just... appear in front of him, one hand wrapped around the edge of the door.

A smile twitches to life on Clark's lips.

"I'm sure that won't be any problem for you to figure out."

He closes the door in Bruce's face, but he does it gently.

Chapter End Notes

Delphiniums: The July birth flower, these lush, dolphin-shaped flowers symbolize an open heart and ardent attachment and convey a feeling of lightness and levity.

*tynth*: head of house/master/chief
More Than These Bones

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the long wait. <3

~” “I am more than these bones; I feel love, feel alone; just wish you would come home. I’m worried it might just be something my soul needs.”~

—Keaton Henson

He’s being watched.

With the prickle of awareness, Bruce turns from Clark’s door to glance casually up the hallway, and sees the open door in his peripheral view. An elderly woman stands there, broom in hand, frowning at him. When he turns his head fully to look at her, she makes a disgruntled sound and her grip tightens on the cheap polyurethane handle.

“Morning,” he says with a short neighborly nod, the urban equivalent of a mutual disarmament treaty. Her mouth twists and she looks him up and down again.

“Shoo!”

_Beg pardon?_  

“Kay kicked you out. No trouble. _Shoo!”_  

_K?_  

Bruce stares at her blankly for a moment, then forces his face into a much more charming smile. “No trouble from me.” He lifts his open hands to make the point, and head high, refuses to hurry.

Her voice follows him down the hall to the stairwell. “He’s a _good_ boy! You’re trouble, mister!”

“Jesus,” Bruce mutters under his breath. _Seriously?_  

The trip back down the narrow hallway has a different sort of feel under the weight of multiple sets of eyes. It’s not Bruce’s first or hundredth ‘walk of shame’, but it might be the first one where he’s legitimately ashamed.

They don’t recognize him, Bruce thinks, or if they do, they doubt their own minds. No, what they see isn’t ‘Bruce Wayne, billionaire philanthropist’—from the way he’s being tailed and peeped at, the way the hostile stares at his clothes and person are falling, what they see is…what? A pimp? Some mid-level Mob man? Maybe a pusher, maybe a scout for one of the more disreputable purveyors of flesh. Who knows what they think they’re seeing, but it’s clear that he’s causing a disruption, and he doesn’t much like it.

Still.

The car’s still there in the morning light, though all four hubcaps are gone. The neighborhood could use a community center, Bruce decides, looking out at the colorful swirls and whorls on his newly adorned vehicle. Maybe a kid’s club and a neighborhood watch program. Or two.

From experience, Bruce knows the easiest way to avoid humiliating someone by offering to smooth their way…is to simply do it and say nothing unless asked. To ask nothing as well, to simply… agree to politely ignore that it happened.

He doesn’t enjoy talking about money, could care less about the management of finances for its own sake; what matters to Bruce, is buying power and value added. Not so much how much he has, but how much he can do with it.

It’s a privileged view, his laissez-faire attitude towards cash and resources, and he knows it. Actively strives to dispel it, but it isn’t a part of his formative training he’s ever managed to shake off. Bruce would be the first to concede that a lifetime of being unable to fundamentally relate to those struggling with what he would consider ‘minor financial matters’ has made him…blind in many ways.

I’m rich, Brucie will say with a charmingly self-effacing twist to his lips. I’m rich, this won’t hurt me. I’m rich, let me help. I’m rich, so please don't be afraid. Please don’t be afraid of me. Let me help, let me help. Let me help you.

People don’t like that though—he’d learned that lesson early, if later than he should have. People don’t like being beholden, being grateful. They resent it, and in turn, oftentimes Bruce has turned from helping one loved friend to another, only to turn back and be faced with disdain. With accusations. With rage masquerading as “common sense” over purchases and largesse he’d been well within his rights and ability to secure. He’s never claimed to have any—common sense, that is. In his experience, the concept is a myth. Another skill people are all too eager to tell him he lacks.

Most of the time it feels like a lost cause, like screaming into the dark, getting people to understand that Bruce knows as well as anyone else that it isn’t business acumen, skill, breeding or talent that made his family wealthy—that gives him the incredible advantages he was born with—just the providential intersection of opportunity and dumb animal luck.

But spending money without a qualm, now that’s a skill Bruce can claim. It’s time he put that skill to good use.

The tunnels are shit this time of day, gridlocked end to end with angry commuters.

This bridge is not my enemy.

Bruce does his best to ignore the stutter of flashes from the couple in the car to his left, and waits for the novelty to die down. When it doesn’t seem likely to happen, he turns to face them, gives a jaunty wave and a sheepish Wayne grin, and engages the tint feature in his windows. Finally free
of stares and unwelcome attention, he takes much-needed time—eight minutes, fifteen seconds—to calm himself.

*It doesn’t matter that they didn’t ask. It doesn’t. It doesn’t.*

With a sharp breath out, he reaches for his phone.

“Metropolis. I need reliable people down here,” he says to the person who picks up on the other end. “Cleaners, electricians, plumbers. No new contracts - find me somebody on retainer who can keep their mouth shut. No suits - the place is practically its own micro culture. I don't want anybody getting spooked - don't need any uniforms involved in this, you understand? I’m sending the details now.” A quick dance of fingers and the deed is done.

Martha doesn’t resent him, doesn’t throw accusations at him or treat him as less for the crime of having been born with *more*. He has to trust… and Christ, that’s—

That’s the fucking rub, right there. He has to *trust* that Clark will give him the same courtesy.

*But Martha comes from a generation and cultural background where women were taken care of by men, and as an older woman she’d expect her child and her child's spouse to take care of her. And Clark—*  

He really can’t rely on that as a gauge for how *Clark* might respond, he realizes. The rules of interaction, of gratitude, are different. However, playing by those rules has never won Bruce any points with Clark, never smoothed the path. Generalizations are useless to him. He has all the data he could ask for, and still no *proof* of anything beyond his own suppositions. He’s going to have to…hope.

Alfred takes a look at Bruce’s scowl on his return with an unseemly amount of glee. “You appear to have misplaced some accessories, Master Bruce.”

Bruce counts to five silently, schools his face into an expression of polite interest. “Oh?” He glances back at his defiled car as if he’s only just noticing the difference. “Hm. Thank you, Alfred,” he says, affecting disinterest. “Would you?”

“I live for nothing more, sir,” Alfred says, smooth tone at odds with the mirth in his eyes. “Ah, and I see you’ve found an aspiring artist!”

Alfred’s amusement follows him to the door, and Bruce finds he doesn’t have it in him to resent the levity. This is a good thing. It is, and it will be—and with that, his mind is already moving on, he’s moving on. Shedding his coat, shedding the publicity and the constant tension of pretense he wears outside these walls. Shedding *Bruce Wayne*, as his stride lengthens, his bearing changed.

There’s always work to be done, and as always, precious little time in which to do it.

~” Early morning, dreary horizon; Aching hands are pulling a millstone  
Wailing from the cart; Moaning from a shattered heart.” —Blue Foundation
“The cottage has called again, Master Wa—“

“Damn.” Damn! Bruce pushes the paper, with its Federal crest, to the floor. He squeezes his eyes shut as tightly as he can, and presses his head into the crook of his own elbow on the desk.

“Another deliberation extension, I take it?” Alfred’s tone is placid and unsurprised. Turning his head, Bruce sees him glance down at the discarded page then pointedly back up.

“They’re stonewalling me.” Bruce leans over, irritated doubly that he’s rattled enough to state the obvious, that it shows. He snatches the fax up, scans it a second time, only to throw it onto the desk again.

“They know WayneTech is the only company with the facilities and resources to do this right.” Bruce’s mouth twists into an irritable scowl. “They just don’t want to admit that someone else can do what they can’t. I doubt they even bothered to read the entire salvage request.”

“Oh, dear. Whatever shall we do?” With a soft clink, a saucer slides onto the desk from Alfred’s hand. Bergamot wafts thickly, making the hinges of Bruce’s mouth ache. “If only you knew someone with some sort of…governmental clout.” Bruce shoots him a withering glare. “Try again, Master Bruce,” Alfred says, gazing at him. “Circumstances have a way of changing.”

It’s too much to ask. Too much to owe. He shakes his head. “No more favors. I don’t know, Alfred.”

“Don’t know,” Alfred says under his breath, chidingly. He picks up the form letter and scans it, mouth a line of distaste.

“Do you?” Bruce sits up. “Do you? I don’t even know what the end goal is anymore. Justice? There’s more crooks running the streets now than ever. Retribution?” Bruce huffs a tired sigh. “Only works when they’re afraid of more.”

"Master Wayne—"

"They aren’t afraid anymore, Alfred. Not since—Clark."

Not since Superman soared across the sky, like heaven’s vengeance—organized crime has bigger problems to worry about than a man in a Bat suit, even one as tenacious as Bruce. Problems like the guy who can see through all their cunning packaging, who can hear all their backstreet deals and plans. Who can come through a wall to lift them into the air without anyone being able to stop him.

"Then perhaps a period of readjustment is called for. You cannot change what has happened in the world, Bruce—you can only protect it."

"I'm one man. The model doesn’t work - not now, if it ever did. All this...authority. We need...I need accountability."

"Now you want to be held accountable." Alfred places the napkin he was folding down in a precise trefoil. "Bruce,” he says, as if considering his words. “Shame is not going to help anyone, least of all Master Clark. I have watched you grow ever more hopeless. Ever more alone."

"Don’t psychoanalyze me, Alfred. I'm trying to tell you—"

"Master Bruce—"
"It's not enough!" His voice breaks free and it’s not a shout—not a yell, though it’s loud enough, louder enough than his usual tone to be one, in this house. Breathe. Breathe. Bruce presses his hands futilely to his burning eyes.

"I'm not," he says in a calmer tone, the flattest tone he can. He pulls the ice up from the void inside, uses it to stifle the ache flaming within him. "I'm obsolete, old friend."

Even as he says it, he knows what he deserves. He deserves for Alfred to agree with him, to ask him if he intends to cry over his mess or clean it up, to tell him this is what he gets, for making the choices he has, for his arrogance in thinking he of all people could ever make a difference, could ever win—

A hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. "Doubt is never an easy opponent." Grey eyes meet his. Allred's tone is certain, intense and hard as stone. “I have never known a man less weak and useless than yourself. The goal—your goal—is what it has always been.” Alfred pauses. “Unless you’ve decided to...retire your evening wear?”

He could. He wants to— set all this aside, for just a moment. Rest, for just a space. Just a breath.

“You know I can’t do that. Not yet.” Not ever.

"Then we do what we can. What we have always done. We do not bow to obsolescence. We do not bow, my boy."


No, they don’t bow. They never will. Thank you, Alfred. Bruce breathes out. Opens his eyes.

“The cottage."

Alfred’s face and tone are carefully neutral. “Another bad night, sir. And I’m afraid the Academy called as well. Apparently they take arson and targeted threats to personnel a bit more seriously than Gotham Preparatory.”

"I’ll handle it,” Bruce says, not knowing how, but knowing he is the one who has to. “Show me these substructure plans again. And the aerial shots."

Buying the Narrows ain’t easy, they say. They’re right to say it. The Narrows has complicated alliances and complicated inhabitants. The place might as well be its own city, for all the notice they pay to anyone else’s dealings in Gotham. It doesn’t matter who Bruce is and it doesn’t matter that he has money.

The thugs who run the Narrows have money too. They have names too, only theirs are more likely to describe what they might do to someone they disliked on a hard night. They have an interest in keeping the status quo and strangely enough, an interest in keeping the peace, as long as that peace comes in the form of ‘neighborhood justice’. Whose justice changes daily - sometimes by the hour in summer when temperature and tempers run high.

This isn’t the same, and it isn’t the Narrows. A man of means can get shit done in Metropolis. The Metropolis cops and mayor don’t have the heavy ties to corruption their counterparts in Gotham share - they’re barely corruptible. Bruce profiles them all, and all he finds is a wealth of petty misdemeanors, a handful of disorderly conduct, some unpaid parking tickets and a few battery charges from bar fights and the like. They’re not good people, not all of them - not by a landslide,
but they’re better people than Bruce would have assumed. Which is well and good in the larger picture, but means Bruce can’t bribe them. He has to give something, to get something.

The good thing about that is: everyone wants something.

Three days later, Bruce is the new owner of a particular stretch of residential real estate.

Clark is right; it’s unreasonably easy to find out ‘Kay Clark’s’ schedule, especially since the construction company he’s freelancing for belongs to a subsidiary of a Wayne-held business. Bruce fully intends to visit him again, as well as have a talk about what constitutes an actual alias. One day after that, Bruce makes another call. One that takes longer than he’s accounted for in his--not rush. His determination to outpace moon's fall of the city limits.

No answering machine. A landline? In greater-Metropolis? The phone rings on and on. Just as he’s recalculating, about to move to Plan C, the phone stops its incessant buzz in his ear.

“How, Bruce.”

It’s not at all shameful to feel relieved. “Well. Nice to be expected.”

“Unlisted number, middle of the night. Gotham area code.” Clark yawns in his ear pointedly. “Don’t know too many folks by that description.”

“You shouldn’t answer unknown callers,” Bruce says, head tilting into the rich timbre of the voice filling his car’s cabin. It’s a minor inconvenience, nothing to keep him from navigating the dark road and the shimmer of fluorescent paint ahead. “Never know who could be on the line. I could have been a bill collector.”

A breath, suspended before Clark breathes out. “Not likely, since I don’t have any bills but rent and nothing to pay em with if I did.”

*Ouch.* Direct hit.

Going nowhere quicker than anticipated. Time for a new approach.

“Dinner?”

A huff he’d know anywhere. “Bruce,” Clark draws his name out. “It’s three-fucking-A.M.”

“Breakfast, then. Your place.”

"Got no food," is the answer after a moment. "I don’t want to go out."

"So stay in bed," Bruce says, wheel turning in his grip as he veers onto the exit ramp. "I’ll bring that thing you eat from that place you like. You know the one."

Another, softer huff. "Anthony’s."

"Sure."

"It’s a family place, B. They sleep." Then the sound of old springs as Clark rolls on his dubious excuse for a mattress. "Wait a minute...are you driving?"

"Hrn," Bruce says.
"You are. Are you...driving here? Now?" The springs fairly shriek across the line at that.

With a slight smile, Bruce reaches for the console buttons. "Can't talk, traffic." The road ahead is clear and free.

"Bruce, wai—"

"See you in twenty." The click of the line drop when he presses the steering wheel is...refreshing.

“Nightbird. What is your purpose?”

“Main protocols: strategic invasive organism removal, assist Commander in reclamation of Kryptonian empirical space and holdings. Report to main battle force in the event of success. Report to main battle force in the event of failure. Maintain and preserve life-support, strength and comfort levels of passengers en route to location.”

A military AI, meant for massive-scale incursions. More than that—an AI programmed to call home, regardless of which direction a conflict ended. They didn’t trust their soldiers.

“When was such a report sent?”

The AI sounds hesitant when it replies. “Negative, Commander’s Chosen. Such a report was not sent.”

*Anthropomorphizing the computer does not help this situation.*

“Why?” Bruce waited. Whether speaking or mentally referring to the AI as personable helped or not, it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore what Bruce hypothesized were subroutines designed to put him—no, not him. Biological users, at ease. A fallacy, he knew. A trap.

“Possibility that culturally-deprived lost one would best General Zod in fair battle calculated at zero percent. Therefore, citizenship of Kal-El is unquestionable. Previous Galactic possession laws reinstated. The Claim is sound.”

*Claim? “Explain.”*

“One giga-rotation past, a colony scout ship belonging to the House of El, authorization Seg-El, filed a Planetary and System Claim to this sector. Kal-El was strong enough to repel the House of Zod’s trespassing. The Claim is sound. Kryptonian and Galactic Law is upheld. No further action is necessary.”

“Christ.” He holds his head in both hands. This is too much. It’s too damn much.

Because according to some however many millennia-long Galactic laws, some Galactic community, of which Earth is no part, Clark owns the planet.

And that’s not even counting the part about ‘invasive organism removal’.

“You do realize this is our planet, Nightbird.”

“According to Synod law, Earth is the property of the House of El,” Nightbird says, heuristics managing to sound both reprimanding and snotty at the same time. “Classification of human, homo
sapiens, changed to indigenous species by Kal-El upon assumption of planetary primacy. Sanctuary of indigenous species is the option and obligation of Kal-El alone.”

He doesn’t have time or the luxury of being insulted, though the concept alone makes Bruce want to destroy something. “You still have broadcast capability. You will send no messages, unless by the direct command of Kal-El or myself.”

“No messages will be sent except by direct command, unless otherwise specified by Kryptonian law.”

Bruce narrows his eyes at the placid high tone of agreement. “State the contingency.”

“Global catastrophe. Trade agreement request from ally of Kryptonian Empire. Colonial aid request.”

Now for the real test. “Do you accept my authority, Nightbird?”

“The Commander trusts his Chosen. The Commander accepts your authority. Authorization accepted.”

"Then you will not make any contact without explicit prior permission. You will inform,” he says clearly. “You will follow the chain of command.”

"This one will follow the chain of command."

Which answers another question Bruce hadn’t wanted to baldly ask. “Tell me about Kryptonian society. What isn’t in these files?”

“Unable to parse request. This one lacks sociology and base psychology modules for Kryptonian society.”

“I don’t need more numbers. Kryptonopolis. Give me facts.”

‘As the Commander’s Chosen wishes. Please specify a locus.”

“Military caste. Child rearing.”

“Young citizens are sent to be educated in the Halls of Rao, with others of their caste. This will form the attitude necessary for proper caste vows and their future work. They learn and explore with those who will form the nexus of their adult communications, as is just. Those entering the military caste are encouraged to bond with a helpmate, who will be crucial should both choose to undergo the Trial.”

“Explain the Trial.”

“Affirmative. Entry to operative service of those authorized to leave Krypton’s sphere is limited to military caste and colonial vehicles and passengers. In order to join operative military service, the Trial must be endured.” Nightbird is extemporizing, something the AI only does when the information is guaranteed to cause Bruce’s ire.

“Explain the Trial.”

“Two Cadets are to travail the wilderness. Oxygen is in short supply. The Trial is a cooperative endurance race, Chosen. Partners are selected from helpmate pairs and sent. When the pair reaches the checkpoint, and one of the pair returns with the token of strength, the Trial has been passed.”
“What is at the checkpoint?”

“Oxygen for the return journey, Chosen.” Then Nightbird pauses.

“How much oxygen?”

The answer comes slower than it should. “Oxygen enough for one with the will to live.”

So barely enough, then. *Fucking uncivilized.*

“Who retrieves the other child?”

"Some pairs fail the Trials, as they attempt to share the oxygen on the return journey. There is no child to be retrieved."

Nightbird gives a low dirge like tone.

"The helpmate left behind at the checkpoint? That child. Answer me. What happens to the other child?" Explosive, how the anger coils and shudders through him, filling him with a need to move, to attack, to *hit something.* He clenches a fist, slow and deliberate. Breathes through the fury.

"The unnamed who does not return is mourned. The Cadet who returns is elevated. All will mourn the loss. All will celebrate the ascension of new blood to the Ranks."

“What about the child’s parents?”

“There is no child within a Cadet. A Cadet has no parents save the Empire. House is secondary to duty. This is known, and just.”

"The pairs...They're helpmates, aren't they?" Not just murder, but cold-blooded murder of children, children who were *friends.* Forcing them to fight over oxygen, just to be allowed to fight older, harder soldiers. “They’re forced to kill their partners."

"Some fight. Some evade. Force is not required, though observation of Trials indicates swift death is merciful and often necessary. Action must be taken for the good of the Empire without regard to sentiment or personal gain. Order must be maintained. Obedience must be assured. Affirmative, Chosen."

“How old?" Bruce’s voice shakes, *Bruce* is shaking. “How *old* are they?"

“Cadets may be—”A short moment of calculation. “Between seven and twelve standard planetary rotations of Sol.”

“*Fuck.*” Bruce has made his mistakes but he's never been so cavalier with the young lives in his charge. He's never *thrown them away.* “So a child dies," he says. Do they know, he wonders, those children. *Do they know the price beforehand?* Surely not. "And you celebrate it."

“Negative. Once a vow is taken, there is no child. Success is expected. Celebration of an expected deed exhibits unseemly pride. Public mourning exhibits unseemly shame. All will mourn. All will rejoice. What other information may this one—“

It snarls out of him, the language coming to his tongue like poison.

“Zhao eworodh.” *<Be silent.>*

A subdued mid-tone ping—the deceptive sound of concern —rings into the stillness.
She picks up the phone the twelfth time he calls.

“Oh it’s you.”

*Flattering.* There doesn’t seem to be much need for the pleasantries. *Just as well.*

“I understand this comes as a surprise. I’d like to offer you an opportunity to work with the Planet again, Miss Lane.”

“Mr. Wayne,” she says. “I’m very happy where I am.”

Right, then. No need to soft-shoe it.

“I’ll double your salary,” A sharp inhale in his ears.

“This may come as a surprise to you, Bruce, but you can’t actually buy everyone.”

Apparently they’ve moved to a first name basis now. “Less of a surprise than you would think, Miss Lane.”

“Why, you arrogant—“

“Triple. And double overtime. I’m on a bit of a deadline.”

There’s silence on the other end, but he can hear the traffic from her side.

“I need an editor, Miss Lane,” Bruce says, tone even. “Lois. I’m told you’re the woman to call.”

“Triple my old salary, to restructure that brick? Ha!” Bruce smiles to himself as she continues. "I want double Perry’s salary, plus travel fees. I don’t ride coach, and I don’t write fluff-pieces.”

“All the perks,” he promises. "Alright.”

“And a new desk.”

“Of course. Not a problem.”

“And First class! Don’t you dare send Clark.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Bruce frowns down at his intercom, waiting for the coda.

“And a goddamn *apology.* Ahhh. There’s the hard-sell.

“Miss Lane—“

“Ah-ah!”

He pauses. Forces himself to smile so it can be heard in his voice, a cleansing faux-warmth that’s seldom failed him. Then he tries again.

“Lois. Please accept my sincere regret, for the… aggressive manner in which I’ve approached our interactions in the past.” Easy and calm, so placidly calm. Business, it’s just good business, is all. “I trust you won’t allow a few bad days on my part to stain any future working relationship we share?”
“That was almost an apology.” She hums to herself, though he can hear a thread of pleasure in her voice. “Alright then – I’ll buy it. You’ve got yourself a deal, Boss.”

Yes, a deal. And another soul under his direct guardianship. A pivotal one, perhaps.

The frown resurfaces. “I’ll make the arrangements. Thank you.”

~”Nobody can be exactly like me. Sometimes even I have trouble doing it.”~

—Tallulah Bankhead

In retrospect, it wasn’t the best thing to say to a man who was already leery of Bruce’s presence in his territory. But when Arthur’s patience breaks, it really is too good an opportunity to miss. True comedy is underrated, even out here at what feels like the edge of the world Bruce knows.

"There's a threat coming. I need warriors," Bruce says, desperation driving the truth out of him.

Arthur Curry laughs in his face. "You're out of your mind, Bruce Wayne."

"Maybe," he allows, the stinging saltfish and stone-dust high in his nose. "Maybe so. But I'm right."

Curry shakes his mop of hair with another laugh, walking away from him. Bruce paces him doggedly, ignoring everyone else—everything else in his path: the subzero temperature—

His paranoia—

The arid raw patches where salt-sea humidity and cold have worn away at exposed skin, his burning eyes, the fact that he’s been backtracking since before the sun touched the horizon—

His burning muscles—

Across what might as well be tundral frost this time of year, the fact that he could barely see straight before getting slammed into a vinegar-stained bar wall, and now—

His screaming, pounding skull—

Find us, Bruce! You have to find us!

Now he’s here, freezing again after the too-brief warmth of the tavern inn—and he hates the cold, he’s always hated the cold—and is doing his best just keeping up with this ‘Aquaman’ guy, this meta guy—who looks like he has a good twenty years of youth on Bruce, to begin with. The fact that he’s so far past tired, driven past exhaustion, so far past any tangible emotion other than nameless, indistinct dread.

Perhaps the reality—the one that he’s been working very hard to not acknowledge—is that chasing
around the world after people with incredible abilities and gifts has made him feel…

Incredibly human. Terribly small. Surrounded by predators.

The only way through it is to fight it, to savage that idea—that thought-process—down to the bones, and deeper if need be.

Someone has to measure up, someone has to show these metas that humans can and will take matters into their own hands, that humanity wasn’t a bunch of scared kids, alone and afraid in the dark. Weak, waiting for a savior. Unwilling to put blood on the line.

And by all that's holy if Bruce has to be the one...

Then he's ready to meet that challenge.

He’d never planned to live forever, anyway. This is how you play the Big Leagues.

This is how he—how all of them, will win.

If.

If—if—if—

He trails Curry down the frigid shore line, as the ground grows dank and slushy under his boots. "You know, Superman—he was by my side, on the battlefield in Gotham."

"Yeah," Curry says with an opaque look at Bruce. "And it got him killed. No thanks." He turns to face Bruce, dropping his heavy shoreman's coat to the wet stones. Lifts his arms to the brutal cold of incoming salt-spray like it’s a warm bosom. His muscles tense, and Bruce knows he has one last chance.

The words shouldn’t matter, the implication of his unworthiness of such a sacrifice shouldn’t cut him—Arthur is an unknown quantity, not even yet an ally, barely a probable soldier…

And still his words bite deep, his accusation no less than the one constantly resounding from the depths of Bruce.

"He's not—" bursts out of him. "He's not dead."

Curry pauses, one ear cocked to the ocean in a move that’s so achingly familiar it drives a shiver up Bruce’s spine.

“He’s alive.” He puts every ounce of sincerity in him into his words. “We can win this fight, Arthur—‘Yes, because thinking of him, talking to him as ‘Curry’ won’t work; call-names and secrecy and shadows won’t work, not for this. ‘Nobody has to die, on your side or mine.’ This time, he offers Curry nothing—not money, not goods, nothing but the truth.

“And how you figure that, Batman?” Arthur doesn’t take the leap backward Bruce could see him gearing up for. Instead, he drops his hands to his sides, and stares at Bruce with uncanny eyes.

“I’m putting together a team," Bruce says quietly. "Of superheroes."

Arthur’s laugh mixes into the roaring surf as if it echoes him instead of the other way round.

Bruce waits, watching his face as the ‘Aquaman’, someone with the reputation of a veritable sea-god, mocks him. All he sees is another young life, in his faltering hands.
"Superheroes," Arthur says with a touch of grudging respect. "My kinda’ crazy. You say he’s with you?" He rubs his chin and gives Bruce a nod. "We can talk..."

"Wha—Really?"

Curry shrugs. "But I still don't like you."

“Good enough,” Bruce gets out past his surprise, past his heart, racing now that the danger is past. No, not good—fucking fantastic.

He’d been convinced this wouldn’t work, that none of them could possibly see Bruce as an ally, as an equal. As a warrior. Apparently word got around, more so than Diana said.

*I may have Diana got around to get that word out.* Maybe. Maybe not. *Irrelevant, actually.*

Perhaps Alfred is right, and that perspective *does* have more to do with Bruce than the people he’s been pursuing.

Unfortunately, as Bruce knows all too well, events have a way of conspiring against him. So the next time he sees Clark isn’t in his run-down excuse for an apartment, or as Bruce has considered, a ‘spontaneous’ pickup from the current worksite after hours.

It’s on the battlefield, with the fate of the world in the balance, godforsaken insectile aliens buzzing around, terrorizing citizens and feeding on their fear—on *his* fear—and a ten foot tall circus act monologue-ing about how his time has come.

The sky is a deep sickly red, too much like the dream that won’t stop replaying in Bruce’s subconscious. Their enemy is at least as dangerous as the Kal from his dream.

Bruce is laughably outnumbered. Ludicrously, *disastrously* outmatched.

But this time, Bruce isn’t alone. The team... (*His* team?) —is with him. And this time, when he calls, Clark is there.

‘You have been drifting for so long, I know you don’t want to come down; Somewhere below you there’s people who love you, and they’re ready for you to come to, please come home.”

—*Sarah McLachlan*

“*There’s something else, though, isn’t there? Another reason you came?*"
They’re sitting, shoulder to shoulder, picking over the limp remains of the latest non-terrestrial HAZMAT report and Bruce’s sad WayneTech-cafeteria lunch salad, olive and vinegar-greased fingers and the snap of cucumber on Bruce’s tongue, when he feels Clark’s fingers against his and realizes.

This is the closest they’ve been physically since.

*Since. Since Bruce, as Dick so eloquently expressed, *fucked up.*

Clark’s touch lingers. “Don’t tell me you came all this way just to watch me eat your salad, Bruce.” His expression and delivery are smooth, but that glint in his eyes…

“Hm.” *He’s playing, coming on to me.* No. *No, not conclusive.* He isn’t. He can’t be, because Bruce isn’t prepared for the scything knowledge that Clark knows, that he will know every unhindered emotion in Bruce’s head and heart.

He keeps silent, because he’s also made promises—to himself, and in the privacy of his own mind, to Clark, to *Kal.* He isn’t making the first move, isn’t initiating anything more than he’s gotten agreement for. Bruce certainly isn’t getting his salad eaten today or any other day in the near future, as far as he can tell.

Even as he’s opening his mouth to answer, Bruce starts thinking the old way. He’s thinking not ‘what is the truest thing I could say’, but ‘what is the response most likely to achieve my goals’. He starts thinking about what response will be *best received* instead of what response is most honest. He knows, looking at that tired face, those too-perceptive eyes on him, that it would be exactly the wrong thing to say to Clark.

He sips his water instead, to buy a few more seconds.

Clark’s expression falters, his brows drawing together slightly. “Bruce?” His fingers slide away, and with a soft exhale, he lifts a curl of endive to his lips and nibbles at it hastily, avoiding Bruce’s gaze.

*Shit.*

A pang in Bruce’s stomach at that, because he’s ruining things again. There *is* another reason he’s here, and yet it has nothing to do with why he’s here at all. It’s a sure bet Clark means something different though, and Bruce isn’t ready for that yet.

“I didn’t come to talk about anything else,” he says. “Except maybe this travesty of a meal.”

“So there *is* another thing.” Clark sighs and looks aside. Bruce waits.


He almost says it, almost tells Clark about the troubles in-city, the fucking nightmares, the sense of impending danger and his efforts to secure what by all rights is *Clark’s* inheritance (poor as it is) from Krypton. He almost spills it all right there, and that isn’t half as upsetting as realizing that he wants to tell Clark—he wants to tell him all of it. Everything.

“I…” Bruce stops. “No. I’m handling it. There is no thing.” He’s tense, on the edge of escape. Hoping Clark will keep speaking, hoping he can pretend for just another span of breaths.

“There is *one* thing...” Clark says, words tentative, voice in the grip of strong emotion. He makes a
face at the bit of green between his fingers. “What is this?”

Bruce focuses on the frond waving in front of him. “Arugula.”

“And this?” Another leaf appears between his fingers beside the first.

Humming, Bruce gives it a thoughtful look. “Dandelion.”

“Right. That explains it.” Regretfully, Clark sets the leaves back down in the container. ”Would you still like to actually have dinner?”

Bruce shelves thinking about botanical greens and starts paying very close attention. “Yes.”

“A real dinner? With me?” His expression lightens; sky eyes smile at Bruce.

“Who else?” Bruce says, in his most leisurely tone. “No time like the present.”

The smile spreads to Clark’s lips. “Only it’s early yet. For...for dinner.”

“Nonsense. Never too early.” Bruce shrugs in an easy looking, practiced movement. “You want dinner, that’s what we’ll get.” Forward momentum has always been easier for him than meandering.

With a small shake of his head, Clark laughs. “Not gonna lie - I’d like that.”

Bruce smiles, then. The air brightens; the room shifts and all the angles, all the lines point to now. To Clark.

“Capital.”

"I don't want you talking about my place like its trash."

“Done.”

“And what about the expensive gifts? The clothes and the flowers and all that?”

“What about them?”

“I’m just… I know you're used to these things, but I'm not comfortable owing you—”

“This is what I have, Clark. If it’s not good enough or genuine enough or... mundane enough for your sensibilities, I won’t apologize for it. Get comfortable. Freely given, Kansas. You don't owe me a thing.”

Clark's dubious silence is it's own answer.

“What would it please Commander’s Chosen to learn today?”

Bruce grunts at the unasked-for title, but glaring at a computer bank when he hasn’t given the AI permission or the equipment to form a full presence is a waste of time and energy at best, and makes him feel like a spiteful child at worst. “Nothing.” You don’t tell me anything useful, anyway. His head is pounding.
“Shall I tell of the Commander’s house, the House of El?”

He’d asked before, and been told that information, as all information concerning the high houses, was only available to the Commander or those entrusted by him. This was new. His thoughts swirl; what does this mean? What does it mean now?

Nightbird makes an amused-sounding trill at his silence. Bruce looks up from his numb stare at the keyboard.

“Teach me about the house of El.”

“The House of El is one of the High Houses of Kryptonopolis. Their genetic specializations include scientific leadership, far-colony educational administration and scholastic progress.”

“So they were rulers.”

“The House of El has always stood beside Synod rulership, though only for a short time as First House.”

He’s heard that twist before. Beside, behind, endorsed, backed. It’s all the same damn thing.

“Els have traditionally held no interest in higher levels of administration of such,” Nightbird continues. “Their primary house virtues are Industriousness, Hope and Truth.”

“You haven’t released this information before. Never mentioned their ties to leadership. Why tell me now?”

“The Commander is not crèche-born. He is—” Here the AI said a word that sounded like ‘different’, but had obvious denigrating declension tones. Kal’s house-name was a part of it, but the rest…

Part of it sounds a bit like ‘hope’, too much like ‘lie’ and the part that doesn’t is far too close to ‘copy’ for Bruce’s taste. His mouth turns down.

“Don’t ever call him that again. As a matter of fact, don’t ever use that word again. Continue data relay.”

“Command confirmed. Nonstandard military crèche disambiguation will not be used by this Monitor again. Kal-El was not adjusted according to Genetic Decency codes, however, he is still a product of the Van and El neurotype.”

Van… obviously a title or more likely a House signifier. Which meant an indication of particular genetic changes to achieve some desired result. A line. “Explain.”

“The El line has an abundance of empathy, curiosity and intellect. These traits were considered best suited to the scientific mind. Best unfettered, they do not bend to convention, nor have they ever. They require external stabilization to exceed base parameters. As such, they are susceptible to heightened emotional states which are detrimental to Kryptonian ascension.

“As a result of these traits, the Els have been responsible for multiple planetary-systemic societal changes to structural power. Analysis indicates a lack of concern for authority and hierarchy implicit in the line. This trait was not encouraged by Synod, but was historically utilized for expressions of analysis and curiosity in the formation of the House of El.”

She cannot be saying what it seems she is. Planetary-systemic societal changes? She means
rebellions. Planet-wide rebellions. Revolutions. She can’t be telling Bruce that Clark, even by Kryptonians standards is—

“Are you saying the Els were unstable by design?”

“Many were the times rival houses sought to exterminate the El line, for these and other less rational reasons. Safeguards to quell the more insufficient emanations of genetic purity were necessary. The Els were not the only House affected by unexpected symptomia. However this trait has been accepted socially as a true indication of El genetics.”

“You mentioned the, the house of Van.”

“The house of Van, the silent house. The watchers, the speakers. Phenotyped for accelerated organizational ability and their talent for soothing the emotional distress induced by genetic overload. Assigned to Jor-El. A good match.”

“So Clark...Kal. Would have been bound to a Van.”

“Negative, Chosen. The child of Jor-El and Lara Lor-Van was assigned to be matched to former Commander, Dru-Zod. Had Dru-Zod fallen in battle or duel, Kal-El would have been bound to another suitable match of House Zod.”

It take a moment to realize that his hand hurts because he’s gripping the edge of the console.

“Zod was insane.”

“Unlikely, though a temporary probability. Primary genetic compatibility at ninety-eight percent. Percentage of certainty that primary socially maladjusted traits will balance out: ninety-nine percent. Military crèche raised citizens respond to emotional stress with predictable aggression, Chosen. Loss of compatriots, overwhelming grief or bloodsworn vows often triggers asocial conduct in military crèche citizens. Battle madness is a standard concern. There is also the matter of elevated fight/flight neurotransmitters and a markedly depressed empathy center. This was mitigated as well, by successful giga-generations of social conditioning.”

“So he tried to kill us all out of jealousy? Your definition of success and mine are very different.”


He hadn’t expected even that much, but it’s a good reminder to be careful how he phrases his questions… and his responses. Bruce thinks for a moment. This… is an unnecessary distraction, an unnecessary burden.

He can carry this knowledge, this weight, if he has to.

Clark doesn’t have to. Clark can do without it.

“Nightbird, is it possible for information to be removed from your memory crystals?”

The answer comes slowly, which for this AI, means reluctantly.

“Confirmed, Chosen. Information can be both removed and deleted from permanent Monitor memory.”

“Copy all of the information concerning Kal-El’s genotype and Dru-Zod’s ‘assignments’ to the file vault. Lock it with this sequence,” he says, tapping the keys. “And then forget the information
concerning Kal-El and Dru-Zod’s ‘assignment’. This conversation never happened.” He waits another moment.

“Have you deleted the information?”

“Confirmed. A deletion is logged, Chosen.”

“Specify information deleted.”

“Chosen, there is no record of any information loss,” Nightbird chirps warmly. “Two minutes, thirty-nine seconds unaccounted for in base time log. System diagnostics advised. Would you like to restate your query?”

Bruce presses his fingers together, pad to pad, and stares at the monitor screen. “Good. No diagnostic. Teach me about Kryptonopolis mating culture.”

The string of robberies and incidents of randomized crime continue. And Bruce is at his wits end, when Tim comes down, munching an apple and reading a pamphlet from in town. He slides the pamphlet onto Bruce’s Ops desk and sits cautiously on the edge of what’s always been—what used to be—Robin’s chair. Bruce glances over briefly.

“A Parks and Recreation flyer?” He looks back to his monitor with a neutral grunt.

“It’s not random.”

Bruce looks up.

Encouraged, Tim points to the monthly activities header. “Music festival. Some out of town band. *Same* band—”

Bruce’s eyebrows go up. “Same nights. A machine perhaps. Hm, yes or something in the smoke.”

“They could just be that good, B.”

“Music doesn’t cause crime, Tim.” Bruce scans the pamphlet once more.

**Flannel, now playing LIVE at the OldG Cinema!**

“Not with a name like that.”

“No.” Tim stares at the paper. “But maybe…” He looks up, thinking. “Worth investigating.”

The next free festival concert is in a few nights. And, yes, *just maybe*; they’ve dealt with stranger. And there are no other correlations in the dataset. Once one eliminates the known from an unfinished equation, one must then move to eliminating the *unknown.*

“Yes, cover band. Good work.” Then in a burst of nerves that comes out nonchalant, Bruce adds, “Stay sharp, Robin.”

He ignores Tim’s stare and subsequent grin—Tim’s smiles are more defensive than indicative of
positive emotional content. But he doesn’t move away when Tim brushes their shoulders together. They stand, side by side.

Bruce is hit with a pang of regret so deep, he shifts with it, rests his hand on the console, leaning into the monitor to mask the slip. He regrets not taking the opportunity to train Tim. He regrets seeing Tim as a nuisance, as an interloper in Bruce’s dedication to mourning. He does not, thankfully, regret sending Tim to Nightwing. Bruce had been in no condition to teach, after.

After.

If not for Nightwing… if not for Dick, Red Robin could have been another stain on Bruce’s hands, another mistake. Another life he can’t give back. Dick… well, when Bruce thought about it, Dick had saved the both of them, he and Tim.

He’s done a good job.

“Too bad it is another crappy cover band, right?” Tim says after a flicker of a glance at Bruce’s hand on the smooth console. “You know Lincoln Park played Metropolis Dome last year?”

“Hrn. One band, another band—” Bruce moves, pushing away sentiment to lean back and fold his arms. “In the end, Tim, it doesn’t really matter.”

Tim stops, and turns fully to face Bruce. “Okay, I give. You’re in a good mood tonight,” he says skeptically.

“Am I.” Bruce hums to himself. “Hm. You take point.”

He is in a good mood.

~”Wish I’d known what you were looking for, Might have known what you would find.”~ —The Church

Bruce blinks his eyes open to vivid, differentiated green. Grass, grass so achingly green he’s never seen its like before. The knowledge snaps home, solidifies as he pushes to his hands and knees. He raises his head to a riot of cornflower blue and neon pink winding sky. Ribbons of wisps, high above. Stands to sunlight thick golden, sweet as warmed sap on his skin, eyes wide.

This is Kansas.

I’m dreaming. This has never been Kansas. Because even as much fond as Bruce is of it, he can’t recall seeing it this way. Eddies in the air, subtle ripples leading out and back towards Bruce, air crystalline, shimmering clouds of matter hung viscid, clinging, shining, like paramecium caught in a drop of water.

“Huh,” comes from his left. Bruce turns his head for a flicker of eternity that shreds into instantaneous motion. Clark looks at him expectantly in the bright glow from above, then a surprised smile curves his lips. “Well that’s a nice change.”

He has better things to be doing with his mental resources, to be sleeping when he’s supposed to be
skimming, meditating, and planning. Preparing. This though—this isn’t any part of his own consciousness Bruce recognizes. He should wake up. Get back to work; people are depending on him. All it would take is allowing himself to relax, to knowingly forget, to accept…

“Hey,” Dream Clark says, warmth in every syllable. “Look up.”

Bruce raises his eyes to see blue-pink-orange open to black, to light, to—

Light. A beautiful truth, the light. Blinding, lancing life, winding flares of star-plasma, dizzying speed. Consciousness, whispers of civilization, a scintillating ouroboros of shattered light as far—no, farther than he can see, the whole of it churning and fluid. Every drop of radiance magnified a thousand-fold, until Bruce thinks he’ll disintegrate, burn away—

“It hits me that way, too.” A fond, slightly smug chuckle from his side. A warm pressure, all along his forearm. “I hope you come back, Bruce.”

Bruce opens his eyes.

What the hell?

Darkness. Silence. Outside his window, the wind chatters through the oaks.
Bruce learns quickly. Clark won't let him buy furniture for his trash-fire of an apartment, but if Bruce brings in lumber and power tools and makes him simple, clean furniture—actions speak louder than words. There is no argument, no long-suffering side-eye.

Clark values Bruce's *time investment* more than the materials. He values the thought more than the outcome. It's a country appreciation for home-made things with love.

Clark would be furious if B hires staff to rip up the old carpet and put in expensive hardwood... But when Bruce breaks in with a crew while he’s out, to rip up the old carpet, they leave him alone after.

Of course none of it would be possible without written, notarized permission from the owner, and lawfully—*normally*—the tenant must be present to provide written authorization of said work. Thankfully Bruce happens to know a few people who know a few people. It's the work of a light afternoon to purchase the property, acquiring half the block and a couple hundred very in-need tenants.

Honestly, for Bruce it *is* more expensive to dedicate the time to it than to hire a crew to get it done in one hour. Bruce is not stupid. Clark’s neighbors won't see the work crew ripping things up and carrying them down the back terrace steps, so that's a nice little shortcut. Though being Clark Kent, the man definitely notices the alacrity and efficiency Bruce utilizes to get the job done.

It makes more sense to do the floors first while the apartment’s mostly empty.

Clark enters his empty apartment to find Bruce, grimly putting in Ikea wood laminate flooring, doing his best to pretend the patterns are an elaborate puzzle. It’s a terrible position to be found in, but Clark seems to find nothing strange in seeing Bruce elbow-deep in materials. He hums to himself, hovers a moment over Bruce’s shoulder, then there’s a light gossamer touch to Bruce’s shoulder. When he turns, Clark is gone, but the shower is running in the back. Bruce is left to his own devices, and he gains strength from that.

He finishes half the floor that night, the remainder in the morning after a stiff fortification of real coffee. From the new coffeepot that had mysteriously appeared on the counter with Bruce the morning before.

It goes on this way for weeks: Bruce makes it a custom to never come to Clark empty-handed. He brings small gifts, and the odd larger piece. Furniture from an old warehouse on Wayne lands. A coffee grinder. The leatherbound ottoman from Bruce’s study. Wind-worn pebbles from the shore. A bookcase that used to sit in the corner of the cave. Another day, two pounds of premium roasted beans. An old set of matched side-tables that used to belong to Bruce’s maternal grandfather. A vase the exact same pretty yellow as the nut bowl on Martha’s table. The floor lamp that used to sit beside a cot, for when one of the Robins was laid up but still wanted to be kept in the loop on comms. A chipped Batman mug, from the lakehouse.

Somehow, despite Bruce's hand-waving, Clark sees these things as meaningful.

“A glowing ember, burning hot and burning slow; I do what I have to do.”

—Sarah McLachlan
“I am capable of apologizing.”

Clark meets Bruce’s eyes. “I’m listening, and you haven’t yet.”

“Clark.”

“Bruce.”

Bruce says nothing for a moment, then he muses, “She did warn me.” At the expectant glance Clark shoots him, he gives an ill-fitting shrug. “It is uncanny how like your mother you are.”

Heat rushes to Clark’s face. His eyes soften slightly even as his lips twist into an unwilling smile. “Still not an apology, but better than nothing.”

Bruce has never been anything but an all-or-nothing man. He knows it, and anyone who’s spent any length of time with him has learned it as well. He is selfish and territorial. As tight-fisted with his inner self as he is gregarious with his facades.

He tries to show emotion, but all his masks fail him. He… he can’t do it. Bruce can feel the moment slipping away.

“You hurt me,” Clark says, quieter, the words dropping between them heavier than Bruce’s armor. “More than.” His voice drops. “You hurt me, Bruce.” His tongue darts out, licking at his dry lips as he stares into Bruce’s eyes. He shakes his head slightly.

“I want… us to be.” The ‘but’ hangs there sadly, waiting for Clark to give voice to it.

He doesn’t.

Instead Clark squares his shoulders and raises his chin. “All I’ve ever wanted was to be able to live my truth. You gave that clarity to me, at your feet, under your blindfold— and then you took it away.”

“Kansas.” It falls in a hush from Bruce, as his chest constricts.

“Don’t call me pet names if you don’t mean them,” Clark says, his gaze acquiring a hardness that’s reflected in his tone of voice. “Don’t treat me like something precious if I’m not. Don’t fuck with my head anymore.” Evident in the way Clark is holding himself tightly, in the way his hands shake, what he means is ‘Don’t fuck with my heart’.

Don’t be so hard, Bruce. Don’t be so cold.

Don’t hurt me.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t repeat my mistakes,” Bruce’s tone is encouraging. He knows he’s done wrong. He knows what the correct response is, what it should mean. These are all goals Bruce can achieve, with proper forethought. “What else, Kansas?” I do mean it.

The use of his favored nickname doesn’t go unnoticed. Clark’s shoulders shake for a moment, his head lowers, the laserlike focus of his gaze finally broken. Acceptance, on however superficial a level.
“Don’t make me care,” he whispers, sounding defeated. “Not for nothing. Not when you can just
turn around and be so vicious. I mean—” He gestures to himself. “Is that all you see? All I am, to
you? A set of experiments, a living toy, someone— some thing to play with?”

I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Bruce lets his eyes close for half a second that feels too long.
Christ. Christ, what have I done?

“No.” It falls heavily from Bruce, a scorch-marked plate of armor over his heart.

“Did you ever need me at all?” Clark’s voice is harsh, hoarse as if he’s been screaming. “Or did
you just need me at your feet? Is that it? You just need Superman to kneel for you, you need to
feel better than me—” He throws himself angrily to his knees and begins to lower his head to the
ground. Not only laying his body but his emotions and heart and Bruce’s feet now, within the
power exchange.

Bruce doesn’t miss it.

He catches Clark’s upper arm, halting him. “No, I never—” His voice is stronger than it has any
right to be. He’s no longer allowed to argue, not while taking the power in this exchange. Not
while Clark is kneeling to him. “It’s not true.” He can’t let it be true.

This has to be corrected— cannot be left to stand, not if they’re to have a damn chance in hell. A
chance to live as one, even if mortality will inevitably make them part ways. Who has Bruce been
trying to fool? Even a chance at a fraction of Clark’s life, a fraction of life with Clark, is worth the
pain it will most definitely bring.

“I needed you. I need you. I do care.” Bruce says again, the words razors on his tongue. He should
have said this, so much more than this, long ago. Baring himself now is agonizingly inadequate.
“I’m just... Not adept at... Wearing my own emotions. I was—” Weak. “Not strong enough to be
open, Clark. That’s on me, not you. It was never on you.” He speaks quickly, ripping through the
pain as efficiently as he can and as sincerely as he knows how. "I have never thought you lesser
than me. I don't want you subjugated at my feet; I want you close to keep you safe. You, not
Superman. What makes you invaluable to me, is you—not your superpowers, not your healing
abilities. What makes me feel powerful... At least it did when I had it, was your trust." Bruce
blinks, finding his eyelashes unaccountably wet. “Your regard.”

Never let it be said that Batman was incapable of pulling out his own bullets.

“Don’t lie to me anymore, Bruce, please,” Clark says tiredly, arm still held in Bruce’s grip. “Don't
you know that it—?” His face twists in something very like nausea. Like pain. “I hate it,” Clark
confesses. “I hate it every time, and I feel it. Every. Damn. Time.”

“I’m not lying. This is me being fully honest. What do you need to believe me, Clark?” Now it’s
Bruce that has laid his heart bare only to have it thrown in his face. He’s been judged and found
wanting—and it fucking burns to know he deserves this. “I did not expect Superman to ever end up
in my bed. I didn’t scheme and plot to have him over my knee. I rescued a colleague who had
earned my loyalty—a hero who deserved my respect, a veteran who needed respite.” Bruce lets go
of Clark’s arm and rubs his hand up over his mouth, lips pressing tight enough to be bloodless,
before he tries one more time. “I did not expect you in my bed, either, Kansas. But it was you that I
trusted enough to invite so close.”

What should Bruce admit, that the house is so fucking empty without his presence it’s like torture?
Like slow poison that fogs Bruce’s thoughts and processes until he wants to rip the tender, aching
thing inside him to pieces? He hadn’t intended it to be this way, for either of them to need.
“I don’t— I don’t want to believe you,” Clark gasps.

“But do you?” Bruce’s tone is curt—dominant and done with dancing.

“You expect me to believe you want me now?”

“I expect you to answer my question, Kansas.” Reinforce the dynamic. Give Clark a soft place to land.


But Clark doesn’t want to. He has to, by virtue of his singular neurology.

Bruce steps back, in an attempt to get a hold of himself.

He tallies his sins, and they are numerous. So numerous. He should have known all of this. He should have known before touching Clark what he’d be offering. He should have known how Clark would take his attention after watching him be dead to the world in the aftermath of Lois. Bruce should have known what Clark needed most was self-belief— god, he’d read the man’s journals, seen the doubt and the fear, the bleak resignation. He should have known Clark would run. He should have known chasing Clark would result in this— a blast furnace, scorching the both of them.

Bruce wants Clark almost any way he can have him, and it aches that it took this much for him to realize. If only I’d paid more attention, if only I’d been more cautious—

He can’t say those words, not now while the failure still thrums through him, fresh and cutting. Even for Bruce, especially for Bruce, it’s too much. He takes a step forward, pulling Clark upward.

This is my fault.

“You are who I wanted, who I still want,” he says instead. My Kansas. “You.” Fuck, he wants so much. He hopes Clark is open to him, almost as much as he hopes he isn’t. The ugliness roiling inside Bruce—Clark doesn’t see it, doesn’t deserve to be exposed to it. Bruce can see it now, though. That same darkness, the same self-loathing reflected in Clark’s eyes.

Had Bruce fallen in love with fear, too, in his quest to feel? Fallen for the rush, the power…without stopping to consider if that power was given or taken? Here, now, Clark Kent— his Clark—is near to breaking, begging him for a reason for hope. For a reason to believe.

In Bruce.

He has worn Clark down, pitiless wind against porous stone. Wearing and carving him down just like he has everyone else in his life. Compartmentalizing him.

He shouldn’t be doing this. Shouldn’t be trying to convince Clark they should be an ‘us’. Shouldn’t let the long-petrified organ that was his heart hope for better than the bitterness of regret.

It’s terrible. Terrible to want this much. To need this much. To see this much naked emotion. Unacceptable.

Bruce is walking blind, the morass of tension and emotional demand a deluge to his senses. The drive to fix what he’s broken.

I have to. I have to do something.
He has to what? Bruce has to...what does he—

“-Zhalishodh khahp, Kal-El.” Forgive me.

The words come hard, but it’s not the language choking Bruce this time. It’s what goes unstated under his words. The potential. The meaning. The truth given voice. The blade to cut Bruce down handed over, just that simply. All it takes is one word.

He can’t quite bring himself to look at Clark.

Instead, Bruce blinks and fixes his gaze on Clark’s mouth. No, he can’t make himself watch the rejection, but he can do Clark the courtesy of hearing it.

A caught breath, a blur too close, too fast to defend against. Reflexively Bruce’s hands come up.

But the blow, when it comes, lands gently.

The cut is just as sharp—just as deep as a razorblade—the keen absence of expected pain, the knowledge that he’s been hit.

“Bruce…” Clark in his arms, shuddering as his bare hand finally touches the skin of Bruce’s nape. Bruce’s muscles tense, his body ready to shift… He exhales, willing himself to relax. Lets himself feel the scratch of stubble against his cheek. The dual-edged sword of Clark, his body giving forgiveness that his mouth conspicuously doesn’t utter.

Clark is silent, pressed tight to Bruce, the double layer of fabric between them unable to mask the solid thump of Clark’s heart against Bruce’s own. Slowly, then with more confidence, Bruce tightens his arms. Clark’s only reaction is to bury his face in the side of Bruce’s neck, breath heated against him. A soundless tremor runs through Clark.

Maybe Bruce has finally said enough.

“I’m going to need a safeword, Clark. Your safeword.”

“Oh? What’s wrong with the…” Clark stops himself, adjusts the metal plate he’s holding in place, frowns then starts again. “Is the system we have now not working?”

Good. Bruce lets his approval be heard. “It works fine.”

“Hm. Then why—”

Bruce stops him this time. “Because you like to beg. And I like to listen. The system isn’t complex enough.” The corner of his mouth quirks up as Clark watches. “Pearl, “ he says quietly.

“B?”

“Eyes on deck.” Bruce doesn’t look to see the reaction, but he feels the stillness, the attention, at his side. “Pass the spectroscope.”

“‘Hope’,” Clark says, just as quietly, beside him. “It’s ‘hope’.”

Bruce nods, pleased, and keeps his eyes on the joint he’s welding. It’s not a surprise.

“I guess I thought yours would be something dangerous like ‘justice.’” Clark laughs to himself.
“Nothing safe about ‘hope’,” Bruce says lightly.

~”Let all the ashes fall to the floor; Once you have it all you still want more
Take my innocence away. Would they even notice either way?”~

—October Fall

“You’re sure about this.” Bruce pauses, one palm pressed to the print-sensor, head bowed.

“I’m sure.” Clark doesn’t flinch when Bruce lays a hand on his arm.

“What’s your safeword, Kansas?”

“Hope.”

The door opens.

“And if you can’t speak?”

“Two taps.” He shivers under Bruce’s hand. “I’m sure.”

The wet shine, warm and slippery-slick on Clark’s lower lip. The flick of Clark’s tongue, hot, buzzing on the underside of Bruce’s cock.

"Fuck!” Bruce breathes in hard through his nose.

Clark’s eyes flick up to his, amused, before closing again. Hypnotic, when his spit-shined lips slide up the shaft.

“Again. Slower.”

Mesmerizing, how Clark turns his head to give chase when Bruce flexes, mouth open and greedy.

The surge of pleasure when Clark sucks him in is sharp enough to drive an appreciative moan out of him.

“Ah…good. That’s good.”

His hand clenches in Clark's hair. Once. Just one slip.

No. He hasn’t asked, hasn’t demanded that yet, and Bruce has no intention of doing so. Not in this room, not without permission. Taking a deeper breath, Bruce releases the strands between his fingers.

Clark’s hand moves from his waist to cover his, mouth still busily working. Kal draws his hand back to where it was, pressing his palm to the curve of Clark’s skull as he moves. A wet, maddening slurp, and Kal lifts his head.

“It’s okay, Bruce. Show me?” And he grins, licks and sucks sweetly at the head of Bruce’s cock. Whispers, low, “I want you to .”
The hair in Bruce’s hand pulls taut when he twists. Under his wrist, Clark’s neck arches back, he pants irregularly, eyes already heavy-lidded and inviting. His tongue flicks out against his lower lip—a pink flag waving in Bruce’s sightline.

Possibility coalesces into certainty. Brue gives a solemn nod. “Remember your signals.”

He reaches down with his other hand, grips himself and aims for that plush target. Sees Kal’s eyes widen for half a second before they close and his jaw relaxes. Lips soft and slick as oiled neoprene. Smooth silken heat—Clark taking Bruce into the furnace of his mouth, onto his tongue, with the rapt expression of a parishioner taking his first holy wafer.

A low vibration sizzles through his cock straight to his lower processing, making sweat jump to his brow. Bruce’s lip curls up, an involuntary sneer surfacing as Clark’s moan garbles into incoherence around the thick length sliding further between his lips.

Clark’s eyelids flutter; his fingers dig and release on Bruce’s waistline, then as Bruce’s tempo increases ruthlessly, his hands fall, gripping and tugging at Bruce’s trouser-leg. Fluttering hands, like lost birds, batting at Bruce without rhythm—not a signal, a surrender.

“I told you what I’d want, the next time we crossed that threshold.”

Clark goes under fast, one moment gripping at Bruce fitfully and the next his head lax in Bruce’s hold. His hands go loose, fingers curled on his thighs.

Bruce lets himself go.

Through slitted eyes, he watches as Clark’s wet O of a mouth widens around him. Watches as Clark gulps and swallows frantically, choking on him. Pulls him up, only to force him back down, further. Further.

“Go on. Get down there.” Bruce’s command is backed by the low growl in his voice.

Clark whines then, cheeks drawn in as he tries to suck the length before he pushes himself down. He’s messy and green and utterly perfect, saliva running in a long string from his mouth to bathe Bruce’s balls in sunshine warmth.

His back arches when Bruce guides him down, muscles in his throat spasming around Bruce’s cock when his lips bury in the well-trimmed thatch of Bruce’s hair. And Bruce holds him there, crimson light shining down on them both, making Clark’s hair look liquid as Bruce wraps his fingers in the coils.

“Stay.”

Delicious, how fragile Clark is this way, how eager to please, how fucking decadent it is for Bruce to bury himself in that questioning mouth. Stop up that indefatigable throat with his own flesh and feel Clark’s tongue trembling to take him.

Bruce pulls him up for a sharp gasping breath, then guides that mouth right back to where he wants it. There will be a thin ropeburn later, on his hand, but right now Bruce doesn’t care.

“Down.” Clark obeys, pliant limbs at rest on his lap as his mouth busily works Bruce’s shaft before he’s once again swallowing, working his way down with muffled little grunts until his lips seal against the base of Bruce’s cock again.
Bruce closes his hands over firm muscle and warm skin. Feels Kal buck beneath him when he drives forward.

“Where are you goin’, kid?” Gets his fingers hooked in the bend of Kal’s hips and drags them back up where Bruce wants him.

"You just can’t get enough cock, can you, Kansas? You'd ride this all day if you could. So fucking tight, can’t live without my dick in you. Just a hot sweet hole waiting to get fucked."

He bares his teeth in a grin at the huffed laugh that squeaks out of Clark amidst the muffled whines, hips driving forward in retaliation. Heart soaring with the knowledge that finally, Clark is paying attention.

Plateau.

Clark, tight and summer-hot on him, fucking incredible, astoundingly good. A shock to a system too accustomed to pain of late, to punishing physical routines and workout regimens.

All Bruce wants, all he can want, is to spill himself into this welcoming body, to lose himself, to sink down and meld into Clark until they can’t ever be separated.

It’s all he wants in this moment, tingling at the tips of his extremities and the back of his skull, thick on the flat of his tongue and... through some confluence of shame and desire, through some damned malfunctioning neuron or nerve... he can’t.

Exhaling shakily, Bruce thruts slightly, hips canting for the perfect angle, and stills again in frustration.

He can’t go forward, can’t go back. Muscles trembling, on the cusp for too long. He's going to shame himself... Goddammit, and Bruce struggles to breathe, to focus, to let himself fall—

He’s going to give himself a fucking coronary at this rate.

He can’t let go. He can’t do this—it’s too much. Too much to ask, too much to have.

Too much to owe, to a universe that’s done nothing but test and test Bruce’s willpower.

“As long as it takes,” Clark breathes into the miasma of heat and rushed oxygen and doubt. “It’s okay, Bruce.” Clark’s words are a moaned breath, panted out through wracking shudders.

His words spear Bruce, his tone bleeding warmth and affection through Bruce’s chest. Things Bruce wants so badly he can taste them, and maybe there is something to transference empathy, because Bruce is so hungry. He’s starving, for this. Ravenous for this connection, flesh on flesh, breath to breath, second to second wearing him down from the arching panoply of what makes a Wayne—what makes Bruce—

He thrusts forward again, Clark’s death-grip on his arms shifting, sliding around him as Clark raises his hips, driving Bruce deeper. Deeper.

“I’m right here,” Clark says, ribs heaving like forge bellows under Bruce. “I’m with you. I’m not going anywhere.” His hands sweep up Bruce’s neck, turning spasm to liquid flight. Warm and large, those hands, capable of feats of wonder—the restrained tenderness in the gesture apparent even here under the glow of a red sun. Newly swollen lips press to Bruce’s bicep, trail sloppily to
his neck, his jaw. Making Bruce feel breakable, invincible. Making Bruce—

Making Bruce.

“You feel.” Clark sighs in his ear. “Unbelievable.” Fingers drift across the hairs at the back of his neck, a soothing counterpart to the wretched pounding of his heart and lungs, the ache of tension behind his eyes.

He presses his forehead into Clark’s shoulder, rides out an abdominal cramp and pushes back against the promise of relief. “Kansas,” emerges as a croak. He can’t, he can’t. He doesn’t want this to end.

“Yeah… come on, B,” Clark pants, hips twisting upward. “I’m ready for you… just for you.”

Just for me.

“Fuck—” he chokes out. Don’t give me this. Don’t give me this and then take it away.

Kal’s hands, massaging locked tendons and obstinate muscles.

“I’ve got you, I got you sweetheart, I promise, it’s okay, nahn khuuhp rraotiv , : zhaote , you feel so good, shhh—”

The Kryptonian words break him—fucking ruin him, for anyone or anything else.

< I am yours, my love >.

Greed and fire, pouring through synapses and sinking into his bones. Damp heat leaping to his eyes. Bruce’s heart seizes. His thighs tremble, muscles jumping under his skin. He gasps once, wetly against the column of smooth throat, hips bucking, pinioned by foreboding and his own damnable self-indulgence, fighting the edge and then—

“Clark —” My Darling.

With a low, helpless groan, Bruce lets go.

Falls into flames, exposed—heart pounding into his skull and out of his chest in blinding dusk, grinding through his release in the blinding light of a crimson star. Falls, moaning languidly, with abandon, into Clark’s mouth; cushioned by soft words, sweet lips and the unassailably vulnerable fortress of his beloved’s arms.

A silence composed of tandem breaths and lazy kisses. Shifting warmth, red-tint behind his eyelids and easy caresses.

"Please tell me you’re not dead," Clark says somewhere from the vicinity of Bruce’s collarbone, sounding amused. "Because that would be really hard to explain."

"No…” He rouses enough to push words out of a chest compressed by two hundred-odd pounds of Kansas beef. “I’m definitely dead.”

"Gonna be awkward at breakfast."

"Hrm,” Bruce hums into silken hair, demonstrating that although he has no intention of discussing said breakfast, he is for the moment, listening.
“I have spoken with Kal-El.”

“You what.”

Diana stares him down, mouth turned down in distaste and what looks uncomfortably like disappointment. “I knew you turned to the darkness for comfort, Bruce, but seldom before have I seen a man so content to let it consume him. How can you use him this way?”

“I beg your pardon?” He heard it—he knows what he’s heard, but the punch of it infuriates him.

“Are you so petty? Is your fear so great, warrior of Man? Using his desire and need—”

“Now hold on a damn minute!”

“Never!” she says, fierce eyes clashing at him. “His need! To please someone older than himself—to please you, for whatever reason! Others in general! His self-image issues, his doubt and his anxiety to wedge yourself into his psyche. Does it satisfy your guilt, to replace the woman he loves? Where is your honor?!” She’s relentless. “Don’t you have any couth, Bruce Wayne? What have you done!”

He’s fuming, furious. “He didn’t tell you that.”

“He didn’t have to.”

Stinging from both the echoes of truth and the misconceptions, he holds his wrist out to her. “The lasso,” he bites out, teeth clenched. “Put it on me.”

Diana glances down at her hip then at his wrist, coldly. “I won’t let this continue, Bruce. Your words won’t save you this time. You have to answer for what you’ve done. You can’t trick your way out of this.”

“Put it on me.”

It feels like rope, wrapped around his wrist, but it doesn’t act like rope. The coils of it squeeze, he feels it tighten on him with no visible sign of effort from Diana. When it glows, stretched between them from Diana’s hand, there’s an invisible tug, a sensation like being pushed, from behind.

“I am not using Kal. I’m taking care of him. I’m living with him, I’m working with him, I’m—”

Bruce struggles. “I’m loving him and he loves me—he wants me. I hurt him; I like hurting him—I get off on it and he loves it. Kal—he keeps me honest, he’s the best man I’ve ever met, the kindest heart. The sweetest smile, when I’m with him everything is brighter. You have no idea what you're talking about. He’s everything. He’s my light, my love and the fact that you’re jealous because he came to me and not YOU—“

Viciously, he bites his tongue. “I swear to god if you don’t get this thing off me—” and, surprised, Diana actually allows it.

I fucking hate magic.
Bruce rubs his wrist, face twisted in a brief grimace before he smooths his expression.

“Satisfied?” He eyes her.

Diana’s eyes are wide, her brows raised slightly: she’s shocked. She quickly steps forward, clasps his forearm and says Bruce in a wondering tone. His humiliation fizzes out under her all-knowing smile. “Forgive my prejudice—I was wrong.”

Uncomfortable, Bruce finds himself smiling. Not a Wayne smile—his own, tentatively.

“Well,” he says, taking a step away from the overly contrite Amazon. “You know what they say about assumptions.”

“No.” A tiny line etches between Diana’s brows. “What is it they say?”

Bruce checks his cuffs fastidiously, then flashes her a pleasant expression. One day he’ll learn not to prod at the naiveté of gods and monsters. Perhaps even today.

Probably not.

"Why don’t we start over," he says instead of answering, with a gesture to the chairs and slight self-effacing tilt of the head. She considers his suggestion, and with a nod and another tight clasp of his arm, Diana releases him and walks to sit in one of the dining chairs. Bruce tries to calm his racing heart.

~” And I ache, while you're not here; Feel you aching.
Wide awake, why’re you not here? I can feel you firing straight into my heart.”~

—Lykke Li

He returns to Kansas, when he feels insubstantial, when the weight of duty and his own failure is too heavy to carry. Bruce returns, because the lack of communication from Clark, coupled with the lack of regular patrol, drives that itch under his skin, drives him seven kinds of mad.

“You came back,” Martha observes, searching his face as she sits on her porch swing. Finding whatever it is she’s looking for in his eyes, she gives Bruce a sharp nod.”Good for you. Not too many do, after the disappearance dance.”

Bruce nods back at her in unspoken understanding, glances over the blooming yard. “So it does happen often.”

“We taught Clark to be careful. Maybe too well.” She stands with a sigh. “When he gets upset, his first instinct is—”

“To protect.”

Martha looks at him with a smile. “That’s right. Unfortunately, for Clark, protecting people, well…” She doesn’t finish her sentence, but then, she doesn’t need to. For Clark, protecting people he loves also means protecting them from himself.

Dusting her hands off on her jeans, Martha eyes the horizon. “Clear day. Grab leather if you’re
staying for supper—I’m headed into town. Groceries don’t buy themselves.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says lightly.

Into the beat-up old pickup truck, and this time Bruce doesn’t even hesitate before he shrugs off his suit jacket and folds it on the seat between them. Damn the dust. Damn the pretense, in even bothering to wear the fucking thing. Cufflinks off. Button open. Hair ruffled. Blend.

Martha watches this minor transformation with knowing eyes. Bruce’s ears heat as he slides into the passenger seat, staring straight ahead.

A small smile on her lips, Martha starts up the engine, and down the road they go. Dirt first, bumpy and rugged, then the interstate— smooth grey asphalt stretching out as far as the eye can see.

Bruce thinks about his mistakes and how to mend them. First: the flowers. If he had scaled them down, put them in plain clay pots or perhaps a simple basket weave— the same kind Martha used —Clark might have seen the gesture more than the expense.

“He’s a country boy and these are plants.

It’s possible that Clark would still have thought it over the top, but he wouldn't have seen it as expensive, would he? Bruce specifically chose extravagant varietals of common flowers, expensive to have transported, potted and in bloom simultaneously. A note for the future, then. Bruce intends to learn from it as well.

“It’s called self-care, Bruce.” Martha smiles at him, sadness and amusement in the curve of her lips. “You should look into it.”

Despite himself, he’s smiling too, a lopsided, slightly bewildered expression, he knows. It doesn’t come out often. “Possibly. Don't know if I’m qualified for the job.”

“Oh—” She gives a soft laugh. “I told you nobody’s perfect.”

He follows her through town, marvelling again at the quiet productiveness of the town, the beautiful and the ugly. The sublime and the mundane, side by side for anyone to see. Bruce suspects he may have a fondness for Smallville.

Several bags and boxes of fortifications later, he suspects Martha Kent is either punishing him or giving him a gift, and Bruce wishes he could devine which is the case. He trudges back and forth between the small general store and the truck, loading the back with dry goods while Martha haggles over a couple of new hens. Then he loads said hens, cage and all, into the truck bed.

Martha's smile grow wider every time she looks at him. Incredible. He resists the pull at his own lips and continues to carry what she points out, including rope and some other barn goods. By the time its all done, Bruce's fine leather boots are covered in a mix of manure and mud-- his jacket is dusted with chicken dander and tiny feathers. They're probably in his hair by now.

"Now you look like Smallville," she remarks. "Chop chop - you've been itching to pull your wallet all day, and groceries don't come cheap." It's not an opportunity or invitation he's likely to refuse. Bruce would have tried to pay anyway, and he finds a calm certainty in Martha's acknowledgement of that.

In the end, after a hot dinner and some quiet conversation, Martha hands him a pie.
“Go tell Clark how you feel before it's too late,” she says, steel in her tone and spine. "I already lost a son once, Bruce. I don’t want to lose another.”

~”I’m holding out, till we’re out of time;
I can feel you here, souls redefined; I can’t let go of our design.”~ —Les Friction

The pie gets reverently placed on the kitchenette counter. Then Clark turns in a mini-whirlwind, glasses already in one hand, the other held palm up towards Bruce. Warding him off.

“You told my mother?”

He hadn’t thought it worthy of discussion. Does it really even matter?

“ I. No.” Bruce thinks. Had he? He hadn’t needed to, no— she’d made it graceful. Easy, for Bruce. But. “But… I said enough.”

Apparently it does matter. Clark shakes his head slowly, a hard look in his eyes that Bruce wouldn’t have thought him capable of. “You told. My mother.”

_Creeping apprehension._ “Was I not supposed to tell her?” He doesn’t recall any particulars signifying such. Unless. “I wasn’t aware that our involvement was intended to be a secret.” No, of course he wasn’t, not after—

“People have been talking about us.”

“It happens. You introduced me to your childhood neighbors,” Bruce says slowly. “You drank behind me, in front of them. You attended a charity ball with me. Did you not realize what you were doing?”

“Yeah, well, there’s people thinking a thing’s so and then there’s my mother knowing, Bruce!”

“Clark—”

“I need to sit down.” He sits. “No, I need to talk to her—“ Less than a blink, and he’s standing again. “I need to go—”

“She’s supportive.” Bruce shrugs, one shouldered. Tries to maintain the façade of casual as his perceptions get reordered once again. “Is this a problem?” he says lightly.

_Of course Clark would care. As well he should._ Bruce himself might have doubts, faced with someone with the same...reputation that he has.

“Problem…?” Clark shakes his head. “No, it’s... It’s not her support that worries me. You know we rely on each other, out past city limits. We can’t afford—we need our neighbors. The farm needs our neighbors.”

It shouldn’t be as much of a punch to the gut as it is.

“Says who? I’d think they need you at least as much.” At the frustrated side eye, Bruce raises a conciliatory hand. “If something I said made trouble, you should give Martha more credit. The lady can take care of herself.” He glances up. “Besides,” he adds, patience wearing to a fray. “I
don’t intend to make lying to your mother a standard. Assuming that’s alright with you."

Clark takes a long drink and sets his glass down with silent care. “She told me, you know,” he says after a long moment. A moment that Bruce spends thinking furiously about how much he hates the Midwest. “She said if I was going to be with you, I had to…” His mouth twists. “Expect the unexpected and be ready to accept it. And I’ve tried.”

*Have you, Clark?* Bruce folds his newspaper, attempting to put words to action as he sets the paper barrier aside finally. “Whatever accommodations you think necessary will be made. I’ll handle it.”

“Accommodations,” Clark says. He rolls the word around in his mouth in a way that Bruce doesn’t entirely like.

“Yes. Changes, alterations to our previous engagements. Changes to schedule, frequency, name it. If they work for you, we can move forward—”

“And who says,” Clark interrupts. “I want to move forward? Who said any of this works for me? You’re so—”

Bruce stares at him, his eyes too wide. Isn’t moving forward, becoming more… the purpose of Clark’s desire for transparency? He considers the possibility that he’s been mistaken, that while being publically involved in *Gotham* is fine, but perhaps Smallville… is crossing the line. It’s not a possibility he enjoys.

“So—” Clark presses his lips together with a shake of his head.

The silence stretches thin between them… Then the tension in Bruce’s shoulders eases. Because Clark, whether he realizes it or not, is breathing with Bruce. And all he needs to know now, is—

“So damn rational. This isn’t math, Bruce. How I feel? It’s just a little more complex.”

He doesn’t answer Clark’s question—not immediately. Instead he nods, resolute, then touches the cushion beside him.

“Kansas. Come here.”

Clark just barely doesn’t roll his eyes. He leans towards Bruce, scooting a scant few inches closer. He stops out of reach.

“What.” His jaw is tight, eyes sharp on Bruce. Mouth set now in a thin displeased line. *Nervous.*

“Come here,” Bruce repeats, without changing his volume or inflection. Clark’s gaze drops to Bruce’s hand, still light on the couch.

One breath. Three.

Then, without looking back up at Bruce, Clark slides all the way over, until his hip is pressed flush against the last finger of Bruce’s hand.

“What?” he says, low. The edge is changed in his voice. Rough, and ill-used, a hunting knife in disrepair.

*“Here.”*

When he looks up, Bruce is ready. So close, and those eyes are so clear now. Clark’s gaze is moving over his face, and he looks stubborn and brave and frayed at the margins and it’s the
easiest, most uncomplicated thing in the world to cup his face in one palm.

“Are you still mine?” Voice steady, Bruce watches, taking note of every flickering muscle twitch he can catch as they roll across Clark’s expressive face. “Clark. Kal… Ta nahn rraop khuhtiv vahdhhah zehdh?” The syllables, thick as oil, are bittersweet across his palate, consonants scraping out of his throat in a low rasp to demand not one, but several answers.

<Are you still mine?>

Are you still my family?

Are you still my lover?

Do you still belong to me?

“I…” No hesitation, as Clark rolls his cheek into Bruce’s palm, lips pressing into the touch. An answer that needs no words. He shivers, silent, as Bruce traces his jaw with two gentle fingers. He inhales sharply, eyelids lowering while a thumb presses into his lower lip and with singular attention, traces his mouth.

He feels exactly the same. This energy, is exactly the same, goosebumps chasing themselves up Bruce’s arm at the contact. No—he hasn’t miscalculated this.

Clark’s skin, familiar and just as smooth as remembered, petal-soft lips a touch too dry. Bruce licks his own.

“Is this working?” He leans in the last half-inch.

And Clark’s eyes snap open.

“Stop.” Just a breath, but enough. Bruce sits back, slow, and lets his hand fall away.

This, he realizes now, this is what gets Clark off—not just Bruce’s hands on him, but Bruce’s emotion. It’s all related, he sees: there’s a reason Kryptonian is so contextually complex. There’s a reason the database wouldn’t return a match for ‘illness’, but would return a match for the exact same set of symptoms without the appellation. There’s a reason the Kryptonian tech and nanites respond to intention.

There’s a reason Clark trembles when Bruce grazes his hands up Clark’s arms, has barely touched him.

How much choice does an empath have, in how he responds to overwhelming emotional stimulus?

Slowly, maintaining his distance, Bruce takes his hands off Clark’s skin. A soft noise of protest and Clark frowns. But Bruce can’t let himself take again, not this way. Not without permission.

“Do you know what I’m doing to you?” His voice is quiet.

Clark sighs softly and opens his eyes. “You love me.”

He sees it in Clark: this is how they think, Kryptonians; this is how they see the world—in a kaleidoscopic swirl of connection and consequence. Stifled and bombarded on all sides with congruent information. This, what they do between them, this is Clark’s independence. His freedom, not his shackle.

"What is it?” he asks quietly.
"You're cheating. Or... maybe I am. I know it. But I just—" Clark's stare sharpens. "I want to be touched, Bruce. I want to feel—"

"Alright." Bruce makes no attempt to undress, not even so much as a cufflink; he hasn't earned that—not yet. Harder than it should be, to make himself move. To bridge the small distance between them and put both arms around Clark on the couch, to urge him to turn, Clark's back solid against his chest. Bruce runs bare hands over hard muscle, tensed tendons. Presses in close, his lips below Clark's ear.

"Like this," he doesn't ask.

The scent of Clark's skin in his nose. The low helpless noise he makes when Bruce kisses lightly up the curve of his neck. The stiffness of Clark in his arms, before he leans into Bruce. His strangled laugh. And Bruce would laugh too, if he could.

If he weren't holding himself so still because if he relaxed, if he let himself hold on to Clark—his Kal, his Kansas—he won't ever be able to let go gracefully, never again.

"Bruce—" It's almost a sob.

I'm sorry. He is, worthless as it would be to say. But more importantly—

He grips shoulders steadier than the floor under his feet. Digs his fingers in, holds on to ribs, skin and muscle. Traces the invulnerable bones that cage that sun of a heart. Presses in hard, as hard as he can—and he's never letting go, he's never fucking letting go—

"I'm here." And then, because it feels right, because it is right, Bruce holds on to more. "Martha has us, now. Smallville might get uppity, judgmental, but she can always count on us. I'm here for her, too."

"I'm from the East side of America, where we choose pride over character;
And we can pick sides, but this is us, this is us, this here."~

—The Chainsmokers

“So you want a return to the Dark Ages.”

“I want a return to the type of reasonable labor practices that built the Union, Wayne. The simple days when men and women were hired because they were willing and able to work—without all this oversight and microhandling.”

“And I think Wayne Enterprises has proven that progress is made by attention to changing attitudes. But you’re right about how it used to be.”

Stanton Pickard, grandson of one of the great power moguls of the East Coast and all-around asshat, splutters into his whiskey a bit. “Damned right I am!”

“It was simple,” Bruce continues easily. "Unskilled, uneducated agricultural workers were replaced by machines. Unskilled, uneducated factory workers found their jobs outsourced to the Third World."
“Another Wayne, quoting liberal bullshi—”

“Stan,” Bruce says. “Let’s not lose our heads over academics. Look, I get it—we all get it, but I have to say it—”

He pauses and sips his ginger ale. Blinks in faux drunkenness at Pickard.

“Your coal mining jobs didn’t go away because liberals passed EPA regulations; your coal mining jobs went away because your company replaced 200 miners with 20 engineers and a whole bunch of machines. Your factory jobs didn’t go away because immigrants stole those people’s jobs; the factory jobs went away because their boss outsourced their jobs to China. That is where your new plant’s located, right?”

Stanton scowls. “You talk a big game, Wayne. I’m not letting some faggot tell me how to handle my accounts.”

Stanton Pickard is as fond of vulgarity as he is well-funded, which is good—there’s a path here that doesn’t lead to Bruce punching him in the mouth. Bruce smiles as disarmingly as he can while he concentrates on not breaking the fragile stem of the glass in his hand. Cuts his eyes across the room to cover his fury. Makes a note to buy a controlling interest in this jackass’s stock. Briefly imagines how satisfying it would be to ‘trip’ and spill his drink all over this man’s finely pressed suit and poorly presented arguments.

He takes another sloppy sip instead, letting some fall from his lower lip. Makes a show of avoiding it as he fakes a cough, gives his glass an approving hum and a second glance, diverting attention from the bug he slips into Pickard’s jacket. Then he stomps ruthlessly on his pride and does what needs to be done.

Faggot. Bruce reminds himself that he’s here for a reason. He forces a smile.

“At least I know when I’m getting fucked,” he says. Adds a wink and Brucie’s winning grin. “Between you and me, Stanton? GenCo is the only big dick I see swinging in here. And I don’t know about you—” He pauses for maximum effect and gives a careless one-shouldered shrug, left hand once again firmly in his pocket. “But me, I’m not fond of the idea of leaving Gotham… Open for business.”

Stanton stares at Bruce (at Brucie), then bursts into his trademark signature bray. Bruce chuckles, letting his grin widen. He makes the decision to loathe this man. It’s quite easy.

“I like you, Mister Wayne! We can do business.”

“Never doubted it for a moment,” Bruce says with a confident non-smile. “Please, call me Bruce. Mister Wayne— actually, Doctor Wayne was my father.”

No matter how many faux-whiskey ginger ales he has, the acrid taste lingers.

~“Are you scared? ’Cause I am, too. This fear in my head has been there for too long.~

—Riley Pierce

Clark’s been gone for too long.
Bruce takes in the scene quickly, feeling numb. *Martha always keeps a light on.* The house is dark—too dark at this hour. The grounds are suspiciously silent.

*Someone’s here.* Or was here. Martha’s pickup is a bulky shape in the velvet dim. Interior light on. Open. Empty.

Everything. Narrows down. To *now.*

*Someone cut the power.*

He can see the front door hanging open, groceries strewn across the lawn in a manic way. To the right of the door, the Dodge’s driver-side door sits open as well. The keys are still in the ignition. Bruce lays a hand lightly on the hood. Still warm.

*She got out in a hurry.*

His foot lands with a crunching sound and he looks; a package inside a ripped cloth shopping bag, the green one that hung on the hook in the pantry. *Someone approached Martha… tried to grab her.*

*Martha went into the city to shop.* *Something, someone scared her.* He knew what happened next: She’d called Bruce, and he’d reassured her and told her to go home. Why hadn’t he told her to stay put? Why hadn’t he met her there, instead?

He moves quickly towards the door and stops. There’s a marked disturbance in the gravel by the porch steps. Almost as if something large had fallen…and been dragged…

A ringing in his ears. A pounding, lancing pain in his chest.

“No…” Bruce breaks into a flat-out run around the side of the house, following the trail. “Martha!” Behind the house, his heart thudding, to where the trail is obscured by hardy Kansas grass and scrub. “Martha!” To the back porch, panic tapping, tapping. “Martha!”

Something—

In Bruce.

Cracks.

He scrambles to the well, wild-eyed and desperate as he looks into the water’s surface. Past the acreage marker where the field began. He calls out for her, against all logic, against all known tactical strategy, and only belatedly realizes he’s calling out a different name.

“MOM!” He turns in a circle, defeated by the plains, by the flat, wide sky and the unforgiving land. “Mom!”

“Bruce! I’m here!” He turns to the barn and is struck in the chest by the strength of her hug.

*Thank god…thank god, Martha.*

“He came out of nowhere! Started claiming to be some kind of agent and said I had to go with him, said he was taking the Dodge—“

He’s gruff, his voice raw and ragged. “Are you hurt?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, hands already in motion. Bruce starts at the top, and works his way down. Pupil check. Runs light fingers through her hair, checking for scalp wounds. Checks her ribcage with light, steady pressure, fingers
trembling. Knows he’s overwrought and can’t stop himself. Because if Martha is hurt, it’s Bruce’s fault— “Who was it?”

"I've never seen him before in my life—"

Her face, no visible injuries. Her skull, intact. Her shoulders— Her wounded, dark eyes.

“What did he do?” The bruise on her shoulder is livid, strands of cloth from the bag clinging to her shirt. The straw and grass in her hair.

The rage.

"Tried to grab me, was rock-dumb enough to listen when I said I had to put my groceries away." She’s already calmer, remarkably resilient in the face of unexplained assailants. Steel in her spine, hidden as well as Clark’s. Inside, fierce pride strikes Bruce.

Ribs, hips, legs.

“He hurt you.” Bruce ignores her attempt to catch his hands and continues his patdown. Ankles sound, calves uninjured. A small wound on one kneecap, sluggishly bleeding. Needs bandaging.

"Just a scratch, from the—the edge of the car door. He was going to," she says, pale and drawn. "I think...he was really going to. Bruce, what..."

"I don't know." He keeps checking for wounds, looking for a telltale splash of dark. “But I will find out.”

“Well,” she huffs, shaking hair out of her eyes. “Let me tell you, this kidnapping thing is getting a little stale.”

He grunts. “It always does.” She’s doing better than most do. Strong.

The wince when he touches her hip, most likely from colliding with the surface of the Dodge’s door. Or perhaps the front door. He growls. Double-check. Verify. Validate.

"Bruce, Bruce, honey, I'm fine...I'm..." The warm hand on his cheek halts his frantic search. And then he notices, finally, the shotgun in her hands. No, the electric short-gun that he had made for her.

"Where is he?"

"There’s a gun...under the porch,” she says shakily. "Shot him over by the door. Dragged him to the back ten." Her chin firms. “He asked about Clark.”

Bruce looks into her eyes and deepens the register of his voice—instinct now, a subliminal sign that tells the rest of his body ‘it’s time to go to work.’ It comes out dispassionately, coolly, though he feels as if he'll go insane with the rage inside him. How dare they? He scans the ground around them as he speaks, keeping his tone low.

“Martha. Listen to me.” He stares, putting every ounce of the Bat he has (a considerable amount) into it. “No one is going to touch you while I’m here. I won’t let anything happen to either of you. We’re going back to the car. You get the keys. I will—”

“What if there’s more of them?”

Bruce doesn’t intend to, but he feels that smile stretching his lips. From the look in Martha’s eyes,
his battle-grin isn’t pretty. “Then they picked the wrong night and the wrong farm.”

“Okay.” She nods bravely at him. “Good enough for me. How do we do this?”

“I sweep the house, in the front, the lower rooms, then the top floor. You stay behind me and do exactly as I say.”

“I could wait in the barn—“

“No,” he says sharply. Her breath catches. “The barn isn’t secure. Your keys have been out here for anyone to use and put back. I won’t risk it. After the house is cleared, I’ll see to the bastard myself.”

*Perp should still be knocked out cold. Check the pulse, then the ID if there is any, make sure the local PD makes a solid arrest. Run a background check to ensure it’s done properly.*

She understands what he’s saying. Her expression flickers from surprise to guilt, then sadness. “Bruce… you don’t have to… do that.”

“Yes I do. Stay close. If there’s more—“ He flicks a glance to the darkened windows. “If they’re smart. That’s where they’ll be.”

He squeezes a short sequence on his watch buttons, calls Alfred and brings the security system online. The biometrics read one warm body behind the house...vitals steady, unconscious. *They weren’t expecting a fight.* After a quick decision, Bruce nods.

“I’m going to turn the breakers on and do a perimeter sweep. I need you to go into the house and stay in the guest room until I come inside.”

“But the groceries—“ She cuts herself off with a sharp nod. “Be safe.”

The night air is quiet as he zipties the perp and leaves the groaning man to come to consciousness on his side. Bruce pauses as he passes the back porch. The scent--

*It can't be. It is.*

There, in the sheltered lee of the roof, far from where they can be spied by passerby, are the flowers Bruce sent to Clark. Some are dormant now but others in bloom, brightly purple flowers raised to the Kansas sky in the light of his watch. No longer root-bare, they're grounded in the Kent flower plot. The reserved placement here, in protected privacy...it's a hallmark of Martha's brand of care. Their roots run deep now; they have foundation. Though Bruce shouldn't let his mind wander while he questions the panicking man, he thinks that means they-- he and Clark-- might just have some foundation as well.

~” Are you lost? Because I am, too.

Directions mean nothing in the dark and I don't know where you stand.”

—Riley Pierce
Clark shrugs. “Because everything’s changed, but I’m still me. And I want to stay me. I don’t… I don’t want to forget what it’s like.”

“Being normal?”

“Being real.” Clark slouches, retreating visibly into what Bruce has begun thinking of as his ‘Kent mask.’

“Real.” The word is heavy on Bruce’s tongue, heavy with self-denial, with self-hatred—a taste he knows all too well. A taste he’s trained himself to know as sweet, crumbling now into bitterest poison from Clark’s lips. “So you want to be, what? Like all the other boys?” he says, dusting sarcasm to mitigate the burn of his words.

“Would that be so bad?” And Clark, he says it as if he’s already made up his mind, or is at least halfway to making it.

Unacceptable.

“That.” Bruce takes a deeper breath. “Would be stupid. And catastrophic.” From the dumbfounded look in Clark’s eyes, he isn’t as adroit at wiping the tint of emotion from his voice as Bruce would have liked. “You know… Your life means more than a cape. And more than this self-destructive urge to—” He stops. Swallows. “You want to die, is that it? Work yourself to death? Of all places, here? World’s not small enough anymore, you need to make it worse?” Bruce shrugs, consciously stays loose and prepared to move.

The sound that comes out of Clark is like nothing human Bruce has ever heard: a low, thrumming, violent hiss that’s more a trembling in the air than waves travelling to his ears. “This is part of why I stayed away. Because it’s all so easy for you, right? You and your goddamn mask. You walk away, and no one says anything; how could they?! God forbid anyone else walk away before Bruce Wayne says they’re allowed—”

Bruce cuts him off, possibly recklessly. The conversation is spiraling out of hand fast. Frustration goads him.

“This is about you!” His voice doesn’t rebound off the walls, but it cracks flatly between them, lower than his usual speaking voice.

Batman’s voice.

Clark’s eyes widen in shock.

Bruce didn’t intend to raise his voice. He didn’t intend to—“Do not—This is about you,” he continues in a calmer tone, smoothing a hand down his own shirtfront. Be calm. Be certain. “This isn’t. About. Me. Don’t make it about me.”

“It’s about them, Bruce. And you. All of you.”

“Are you saying that because you believe it, or because you want me to believe it? I don’t.” Bruce takes a moment, runs a hand across his brow and is unsurprised to find it damp. “I don’t believe it.” He walks the room, to give fight-ready muscles something better to do than flood him with attack signals. It doesn’t help; the tv playing the news grates on his nerves.

“Turn those lies off.”

Clark’s mouth twists. “They’re not lies. I was there. People died. I didn’t…” An internal flinch,
and Clark bows his head briefly. “I didn’t do what needed to be done.”

*Outrageous.*

“Ten people, Clark. Ten people died. How many did you save?”

“I don’t…”

“You don’t know? What, didn’t keep count? Slipped your mind?” There is no way in hell Clark could fail to keep count, Bruce knows that better than anyone. He knows Kryptonian physiology, better than anyone.

It nets him a sharp glare from under dark locks. “I kept count.”

“So, then. You know you rescued three hundred and seven people. *Three hundred and seven.* You’re going to let these people ride you down for the ten that chose not to follow standard safety advice? The ten who ran, instead of waiting the five seconds it would have taken you to get the building off its foundations?”

“They...they were scared.” A low, pained huff of air. “They were scared of me.”

“Clark.” Bruce sighs. *Sometimes you can’t save everyone.* He can’t say it. Not to Clark. Not now, and possibly not ever. So he approaches the problem from a different angle.

He turns the damn idiot box off himself.

“Some don’t like you. Some have all the gratitude of rattlesnakes. They don’t care about other people, the way you care about people.” He raises a forestalling hand when Clark’s face reddens. “So they don’t see you.” He waits, for Clark to look at him. “They don’t know you.”

Burning red, glowing from Clark’s face. Bright enough that if there had been bulbs lit in the place, they’d be overkill. *Demonic,* he might say were he a god-fearing man. Casting everything in the sickly shade of oncoming death, the furious gaze of a god.

Bruce straightens his spine to meet that glare and refuses to fear what he understands.

“But I do.” He steps closer, approaching Clark with his eyes open, in more than one sense. “I see you. I hear you.” With his final step, Bruce reaches forward and gently strokes Clark’s hair back from his face, stifling the urge to flinch from the ambient light. *I know you.* “I’m here for you.” He doesn’t look away. “And I’m telling you, you don’t have to do this.”

“I’m helping as many as I can. It’s the right thing to do.”

“I’m not debating that. I’m saying that you don’t have to do this—run yourself ragged. There are people who work at the street level, Kal. Plenty of people under the radar, but you can do so much more—”

“Can they do what I can do, Bruce?”

Bruce doesn’t waver. “They do their best.”

Tight jawed. “It’s not good enough.”

Bruce lets his shoulder lean into Clark’s. “They do their best,” he repeats. *I do my best.* “Nobody’s perfect, Kansas. Why don’t you let *me* carry that for a while?”
Slowly, Clark's temple rests against his. "I didn't mean—"

"I know." With a sigh, Bruce runs a soothing palm over his nape, feels the short silky hair at the back of Clark's neck under his hand.

“I wish I could.”

Bruce knows what to do with that. “Let me help you.”

“Bruce?” Clark reaches out as soon as he opens his door. Hand on Bruce’s wrist, he moves aside to let Bruce in. “You didn’t patrol last night. What happened to you?”

Bruce grunts, elbow tight to his side to keep himself upright. “Was up at R&D’s launch site for the beta run of the new engine. State of the art has hard corners.”

Let Clark think he fell. Let him be too distressed, please, to realize the damn thing had exploded in their faces.

“I thought that test wasn’t scheduled for another month.” Clark’s hand on his back is gentle as he helps—assists—Bruce over to the new, thankfully well-padded, sofa. Bruce lets his breath out in a rush when he sits. “And I thought you said you had the bypass for the Kryptonian integration all wrapped up.”

_Fucking ribs. Why is it always in the ribs?_

“Ticker-tape. Had to be done now.” Repressing a groan, he sits up straight. “I’m fine.”

“You’re hurt,” Clark shoots back, tone disapproving.

“Yes, well, the parts from LuthorCorp were not up to integration. They were bullshit. Broke down, third trial. Glad I spent on that upgrade for the sprinklers.”

At Clark’s expression, he waves a hand in a languidly practiced motion. “Don’t make a fuss, Kansas. At least wait till my head stops ringing.”

But Clark’s glaring at him, eyes narrowed.

“The only place you oughtta be going is straight to bed.” Clark reconsiders visibly. “Or maybe a hospital.”

“I said I’m fi—”

“But you’re not fine.” Stubborn. “You could have a concussion. You need a doctor, Bruce. And I’m calling Alfred.”

_Jesus, no._ He’d promised Alfred he wouldn’t be on the testing floor, that he’d watch from the remote viewing station like he was supposed to have been.

“Clark—” Bruce shoots to his feet, or would have, if the brace currently bolstering his torso had not chosen that moment to crease on him. “Agh.” He falls back against the cushions.

“Mm- hm.”

_Could you be any smugger, you prick?_
“No..” He waves his hand again, projecting as much polite indifference as he can muster. “No need to involve Alfred. I came to see you.”

“Bruce.”

“Just… give me two minutes.” Is that his hand, still waving? Bruce makes it stop. “I’m… We have plans. I promised you dinner.”

Clark sighs, expression softening. He brushes a wing of grey from Bruce’s forehead. “We’ll have dinner at the hospital.”

“How about we meet in the middle.” Bruce leers half-heartedly at him. “Say…Chinese? This couch is very nice, if you haven't noticed. We can watch that Mission Impossible show you like—"

"Restaurant Impossible."

"Restaurant, sure. Right." He’d known that. He’s sure he’d known that, just on the tip of his—shit, breathing really ought not be this much a trial. "Put on…what you like.” He knows it's a lost cause the moment the PR grin makes it out around the stabbing pain when he moves. It's reflex, that smirking grin, and Clark's seen it too many times not to know what it is.

“Nope.” A whoosh of wind that knocks half the styling out of Bruce’s hair, and Clark’s back in front of him, jacket on and keys—Bruce’s keys, from his pocket—

_Dammit, Clark._

—in hand.

“Nice try, though. Alley-oop!” Being lifted by Clark is akin to the rise of the line after the snap of the grapple; there is no fighting it, no possibility of fighting it. And Bruce finds he doesn’t much want to.

"Have it your way," he says, head spinning. “No hospitals… Alfred.” _O2 depletion, lung bruising probable. Definite concussion._ Of course Clark wouldn't listen to him. "But you're explaining it to your neighbors."

“It’s the way that you know what I thought I knew;

It’s the beat that my heart skips when I’m with you…but I still don’t understand,”~

—Beyonce

There are things Bruce should not have to say.

The inviting potential of a summer's day dims. He’s tense, he's been tense since the mention of going into the city. Bruce isn't ready yet, to be seen with Clark. To be _publicly_ known as what their relationship marks him to be.

“If you’re expecting me to become someone different, Kal—”

Clark laughs, only a little sadly, to himself. “Cosmo says probably not.” He sits and tries to ignore how B attempts to look through him instead of at him. “They have this crazy idea, that when you
fall in love with someone, you should love them for who they are even when you don’t agree with all their decisions.”

Bruce grunts. “New age.”

“Undoubtedly. Hippies and pot brownies all the way down. Bruce—”

“I’m not a good man, but I’m not a monster either.”

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“Is that all? Glad to be able to assuage your curiosity. You can go now.”

Clark looks down at his hands, folds them tightly together as if he’s trying to keep something from escaping. He’s quiet, so quiet that Bruce has to focus, when he speaks. “I don’t want to go.”

“Then accept that this has a goal. For the greater good. Accept that this is important. This is what I leave behind.”

“I know that. I’m not asking you to stop being you—”

“You are. That is exactly what this is,” he says.

Clark shoots him one of those looks, that disdainful fucking righteous side-eye, and stares at him silently, jaw working. He takes a breath, a deep inhale. A super-powered, completely unnecessary (in Bruce’s opinion) loud inhale. And then he holds it, before blowing out the tiniest fraction of a wisp.

*He’s probably compressed about fifty pounds of air into his lungs with that whoop.* Bruce eyes him back, refusing to retreat.

Then Clark speaks, in a tone that Bruce can tell is carefully calm, even as he spits the words out. “So you’re not embarassed of me. And you feel absolutely no shame at being with me. At being seen with me.” His mouth twitches downward unhappily. “Unless it’s your big money peers. And all this… denial. Is for some greater good. Okay.”

“Not the situation.” Bruce says, clipped. “I have business relationships I need to maintain, I have plans, Brucie Wayne needs to stay—”

“*You are not Brucie Wayne.* I did not come back for Brucie, and I am tired of you shoving him in my face. And none of them are worth it. Not one of them, Bruce.”

“*Kansa—*”

“I didn’t come back for—I don’t want. Brucie.”

Bruce locks everything down. He can’t think straight, not with Clark hounding him about…what? Public appearances? Flowers and staged candid shots? Letting the goddamn *world* in so they can destroy everything? *Again*?

Bruce interrupts, his voice purposefully harsh. “Then what do you want, Clark? *Romance?* ”

Clark blinks and lets Bruce’s words settle into the air before giving him a small unhappy smile. “Stupid me. Thought I already had that.”

Bruce is too sore and too tired for this shit. *Too old* for this shit. He sighs and doesn’t much care if
it can be heard or not. He resists looking at Clark for as long as he can, then shoots a sideways
glance of his own.

Clark stands, arms folded over his chest, not as if he’s defensive, but as if he’s holding himself.
He’s staring, that terrible blank stare that he does when he’s most upset, hands open and pressed to
the sides of his own ribcage as if they might fly away all by themselves.

Bruce’s mouth turns down regretfully. *I’m not thinking clearly.* “I need to sleep. Can this
conversation wait?” He feels old and more than a bit agitated himself.

Clark tunes in, eyes preoccupied, and Bruce knows he’s checked out, already listening to someone
else, most likely on the other side of the planet.

“Yes,” he says, but he lingers. His eyes flicker to the window and back to Bruce. “I won’t be able
to sleep. I have to—”

Bruce will be well into REM by the time he gets back, if Clark even makes it his business to be
back before daybreak. Bruce doesn’t allow himself to scowl or glare. “*Go*, Kal. Do what you need
to do.”

But he does force himself to reach out, to lay his own hand over Clark’s wrist, where the cuff’s
ridden up to reveal skin. “*I will* explain. Soon.”

*Come back to me.*

Clark chews his lip, then gives a sharp, quick nod and he’s gone, the window open, curtains
blooming in the wind of his wake.

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