drunk with the great starry void

by bonehandledknife (ladywinter)

Summary

Comic canon: Clark can hear and identify Bruce's heartbeat from anywhere on Earth

What if DCEU movieverse Clark heard Bruce's heartbeat before they've even met?

Clark is staring down blankly at a wrist, trapped in his hand somehow, his thumb right on that large vein. The heartbeat starts to run, and he rubs his thumb gently along it, which is when it starts to sing.

“Who might you be?”

Clark lets go at the saccharine tone. Darts his gaze up, flushing. Bruce Wayne’s gaze meets his, eyes dissecting and dark in contrast to the playboy leer. He wonders how many people fall for the smile that didn’t reach his eyes and fall for the voice that hides that darkness.

(sings like a knife's edge, a warsong)
Main arc (Ch 1 and 2, PG13) is finished and posted.

Catharsis (Ch 3 and onwards, NC17) is 10 of 13.

Notes

Comics panels about Clark being able to hear Bruce's heartbeat from anywhere: 1, 2

Many thanks and love to BatShitCrazy and moonbelowsea for the betas and support! All remaining errors are my own. Much love also to the superbatreversebang Discord for all the sprints and discussions and support that got this fic written!
“Be an island,” his ma says.

But there’s too much noise. The refrigerator’s electric hum, the fluorescent light’s lemon whine, the crawl of worms. The screech of glass compressed, breaking, a million feet on a million miles of concrete, words both English and incomprehensible. The air in people’s lungs, and the screams they let out. The high pitched ones are the worse. Clark screams back.

The carpets hurt.

No man is an island and he doesn’t know how to block it out.

“Stay with me Clark,” she says and hugs him to her and tells him to listen to just one thing.

One thing.

Maybe he had a choice. Maybe there was no choice, because he focuses on her heartbeat like any child would, seeking something safe and familiar.

The noise falls finally away.

(clark please try it out? it'll be good for you, you'll need to be independent)

The problem is he can't live or go to school wrapped up in her hugs forever.

(let go clark, you gotta get on the bus)

Even though his senses are powerful he doesn't have control; it's like asking a toddler to hold a pencil. His motor skills aren't refined yet, not without practice or the muscle or long enough fingers. Fat crayons held in small hands, sidewalk chalk, scrawled messily over large surfaces like tables and walls. It feels just that messy in his mind.

(it's ok honey, look it'll be ok)

Clark tries, is the thing, he keeps trying to find something to ground him. Something that’ll help him pull focus on the wild scenery of his life. His attention keeps flying around, latching on this sound or that sensation and usually the one most attention-grabbing. The most annoying. Or most unpleasant. Or the one that hurts.

(why is he rocking make him stop, ms brown make him stop)

When he tries to push the sounds away, as his veins pound with his fear, he could make it silent. But everything else stops too.
It’s like he managed to somehow press ‘Pause’ on the world and Clark has never heard of other people doing anything like this. People’s mouths would be open in mid-shout, a ball caught mid-flight hanging in the air, plates mid-fall hanging in the sludge that air has become, caught by an invisible hand. And it would be quiet. Clark would stare. Everything becomes unearthly silent. But everything is worse when sound starts up again, the terrible crash of plates breaking, the ball slamming against his face, the shouts of teachers and passerbys. Life skitters around him like a railless train.

(what's wrong with him)

And then.

Then: he hears this heartbeat.

It sounds like the earth itself, deep and slow and cavernous. Round and smooth like river stones.

It sounds like those cathedrals he sees in pictures, the echoes of it, the strength, the feeling of light; languid and unhurried even when it runs quick.

It sounds safe.

Leaning against the heartbeat lets him go about his life; to dress himself without wincing at the texture, taste food without tasting the bugs or the rot or the char, see only at the surface instead of all details inner and outer. The sound lets him be in the moment. Clark paces his own heart to it and finally time speeds up even as the world slows down. Becomes manageable.

“—ark, Clark, are you there?” his ma would ask.

And finally Clark could breathe, curl his toes up against his socks in his shoes, and say, "Yes."

(an island, alone but surrounded)

A minute becomes parsed out into roughly 30 segments: a sigh in and a whoosh out. A heartbeat. A simple ba-thump on the surface melded into a multi-layered chorus, a four-part harmony. Two atriums, two ventricles, aorta and arteries and valves and—

He reads about heartbeats and he thinks it must be an athlete’s, to go so slow. The world record holder goes as little as 26 per minute, who is a retired runner.

Athletes tend to be famous and maybe Clark could figure out who it is.

The Summer Olympics were taking place. He watches eagerly and tries to listen for the heartbeats because it surely has to sound different, easy to locate, all those slow beats gathered together. Like a grouping of stars. (which he'd always liked to watch, sitting on from the highest tree he could find.)

And Clark was right, he does find a distinct group of very slow hearts. Watching the live competitions helps him focus on when to listen. Watching them set up and prepare for events lets him pay attention to which hearts should be going faster as they compete, when those slow hearts beat
closer to a normal speed.

But he can’t find his heartbeat among them.

They all sound tinny in comparison. Like the difference between hitting a spoon and hitting a bell. Like the difference between watery store bought strawberries and the ones that sprout on their porch, sweetened by sunlight. Like the difference between the world seen from behind his glasses and how color and clarity bloom without them.

Maybe the heartbeat Clark grounds himself on participates in a different sport, or just not at these events. It's not like Clark stops wondering or searching after the Olympics, even though it doesn't matter, really, knowing who it is. He’s not planning on meeting this person. It would be creepy. It would make no difference to them if Clark matches his breathing to that beat, that the pace of it reminds him to walk slow, that the thrum of it reminds him to touch soft, that it curls up around his ears like one of those giant delicate seashells.

People say that you can't really hear the sea when you listen to a conch, that the sounds are just reverberations and resonance. That it’s fake.

But is it really, Clark wonders.

What if it’s like the sun and the moon? In a perfect eclipse they completely cover each other, but they match so perfectly only because gravity is in balance. They match because their gravity makes them balance, and fall into place.

What if it’s like the butterflies? Like how orange and black appears in both Monarchs and Viceroyos, in similar patterns. Scientists had originally thought that only the Monarchs were poisonous and mild Viceroyos simply hid themselves in similar coloring. They’ve now found out that the Viceroyos were also toxic, in their own way. It’s unclear who lead and who followed.

What if, Clark thinks, it's not that seashell's echo is fake or false. But that the shell exists to echo, to carry the sea around even where the sea doesn't exist.

To carry a home for the echo that would live in the shell.

(is he the shell, or the echo that seeks a home?)

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“Clark, honey, there’s something you need to hear.”

“But you know that we’re your parents and we love you right? We’ll always love you, son. Even if...”

"Even if what, ma?"

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Oh.
Is that why everything is always so much? Clark wonders. Is that why he could never seem to fit, that things are never easy, that he's always too fast or too slow. That people stare at him like he's—like he's—

(missing something, incomplete)

Other.

(he's not from their world. alien.)

It still…

It.

Still, there is a wretchedness to the knowledge. That he had been found. That he was not of this planet. That he's alone.

It’s too big for his chest to contain. Too hollow. Too empty.

Clark can’t breathe past it, as if lost in the dark. Flailing, trying to reach the opposite wall across a yawning pit, while holding onto the one wall that he knows (family, but they're not really—), boxed in but still afraid to move, the sky a dark container above, trapping him next to farm and field and—

And then:

The sound of the earth, a round cathedral, spanning from end to end. An echo off an unknowable unseeable untouchable edge that sets Clark’s limits.

An opposite. (a star. a heartbeat)

Clark breathes, in and out, to the sound. And feels human again.

It’s not that the heartbeat stays always slow. It sometimes chimes high, curious interest, sometimes jumps an annoyed tch, like tongue against teeth. It very very often runs almost the speed of a normal person, usually at night. But even at almost twice its usual rate, it is resonant; an orchestra in a concert hall, flute and brass and timpani in a controlled crash, an 1812 Overture with cannon fire.

Clark wonders if they have nightmares. Sometimes he gets mistaken that they’re his own. He wakes up certain nights heart pounding with the sensation of needing to be somewhere. Of needing to chase or to flee. He finds himself trying, sometimes, when darkness is draped around him and the moon is high, to breathe in deep with all his lungs to try and slow his heartbeat down. (but it's not his
heartbeat he'd realize, as his own falls out of sync)

It makes Clark want to find this person, and call them, and breathe with them until their nightmares leave.

It makes Clark try to expand his hearing and try to get context clues, but it doesn't much work. In the beginning all he heard was air, as if from a mountaintop, something about it sounding like the scream of ice cracking apart.

But Clark thinks he'd probably just had shit control when he was little because it never much sounded like that once he started really trying and succeeding at controlling his powers (once he realized they're his powers, and that he has a responsibility to control them): it was air, but like it was rushing by, like you were moving fast, and the scream was that of rope, not ice. Or of people. Of sirens. Of the city.

His focus must be too wide.

He doesn't want to hear an entire city, not even a few city blocks. Clark just wants to hear the heartbeat's immediate surroundings. Maybe a name, a location, some context clues. A hint perhaps of what the nightmares are about. Did they fear the same things Clark fears?

(are they as hollowed? do they echo too?)

He keeps trying, with more or less success. Mostly less.

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Sometimes though? Sometimes the beat rises, but sings sweet. The first time Clark heard it sing, he found himself staring up through the ceiling.

Watching the night sky.

Because that? That wasn't the heartbeat of the earth, smooth and steady.

It was the siren call of the stars, leading you right off a cliff.

Trust me, it sang.

I will catch you.

He was unresponsive for about half an hour.

His parents made worried faces for the entire evening, after that heart slowed down, and questioned him over it the entire week.

Clark couldn't have said for the life of him what it was about, until very very much later. When he finally managed to control his hearing enough to widen out to the sound of lungs, widen out even more cautiously to the sound of breath, to the shape of air as it left the mouth, to the press of it against skin.

There's a sound, wet. And then another one, obscene, a moan catching itself on all sorts of hooks and knives and teeth as it fought its way through.
Oh, Clark thinks, as his control breaks and his hearing snaps back. He finds his hand already down his pants as his heart catches up and finally learns how to sing that song, too. Oh.

Clark learns how to do laundry that summer.

Clark is torn between listening more, and listening never. He's completely embarrassed. Which makes for a nice change from being completely afraid, dealing with: powers that increase by the day, his place in the universe, homework and class presentations and public speaking.

But humiliation isn't fun. Even though his Pa says that's all a part of growing up.

"Pa, I'm an alien." Clark reminds him.

"And yet you mess the sheets and try to hide it like any other teenage boy." Pa grins and tries to ruffle his hair.

Clark watches the hand creep towards him with agonizing slowness. The little expressions on Pa's face as the milliseconds tick by. A fly is passing by them, stuck mid-air as if in amber. Clark looks at that broad hand, a farmer's hand, his father’s hand, and knows it will feel warm. None of the many expressions on his Pa's face announce anger or confusion, and if anything, he seems relieved. He keeps on seeming relieved as the tiny moments pass by, as the fly floats its way through, its wings a slow backstroke, Pa’s hand inching ever closer to Clark's hair.

Pa means it, that it's ok, Clark thinks, and finally believes. Lets the words comfort him. Listens as that heartbeat finishes its reverb.

He pretends to duck and paces the speed of it to that echo.

Clark lets his Pa ruffle his hair, and knows he is loved.

It's Martha that eventually pries the truth from him.

"It's been a year, and you're still getting that look on your face." She says gently, scalloping a pie’s edges with her fingerprints.

Clark blinks back to the room, the heartsong ramping down. It’d been singing again. It sounds aglow now, and Clark's cheeks are too, because he’s not listening to anything but that heart, but he knows what that pace means, because it’s almost Pavlovian now to blush at it, because it's the afternoon and
he spaced out right in front of his mother—

"It's not anyone around here, or I would have known." Ma sounds playful, "Did a celebrity catch your eye?"

Clark stammers and is caught. Nobody's name comes to mind even though he screams at himself to just say a name, any name, a random name he's heard. None seem right. What falls out of his mouth is, "I don't know their name."

"Someone passing through then?" Ma laughs, "It's been known to happen."

Clark is struggling with a response, but his mind is still caught in the place it’s been curled around all these years, and that place is indolent and unresponsive like a cat's slow blink.

She bumps her shoulder against his, where he's doing the dishes, "Well? What does she look like?"

Trying to center himself, Clark shakes his head, mind still stuck in syrup and other sticky fluids. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Ma pauses.

"Just their heartbeat," falls out of his mouth, and the dust motes freeze in the golden air, sink water stops mid-fall, Ma's eyes starting to widen.

Clark jerks back from her and wants to tug a sheet over himself.

He wants to hide under his bed.

He wants to fly away.

He knows, however, that even if he flies away, she will question him when he comes back: he has already spoken. He knows the sound of it is already flying through her synapses, like a blooming explosion. Each revealing word.

He can’t run from this. From her knowing, from this conversation happening.

The heartbeat ba-dums back into its usual slowness, like the ground settling into place. Clark meets her eyes, ready to be hurt.

"I don't know who it is. I think it's—" He swallows. *This is so hard.* "I've been listening to them for years now and I still—" He inhales and it's like swallowing lightning, sharp, burning. He's not sure why he's so breathless and ashamed but he feels like ma would say she taught him better. That he shouldn't want. And shouldn't stretch himself using abilities no one else has to have and to take.

Even if it's only sound that already exists in the world. It's not his to have. (clark you can't crush all the corn cobs even if the pop they make is fun, you can't lift the tractor even though we make funny faces, put it down, put it down)

"Oh Clark," she says.

"It's, it's invasive, I know," he stumbles through the words and the hot shame, "You've taught me that I should be better than that but it's such a nice, I mean it's pretty. I...I mean it— I didn't want to stop. I'm sorry. I know it's wrong."

"That's not what we meant. You're not 'wrong,' I think... I think there's been some misunderstanding? Clark, tell me more." She brings him into a hug, and his Ma's heart drowns out
everything else. It was only her embrace that allowed Clark to work his way through his words, letting him explain how that one steady sound pulled meaning into place against all his sensory overload. A heartbeat like the entire width of the world.

"Clark, honey," she says finally after he's wound down, "I'm sorry it's been so difficult and I wished we'd known sooner how much but..." she pauses, clearly searching for words.

“You don’t like this.”

“Not exactly...”

"You're scared," Clark mutters.

"Not of you," she insists.

"I can hear so much, how can you not, I can tell when you—"

"But you don't," Martha says, steady as the earth, "You try your best not to, you try to hear only this one person's heartbeat, or did I understand that wrong? It's the same person?"

"Yeah? But then what...?"

"It's," she sighs. Looks past him, then meets his eyes, "It's a lot put on a single person."

"My listening to them?"

"Your leaning on them for control," she says.

Clark blinks.

“What if you don’t use that heartbeat?”

He freezes.

“Is it possible? For you to step away?”

“Uh...” He tries to keep his breathing even, and warm.

"I know that was how it started but, let’s think about this, you say they’ve always been there?”

He nods.

"So they're older than you," she holds him tighter, "What if they die first? Or have an accident? Do we... is there reason to be afraid of you if that happens? It’s something we should know."

Clark shakes his head in denial and has to stop himself from vibrating out of his ma's arms.

He curls his toes in his socks and doesn't match it to that slow heartbeat just to prove that he could. Times himself to the schhnnick! of the various farming equipment in their area, harvesting grain. It's strange. Discordant.

But he manages to do it.

“I can go without it,” Clark breathes, relieved. (gutted, cored.)

His ma stares him down.
“Try, then, for a month,” she finally asks.

“And then?”

“Then we’ll decide what to do.”

“Huh?”

“Clark,” she strokes his hair, “You may be only seventeen but all of the town trusts you more than most in their twenties. You’re a grown young man and I trust you, I didn’t think for a moment that I couldn’t. But I want you to try. Do it on your own.”

He looks at her in confusion.

“So you can trust yourself,” she says, letting him free of her hug.

Clark understands, after a moment of panic when his mind raced so fast time froze again.

Ma thinks I don’t trust myself?

It froze so thoroughly that when he walked outside, the towering corn stalks shattered at his touch instead of bent, and he forced himself to turn back and sit on the porch so that he wouldn’t ruin the crop.

He wants to hide himself in the fields but it’s not like anyone could come find him. Time has stopped. Even the heartbeat has all but completely stilled to his hearing, and Clark fights against himself from reaching for the rest of that melody.

He sits there, in a long subjective moment, working through his ma’s logic. It’s not like Clark does not trust himself but— He has never been without the sound and— He is so powerful that— what if—

He thinks up different ifs, ands, and buts, but they all sound like weak excuses. He lies to himself in that picosecond in over a thousand ways, sometimes repeating himself, looping on his thoughts over and over. He thinks of the careful way she had been speaking, of her careful use of pronouns, and his mind whirled itself around again as he realized that she was only echoing his own.

Why would pronouns even matter, he wonders, squirming and not knowing why, what difference does it make, he's just, he's just listening. What does it even have to do with trusting himself and why is Ma being so vague?

But he knows that he's resistant for some reason, even if he doesn't have the words for what it is. Clark eventually gets tired of arguing himself in circles.

Alright Ma.

He spends another endless subjective moment fighting against using the heartbeat to calm himself down.

Just pick one thing, he thinks as he stands up and walks back to his ma, anything else. Something close by.

The seashell sound of the wind through the corn. He lets it in and settles against the hush and the swish and the murmur. (better, at least, than that of the harvesters. worse, than a heart he's not letting himself reach)
“Ok,” he says, breathing in and out to its echoes, “I’ll try.”

“Thank you Clark.”

He loves her hugs, and lets himself lean into her just a little.

(no clark, put it down)

* Clark stumbles through a wretched month. There’s disorientation for maybe a week.

But all that past effort spent on attempting to focus on sounds so far away, to find sounds in and around that heartbeat—(and it must be far away, like trying to gauge the distance of stars from you and from each other, Clark knows the heartbeat is far, but not how far, nor exactly where)—It’s done miraculous things for his control over his powers when he’s simply focusing on objects around him.

But using most close-by objects or people as a focus was not a very comfortable state of existence. He never fit quite right. He keeps trying to modulate his own beat but his own heart seeming not quite sure what to do with itself. The speed it should go at. What to pace itself against to blend in. In desperation he tries various peoples heartbeats for awhile, like Lana’s, but hers flutter like hummingbird wings. Going that fast makes Clark feel like he’s inducing a panic state and the world slows down to an unreal crawl.

Is this what caffeine is like, he wonders.

It’s nice for getting homework done. Maybe. And maybe for reading through all the books in the bookstores and libraries. Hauling the crop in. Mending his socks. Learning how to whittle. Carving an entire tiny castle out of a pencil stub and then pressing on it carefully, until it crumbles underneath his thumb. He always regrets it after, even though it’s what his father would have wanted, to keep Clark safe.

In this bubble of false time, Clark feels very alone. This is what he tells his ma at the end of that month, grounding himself with the susurrus of grass and the slight groan of their windbreaker trees. The corn had all been harvested, but he’d quickly found other things to anchor on, ill-fitting like someone else’s clothes.

Martha Kent only nods.

Jonathan scratches his nose and catches her eye in that way that Clark knew he was saying, Fine, Martha, you’re right.

“You’re ready, Clark.”

“Pa?”

“To fly from the nest,” Martha’s smile is a bit sad, “You were always too big for Smallville.”

“But I love it here,” he says.

She eyes him shrewdly, “Do you love it, or just feel like you can’t leave?”
“But the farm!”

“We pulled in the last of the harvest already, and we handled it fine before you started helping out.” His pa laughs, “We let you work so that you know how to work, not because we needed it.”

“You ‘let’ me?”

“It was nice, don’t get me wrong. But yes, ‘let’. Knowing how to work will only help you out there in the world.”

“But—”

“Don’t you want to find that heartbeat?” Martha asks.

And Clark stares out at the empty fields. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Pick a direction,” Martha’s eyes twinkle, “use those scouting skills for some good. Find a map and actually ask for directions.”

Clark covers his face, “It was one time!”

“Go on eHarmony.”

“Ma!” his face is hot, “It’s not like that!”

She nods in acceptance but her eyes are laughing too much. His pa looks at him in that commiserating way that tells Clark he’s not going to win this, she’s gonna tease him come hell or high water.

And since they were both being so— (and they were being so much: accepting and understanding and loving and trusting and willing and) Clark seeks out that heartbeat again, he—

The sound is somehow even more immense than he remembered, deeper, broader, richer. Devastating. He closes his eyes against it for an infinite moment and then grabs it again, experiencing the heartbeat complete its pulse, tremoring through him like an earthquake. Nearly shaking loose his skin.

It’s a close thing.

These words fall out of him, “Maybe next Monday then.” He watches himself talk as if from a great distance because it feels like the whole of him is tuned towards that slow, steady, sound. “Let me go around and see what else I can help with around here. It’s the least I can do.”

Pa nods, “Seems fair.”

And that was that.

—

His parents, of course, are lying about how much they could use him around the farm. Clark thinks about this when he lets the world pause around him, watching the vee of birds migrating south. Looking for a warmer home, temporary though it might be.
They hang in the sky, wings stilled between one beat and the next.

Clark struggles with it, lost in a sped-up moment his parents can’t see, can’t take part in. He knows they want this for him. (because they think— they know they are not enough) They want him to find his place, belonging. Maybe people like him. They are gifting him the ability to travel.

It would be rude to return a gift. Even if he thinks they can’t afford it.

Especially if they can’t afford it.

He promises himself to come back during plantings and harvest.


Tornado ‘season’ doesn’t really account for climate change. Nobody was prepared.

(no clark, don’t)

Pa dies.


He’s more than fast now; planting and harvest takes barely a day. Ma works at a diner mostly to keep in touch with friends, and he keeps an ear on her heart to make sure she’s safe. It would take maybe seconds for him to reach her from any part of the globe.

So Clark spends the next several years traveling and learning. They seem, subjectively, like decades. He tries to balance himself on all sorts of sounds, all sorts of pulses, as he thinks (and avoids thinking, and avoid as much as he can the castle of that echo and the wish to shelter there) of what it is he's searching for.

He searches (and avoids searching, feeling with every passing day the delicate shell of the world around him) for the person that sounds like the earth itself.

He knows the heartbeat is in a city, but he doesn't know which one. And half the time cities are too much for his control, still, its towers, its halls, the bustle of its people; it's too much. He finds himself traveling empty spaces every month or so, far flung towns and tribes and farms and other such little nooks of civilization, to recover and recenter himself and keep from being overwhelmed. Clark listens to a great many heartbeats in all these places, certain of those heartbeats from up close, a couple that he makes sing.

None of them fit quite right.

He gets some experience in a very many things. (some of them erotic, and olympic. and, well, at one point he stumbled into a Village.)

Some of them heroic.
Some of them just him, up in a tree, sitting with a cat. They would meow at him piteously and he would think, same. Together they would watch the sky from above the places they’ve both stopped in, for an hour or two, the city smelly and loud and too much and wonderful and never quite the right size or shape. Some days he couldn’t bear to set his feet on the ground; there was this one beach, sand entire covered with translucent shells, sparkling like stars. They broke beneath his weight.

How do you walk in the world, he asks those cats.

Watch, they say, as they pick themselves through branches both thin and trembling. Watch.

He helps them down when they’ve both had enough of being apart from the world. He discovers for himself the bounds of his own skin.

It slowly gets easier.

* *

And then Zod calls for him.

* *

The zzzzz-whoomp of the World Engine sounds nothing like a heartbeat. The blue light is an incomprehensible hammer banging on the nail’s head that is Earth, attempting to reform and reshape everything that makes their blue marble livable. It’s a jackhammer, magnified, a high-pitched screech against crust and mantle, a deep bone-shaking bass that on impact counterpoints the sound of castles crumbling beneath a thumb.

Zod hits him.

Clark feels glass and concrete and steel shatter against his back, smells all the detritus of dust and blood and insides torn apart, hears the dying around him and hears the overlapping cries for help from television and radio and phone and people. People praying. There are children, nearby. Bodies that sound old. Bodies that sound crushed. Bodies that——

stop

—and the heartbeat that sounds of wide spaces and caverns, that sounds of safety and home, is racing. It sounds like it’s experiencing a nightmare.

It sounds like it is getting nearer.

The owner of that heartbeat is, to Clark’s horror, in this city. Somewhere below him.

And Zod keeps fighting.

Clark tries all that he knows to de-escalate, time skipping both fast and slow as he works through his options, as he tries to plan.
But it’s hard to plan when Clark never learned how to fight. It’s hard to counter Zod when Zod
seems to anticipate him. It’s hard to keep him in his grip when everything he does only seems to
exacerbate the damage.

There is a moment, both of them midair, after Clark has been struck, Zod following close behind,
and Clark looks around. Destruction is blooming around him. The city is smoking, people are
running on the street far below, stonework hang in the air waiting for gravity’s hand, dust
billowing around him but far more beneath, and Clark knows there is a building behind him that he
doesn’t have the momentum to avoid. *It will fall.* It might even fall on the person with that heartbeat.
Clark wouldn’t be able to prevent it.

He can watch and think as much as he wants but there is nothing he can *do* because the punch
already landed and he can’t react fast enough.

Pandora’s dark box has been opened and he can’t shove anything back in.

Is it ironic that people from a place he might have called home seek to kill him? Clark had been
searching for belonging, for home, and here in front of him is Zod, of Krypton. Genetic family. A
possibility of connecting both past and future. A ready-made position with people who know him.

But Clark could only have it if he lets Zod destroy Earth. And Zod refuses to stop unless Kal-El
stops him. Power blasts from the other Kryptonian’s eyes. (around him, a tower breaks.)

The heartbeat is one of many at its base.

Clark has spent *years* searching. He’d spent so much effort and time and *hope* on the possibility...
but, no.

*No.* He thinks as they grapple in the train station. He will not barter his past for his present, he will
not throw away the home that took him in.

He sets his weight.

Snaps Zod’s neck.

(he doesn’t know if there’s enough hope left. he feels like a mimic made of *poison* because—)

A family is alive, near him, but— there are people alive in the station but— there is a city, a planet
full of life but—

When the dust settles, when the government comes, when the rescue workers arrive... they lift Zod
away from him. Zod, who is dead. And there are too many quiet places around the city.

Clark still hears that heartbeat. It’s racing, as if still stuck in a nightmare.

*Me too,* Clark thinks.

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The next few days finds himself a bit hollowed out (a displaced seashell, an empty box) that he fills
with the minutiae of settling things with the government, and with a new job, and with Lois. He wonders idly what it would’ve been like to meet Lois and know her heart first, but it doesn’t matter. It’s a relief to have a friend who knows all sides of him, a relief to find a city to grow roots in, a relief to know that he can stop searching. He’d been forced to make a choice, so he made one, and now he throws himself into it.

He builds up a life for Clark Kent. And he helps his chosen homeworld as Superman. As he repairs, as the city repairs, the cavern of a heartbeat seems calmer too, in recognition. Or at least it’s not always so frantic.

The heartbeat is nearby, for a given value of \textit{nearby} when there’s 11 million citizens within city limits. Over 25 million if you count the greater Metro-Gotham megalopolis, one of the densest concentrations of people in the world.

(so loud that it is deafening at times, pure white noise)

But Clark thinks he should get his life in order first. There’s no need to rush this.

And he should figure out how to even say…

\textit{Hi, you don’t know me but I know you and have been listening to your heartbeat for years and I know when you sleep and when you’re scared and when you have sex.}

\textit{You sound great, by the way.}

Yeah. Not like that.

And Superman would have to say it, not Clark. Or if Clark says it, he will in the eyes of the other person become Superman by implication, and most people only know of him through what they’re calling now the Black Zero Event.

He doesn’t want to be feared.

He’s not even sure what he wants from that person, but he knows what he \textit{doesn’t}. He doesn’t want to overstep. He doesn’t want to coerce. He doesn’t want to be a burden on whoever’s heartbeat he’s been leaning on all these years, creepily, like a celebrity’s fan. And all of that still doesn’t help him figure out how he should approach this.

\textit{I think your heart sounds like a citadel. Do you want to be friends?}

Yeah, no.

Clark writes articles and assists in natural disasters and sometimes writes articles about assisting in natural disasters. He finds enough hope left where he’d thought he'd been emptied, watching people rebuild their homes and their lives time and again. Helping them rebuild, where he can. He listens to the strength in that one human heartbeat, in its life as it goes about after Black Zero, and feels humbled. He gets an apartment, watches movies with coworkers, joins in the peanut gallery
observing the back-forth between Perry and his red-headed problem child. He joins, but declines on betting against Lois, because that’s a sucker’s bet.

He works on how to word things.

Thinks about shells and butterflies and caverns and music and—

...okay I know that’s really lyrical but I’m not writing you poetry or anything. I just wanted to meet you. Don’t take this wrong.

Ok, that won’t work either. It sounds like ‘No homo,’ when

1. he’s not even sure if his sexuality can even be defined by human terms
2. he’s already reconciled that he’s attracted to humanity as a whole
3. he’s not even looking for that? really? really. the heartbeat is terribly compelling, sure, beautiful even, but that’s incredibly shallow and not something you could base a relationship on and
4. he doesn’t know if the heartbeat even belongs to a man. He’s fairly sure it’s probably a man given his estimation of the size of the heart and the attendant ribcage needed to make the sound but there are always outliers.

Then, too, the person that Clark is not exactly avoiding seems to be having more nightmares. Many of them in the daytime, heartbeat running furious, sounding terribly mortal, merging into the hum of everyone else’s hearts. He’d been able to tell himself that it was probably a natural reaction to Black Zero happening, perhaps latent traumatic effects of that day.

It’s harder to convince himself of that when it coincides with his public appearances. When he hears cameras on him, voices that say, Reporting live on the scene we are watching Superman...

And the heartbeat ratchets up like a warsong.

Like Clark is a living nightmare.

How do you approach someone like that? Like someone who would rather cross the street rather than walk on the sidewalk next to you? Like someone who thinks you’d want to hurt them? Like you are their worst fear?

He bleakly watches the protests against him on TV.

“Clark, honey, I’ve been watching the news.”

Are you alright? hangs in the air that connects two phones.

“How are you Ma?”

“Worried about you, mostly.” She barrels on, “I hope you’re not taking it to heart? Don’t listen to too much of it, y’hear?”

“But I should,” Clark says to steady himself, “I should listen to their concerns.”

“Not all of them I hope,” Martha says, “You know that some people just like to yell.”
“And some people get paid for it.”

“Like so,” she laughs and Clark laughs with her, because he could be considered one of 'those people,' now that he’s a journalist.

She grows quiet. “They don’t know you.”

Clark makes a questioning sound.

“If they knew you, they wouldn’t be afraid.” He could hear her smile over the phone, “You grew up under my nose, and let me say that there’s no part of you that I’m afraid of. I’m so proud of you. They don’t deserve you.”

Clark starts to protest but she just talks right over him.

“It’s the goddamned truth!”

“Love you too, ma.” He says, always a little shocked that she cusses around him now that he’s grown.

They catch up about his work at the Daily Planet and about the new gossip about town, but her words linger.

*If they knew you, they wouldn’t be afraid.*

And Clark recognizes how afraid he was himself. How making contact with the person who held that heartbeat terrifies him, and that he’d let himself not listen to sounds around it. Because he might discover how else he could be hurt.

Because thinking 'Superman is a nightmare' hurts.

He works through his fear in the long taffy of elapsed time.

*If Superman could be hurt, would that stop him? Is that all it would take to stop him?* Clark thinks, and then he knows that he can’t let it.

If Clark listens, if he tries to understand, he might find a point to touch base with this person, some commonality he could to use to connect with. If he works through his own fear and his own hurt, maybe he could find some way to strike up that needed conversation, past the other's fears, and perhaps a mutual understanding. A friendship.

And *Clark* is the one who needs to try harder and understand more; because he’s the one with power here, his own fears are not greater than those anyone else on this planet. His capacity to hurt is greater than theirs to hurt him in return.

So, giving brief thanks to the speed that gave him the subjective time to work though his own bullshit, Clark tries to start listening.

It’s easier now to listen in on sounds close that heartbeat. Clark’s had more practice using his powers, and specifically using his powers in and around the cacophony of a city.
The hardest part turns out to be actually finding a moment to spare, in between his duties as a reporter and his duties as Superman and his duties to be decent instead of a creep, when Clark could listen to sounds that might help him find context. Afternoons and sometimes evenings when he’d have the time, Clark would only hear papers rustling or what sounded like typing. Clark usually stops listening only a second or two of this, knowing how much it bothered him when anybody lurks over his shoulder at work.

Whenever he tunes in during the morning, all he hears is generally the quiet breaths and rustles of sleep. Given how often and how late the person sleeps in, Clark had thought it might’ve been a professional athlete but he tries listening during various live sports aired on TV and only rarely did the heartbeat rise. And it never slowed during any breaks or halftimes. The most he hears is the sound of glasses and a weird echo of the TV, as if the other person was somewhere watching as well.

Maybe the weird hours indicates a college student. Or there’s any number of construction workers, police, or random fitness junkies that might be a match.

Or, he thinks in shock one night, that person could be in fight club.

Clark hears fists against flesh, some yelling, bones cracking, a low groan. His hearing snaps back to himself in his surprise. He’d already been uncomfortable because the heartbeat was racing and it’s incredibly rude to listen in on someone’s nightmares. Even more, its incredibly uncomfortable for him to listen to someone in pain without being able to help them. Clark had already been half-ready to shut down his abilities when he’d been startled out of his focus.

Clark stares blankly out his window.

It was a little past midnight.

The person he’d been listening to… is in an underground fighting ring? It would explain the hours and the athleticism needed. Maybe even explain the sound of champagne and sports that he hears earlier in the evenings.

But that would also mean all those nightmares Clark thought he was experiencing as an echo… weren’t nightmares?

Had he been wrong this entire time?

Clark flops over on his mattress.

If the heartbeat is racing only because of exertion, or at least mostly, maybe he wasn’t scared of Clark? Of Superman?

How much more effective could Clark have been on that day, facing Zod, if he’d actually known what to do? Was it even possible to get tips that would work for him? How could Clark even train with a normal human? It would be difficult, maybe absurd.

But then, the owner of that heartbeat wasn’t normal. The rate of it, the sound of it, their resonance, they must be among the most highly trained people in the world; Clark had always known this.

An athlete, he’d thought, but never this type of athlete.

Underground fighting is not polished, not socially condoned, not even with the veneer of respectability given to such things as Vegas MMA or boxing matches. It’s ugly in a way that is hard to look at, in a way Clark didn’t know that he still found things ugly. He didn’t want to believe that
the person the heart belonged to would be so crude and unrespectable.

It’s a small-minded thought, Clark realizes eventually as time grows elastic around him.

And feels ashamed of himself.

Who is he to judge how a person gets by? Hadn’t he travelled the world and seen all sorts of situations where a person could fall into ruts, places both city and village where people get lost in the cracks? There are very few people who run into danger, and most of them are the type who are good hearted people, wishing to help.

Because that heartbeat, during Black Zero Day, had been getting closer. Running towards the disaster instead of running away, despite all its humanity and mortality and fears.

Maybe he ended up getting a job on the scene, Clark thinks excitedly.

The rescue workers were so short handed that day and the days following, that many people pitched in no matter their jobs. Maybe the heartbeat sounds so quick whenever Clark appears because he’d been kept on as a first responder.

And that’s why the next time the heart races, Clark has no problem with listening in, but tries to time it to when the heart is slowing down instead of racing. It’s right after lunch so maybe it’s right after an emergency. Maybe there’d be a debriefing, and Clark can get a better idea of a location and if he’s very lucky maybe a name.

Instead:

A rattle of small objects. Pills, he realizes, recognizing the distinct pop of a prescription bottle. The type of gurgle that sounds like wine.

“Don’t you dare.” The sound of a tray being set down. The chime of china and silverware.

“Alfred?”

“Take that with orange juice.”

“What if I prefer grape?”

“Fermented I suppose.” A sigh, “What if I prefer you stop chasing that early grave, sir.”

“—KENT what did I say about spacing out?”

Clark blinks at Lois, thrown. “Ah, sorry.”

Why would someone working as an EMT or other type of first responder have someone deliver breakfast to them? It can’t have been food delivered to a hospital bed; he would have heard a plastic tray, maybe the beep of machines, not china that sound expensive, not wine bottles.

Maybe the man, and Clark knows it’s a man now by the voice, doesn’t daylight as anything. Does underground fighting really pay that much? The puzzle furrows his forehead even as he goes about his day, hearing all the talk shows dissect Superman, hearing the discussion over the use of power and the need for accountability, and trying to convince Perry that chasing down the Gotham Bat was
the necessary and responsible thing to do.

Clark spends long amber moments during the day turning the memory around all its angles, worrying at it. The fondness in the voice while jesting with the man named ‘Alfred’, and the paternal exasperation in how Alfred pushes back, the undercurrent of defeat in the back of both their throats. The clear habit of taking medication with alcohol, and of the presence of alcohol itself, right after waking up.

*Was the prescription for an injury?* Clark wonders, and presses on that thought repeatedly the way he’s seen people pick at bruises or scabs.

A bit surprised at the pain of it, as if by hurting he could be sure its real.

As if by hurting it could make the hurt less.

*What if the prescription was for an ongoing condition? Some of those first responders are still suffering from conditions due to asbestos.* Clark thinks that might be worse. Or at least it causes him to be more short of breath. It makes a sharp heartache turn slow and sore.

It’s so easy for the people around him to die.

It could have been so easy, he realizes, for this person to have died during Black Zero. He’d known the guy had been there on the streets. But it’d been one heartbeat of many, and it’d never left his ear. His Ma had pointed the fact out long ago, but the idea hadn’t truly *touched* him. He'd never truly prepared.

He’d filtered the sounds separately: There was the sound of everybody in the city. There was Zod. And then there was him and the person with that heart.

It hadn’t been a surprise, with Zod finally dead, that the heartbeat survived too. Clark survived, so of course it beat on. Clark was alive, so of course he hears it. And he didn’t even realize that he’d been unconsciously carrying the thought until today.

And the idea of that heart *stopping*, perhaps even because of him, makes him wheeze as if punched by Zod all over again. He'd always known of the possibility but he’d never *felt* it. He’d thought he’d been prepared that one horrible month, but Clark had always known that the sound would be waiting, if he reached for it.

He reaches for it now, and it seems infinitely more precious.

And finding this person seems infinitely more vital.

At night, the heart races again, and Clark waits for it to slow down. This time it slows down exponentially fast, as if rigidly controlled. And when he listens, he hears a voice doubled; one familiar, and the other deeper, metallic, mechanized.

“This way.” Something heavy is pushed open.

“You are sure?” a woman asks.

Clark realized with a start that it's in Cantonese. Both parties were speaking in Cantonese. He’d picked up the language in his travels.
“Yes, your kidnappers, I’ve stopped them at their other building days ago. The policemen were there and will come. You can wait, or follow me.”

The words were almost gentle. There’s the sound of quiet footsteps, and then many lighter ones after a pause, much more noisy. The sound of a door opening. That metal echo of alleyways funneling street noises. Hushed female whispers.

The particular buzzing sound heard near a large halogen sign.

“They are kind here, and will keep you safe.”

The ‘thank you’s that echo back have a familiar lilt to it even as they fade away.

It’s familiar more to Superman than to Clark. It’s familiar to that heartbeat too, because the beat remains in that same steady rhythm.

It’s familiar, Clark realizes in shock, in panic, because—

“It’s the Bat!” a boy’s voice yells excitedly, Clark’s hearing is jumping around uncontrolled, seeking something understandable, something sane, “Look, Will, look!”

“Shuddup Jerome,” an older voice says, “The guys say he just a boogeyman, he don’t exist.”

“What, ‘cause you scared? Momma says you do nothin’ wrong, he’ll watch over you.”

“Yeah, right, whatever.”

“Will!”

“You’ll understand when you’re older.” A door slams.

“Superman, help!” The shout interrupts his concentration.

The noise around that shout: plaster cracking and wood giving away. The rumble of an earthquake, screams, objects falling.

Widening his scope: We are just getting news of this, there has been a magnitude 6.5 earthquake in Los Angeles…

Clark shakes himself loose from his thoughts and goes to help. Tries, that is.

Tries to focus (tries to help). He is still too late to be able to save some people, especially those in buildings that aren’t up to code, fragile and dangerous, projects and apartments rented three families deep. The poorer communities tend to live in them and many didn’t survive the initial quake.

In the morning, on talk shows, “Why didn’t Superman focus equally on all neighborhoods?”

On blogs, ‘Map of Superman sightings, overlaid with the 2010 census’.

On Twitter: SUPERMAN IS A RACIST ASSHOLE #notmysavior
There has to be a better way. Superman can only help with the immediate crises. He can’t help with long term problems, systemic abuses.

But Clark Kent can.

“This Bat vigilante has been consistently targeting the port and the adjacent projects and tenements,” he argues that same morning.

But gets his story pitch shot down.

Perry speaks and Clark knows that’s not all of it.

They’re arguing past each other. Perry is dealing with the newspaper’s bottomline and Clark—Clark is still reeling, he wants to punch something; the heartbeat Clark has been attuned to is the Bat vigilante’s. The person with that heart that he grounds himself on is causing fear, on purpose, when Clark would give everything to only give hope.

The Bat must be insane, there must be something wrong with him.

(does that make him a monarch or a viceroy? the poison or the mimic?)

Is this his line in the sand? Is this too crude, too unsavory, too ugly for him to take? (to be? to relate to?) Enough to make Clark stop listening, make him stop being enthralled by that heartbeat? He thinks about how quickly he latched onto the idea of the guy being an EMT instead of working in an underground ring, thinks of how he was more willing to consider that the prescriptions were for physical injuries than pills for a psychological condition.

Clark didn’t know he still carried this in himself.

Clark had been so desperate for some sort of connection, to get him to listen, that he’d let Zod get away with all that destruction— so what sort of heart could be one to match Clark’s?

What sort of heart belongs to Batman?

‘...how could he decide which lives count, and which do not,’ asked the woman from Nairomi.

‘...to have an individual engaging in the state level interventions should give us all pause,’ said the senator.

‘...thank you.’ He remembers the women, Cantonese and cautious, saying.

He knows now that those words must be a rare occurrence because people still don’t catch sight of the the Gotham Bat often enough to disprove that he is a myth. Despite two decades worth of rumor, several years of which in the age of social media, not many have a confirmed sighting or a clear video. Thus, logically, not many to ever get a chance to say thanks. Even if enough people know so that good people feel safer.

Enough to make criminals afraid.

Maybe enough so that good people don’t turn criminal even though they’ve fallen through the cracks of the world. (the Wills, the Jeromes)

Clark’s still thinking about this as he arrives at the library benefit at Luthor’s mansion. About strange awful symmetries, and the limits of governments and law and police. About the problems they might or might not solve, and brands on sex traffickers, what hides as truth and what could be justice and
how Clark has relied so much for so many years on a sound that’s—

coming closer.

A car drives up, slows, and paparazzi light bloom like so many explosions. Time slows down but Clark can do nothing to stop it. A man exits from his black box of a car and Clark has the crazy urge to close that door before he could get out.

“Who’s that?”

Clark knows him to be the Bat. He knows him by his heartbeat. He feel his own heart speeding up at the proximity and when he looks at him it’s like snapshots, like layers. Fine fabrics and expensive metals, small blades tucked away in shoes, tiny screwdriver and pliers in his watch, and electronics at wrist and ear and belt.

Something of a James Bond, Clark thinks wryly, except Bond never had so many fractures or contusions in so many stages of healing. Never so many scars. And Bond was never built so much like a brick wall; which is when he takes in Bruce’s skin as a whole, and then drags his sight away before his face can get any more hot.

He is, and it is a wild shock, more attractive than Clark expected. Clark breathes in, shuts his x-ray away. (Clothed, the vigilante is somehow smaller. Or is it more contained?)

“—that is Bruce Wayne.”

And now Clark knows him by name. It doesn’t help. His thoughts unravel like a trainwreck, more unstoppable than a locomotive.

The Prince of Gotham, everyone knows because everyone else knows, is a feckless playboy and worse than a Kardashian. Careless and insulting and with someone new on his arm daily, saved only by his philanthropy. Which he uses for tax breaks. An unreliable owner and CEO, more wealth than brains, an adrenaline junkie despite multiple extreme injuries at whatever new sport he decides to fail at—

Clarks can’t unsee the array of lacerations and bullet wounds that give lie to the tale, nor the pattern of healed fractures that can’t be explained away. He remembers all the bruising he’d glimpsed. He remembers the pills. He thinks about how incredibly mortal this human is. And the hours required if a man, without powers like Clark’s, were to do all the things he’s read the Gotham Bat to have done.

The heart capacity required to be a vigilante.

To help despite the media hating you. Despite thanks given so rarely. Despite nightmares, and waking up from them. Clark thinks about the Wayne family history.

He thinks also about those times that heart sang and how it doesn’t come close to the frequency of sex the playboy Wayne is perceived as having, unless the sex he’d been having had been singularly and consistently shitty.

He watches Bruce Wayne greet an acquaintance by the door, a model perhaps, in a low-cut sapphire dress. She’s all but falling out of it as she presses her chest against the billionaire’s arm. Clark sees him leer at her and sees him peer down her cleavage, sees his eyes crinkle and sees him lean down to whisper something into her ear, as she smirks.
The heartbeat is unmoved. Its orchestra rolls on, detached from events as if its owner was stationed elsewhere, steady and sonorous.

Clark hears it stay that way even as the man gladhands his way through the entrance hall while everyone waited for the speeches to start. The rich and the glitterati turn towards Bruce Wayne as if iron filings to a lodestone. There were all kinds, senators and old money and Fortune 500’s. And there were the athletes and celebrities and models and socialites that came as plus ones and who shamelessly threw themselves at the billionaire, no matter whose arm they were originally attached to. Hell, at times both try; there were three offers for a threesome before he made it past the atrium.

But no matter their type or gender or offer and no matter the degree Wayne flirts, no matter how much they touch him and how much he touches back, his heart stays lazy. Clark would think that he’s identified the man wrong except for how absolutely certain he is of the heart, the voice, the sound of his lungs.

He is even more certain when he hears the name ‘Alfred’. And when Bruce Wayne moves, Clark could only follow.

Because that heart? It’s moving just a little faster now. He goes down stairs, past a kitchen, dimly recognizes a wall of servers because this is as near to that sound as he’s ever been and Clark is so close now that he feels like he could pretty much touch the heartbeat.

It jumps.

It jumps both in his ear, and beneath his thumb.

Clark is staring down blankly at a wrist, trapped in his hand somehow, his thumb right on that large vein. The heartbeat starts to run, and he rubs his thumb gently along it, which is when it starts to sing.

“Well who might you be?”

Clark lets go at the saccharine tone. Darts his gaze up, flushing. Bruce Wayne’s gaze meets his, eyes dissecting and dark in contrast to the playboy leer. He wonders how many people fall for the smile that didn’t reach his eyes and fall for the voice that hides that darkness. (*sings* like a knife’s edge, like a warsong)

“Well, there’s no need for that, son.” He reaches for Clark’s press pass and reels him in with a tug on his lanyard. “Clark Kent, Daily Planet,” he reads, “I didn’t see you come in.”

“I,” Clark breathes in. This was nothing like any of his plans for how this would go if they’d ever meet. The air turns sticky and sound falls away. If he moves now, even at superspeed, Bruce will feel the tug on the lanyard. This close Bruce would feel the air displacement. His clothes would rustle. This man is the Gotham Bat and he has to already suspect; Clark has surprised him already by grabbing at his wrist, a man who is used to fighting and used to people grabbing at him.

Bruce’s pulse had jumped at that moment.

Maybe Clark has already given his speed away. He doesn’t remember. The dust motes hang in the air and Clark looks past them and looks at the man’s eyes. They’re dilated. Each microexpression in those picoseconds is broken up by false placidness; the struggle of a mask attempting to stay on.

Behind it, breaking through: fear, awe, lust. Moment by moment, cycling as if simultaneous. Or indecisive.

It’s already too late.
Clark doesn’t want the fear; it may dog the Bat’s heels, it may be a bedmate of Gotham and thus of its Prince, but Clark has had more than enough of it these past months. Clark also has enough of awe, enough of people looking towards him for answers and solutions that he only has so much capacity to provide. He doesn’t want awe from someone that he wishes to be a friend.

But it’s not so much that Clark is backed into the choice so much as he lets himself choose something he’d decided probably years ago, that his mother had already seen before he’d left home, before he’d let himself know consciously.

Alright then, Clark gives himself over to the song of that heartbeat, and lets that heart pace his own. With how hard this man lives, time is precious, each beat of it.

He reaches up with both hands and lets fingertips rest at Bruce’s throat where that heartbeat thrums harder, as if reaching back, or trying to strike him. Smooths across the veins gently enough to feel the pulse and lets their connection roll across his senses. Cologne, applied at the neck, skin-warms and unfurls into Bruce’s scent; his smell as complex and subtle as the way life moves in the rooms of this man’s heart.

Clark exhales, shuddery, “It’s better up close.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” Bruce murmurs, eyes a shock of black, all pupil, breaths controlled but lungs trembling with holding it level.

Clark can hear everything.

But especially that heartbeat in the cup of his hands. He lets one palm fall, drifting down closer to the sound so that he can splay all five fingers across the breadth of Bruce’s chest, beneath where the muscle works. A hand catches his wrist but doesn’t move him.

The pulse races faster as he presses careful, careful.

Clark glances up and lets himself be measured.

“...really?”

Clark nods, relieved that Bruce gets it, that he understands. “I didn’t know who you were.”

“You didn’t know how to find me?” Bruce looks down, visibly discomforted. He stares as he lifts Clark’s hand from his chest, using the lightest of pressure from his fingertips to guide it away. He stares at their hands for a long, astonished moment, “you were searching for me, Clark?”

“...yeah, for years.”

Clark can see the moment Bruce realizes that he’s containing Superman with that touch as thoroughly as if he’d been pinning him down. Even more so, considering.

His heartbeat is singing. Clark’s own sings too. Flushed, overheated, overwhelmed, he looks back and sees Bruce registering it all, naked on Clark’s face.

Bruce inhales sharply.

“Speaking of time: may I say, before this goes much further and I run out of libations, that the download is complete.”
It’s like being hosed down. The voice from the earpiece is drier than a single malt.

“Oh! Sorry, um, Alfred, is it?” Clark hazards.

There’s a pointed silence.

“...Mr. Kent—”

“Mr. Wayne?” Lex’s assistant interrupts from the doorway. “This area is off limits to guests. I will have to ask you to leave.” Her voice is firm and her face set in the particular manner people have of walking in on things that are Entirely Too Much Information.

It’s a face that 'Bruce Wayne' seems very familiar with, as Bruce goes full-playboy in response, “Could you be a sweetheart and give us, say, fifteen minutes?”

Clark’s mortified and steals a glance over his shoulder.

Her eyes narrow.

Bruce’s hand slides around to the small of Clark’s back and tugs him in. “Ten,” he bargains with sleaze in his voice. “Look at him, we can make it in ten.”

Clark chokes.

“Now, Mr. Wayne.”

“Aw,” Bruce steps forward and turns them around so that Clark’s back was against the servers and he’s hidden from the assistant, “Raincheck?”

Clark kind of wants the ground to swallow him whole but notices there’s a small device dangling on a cable. It's display is zero’d out.

'Transfer complete.'

Bruce twitches as if he wants to reach for it, but the asian woman in the terrifying heels is taking one step into the room, clearing her throat pointedly. There’s no chance to do anything. Clark doesn't have a good angle to grab it either, not without being seen. Bruce whisks them all from the room, seeming to be trying to hide the sight of Clark from her gaze as he sets himself between them.

There’s a tenseness about the line of Bruce’s back and Alfred’s voice confirms it.

“A gallant effort, certainly, to retrieve the leech if that was your Plan B. Dare I hope you have a Plan C?”

Clark tugs them to a stop in the kitchen to help stall, asking for a drink, but all the waitstaff’s distracted by the TV.

There’s a fire in Juarez.

A girl is trapped in the building on the upper floors but the ceiling is made of wood, and on fire, weakened. They can’t land a rescue. All the stairs have collapsed. Residents and firefighters and media alike stare at where she’s waving from a window and there’s the horror in the realization that there’s nothing anyone can do except to watch her burn.

Clark is torn, they still have to get Bruce’s leech.
It’s probably fairly vital if the Bat is willing to stall and if Alfred spoke up. Clark had interrupted them at their task, and they’d probably have gotten away with it if Clark hadn’t followed. He tightens his fingers around Bruce’s and he glances back at Lex’s assistant, who is stationed by the door to the server room still, watching them like a hawk.

50/50 chance she suspects something.

On the news, reporter’s voices are leashed under professionalism.

The anchors coldly review the information they have. It’s not clear if they maintain the cameras on the trapped girl out of respect rather than their own self-interest. She seems to be trying to shout her last words to her family. Clark is not sure if they will turn the cameras away as she dies. Death by fire is the worst; the screams are the worst. He can’t watch this.

Clark looks to Bruce.

Bruce is already glancing at him. Then he nods at the TV.

Go, Bruce mouths like he understands.

And of course he does, that solid steady heart. Clark keeps his smile inside himself but feels his whole face light up. He releases Bruce’s hand and walks out of the room.

Bruce watches him go, a side-eye.

“I need some air,” Clark tells him, Lex’s assistant in his peripheral vision. "Um, I..."

Bruce snorts, visibly feigning that it doesn’t matter, and lifts a champagne flute from a tray. He’s turning back towards the screen in the same motion, a clear dismissal. Don’t call me, a clear command for anyone who could read the air.

To an outside observer, it wouldn’t be surprising if Clark made himself scarce for the rest of the night, after such a brush off. It reads like it’s an assignation that turned awkward.

But they understand each other. As Clark walks up the stairs, out of the mansion, and speeds towards the fire, he knows he doesn’t have to wonder at Bruce’s look just as he knows Bruce won’t wonder at his words.

Both of their hearts sound light.

Chapter End Notes

“There were thirst and hunger, and you were the fruit.
There were grief and the ruins, and you were the miracle.”

— Pablo Neruda, Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair

Was there any particular lines/moments that was ??? or :0 or =D ? Let me know!
(honestly I leave keyboard smashing for alot of my comments so, y'know. I love them all and have no shame)
Chapter Notes

Many thanks and love to BatShitCrazy and moonbelowsea for the betas and support, all remaining errors are my own. Much love also to the superbatreversebang Discord for all the sprints and discussions and helping me through figuring out a conclusion that got this fic written!

Many of the character dynamics is a blend of movieverse and comicsverse. See Batman #36. In particular I will also never stop laughing at this. I also took certain characterizations from Snyder's cut of JL that never made it to theatrical.

Bruce sees Mercy’s eyes following Clark as he leaves. They return to pin him with a look, while she maintains position right outside the kitchens by the server room door.

Someone comes up to her with a clipboard and questions. She turns to them with answers, but Bruce notices she’s keeping him in her peripheral vision. He wonders how far Lex has let her into his confidence. Whatever Mercy thinks she walked in on, she’s clearly not letting him wander around unattended, and in fact takes a step further into the room as if to loom over him from a distance.

There’s something distinctive about the way that she keeps her balance that he doesn’t entirely trust. Three places on that outfit where she can hide a knife.

But Bruce is secure in the midst of the kitchen staff; he ignores her and steals a canapé from a side tray.

Scarfs it down.

“This is great,” he compliments the chefs from around his mouthful. They grunt at him, absently working. They’re all watching the TV.

A murmur rises as a streak of blue appears.

Superman.

The anchors are excitedly speaking over the video. A quick patter of Spanish echoing the cheers and prayers from the crew around him. Superman floats gently down and delivers the girl to her mother.

The people on the scene crowd him in a tide and reach towards him as if to touch a statue that’d wept.

There’s a closeup of his face and Bruce sees Superman look around himself, at those reaching hands. The anchors are describing the live scene. Its as if the alien is holy, as if he's giving benediction. They say the expression on that face is happy. That he is full of quiet joy, a reserved grace, using words usually found in descriptions of religious artwork.

Bruce thinks the man look nothing so much as confused and a bit distraught, framed and trapped behind the glass of the TV screen.
He glances away and looks at Lex’s assistant. She is watching the news as well, unamused, jaw hard.

Behind her a woman in red meets his eyes as she slips into the server room. Bruce picks up two champagne flutes from a tray and walks over to pass one to Mercy.

“A drink? Love your shoes by the way.”

She takes it, but her eyes narrow. “Are you quite done, Mr. Wayne?” She sets the flute down on a nearby table, her gaze tracking that she set the glassware down gently. Behind her, the woman-in-red moves quickly back up the stairs, tilting her head at him.

Meet me up there, Bruce reads.

Bruce tosses his drink back and picks up another, saluting Mercy with it, “Ok, now I'm good.”

He swans up the stairs ahead of the assistant, quickly losing her in the crowd in time to catch the last of a very awkward speech.

Bruce takes a minute to unpack the last twenty. It couldn’t have been more than that, the time it took for him to slip into the server room maybe 3 minutes at most, 7 more minutes to download, the last ten to stall and resurface.

It’d felt an eon.

Bruce had always been the most himself as Batman rather than the personality he’d constructed that lives under ‘Bruce Wayne’. It was a farce he’d taken up as a necessary evil after he’d came back to Gotham from his years training. He tells himself that it’s no different than the faces normal people put on to go to work with, to talk to customers with, to serve assholes coffee with and then have to smile.

“Thank you and have a nice day!”

Going to these charity events is a type of patrol that leaves him with deeper bruises than those from the Gotham streets. Even ignoring the soul-sucking two-faced gladhanding of various powerbrokers and pocketbooks, the way he has to balance short term losses and completing long term goals, is the grating reality of the glitterati.

The arm candy seek him out like he’s a prize to be fought over.

They perform the type of people that they hear Bruce Wayne is attracted to.

When he was younger, he was better at performing with them. It was like a play where everyone was in on the secret that they were all just after something. Using each other to get by. Increasingly Bruce had been wondering, what was the point?

All these years. Everything sacrificed, everything bartered, everything lost; was Gotham any better?

He’d been venturing out less as Bruce Wayne over the past 18 months and more as Batman, as he’d felt the facade of ‘Bruce Wayne’ worn thinner and thinner. He’d look to Jason’s memorial case when Alfred makes protests for him to go out more and those protests die like so many other things. He already knows that success from an outing tonight will net him at least a silent, I told you so, and maybe yet another needle about children.

Most likely Alfred has a silent bet with himself over the amount of indirect prodding it will take for Bruce to blow up at him over it. To finally shout the words, “How could you,” and “I will not
replace him,” and “my son has died.”

Bruce hasn’t called Jason that to his face, let alone—

let alone—

The words are unnecessary, that’s all. There’s no need to say them. It’s maudlin, and they have work to do.

He’s his parents legacy. Bruce can’t be Jason’s… anything.

But he can be a good son. He can still protect Gotham. Barely a month after the anniversary of Jason having been put into the ground, the spaceships came to their world like the some cyberpunk dream, and he had to watch as Gotham’s sister city was pulverized by it. Bruce had to watch as even more people he’d been responsible for died under his watch or were irrecoverably damaged in front of him.

(a little girl, crying)

The fact of the matter is that Bruce is past his expiration date. The fact of the matter is that Bruce is setting himself up against a god that he doesn’t trust to be merciful, or good, or considerate. To that alien, Earth must be nothing so much as a house of china, as it stumbles around with its heavy paws. Bruce refuses to let it break anything else.

The leech connects.

Seven minutes, it reads.

And then Bruce finds his wrist in one of those self-same paws.

It takes an instant to realize these facts: someone had followed him, they moved unobtrusively, there is a sense of air displacement from something moving fast, the displacement doesn’t match that of a strike or a punch. Bruce’s reflexes, honed by over 20 years of practice and danger, had not been fast enough to compensate.

And this intruder might’ve been an unknown; but Bruce had done his research. He’d been gathering footage of the alien and attempted to parse its thoughts and the motivations behind its eyes, which were blue.

His eyes... are blue.

Bruce recognizes those cheekbones, that mouth, the furrow on that forehead even though the glasses mute the shape of that face.

Superman.

Some part of him is shrill in terror, completely unprepared. Eighteen months of anger and resentment crashes through him for an instant before he could command himself. Had it been another life, he would have chosen to face Superman first as the Bat, with an armor of anger surrounding him like a shield. (His fear had always been forged into anger, into determination, into strength. But he can’t fetch that suit right now.) As ’Bruce Wayne’, his armor consists of cloth and smiles and deflections; it consists of money and lies and lust and leers. He shoves it all down so that he could have battle clarity.

He needs to survive this.
Superman has a hold of his wrist. He could snap it in two like a building girder, he could pin Bruce to a wall like a butterfly, he could—

rub his thumb along his wrist like a lover’s caress.

“Well who might you be?” Bruce Wayne has habits for this sort of thing, even as conscious thought blanks out in that moment while his synapses seem intent on preserving excessive sensory information into long-term memory.

The hand is fine-boned for his size, uncalloused. Soft. Controlled; even though those eyes had been, for a good while, unfocused and not present. The fingers didn’t press hard. The thumb follows his vein blindly, but accurately, as if it’d been seeking Bruce’s pulse.

The fingertips are warm, but not painfully so.

Bruce would still swear Superman left brands behind when he lets go.

The door to the server room is made of glass, he mentally notes. Anyone could see them speak if they glanced in.

Bruce Wayne needs an excuse to linger.

Bruce Wayne, Bruce thought to himself, reels Superman in, reads off a name that made guileless blue eyes blink, flickers of thought suddenly racing in them too quick for Bruce to see.

He looks singularly alien right then; when the moment before, Superman had looked nothing so much as confused, startled, human.

Was it only a good imitation?

He’s leaning in, slightly, because Bruce had tugged him in by the cheap polyester lanyard. Its tensile strength should have been nothing to Superman; he could have broken it simply by not moving.

Superman’s shorter than I am, he thinks wildly, watching from beyond himself as two hands reach up to Bruce’s throat, touching his pulse. If they pressed in too hard, at those points, held for perhaps a minute, enough oxygen would be blocked from his brain that even Bruce would pass out despite his training. So easy a 90 lb woman can do it, let alone hands that can smash through rock.

Bruce loses all track of time, feeling fragile, his heartbeat pounding helplessly at those fingertips, waiting for those hands to close tight. Waiting to die.

To be proven right.

If Superman was following him, did he see into Bruce’s heart? Know what Bruce was after? Did he understand how much Bruce wished to put him down, to pin him beneath his boot? To watch that improbable face twist up in suffering? (or something that looks very much like suffering)

His pulse throbs through his ears and Bruce knows with vague out-of-body horror that he’s moments from getting hard.

“It’s better up close.”

Christ.

He asks for clarification. (Bruce has to be wrong about the lust in that voice, he has to, because if there was, why wouldn’t the alien just—)
Superman drifts his hand down to Bruce’s wildly beating heart, as if he hears it and wants to pull it out. Bruce’s mind flashes towards the points on his body where the alien had touched, wrist, throat, chest, all pulse points, and comes to a startling conclusion.

“...really?”

“I didn’t know who you were.”

“You didn’t know how to find me?”

And Superman looks abashed, perhaps a little ashamed. Tentative.

(—why wouldn't he just take, like any man in power might?)

Bruce knows what attraction looked like, sounded like. Bruce knows his attractiveness, knows his wealth, knows his status; Bruce knows them as well as he knows all his weapons and his gear. He knows how much people want it for themselves. Knows that the reason people didn’t try to take was because Bruce didn’t let them.

All that power at Superman’s disposal; he could have just took what he wanted.

Instead: he stands there and lets Bruce move his hand away.

While all but drunk, apparently, on the sound of Bruce’s heart, tracked him into this room like a bloodhound for it— “You were searching for me, Clark?”

“Yeah,” Clark answers quietly, like Clark is his real name, and maybe it is. Maybe it was. Did his mother give it to him? Did he grow up with it? Had he lived here, like he was just anyone else?

This changes everything. This makes all of Bruce’s plans petty, worthless, useless. This is ridiculous, how Clark is looking at him with awe and trust, as if he’d been looking for Bruce like a man seeking water—

“For years.”

Bruce looks at Clark and feels damaged in comparison. He stares at how he’s trapped Superman’s hand. Bruce’s fingers, calloused, knuckles hardened, microfractured, feels like it is touching something that should’ve been set in stained glass.

*What do you want of me?* he’d thought in that moment, mouth opening. *(I’d give it to you.)*

And Alfred interrupted them like a shock of cold water.

Good timing in the end, as Lex’s assistant had interrupted them soon after.

And speak of the devil.

“Bruce Wayne!” Lex makes a beeline towards him now that he's finished his speech, looking around like he'd misplaced something. “I wanted to introduce you to, hmm. Where is he?”

“No worries,” Bruce laughs and tips his glass towards the man, “I’ve been introducing myself to your very fine vintages.”
“A fourth hin of wine am I right?” Luthor’s eyes were still flickering about. The tightness around them read as angry. “How rude, where’s a lamb when you need one?”

‘... and you shall prepare wine for the drink offering, one-fourth of a hin, with the burnt offering or for the sacrifice,’ Bruce internally quotes and raises an eyebrow, but drawls with pretend confusion, “Leeex, lamb needs a red, not champagne.”

“You’re right!” Lex crows, throwing a triumphant pointer finger, “If I bring the red then, would you bring the lamb?”

The hell? Bruce files the oddness away in case it might prove significant later.

Mercy appears over the other billionaire’s shoulder, “Lex, the senator would like to speak with you.”

Luthor smirks and bows his apologies and they head off.

As soon as they disappear from sight, a slim hand slips into the crook of his elbow. Bruce looks over and is entirely unsurprised to see the woman in the red dress.

“I seem to be meeting all sorts of people tonight.”

“All sorts of friends, I assure you,” she ducks her head towards him as if for a flirtatious whisper, sliding a hand across his chest, then beneath his jacket. “I think we are not at cross purposes, you and I. There is a photograph Lex has that belongs to me.”

A sudden weight drops into his inner-coat pocket.

“This, I think, belongs to you. I trust you can return the favor.”

“You would?” Bruce doesn’t like to owe favors to unknowns, and his public persona isn’t one to inspire faith. He gives her a rakish grin and puts some space between them. “Whatever gave you that impression?”

“I’ve a job recovering the lost. And I hear things.” She smiles like everyone in the room is naked to her. “I know how to see through damage to find that which is just in need of… some repair.”

A grimace twitches at his mouth, Bruce wrangles it back into a leer. “And you’re the one who’s going to ‘repair me’?”

She laughs and shakes her head.

“You are a better man than I think either of us know, Mr. Wayne. Even if you sometimes forget.” She smiles and pats his face.

For all his age, Bruce suddenly feels very young. And chastised the way he usually feels only in front of Alfred, and the dead.

“You have my information,” she looks towards his breast pocket. “Moreover from what I hear, you already have your hands full.” With another enigmatic smile, she wanders off.

Bruce watches her go, thinking, then lifts up his coat’s left lapel to reach into the pocket. Next to the smooth and familiar plastic of the leech is a business card.

He draws it out.
Bruce, in another life, after he’d extracted himself from maybe another half an hour of gossip and networking, might have found himself staring down the progress bar as his systems decrypt the files retrieved from Luthor.

He might’ve passed out at the monitors.

In this life he finds himself distracted as his computer runs, rubbing his hands, chasing lingering phantom heat. For all the intensity of that moment with Clark, they’d barely even touched; just his throat, his chest, their fingers.

It’s stupid, that’s what it is, to be like this only after one meeting. Bruce knows he is intense, knows that he processes facts and meaning faster than most people can react, able to solve mysteries that other people cannot; this is what makes him Batman. This is what allows him to do what he does.

This is why he couldn’t be anything than what he is.

This is why he can fight beyond what others can, why he is able and willing to do more than an entire department of police, why he understood his life’s work that night in an alleyway in Gotham.

Bruce understood in that moment that his own tragedy may as well be all tragedy. That this hurt only echoes other’s hurts, that he was singularly privileged to have never been this way hurt in all his nine years of life before, and that other people spend their whole lives in this fugue and continue their lives walking wounded. There must be something, something, he can do, must do, is duty-bound to do, to fix this. People can't live like this. (shouldn't live like this. I can't live like this.)

That night watching his parents breathe their last was an extended revelation. It changed everything.

Must tonight be the same, he thought to himself. This isn’t comparable.

He only met Superman. Briefly. He talked to Clark, not even exchanged that many words. It’s not…

It’s not.

(a little girl, crying, lifted out of a building on fire)

Bruce remembers a couple nights ago. He’d found out that there had been other holdings belonging to those sex traffickers, other cells than the one where he’d pinned down Santos’ crew. The women had been left unattended, trapped, hidden, discarded like a fired gun, and it was nearing the limit to how long a person could survive without water. When he’d broken in, he’d discovered they had been lured to this country with promises of work even though they could not properly speak or read English.

If the women couldn’t read street signs or ask directions, they’d need someone to guide them. But there wasn’t enough time to find people who both knew Cantonese and could be understanding. He doesn’t trust these women to the police; women who are without language or support, power or
documentation, women who 'were going to be prostitutes anyway.' He doesn’t trust them not to just 'disappear'. They arrived in America, seeking hope. Bruce couldn’t just leave them.

So Batman had led them to a shelter sponsored by one of his charities. Their gratitude sank into his ears like awkward touches, like hands reaching out to him as if he was a savior.

(he’s no savior)

Batman works alone out on the streets. Alfred supports him and Bruce is grateful for it. He’s also grateful that he’s the only one receiving a beating, the only one in true danger. There are plans in place, for if Bruce is ever implicated or uncowed, to make sure that Alfred will be safe and free no matter how Bruce failed or has fallen.

(he tries to be a good son)

Clark looked at him like he’s seen the whole of him, and it’s terrible because maybe he did. He’s probably seen Bruce Wayne work the crowd, heard of him through the news; Clark had found out about the espionage, and participated in the deflections. He’s been listening to Bruce's heartbeat ‘for years,’ and how fine had his hearing been? (not fine enough to locate him, but maybe fine enough to know Bruce, hollow and unseemly, except—)

Clark had seemed to know him and still touched his pulse like he wasn’t something contaminated.

Did he even know what Bruce had been looking for? Did he know that Bruce was seeking a way to kill Superman? To contain him?

Bruce knows intimately how much of Gotham, one of the nation’s powerhouse cities, he controls: a little over half the land and businesses, an incredible amount of social capital, and the attendant leverage Wayne Enterprises has over the nation’s economy as a whole. With even this much power, Bruce has been unable to complete his mission, despite two decades of constant work. His parents had done better. In fact Bruce wonders if he’d made things worse.

What Bruce wouldn’t have given for someone he could trust to understand what he sees and say, sometimes, Stop.

(Or perhaps to see the same thing, and say, Go.)

Could Superman condone such a thing, let himself be constrained by more than a hand on his wrist?

Could Clark?

Bruce walks up to his deck, coat off, cuffs rolled up his arms.

He looks for a long moment at the starless night; their light hidden in Gotham pollution, in the smoke from its industries, in the neon and glitter that Gotham streets throw off.

He sits down and folds his legs, at first slightly chilled by the breeze off the water until he breathed and mastered his heartbeat and core temperature. He’d learnt from monks who could maintain equilibrium while sitting shirtless and barefoot in the snow. In comparison this is nothing.

He breathes deeper and slows down his pulse. Then slows it down further. Further.

The temple masters could slow their hearts to nearly a halt. They could exist for hours in an in-between state that gives the appearance of death.
There’s a streaking flash of color in the sky, as if a star fell, its wake slicing a furrow into the lake, booted feet on wood tap-tapping its way towards Bruce, the thunk of knees falling onto the deck, the sound of breathing gone ragged.

The temperature difference between their hands felt like his burned.

“Bruce.”

He raises his pulse back up, to the pace and tremble of the sound of his name.

Bruce comes back to himself; he had folded his hands in full lotus meditation and found Clark had placed his in the cup of them.

Clark looks alarmed as he takes him in.

Bruce stares calmly back.

There’s a race of thoughts behind Clark’s eyes, and then he relaxes.


“You did that on purpose.” Clark states. It’s not disbelieving, as if he’d already processed his disbelief. It’s not angry, as if that had been processed, too. It’s gone right into being a statement, as if he’d already resigned himself to Bruce doing that, as if he knows him well enough to expect it of him.

Clark said the words only to let him know that Clark knows and sees him, not because it was a demand that he change.

Bruce can’t meet that idea head on. Can’t meet that sort of understanding, of empathy and humanity. “You were listening,” he says instead. He looks at the blue of the Superman uniform, and instead of the simple bright color it’d appeared to be from far away, on monitors and cameras, this close the fabric is subtle. It is a mass of refracted edges catching the light, a tessellated pattern, a shifting mask.


“And what would stopping do?” Bruce already sort of has an answer, in how quickly Clark showed up after Bruce slowed his heart, but he wants to see how Clark would reply.

He seems to be trying to hold his face steady, “It would be uncomfortable.”

“Elaborate.”

Clark’s forehead furrows in thought. His eyes race with them. “Say someone told you, asked you, never to eat bacon again. Or maybe never smell a rose. Never look at the stars.”

The cape puddles around them like a strange liquid, rippling in silky curves. Bruce wants to grab it. Tug Clark closer.

“You could do that, right? Stop?”

He knows Clark would let him.

“If needed, yes.” Bruce commands his hands to stay still.

“There’s your answer.”
Bruce is shaking his head. Those are simple pleasures, human pleasures, and nothing Bruce would deny him. He feels like the true answer is deeper and broader and far more complex than Clark’s words and from Clark’s expression, he knows it too.

“The sound is familiar to you.” My heartbeat is familiar to you.

Clark looks at his face, and presses one hand splayed down on the wood between them, leaning forward. “Given the chance, I’d like to keep listening.”

It hangs in the quiet, thrown like a gauntlet.

Bruce wants to move closer, wants to give whatever Clark might ask, and Clark rises up to meet him but— He pauses, or perhaps Bruce does.

There are things you need to know. Bruce thinks.

Please let me, Clark silently begs, his mouth temptingly close.

And then the world tears apart to one side.

A man in a red mask and costume sticks his torso through the boiling rip. They flick their eyes over, warily. Both stay frozen so to not invite attack.

“Batman! Lois is the key! Lois is— Am I too early?” The man takes a long look at them, groans, and covers his eyes, “Oh god this isn't even the right dimension!” he peers between his fingers and then covers them again, “It's like watching your parents, this is awful.”

Clark shifts so that he’s in front of Bruce, as if to shield him, rising. Bruce gets up too, watching the newcomer from over Clark’s shoulder, studying the rip in the world. A storm looking as if created of quantum and lightning.

“You know what, nevermind. Superman, they’re coming, he’s going to try to control you.” It spills out quickly, an incomprehensible speed. “I don't even know if Lois is the key anymore. Oh my god, maybe it’s you, prep yourself Batman. I don’t know. Gotta go.”

And then he draws back and the tear closes.

A leaf swirls around the absence, vacuumed in, the only sign of a disturbance.

“Well that wasn’t ominous at all.”

Superman looks down at his feet, bleakly, then across the water. “It’s going to be Zod all over again, isn’t it?”

Bruce pauses and looks Clark over. Lets himself believe in the familiarity of an alien's expressions. Turns on his heel and opens the door. “Come on, there’s something you have to see.”

Bruce takes him down the stairs. Clark’s footsteps are nearly silent on the metal, taking in the cave with long sweeps of his gaze.
He wonders how much Superman can take in at a glance.

Bruce brings him to his monitors, the data had finished decrypting, and pulls up a search for the White Portuguese. He pulls up, silently, the data on the glowing green xeno-mineral. The videos and the simulations of Kryptonian cells breaking apart.

And lets the information damn him.

Clark looks at it. Then turns to Bruce as if he doesn’t understand at all, says, “So what's the plan.”

“You trust me?” The words release on an exhaled breath.

“You could have hid this.”

He couldn’t let that stand. “I was planning on it, yes.” Planning on killing Clark in cold blood; Bruce lets the knowledge of it sit across his shoulders, his face.

“What changed?”

Bruce sees the other man see him wince. He could, in this moment, control his heart so it doesn’t twitch, doesn’t race, isn’t moved.

But he’s already been moved, hasn’t he? Clark had already been listening in.

*What is there to lose?*

“Everything.” Bruce replies, revealing himself. His metaphorical throat in Clark's hands. Continues, knowing this will hurt, “you were raised here, weren’t you?”

Clark shrugs, “Does Kansas count?”

“*Kansas,*” Bruce presses a palm to his forehead, not simply *Earth* but, “What, raised on cows and corn and apple pie?”

“Well, we raised corn, only ever had the one cow for milk, but Ma’s pie is pretty amazing.”

“Your ma’s… pie.” Bruce says flatly and tries to hold the ache in.

“I’ll have you know Martha Kent is the county blue ribbon holder for five years running now and…”

Clark’s voice drifts off as he takes in Bruce’s expression.

Bruce doesn’t know what his face is doing.

Martha. His mother’s name is *Martha.*

Bruce knows how similar he is to the villains in his city. How he is as much a product of Gotham as they are. Knows that it would take just a small change, some awful twist of fate, maybe one truly bad day, to make him a worse sort of ugly. That if he didn’t have Alfred, didn’t have money, or access, or power, there might be no difference.

But never until today has he felt so goddamned close to the man who’d gunned down his parents.

Never had he fallen so far. (Never did he have so little power, did his access not matter, did his money mean *nothing.*) He finally understands what Alfred had been trying to tell him these past few weeks.
Bruce would have—

Would have—

“Hey,” Clark says quietly, hands hovering in front of Bruce’s shoulders as if he’s not sure if he’s allowed to touch.

“I was planning to kill you.” Bruce admits the whole thing out loud, finally. Finally. And gives himself over onto Clark’s hands, falling against them, letting gravity do what it will.

Clark takes his weight with ease.

It’s unfair. He doesn’t deserve this.

“I figured.” He says this like Bruce has already been forgiven, and Bruce can’t wrap his mind around that. Bruce leans his headache against Clark’s brow, who tilts up into it with a pleased hum.

It’s incredibly devastating.

Too much, too intense, they’re close enough to share the same air. Close enough to see the tiny expressions around each other’s eyes. Close enough to see pupil flare black. Bruce can’t help but see how much he’s been forgiven (how he’s precious, how he’s adored), and can’t help but echo it back. Bruce wants to break it into something smaller, into a hug, into a kiss, into sex, into something quantifiable. Into something he can contain.

His lungs hurt from how much he’s breathing, and from how much he’s not breathing.

“I don’t think I could’ve.” Bruce says.

“Figured that too.”

Clark pushes up into a kiss and, no, this is actually worse. Bruce feels more pared open and less able to handle this, this whatever it is, that’s hollowing him out and leaving nothing but stars behind.

Clark makes a sound that echoes in his bones and it curls Bruce’s toes, helplessly; makes him lean in to drink that sound straight from Clark’s mouth. Shove his hands into his hair and their bodies up close.

Alfred bangs his way into the cave.

“Excuse me Master Bruce, but I work here.”

And Bruce is... huh, okay, that’s valid— they’re sprawled against Alfred’s table, and it can’t bear the weight of two grown men and Alfred’s disapproval.

His caretaker pointedly sets down a tray with a carafe of coffee and three mugs between them to separate them when they step apart, sheepishly. After a brief inquiry as to preferences, Alfred presents a cup of coffee to Clark and goes right up to Clark to stare him down.

Clark accepts it, flickering a glance at Bruce, and takes a sip as if it doing so is a test.

“I don’t suppose you have any strong opinions on adoption?”

There’s the slightest of pauses, but Clark maintains eye contact and swallows instead of spits.

“Ignore him,” Bruce desperately says with what shreds of dignity he has left.
“I suppose you can get a surrogate.”

“Alfred!”

Clark takes another sip, consideringly. He lets the pause grow long as he fiddles with the mug and thoughts zoom quick through his gaze.

“I’m not opposed to children, but,” watching them both. “Isn’t that more of a second date sort of question?”

“There’s a showing at Gotham’s Museum of Antiquities in a couple days.” The words echo in the cave. He doesn’t quite know where they came from. Bruce has no recollection of deciding to say them.

Bruce feels extremely caught out when Alfred turns to stare

Clark smiles, “And you would like company.”

“Hadn’t been planning on it, no.” Bruce pours himself a mug.

“Then there’s nothing preventing you from picking me up at 7.”

Clark is blinding, Bruce could barely watch him from his peripheral vision, the knowledge that he weighed the possibility of a future with Bruce and found it not displeasing. That Clark likes the idea of it enough to box step them into it, and manages to keep up with Bruce’s changes of pace.

“That’s assuming you’re considering tonight a first date.” Alfred’s tone is exceedingly dry and paternally disapproving. But he isn’t entirely incorrect.

“No, that’s assuming Clark will let me take him out to lunch tomorrow.”

He beams his best Bruce Wayne smile at the man.

“How about it?”

Clark, unfathomable, suited in alien regalia, peers at him over his mug and takes a long, slow, swallow.

* *

Clark whispers at his side, “So I think we’re counting this as the 9th date?”

The museum curves around them, all arched ceilings and columns and resonance, artifacts housed in delicate glass shells, presented to the Gotham elite as if in tribute. What many don’t realize is that maybe about one in six are forgeries, some that’d escaped scrutiny for decades or even hundreds of years.

But, Bruce muses, there’s something to be said for the value of a flawless imitation. If this is the only way to make art accessible to the general public, instead of keeping them locked away in private labs or bedrooms, then why not let the counterfeits shine?

Why not give them a home here?
“Alfred would say it’s the 6th.” Bruce studies this flipside of Superman. Clark Kent doesn’t exactly slouch but his shoulders are folded forward and thus gentles the line of them, his shirt is tucked to give an impression of paunch, and there’s a weight to his movements that gets the animal hindbrain to register the man as being around 230 lbs.

Superman, meanwhile, gives the impression of being both absolutely weightless and the center of his own gravity. His movements seem infinitely heavy; somehow more real than anything else.

How about it, he’d asked, Inviting Superman to lunch and possible future lunches, and Clark later answered, a hot rush of hands mapping Bruce, pressing him against the lakehouse windows. It felt like he’d been shocked into his body for the first time in decades, as he was swallowed to the root. Finally present and real.

“Alfred does not know that I snuck back onto your deck that night.” Clark doesn’t follow that statement with a touch to his hips, doesn’t defect its meaning with a pat on his back, doesn’t accent it with a hand on his arm. Doesn’t let the content or context of the words affect the tone of his voice, or the proximity of their bodies.

Bruce is simultaneously amused and vibrating with frustration. “Are you still counting that as a third date?”

“Well you know what they say about third dates.”

Oh he knows, all right. After Alfred shooed Clark from the cave like a recalcitrant teenager, Alfred gave Bruce a great many looks and silent words on the subject of I Told You So. Bruce fled upstairs in self preservation. He’d been making himself a snack when Clark knocked politely on the glass from outside, evidently after having circled around again.

Somehow he’d wound up with half of Bruce’s sandwich.

And, after an eventful hour, half of Bruce’s bed.

At least he didn’t hog the sheets…

Bruce vaguely knows what his face is doing and he doesn’t like it, he’s unfocused. He scans the area and finds who he’d been looking for. She’s lingering in the Macedonian section with the museum director.

He catches Clark looking over too, and their gazes meet in agreement.

They head over.

“It’s the sword of Alexander, the blade that cut the Gordian knot. It’s a triumph.” James is passionate about his work; to be honest more passion than willingness to cut corners to get ahead, which doesn’t make him the best museum director. The high level arts are ruthless, as is any field that involves such immense sums being passed around. But the heights of his ruthlessness isn’t why Bruce wanted him to have the position, nor why the Wayne Foundation safeguards Harmon’s job.

Nor was it customer service. Diana Prince is making the polite noises women make when they are indulging a man’s explanations.

Luckily James steps away soon after. Maybe his people instincts are improving.
Bruce takes the opportunity to cut in. “It’s a fake.” Revealing knowledge that ‘Bruce Wayne’ would not be expected to know could help bridge the conversation. “The real one was sold in ‘98—”

“And the metal looks wrong.” Clark agrees, bending down to peer through the case. Bruce raises his eyebrow at him.

“Looks wrong?” She inquires, bringing her attention to Clark.

“The crystal lattice seems too modern.”

They exchange a glance and Bruce is already planning on dragging Clark to his machine shop to test this ability out.

Clark beams at him and his mouth twitches.

“What a useful skill,” the amazon says with faint curiosity.

“I’m very skilled,” the little shithead grins, finally touching Bruce by knocking their shoulders together, when Bruce can’t even do anything about it. “It’s why he keeps me around.”

Bruce’s mouth turn flat. “Who says I want you here.”

“That’s a lie.” Diana says helpfully.

“I know.” The way he smiles should be irritating. It’s not. “He tends to do that.”

“Doesn’t it get tedious?”

“Not really,” Clark glances at Bruce’s expression and pats his shoulder, “Don’t worry you’re very good at it. I cheat.”

“As do I,” Diana smiles, and her gold ribbon necklace catches the light.

Bruce breaks in before they could drag him further, “Regarding our previous talk, I’ve sent some files to you.” To her private email, under several layers of security that will fold back under her identity verification.

“Oh?”

“I’ve attached your item of interest, but there were some surprises in the files you gave me.”

“Surprises,” she says with a hint of wariness.

“Nothing bad!” Clark says, “You could say you’re in good company.”

“We can pull together a team that can tackle some interesting projects.” Bruce continues.

She looks doubtful. For a moment Diana seems a socialite moments from giving a polite brushoff to two strange men who were crowding her.

“We’d really appreciate your support, Ms Prince. But are already thankful for all the support you’ve given. You didn’t have to do it, but it’s helped a lot of people.” Clark is so goddamned earnest that it makes him want to claw at his face. “You don’t owe us anything. Take as long as you need to think about it.”

And of course it works.
She measures Clark. And the smile she gives back to them is ancient and a little self-mocking. “It’s been awhile. I could extend my trip a little.”

“I’ll arrange for a hotel if you need accomodations.” Bruce suggests.

“It’s covered,” she assures him. Then takes another long look at them both, “Hmm, tonight was unexpected, not at all how I’d thought this talk might go. It’ll be interesting to see how this partnership of yours progresses.”

It’s entirely clear to Bruce that she’s not referring to the proposed team but rather to the two of them. Clark coughs, and blushes, realizing it too.

“Gentlemen,” she nods a goodbye, and a congratulations, and heads off.

They watch her go.

The sound of the museum rises up in her wake.

Clark hums. Quietly, “Do you ever get the feeling you’re completely outclassed?”

Entirely too often, Bruce admits to himself. Bravado, and being too stubborn to back down, has gotten him through more situations than he’d like to mention.

But look where it’s got him. Bruce glances at the man standing with him, shoulder to shoulder.

He wastes a moment thinking of what it might’ve been like had they been the same age. Had they taken up their capes at the same time. What would those twenty some years have been like, with someone like Clark there? Maybe Batman would have gotten used to having backup, or maybe they would have both been unmitigated disasters at each other. Maybe it would have taken just as long for them to get to this exact same place.

Or maybe they might have never gotten here.

“You’re in a class all your own,” Bruce Wayne says out of habit, but Clark peers at him until Bruce lets his facade fall away.

He shakes his head. “I think you had the right angle. It might take a couple more meetings, but she’s invested now. You saved it.”

“It wasn’t just me,” Clark scrunches his brows together, “She was testing you. There would’ve been nothing to save if you hadn’t matched her and caught her interest. She’ll be on the team.”

The last word sounds wistful. Bruce himself had never much sought to work with others but he knows people who’ve wished to work with him before. He knows what that can look like on a face. He knows Clark is both more human and less broken than he is, and that he seeks to belong. Bruce will make a team for him; it’s only practical, with the danger that’s coming. Only responsible to leave Clark with capable people if Bruce doesn’t survive the battle.

“One in place, three more to approach.” Bruce gives him a lopsided smile, “Make it so you’re not the odd one out anymore.”

Clark glances back, “‘Us’. Make ‘us’ not the odd ones out.”

His sudden smile has Bruce feeling like vital organs been ripped out. That’s what Bruce tells himself. The words mean nothing.
“God, you’re such a distraction,” Bruce grouses as he checks around them. This entire night proves it, as well as these past couple of wild days where they’d been sneaking around during their bits of free time like teenagers. Clark appears to be very familiar with his schedule. Bruce guesses he should find it creepy, but he has a running tracker on Clark’s phone and a feed of the Planet’s bullpen.

“That’s a bad thing?”

“You make me lose focus,” he tugs so that Clark’s looking at him, “I gotta get over you.”

“And how are you planning on quittin’ me?” Clark’s everything is indulgent.

Bruce leans in, to breathe in his ear, “By fucking you in all my favorite positions until the sex gets boring.”

Clark chokes on nothing, and then laughs, “And you think we’ll get there. ‘Boring.’” Smiles some more, “You think overexposure is going to work.”

It’s a valid concern, given this week. “Usually it just takes the one time.” Bruce hums thoughtfully, leading them around various exhibits, finding the quiet spaces. He’s not letting himself think of futures, as he’d never had the habit. He’d honestly not expected to last two decades as Batman, had counted his life expectancy in fragments of years. To let himself get bored of Clark is a horrible indulgence, necessary though it is, because it implies a future. And Bruce is indulging himself because he knows he has none.

“‘Usually one time’ for you to—?” Clark’s eyes glaze over in thought, “Holy shit, let me guess, you only meet someone new or interesting maybe every month or so? The rest of the time you’re busy with the ‘knight or it’s someone you’ve slept with before?”

Bruce’s eyes narrow. “What of it. And how—”

“You’ve been having alot of boring sex.” Clark declares like he’s saying eureka, looking deeply amused, “And you entertain yourself by trying to control your heartbeat through it.”

“I don’t know how you get that idea—”

“Oh don’t you?”

“But I’m taking the weekend off and plan on keeping you in bed for all of it. In fact, let’s get that started.” He starts dragging Clark to the exit.

Clark peals out in golden laughter and the high ceilings in the museum’s rooms catch the sound, bouncing it around until it is difficult to pinpoint where it came from. It shocks him how he much wants to linger, listening.

The night hits them like a slap to the face, when Bruce pushes open the large glass doors, spilling them out into the street. Clark stumbles with it, a sort of simple joy in the act, and Bruce sees the performance for what it is. He slides his foot against Clark’s, just the right way to be caught and stumbling too, and spins them around so they won’t crash onto the sidewalk. His hands are warm at Clark’s elbow and chest.

“Careful there,” Bruce intended the words to be a jovial bark, but it comes out too soft, too fond.

Clark’s pulse is an excited thrum like he’s carrying the light of the rooms they’d left with him into the Gotham night. He belongs back there with everything beautiful. It’s difficult to let him go, to call Alfred for the car.
They wait for it to come around. Their exhalations leaving mist in the darkness.

“Why mine?” Bruce blurts out, when his real question is, why me? He knows he’s a mess and a shell of a man. He knows Clark deserves better, and that Bruce is completely outclassed. But he knows he has so much to make up for, and Bruce has always thrown himself into doing what’s needed. Clark wants him here, needs him here, so here he is. But why? Why—

*Your heartbeat*? asks a thumb at his pulse.

He gives a sharp nod.

“I’d wondered that too.” Clark tilts his head up to examine the sky, not releasing his wrist. “You know there’s louder ones? And ones with more interesting cadences. Slower ones too. From what I can tell the slowest is in Europe or somewhere in that direction. And a lot of them in other places, athletes mostly. Not that you aren’t one, just that none of them…”

Clark’s thumb circles his vein as if absentmindedly, but they both know the careless appearance a lie. The circles complete themselves at each of Bruce’s cardiac cycles. He feels their breaths pace to it, ever slower, until he’s a well of languid calmness.

“I guess you could say yours sounded like a match for mine.”

Clark catches sight of Bruce’s face and starts laughing again as Alfred pulls up.

“You don’t believe me. That’s okay.” He drops a kiss onto Bruce’s startled cheek, and slips into the black limo. “I’ll have time to fix that.”

“I bet you think that’s cute.” Bruce follows him in, shutting the door behind him.

Clark had taken off his glasses, tapping his chin with them as he stares at Bruce, gaze flashing with his thoughts. In this small dark space where they’ve blocked away the world, the man some know as Superman lets his shoulders set more naturally, straightens fully, breathes deeper. And when he tugs Bruce close, Clark’s chest to his back, despite all the height and breadth and mass that Bruce had also uncurled himself into, Bruce feels small.

And he’s already trying to figure out how to work himself free.

“You know, for the longest time I’d…”

Bruce raises an eyebrow at the pause, and pauses too.

“For the longest time I’d imagined I was just a shell, containing the sound of your heart. Silly, right?”

Incredibly so, because how could Clark ever let him think himself empty? How had Bruce ever been enough to fill anything, it must have been a mistake “…and now?”

“Now I don’t have to imagine it,” Clark says, arms holding Bruce within them.

Bruce’s thoughts blank for a long moment, airless and hollow and filled with something that might have been membranous wings, or stars. The words resonate in the space they share. He’s horrifically glad that he can’t look at Clark’s face from his position. Nor can Clark look at him without moving his head. Bruce wouldn’t have been able to process the meaning otherwise.

‘You make me want to be a better man.’

Or perhaps—
'As you wish.'

Maybe even—

'I know.'

He inhales, lungs straining; understanding and resisting it. If he doesn’t look at it, doesn’t name it, doesn’t stick it in a box, perhaps it’s not there and it can exist for however much longer Bruce has left to give.

“Ridiculous,” Bruce says, and he doesn’t know if he’s talking about Clark or about himself.

“Yep.” Clark nods, in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

“And I, infinitesimal being, drunk with the great starry void, likeness, image of mystery, I felt myself a pure part of the abyss, I wheeled with the stars, my heart broke loose on the wind.”

— Pablo Neruda, 100 Love Sonnets

If you particularly loved a paragraph or a line or something, please let me know! I'm super curious even if it's just keyboard smashes or smileys.
Catharsis [1/13] (you weren’t raised to love tender)

Chapter Summary

So I said at the end of the previous fic that I would write a porn epilogue.

WELL, it's kinda become its own arc but is so heavily tied in with the previous fic that I couldn't imagine putting it as a new series.

MEANWHILE.

**SPOILERY TRIGGER WARNINGS** applies to Catharsis as a whole, go to the bottom of the end notes.

Chapter Notes

This fic assumes the reader has knowledge of the events in Justice League (2017) movie.

A rough summary: Bruce and Diana try to gather the Justice league. Temescyra and Atlantis lose their mystical boxes that prevent Steppenwolf from phoning home. Justice League try to fight Steppenwolf w/o Superman and kinda fail. Hijinks involved in raising Clark from the dead in the Genesis Chamber with the last mystical box. Clark comes back a little evil. Justice League goes to fight Steppenwolf and Steppenwolf is defeated much like Emus defeated Australia and won the Great Emu War.

Much love to my betas and the manmanbangbang Discord! All remaining errors are my own, critique welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The chamber still trembles with power and creation and all the dark prophecies of Mary Shelley. There is a hand at his throat, not at all gentle, and Bruce breathes through the pain, heartbeat a high trill.

*He’s alive.*

*Clark’s alive.*

“Kal-El—” Diana starts.

Clark’s face is harsh and angry and unfamiliar. Vacant and otherworldly like the worse of Bruce’s dreams after Black Zero Day, after streets choked with dust, screaming, bodies under rubble.

They, in the womb of the Genesis Chamber, in the belly of the Kryptonian ship, in the shell that the government constructed to isolate it. Here, in the square called Heroes Park built, in the wasteland in Metropolis, where Zod had threatened the world; here they stand as if at high noon.
The team that Diana and Bruce had pulled together after Doomsday. Against Superman.

(No, Bruce thinks.)

Clark looks at them, through them, hollow-eyed, at everyone who stands around them, as if they were his enemies.

They are not. (You are not.)

“Clark. Listen,” Bruce croaks, dangling from his grip.

Clark’s gaze tears back to him like an audible sensation. “I know you,” he says, the first words he’d said since he arose from the amniotic fluid, and walks them forward until Bruce is slammed against the ribs of the ship.

The team takes a collective step towards them.

Bruce tries to wave them back with a hand.

Clark shoves his face close and takes a long breath, gasps into Bruce’s throat, “I know you.” He runs his nose against Bruce’s vein as Bruce’s blood races through it. Bruce cups his hand at the base of Clark’s skull. Skims through Clark’s hair, and Clark lets him, plastering himself against Bruce with a deep rumble like that of a large apex predator.

“...dude, I think you left out some details here,” Arthur replies, a dark eyebrow arched high.

“Irrelevant.”

Arthur snorts.

“This was a possibility I’ve factored in.” Bruce insists.

“One that you have a contingency plan for?” Victor’s cyborg eye takes in the still-pulsing room around them and the crazed Kryptonian with a human captured in his unshakable grip. Clark’s gaze rolls towards them like a wave threatening to break.

The hair rises on the back of Bruce’s neck as the rumble deepens.

“Yes.” Bruce hisses, and Clark’s hand leaves his throat and slides down his chest, his armor parting like tissue paper. Clark’s hand comes to a rest over his heart.

Barry squeaks. Arthur’s hand shifts on the handle of his weapon. Victor’s eye cycles red.

Bruce knows with clarity, as if he could hear it himself, that their hearts are ratcheting up.

“LEAVE.” Clark roars and the entire ship shakes with it.

Diana, measuring Bruce with her gaze all this while, nods slowly.

She strides out. Pauses in the hallway. Collects the others with a sharp look over her shoulder.

Arthur and Victor exchange a glance.

“We’ll be outside.” And then they go too, muttering between them.

Barry helplessly stares at Bruce.
Bruce mouths, *not your fault. go. Quickly.*

And with another spark of lightning, the chamber is emptied except for them, the motherbox, and the strange orange liquid glow that pulses as if alive.

Bruce is thrown into the fluid. Its a sensation much like if he’d been slammed against *cement*, unprepared, painful. There was no way to break the fall. No way to prevent being tossed.

Dark eyes follow him down, hands further shredding his armor, and they stalk after him as Bruce scrabbles away from Clark to the opposite edge of the pool, his skin stinging from the sparks that still race through the liquid. Like it was *acid* eating at him.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Clark asks, voice low and wet. “You stay.”

He shoves Bruce into the fluid again.

This reminds Bruce of his earliest fights when he took up the cape, and even before that: all rush and less planning, reactive, less prepared than he needed to be. The humid air stings, electric, as if it were ice instead. Feels like it’s stabbing at his lungs, Himalayan skies and ruthless teachers, both.

Around him, his suit melts away. The metal eaten up as if by some greedy force, chewed up to be remade, cloth scraps and stray threads going last and funneled off as if refuse.

Bruce is left standing there in torn underarmor and boxerbriefs, both slowly dissolving off him. Nothing but rage and bravado and stubborn necessity to shield him if he pits himself against this elemental force.

“Computer,” Clark begins, voice clarion clear, “*how much power is left t—*”

Bruce realizes what going to happen, even as the ‘h’ sound left the Kryptonian’s mouth. *No,* he thinks. He breathes in, and then pushes off from the floor, refusing to cooperate without a fight.

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**Chapter End Notes**

*reasons to not kiss him:*
1. you weren’t raised to love tender.
2. when he’s around all you do is tremble. when he’s around you want to get on your knees. look how much power he has over you. it’s dangerous.
3. he’s too good at forgiving and you’re too good at violence.
4. you know what they say about monsters. you know what happens to the boys who love them. are you going to do that to him?
5. your hands don’t know how to be gentle. think about the last beautiful thing that shattered in your palms. the fresh rosebuds crumbling between your fingers like a bruise. you wolf-boy, you war machine. you wouldn’t know how to hold something magic and not destroy it.
6. if you hurt him it might kill you
7. if you hurt him you might kill yourself.
8. you are very bad at rehabilitation. this is one addiction you’d fail to give up. he’s going to ruin you for all other kisses and all other boys and you’ll spend the rest of your life trying to forget his name.
9. you still aren’t sure he isn’t a dream.
10. if you kiss him, you might wake up.

**reasons to kiss him:**
1. because he’s beautiful.
2. because he asked.
3. because he preceded please with, *i’m not afraid of you.*

—

*yes & no // natalie wee (via wondersmithinc)*

**SPOILERY TRIGGER WARNINGS** applies to Catharsis as a whole:

Highly dubious power dynamics and pain play (and choking kink because let’s be real, Bruce in BvS and JL was Obvious), depression, suicide themes/mentality/ideation, medical procedure performed without consent, and rape roleplay.
Chapter Summary

Part 2 of the Catharsis arc, a side trip into the past, wherein a date happens. Sort of.

Or basically:

Over a year ago, a lifetime ago, when everything was still so sparkling new: they sat at a diner.
It’s lunchtime, the day after Luthor’s Library gala. Maybe their first date. Maybe their fourth. (Depends on if Alfred is the one counting.)

It’s a booth table, in Metropolis, it’s fixtures chrome and blue and green. Bruce is pressed up against the corner where the booth meets the glass, looking out to the tree-lined street, his peripheral vision scanning for attacks from the sidewalk.

He can’t tell if he’s feeling cornered. Or if he’s cornering himself. He knows he’s going into this with eyes open, but feels totally blind. Clark makes him feel totally blind. Like he has no experience whatsoever in the face of whatever this is.

Clark is sitting opposite him. At the edge of the booth as if he’s preparing to leave. His hands are fiddling with a green coffee mug, twisting the ceramic curve between his palms.

It makes the handle of the cup wag back and forth, like a dog’s tail, uncertain.

They are separated by roughly four feet and a silence the word count of War and Peace.

The only thing that settles Bruce about this entire situation is that Clark's half-turned towards him. It’s hard to tell by his shoulders, but many years experience in reading body language says that Clark’s knees and feet are pointed towards Bruce. The same way that Bruce realizes his own are unconsciously pointed towards Clark.

No matter how anyone try to pretend otherwise, their body language point to the direction they want to move towards. That they feel safe in.

The waitress stops by. Refills their drinks. She eyes them with curiosity.

Bruce gives her a tight smile that encourages her to leave quicker.

Clark watches them. He glances at the other waitstaff, very poorly hidden, gossiping from right behind the kitchen’s swinging door. Glances, too, at the other customers in the diner. One of them hurriedly tucks their phone away.

Bruce has an image disruptor on him. It corrupts any media captured of him on an internet device within 40 ft of his GPS location, rendering them with a blur calibrated to give the impression that either the camera was jolted during capture, or objects therein were moving too much, or the lens was too fogged up.

But Clark doesn’t know this.

“All a part of the lifestyle, I’m afraid.” Bruce picks through the last of his fries, smashing them down so it’d look like he’d eaten more than he actually did. “Does the attention bother you?”

Clark gives him a quick look and then goes back to scanning the diner. “I think if I’d been established more, it would.” A wry twist to his mouth, “But I’m new to Metropolis, just starting to build myself here.”

Unsaid is that Clark’s cover identity is new, the life that he’s building for himself in Metropolis is still relatively unknown, still malleable. It would actually be harder for Bruce to change his accepted patterns instead of Clark. ‘Clark Kent’ is still allowed to surprise people. Most people don’t even know his name, most people don’t know how absurd it is that he might consider dating Bruce Wayne.

“It will change your options,” Bruce gestures to the space between them, “If we do this.”
“Yeah it might make some things harder, ethically speaking. I won’t be able to write certain stories —”

“Or it could make it easier.” Bruce Wayne can open doors for many people’s careers.

Clark stares him down. Takes a steadying breath. “Don’t help me.”

Bruce frowns.

It shouldn’t matter, because being Superman while investigating a story? It’s already ethically grey, practically cheating if Clark’s competing against peers who don’t possess supersenses.

“Let’s trade: Stay out of Gotham. At night.” He’s referring to mid-city Gotham crime, of course, and to Superman, in particular.

Clark had left the lakehouse that morning, murmuring about possibly meeting Bruce on patrol. Bruce, half-awake, had nearly taken Clark’s head off at the presumption. Metaphorically.

Clark’s face had made an expression that Bruce never wished to see again.

It’d taken slamming his control down on his heart and slapping himself to wake up a little, to think fast enough to fix this, to eke out a request to confirm that they’re still on for lunch. Clark had nodded without looking back, and left.

Bruce, this morning in his empty bedroom, had stared down his meds. And taken one. With orange juice.

Here they are now, several hours later over lunch, and everything is awful.

There’s a long tense moment.

“Might be safer at night if your city didn’t have someone going about branding people.”

Bruce’s fingers tighten into a fist, and he breathes until they uncurl. He’d been struck by how far he’d fallen, last night, and this moment makes him wonder if there were more than just that single failure of logic that lead him to seek a way to kill Superman, to kill Clark.

The sour shame of it makes it easy to avoid examining the rest of that time, the whole of his actions these past couple months. He forces himself, now, to look at the idea even though his entire mind cringes away from the thought.

He’d known, even as he’d made the brand, that it was a further step than he’d ever taken. Something he’d made in honor of a suit in a glass case. (Because maybe Jason was right. Maybe he’d been too lenient, and Jason would still be—) The first couple men branded had been sex offenders of the worst sort, the ones that seek children, the ones that don’t survive in prison long anyway once their crimes are revealed. Apparently the brands had been taken as a pattern, and any subsequent intake found with the brand was judged by the same rubric: Pedophile, put to death if found.

It was unexpected. That it was so completely unexpected is a failure of his own reasoning. Proof of his own instability, of his shaky mental health.

What was further hard to self-examine is that once he’d found out people were dying by the brand, he didn’t stop. Those lives may as well have been by his hand. And he can’t figure out if he’d continued onward because pride made him stay the course or if the satisfaction in finally making a literal mark on Gotham’s criminal element was too addictive. He still doesn’t know how to atone for
“Might be safer if it didn’t have people who dress up as clowns.” Bruce says with self-loathing, “Gotham chews people up. And breaks them.”

*I chew people up and break them,* he means.

*Why would you want a failed mess,* he means.

Clark sighs, looking away. Then for some reason smiles. “You know, I’m reminded of a TEDtalk I’ve heard on failure. They were saying it should be celebrated.” Clark says lightly, staring intently at the cup in his hands, “That accepting failure lets you change directions midstream and is the only path to overall success.”

Bruce looks at him blankly.

“Also? Your coffee’s cold.” Clark leans over and places his cup in Bruce’s hands, whisking away the one at his elbow.

Bruce curls his fingers carefully around it. Letting the alien heat seep in. He frowns at it, heart quickening.

“So... tell me if I’m reading things wrong here, but,” Clark shifts to the middle of his booth.

Bruce feels shoes slide between his, his ankles being suddenly skin-warmed and held snug. He has to spend more effort to control his breathing.

Clark’s cheek rests on his fist, studying Bruce. The waitresses by the cashier are grinning and nudging each other.

There’s no way Clark doesn’t know that too.

“If you’re being stonewalled for an interview,” Bruce says at last, “At least let me know.” So that Bruce could help leverage him a phone call.

“Only if you let me know when you need an exit strategy. I’ll give you a lift sometime.”

Oh *christ,* there’s no way that Superman could carry him in costume without it being a *godawful embarrassment.* Besides, “It’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Clark, we are talking about your life.”

Clark breathes in sharply. “...Alfred was right.”

Bruce blinks, confused.

Clark stares back, something about it reminding him of empty night skies and held breaths.

“You were speaking to him?” He narrows his gaze.

“Um, something I overheard.” Clark reaches over and replaces the coffee with his warm hands. “So, right, lunch was intense, let’s have a do-over.”

“No, go back. What was Alfred right about?”
“Are you free for dinner?”

“Stop deflecting. What did—”

“Dinner, and coffee after.”

Which derails him entirely. “I thought that was known as *netflix and chill* now,” Bruce can’t help smirking.

“Oh you know that phrase?” Clark says innocently.

“Are you calling me old, son?”

“Depends on if you want me to call you daddy,” thankfully *sotto voce.*

Because that was decidedly not diner-friendly and Bruce’s pants can’t decide if it’s interested or *completely appalled.* “Let’s table that discussion until at least dinner.” Bruce clears his throat, “I’ll make the reservations.”

Chapter End Notes

Was there any particular lines/moments that was ??? or :0 or =D ? Let me know!
Catharsis [3/13] (he’s too good at forgiving and you’re too good at violence)

Chapter Summary

And we return to the Genesis chamber...

Chapter Notes

trigger warnings in end notes, READ IF YOU GET TRIGGERED

That was then.

“Why are you refusing this?!?” Bruce hears, right before he’s thrown back into the center of the Genesis Chamber, before his entire vision is filled the orange glow of the base of the pool.

He tries to push up from the bottom but a hand at his neck is keeping him submerged.

They let go when his lungs run out of air and Bruce breathes in the glowing fluid. It goes down like poison. Like cheap whiskey, 100 proof, scalding Kryptonian fire and lightning burns. Nanites bearing microscopic scalpels.

He resurfaces, coughing, dragging in air.

“If I don’t leave they’ll bring the spear in,” he bluffs.

There’s no telling what the green xeno-mineral would do to the ship itself, to the raw mix of technology and organic material that the Genesis Chamber is composed of. But Bruce knows for certain that it would stop Clark.

If Bruce can bear to use it.

Clark’s arm winds tight around his ribs. His chest pressed up against Bruce’s back; everything is slick with the strange electrified substance that feels like acid. They are both naked.

He hears the commands that Clark is giving to the computer and is not sure he wants to survive this.

“They will bring the spear!” Bruce twists and tries to implement three different grappling moves that should free him. None of them stand up to Kryptonian strength.

“The one that you made?” Teeth at his neck. Clark’s other hand skimming down his side, his hip, his thigh. Then bringing it inwards and up.

“The one that killed you, yes.” Bruce tightened his jaw against the hand that briefly fondled his balls, the fingers that danced up behind them and started prying his asshole open. He closed his eyes and let out a ragged gasp at the fluid that slurped in, like a sentient fiery tongue.
“Not so dead right now.” Clark says over Bruce’s pained moans.

Bruce grit his teeth, hurting and angry, “Not for lack of trying.”

“You want to go there?” Clark shoves them over to the pool’s sidewall, the hard surface wedging itself into Bruce’s stomach, “Really?”

Bruce is an inch from screaming, the chamber thrams as if boiling, riotous with energy; his entire body feels like it’s burning up, consumed, being torn and wrenched or compressed until cracked. He’s never felt anything like this torture.

“Stay with me,” Clark demands, his arm tightening until Bruce can practically feel his skin breaking underneath Clark’s arm, a blush of pain that is at least familiar. He clenches around Clark’s fingers that are still shoved in him, aware dimly that he’s hard. His insides are shrieking at the sensation of thin needles slicing everywhere, his bones being pried apart.

His lungs heave, a dry sob.

Clark swears, and Bruce feels a hard pressure where there’d been fingers. He sets his hands against the wall and bears down against it until Clark’s dick shoves in, a sweet punch that he hangs on to, through all the rest.

Bruce stares down at the alien bulges that push up under his skin, down the length of his legs. His eyes are wet with tears that he’s fighting, his chest is a solid wall of hurt. One of the bulges break his skin open. Screws are shoved out, dissolving as they hit the fluid.

He’s vaguely aware he’s screaming.

“Shhh,” Clark hums, as he gives him something to brace against. Something to fight against as his bones are remade. “Shhhh.”

“Fuck you,” Bruce demands, trying not to pass out.

His cock pummels Bruce in response, an inhuman speed and a rush of sensation, and then he’s torn away from the wall. The arm around his chest is looser, and the other is underneath his thighs, held up and close, as metal and ceramic seep from his skin and fall free like sweat. Metal couplings, pins, rods, screws, plates. Everything that’s held him together these past two decades. He’s lowered all the way to Clark’s root, and Bruce’s toes curl and scrabble helplessly in the air. Clark grinds up in him in a way that reminds him very much of a concussion, an out of body experience, dizzying.

“Clark,” Bruce asks, breathless.

“It’s almost over,” Clark promises, starts fuck into him harder, bouncing Bruce’s weight on his cock like it’s nothing. And for Superman it may as well be. Bruce may as well be a fleshlight, a limp doll, for how much he contributes, as the lightning around them coalesces, a sword hanging over his head. He tries to inhale, mostly sobs.

“This will suck,” Clark apologizes and Bruce couldn’t even brace himself as Clark sank to his knees, bringing Bruce down with him with a jolt, right across the prostate, Clark’s freed hands twining around him, one jerking him off perfectly and the others palming his balls in a slow decadent roll as the lightning slices down through him in a rush and he is entirely reforged, cracked open and reset like a broken nose except he has a broken everything.

Bruce blacks out.
Skip this chapter if you don't want the dubcon sex scene.

*I've got the scars from tomorrow and I wish you could see*
That you're the antidote to everything (except for me)
A constellation of tears on your lashes
Burn everything you love
Then burn the ashes
In the end everything collides
- Radioactive In The Dark (mashup)

Was there any particular lines/moments that was ??? or :0 or =D ? Let me know!
Catharsis [4/13] (you know what they say about monsters. are you going to do that to him?)

Chapter Summary

And now we revisit their first week, the day after the library gala... a dinner date.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Unlike at lunch (their fourth date, where the waitstaff was buzzing over just having someone like Bruce Wayne appear at their diner, so mostly ignored Clark), the maître d’ at the restaurant where they had dinner looked at Clark with neutral studied nonchalance.

Ah Bruce Wayne found another one, their gaze pretty much said.

Clark wonders what it meant, if it was an observation based on his looks or his gender or just the fact that he’s new. It makes him feel underdressed. It makes him wonder how he compares. He wonders if any of the others appreciated Bruce as much as he does, and then knows that they couldn’t have.

None of the others know him.

There’s a halt of time as Clark tested that thought with a cold shiver: Could Bruce only wish to spend time with him because Clark knows all of him?

But that clearly isn’t the case, there are the files from the leech. The woman in them, Diana Prince, that Bruce said had helped him retrieve it. And surely others that Bruce had met throughout the years that were far more similar to him than Clark could ever be.

And instead Bruce keeps falling onto Clark as much as Clark falls in return.

That afternoon, he’d found Bruce’s Gotham office through a combination of the internet and his senses. It has a balcony. It was the work of a moment to drop in at 3 pm with a packet of mochi and some nice Earl Grey to make a quick joke about tea time. Clark had originally planned to steal a kiss and then leave, but found himself dragged to a blind spot and had his brains sucked out through his cock.

He’d barely managed to return the favor, uncoordinated and an utter mess, dragging deep satisfied breaths and kisses across Bruce’s erection because he could hardly rub two brain cells together, still shaking with his orgasm. But that apparently was enough; he came all across Clark’s glasses and cheekbones.

The office had an attached bathroom, luckily.

The slightly raised heartbeat draws Clark back to himself.

In the subtle lighting of the Gotham restaurant, seeming verdantly lush despite its sharp angles, the billionaire idly twirls the stem of his wine glass. The golden riesling laps up the sides, velvety. His back is to the wall. Bruce stares over Clark’s shoulder and there’s an absent smile on his mouth, worn like a bowtie.
It comes off looking perfect but Clark has the intuition that it’s too tight underneath.

It’s a Bruce Wayne smile.

“You probably have an excuse for tonight, if you are having any second thoughts.”

“What?”

“You’re a reporter, you have an excuse to be seen with me.” The billionaire gestures with his chin behind Clark and takes a sip from his glass. “Once, maybe twice. A third time will be a pattern, especially if no articles come out of it. And if we appear to be more than friendly. It's ok, I've had many dalliances with reporters.”

The entire wall is a mirror above hip height. Clark’s neck crawls as he glances at it to see they’re being observed by several tables. He idly notes which tables are talking and eating uninterrupted and which tables seem attuned to their patterns. It’s not much different from the diner, in Clark’s opinion, though a touch more reserved. There are no phones out, for example.

“I thought that was what we were working on,” he says carefully, “A pattern.”

“They’ll say things about you.”

“I can guess.”

“Can you?”

Clark’s forehead furrows, “You realize that I work at a newspaper right? That I speak to my coworkers? That I go on the internet?”

Bruce looks at him, steadily, as if Clark hadn’t had lunch with him, hadn’t slept with him, hadn’t held on to his hips. As if they were strangers.

His heart is controlled like a metronome.

Their server brings their plates, the first of seven courses. The clink of china and silverware seems to echo in the opulent space, the chiming sounds coming as if from everywhere, and very breakable. Clark gives a brief mental thanks to Google and guides on how to navigate formal dining cutlery.

And then he sees the plate. It has a single tall shot glass on it, showing off striated layers of what the server describes to Bruce as chilled avocado and cucumber soups separated by balsamic and citrus foam.

The server pointedly doesn’t stare at him; it’s like Clark doesn’t exist.

Bruce’s heart is primed like a sprinter in preparation, for all that he looks calm. His face is a lie and for a moment it makes Clark feel very alone even though their hearts match, both an uncertain quickstep.

The waitstaff leaves and absconds with their soup spoons.

Clark watches him go, then continues quietly, “Our best guess is that people will call me your ‘boytoy’, ‘a gold digger’, ‘a hick’. I’m both too much and not enough of a twink. There might be some surprise that I’m a man, but most people still haven’t forgotten the pictures from ‘08. Or at least, they won’t because the internet doesn’t forget and there’ll probably be a Huffpost or Buzzfeed article on you. Again.” He calmly reaches for the shot glass.
“‘Our best guess?’” Bruce asks sharply.

Clark raises his glass in a toast before he says, like throwing himself off a cliff, “I made sure to give Perry a heads-up about our dating status the moment I arrived this morning.” And tosses the soup back.

“Potential dating sta—"

“After Perry stopped swearing,” Clark continues, after swallowing, and the soup was really quite tasty and smooth, “He called in a war room for Cat Grant and a couple others on the society section. Lois slipped in because ‘I should have told her sooner.’ And HR,” holding up a finger at Bruce’s alarmed look, “Just to write into my contract an update that I’m not allowed to work on Wayne Enterprise-related stories.”

“...or any of its subsidiaries.” Bruce adds, consideringly.

Clark nods. Then grins. “Which means I’ll never have to cover sports again because you own at least a minor stake in all of Gotham’s teams.”

“Metropolis still has sports teams—"

Clark waves him off, “Metropolis teams have their own beat reporters; it’s only if a situation comes up like that fight with the Gotham Knights that I get called in.” He takes stock of Bruce’s closed off expression and continues, “Perry will hold off printing anything until the Museum of Antiquities event; at minimum a line mention of us due to most papers’ scheduled coverage of the Grand Opening. It’d be unavoidable by then.”

There’s no way Bruce wouldn’t have known when he’d extended the invite last night, this was the limelight that Bruce Wayne lived under. This was what Clark had considered and accepted in that long moment when Bruce first asked. Did he think Clark didn’t recognize what he’d agreed to? Did he think Clark might back out?

Was Bruce planning on backing out himself?

“You really think you’ve thought this through.” Bruce seems disturbed, if Clark looks beyond the shutter of his eyes. His fingers keep dragging his wineglass near, by the flare of the base, then shoving it away. He’s left the soup alone.

What changed, Clark asks himself, since last night? since this afternoon? Since Bruce’s pulse danced so sweetly as Clark mouthed his cock? Since Clark looked up, filthy with Bruce’s cum on his face, to catch sight of Bruce gasping through an obscenely bruised mouth, thinking he wouldn’t mind someone walking in on them. Just so that he could have someone else confirm that this was really happening.

He’d kneeled there as Bruce caught his breath, shuddered as Clark cleaned him up with careful tiny licks, the last of it in weak spurts that dribbled out and caught on his dickhead. Tiny, to drag it out longer.

Bruce didn’t push him away.

Clark wondered if he got oversensitive at all.

“I could ruin you,” Bruce says.

“You have the power to,” Clark agrees. On a certain level, they both hear. Superman is known now,
but Clark Kent could disappear into anywhere in the world. Superman can hear Bruce from anywhere in the world. Superman can crack open even the pinnacle of human fitness without breaking a sweat, and there’s something about that idea, of cracking Bruce apart until he could touch the heart of him, that is so—incredibly tempting.

“Grab on,” Bruce had urged, that afternoon, as he’d sucked at Clark, then swallowed him down. He’d urged Clark’s hands onto his shoulders, urged him to press. Clark could smell Bruce leak precome when he did, heart ratcheting up another notch, breathing getting harder, mouth working more insistently. Hair disheveled, shirt wrinkled, mouth ruined, bruised red.

He’s not quite sure how Bruce put himself together again to finish off the afternoon at his office.

When Clark looks at Bruce now, beneath the flawless exterior, underneath the shoulders of his bespoke suit, are Clark’s fingerprints. Dark blood under ruptured skin. It makes his fingertips itch.

Bruce’s eyes narrow as if sensing Clark’s thoughts.

“Stand up.” Bruce says as he does so, throwing his napkin to the table, shoving his chair back with a screech.

Clark pauses where he sits, watching from his peripherals as the maître d’ hurries over causing a rustle from the other tables. And thus missing how Bruce stepped over to his side until he grabs Clark by the chin. He gives Clark half a breath to realize he is going to be kissed, but there’s nothing in Clark that’s going to refuse.

Clark surges up from his seat to meet Bruce part-way as if throwing himself into the air that very first time.

There’s a bit of a murmur starting up around the tables. But it’s easily ignored for the lips that tug at his, on a mission, hand broad and hot at his jaw.

Bruce Wayne releases his mouth with an incredibly obscene noise. He stares down at Clark with eyes gone dark.

“Sir?”

“Box everything and have it delivered to my penthouse at the Four Seasons.” The billionaire pushes underneath Clark’s chin until Clark stands up with it, in front of god and everybody. Once he rises, Bruce slides the hand back until his fingers could cup the hinge of Clark’s jaw. “What was it you said? Dinner and coffee? Want to skip to the coffee?”

Clark had stolen Bruce’s soup and is three steps towards the coatroom before he notices Bruce wasn’t at his shoulder. He looks back and furrows his confusion at the man, blushing lightly.

Bruce stares, something about the look in his eyes expressing disbelief even though nothing shows in his bearing. Then Bruce barks a laugh and catches up.

There is time for Clark to toast his compliments to the chef.

He leaves the empty shot glass on the hostess stand.

Chapter End Notes
Random Outtake:

After Clark first gave Bruce a blowjob in the lakehouse that first night, Bruce slides a condom onto Clark's dick and gave him a handjob while spewing filth in Clark's ear about Superman coming hard enough to rip through rubber and if Bruce were to fuck Clark in his bed, he'd break the bed, he'd break the wall, he'd bring down the lakehouse around their ears, and Clark would have to stick fingers up into himself next to Bruce's dick just so that Clark wouldn't snap it off when he comes that incredibly hard from Bruce fucking him—and when Clark comes from all that, with Bruce's grip viciously tight on both his dick and the condom, there's a part of Clark that's more than a little bemused at finding that shit hot but mostly focused on how Bruce's dick had been valiantly trying to rise despite having just come right before.

And then he's watching Bruce tie off the condom and stick it in an evidence bag.

Clark covers his face with one palm, "Are you going to look at that under a microscope?"

"Yes." Bruce eyes him, "I'm assuming as some point you'd be open to going without protection, good to know you don't actually come harder than the average man by the way, and I'm not chancing that you're invulnerable to STDs but some sort of Typhoid Mary."

"I'm clean." Clark reassures him. "And can't transmit anything."

"Don't tell me you actually left samples at a health clinic," Bruce says, repressively, as if ready to leap out of bed and seize these potential samples himself, Right This Moment.

"Of course not," Clark sputters, he wasn't that dumb. "I checked it myself."

Bruce eyes him, "Are you seriously telling me you came on a glass slide?"

"NO, I come in my hand like every other guy, it looked normal!"

"Clark, just because it looked—"

"Like it had all the functional cells of a spermatozoon, with the normal breakdown of fluids, and no virals or stray hangers on? I don't just have xrays and lazers, you know." Clark frowns.

"...you can see cell structures with the naked eye?" Bruce has a complicated expression on his face.

"Yes?"

"...I'm still keeping the sample."

Clark turns his hand to press his wrist against his forehead and laughs. "You have fun with that then. Stick it in the fridge and come back to bed." He thinks if he were anyone else he'd have a headache at this point, but he's not, so he doesn't.

"I'm just going to pop down to the cave real fast."

Clark ended up having to drag him back to bed after Bruce had set up the labs.
SERIOUSLY THO. Test results or condom or nothing. Stay safe everyone! =D

Was there any particular lines/moments that was ??? or :0 or =D ? Let me know!
Catharsis [5/13] (think about the last beautiful thing that shattered in your palms)

Chapter Summary

After dinner and 'coffee'...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I need to head out for patrol.”

Bruce had redressed quickly after ‘coffee,’ multitasking between putting his clothes on and quick bites of their dinner. Even the takeout boxes were fancy: waxed cardboard with gold embossed logos, styrofoam sleeves on the main course, inserts to separate the hot foods from the cold, and little stickers indicating which course was in which box.

Clark wonders if anyone cried, boxing all this up, having to wreck their meticulously planned presentations.

Bruce finished chewing his current bite. But he was still working at his cufflinks. His face looks distant.

Guarded.

Clark remembers their argument that morning, about patrol, and their argument during lunch, and reminds himself of the sensation of buildings crushed beneath him. Of veins popping beneath his fingers, manacles broken at his wrists, glass shattering at his back; of talk shows and opinion pieces that question what right Superman has to act, even if he is offering help. What right does he have to intervene if someone doesn’t want it.

If they don’t consent.

He studies the dish in the fancy box and stabs his fork into a piece of sliced steak. Looks up. Holds out his fork.

Bruce catches sight of him, and sends over a glare.

Clark waggles the fork. “It’d be faster this way, you’d have both hands.”

Bruce works at his cuffs a little more, futilely, then turns towards him. The steak’s bitten off the utensil as if Bruce is a sullen cat.

Clark hides his grin.

“You can stay here as long as you want, but meet me on my deck at 4 am, we need to talk about tomorrow.”

When they were planning on hijacking Luthor’s shipment of the only piece of xeno-mineral large enough to matter.
Clark makes a sound of agreement as he chews his own bite. Offers another piece of steak for Bruce to occupy himself with as he works on his tie. He removes the fork just before Bruce rams his teeth into the tines, snapping as if he’d wanted to hurt himself on them.

Bruce slips on his jacket and turns to leave. Clark lets him.

Beneath the layers of cloth are fresh bruises at his shoulders and waist.

Clark had put them there.

“Come on,” Bruce had raged at him, prying Clark’s fingers from the bedding where he’d all but shredded it, tugged them loose from their moorings like Bruce had tugged Clark onto his cock, his shoulders on the penthouse mattress, gasping. Fighting for control as the world slows—

down, there, his hips high up on Bruce’s lap, Bruce’s dick hard, and angry-looking as it pressed in. All the blood in it making his cock hot and Clark felt it, the veiny unevenness, silky texture, every slowed down millimeter, by millimeter, as he opened himself to being fucking. He clutched at it, flickers his ass around it as he trembled, overwhelmed, floating in distended time just to be able to process it all. To feel it more.

Bruce had been caught in mid-blink, eyelashes leaving feather shadows on his cheeks, looking in that moment utterly wrecked.

His heart had been singing itself hoarse.

Please, Clark thought and the world rushed back so that he could say it but it was garbled, a sound punched out of him as Bruce pushed in, asking for more even as he was given it, digging his head back into the mattress. He’d felt so selfish, getting fucked and decadent with it, that he’d finally let go when Bruce pulled at his hands. Placed them on his shoulders. He’d touched Bruce everywhere he’d seemed to like and let blood vessels pop beneath his fingers like bubble packaging, tiny castles under his thumb.

Bruce came explosively when he did.

Clark savored the elongated moment and then let himself come from the earthquake tremors of Bruce’s aftershocks, dialing into every wrung out pleasure, every minute hammer made magnified through his senses, sublime.

But after, Clark had caught sight of the marks he’d left, dark and surly. He’d frozen staring at them, and Bruce watched him with a face gone cold. Then colder.

He thinks of it absently as he finishes their meal and cleans up.

He looks at the empty penthouse room for a second; Clark lets the second draw itself long and experienced it as an hour, but Clark could find no new meaning in it.

He leaves for his own patrol.

Sets a car back onto the road that had skidded off, going too fast. Escorted some cats out of their trees. They looked at him like he was supremely dumb. He looked back at them and did it anyway because they weren’t getting themselves down, now were they?

Clark hauls an ocean liner back to port, digging into the ground lightly for traction. He looks down and frowns. The ice doesn’t crack beneath his feet. Clark is pulling several tons of metal behind him and manages to keep the ground pristine, even as he shoves against it.
At 4am, Bruce lets Clark into his house, in sleep robe and underarmor briefs. He smells of carbon fiber and exhaustion. Lets him into the cave where they mapped out their plans for tomorrow night.

There is more bruising than Clark had left him with, several hours ago.

Bruce is pressing down on his shoulder.

*Did the bruises Clark left hurt more than the ones he’d gotten on his patrol?* Clark asks himself with sick wonder.

“It’s fine.” Bruce says, catching sight of his face. Returns to gesturing at the map of the ports and explaining the rationale for the roads down which they might funnel Luthor’s men.

They argue tactics and methodology until maybe seven in the morning, with a tangent on what to do with the mineral. Once they acquire it, that is.

“Bruce, listen, I grew up in the country, it’s *easy*. Just make some bullets. It’ll let you keep at a distance and—”

“How many times do I have to say no? Don’t you think I’ve considered that already? I’m making a *spear.*” Bruce shouts back.

“Tranq darts then!”

“I am not,” Bruce says, chest heaving, “going to shoot you.”

“We don’t even know what’s coming,” Clark is reminded of Zod and the ships that tried to hammer the world apart. More and more as the months go by, Clark keeps finding his physical limits and then surpassing them; he wonders if he’d even need a ship to destroy Earth at this point, or if he could do it himself. All Clark would have to do is push straight through the crust, maybe shove a landmass over, melt the poles. All someone would have to do is to create a situation that removes his judgement, maybe make him the equivalent of drunk, and they’d be able to hold the entire world hostage. “It may—”

“You were there, you heard him too, ‘he’s going to try to control you’,” Bruce breathes harshly.

“You are asking me to make a weapon that is designed to put you down.”

“Yes.”

Bruce *rears* back. He stands up and paces, coming to a stop in front of the glass case. There are dark bags under his eyes, like Clark had punched them there himself.

“I'm sorry,” Clark says. What he means is: *I'm sorry to have to ask this of you, I'm sorry you're in danger from me, I'm sorry I bruised you, I'm sorry you have to protect yourself from me, I'm sorry I'm asking you to protect yourself from me.*

“What are you sorry for.” Clinically.

Bruce is ramrod straight, hands clasped at the small of his back. He’s staring at the ashen suit, painted with yellow graffiti, covered by that glass shell. A pivot of the room.

“Everything that makes me similar to everything about this,” Clark reaches forward to touch the glass, “that's hurting you.”

Bruce’s hand strikes out, faster than normal sight, and grabs Clark’s wrist.
Clark watches it dart out; *why*, he asked himself in that pulled open moment. Why is Bruce keeping this thing that is so visibly hurting him, why is it kept so pristine, why is Bruce afraid of letting anyone else touch it? Because there’s no dust on that glass except the crust on top, there’s no smell of cleaner, nor of cloth. No sign that fingerprints had ever been left on it, and then scrubbed away.

In that microsecond expression Bruce looks incredibly pained.

*Why are you keeping me, if I’m doing this to you?*

“*Don’t.*” Bruce gauges him.

Clark slips his hand away.

“I think you need to leave.” Bruce says.

Clark thinks if he asks him to rest, Bruce (even with exhaustion radiating so visibly) might just be contrary and try to stay awake longer, “We’re still meeting up at the pier, 8pm?”

Bruce nods.

“I’ll make sure to be ready,” he challenges. *Make sure you come rested,* he means.

“I’m always ready,” Bruce says instead.

Clark hums an agreement, not letting doubt fall into the tone. “Come give me a goodnight kiss then,” he lures, walking backwards up the stairs, dodging Bruce as he lunges.

“A good *morning* kiss, at this point.”

“A good night kiss,” Clark insists, as he exits the cave and lets himself get tackled onto Bruce’s bed. He lets his mouth be practically mauled then eases down the kiss. Clark can *taste* the hours that Bruce hadn’t slept, in his consciously precise movements, like a man walking drunk on a police line.

He catches Bruce’s hand before it hits his crotch, and hums in denial.

“Clark, let me—”

“Not here for that.” Clark murmurs against his mouth, thinking, *do you expect that of me?* Thinking, *do you expect me to expect that of you?* Thinking, *you don’t need to keep up with me, you’re tired, so tired, and lovely, and hurt, and,* “I want to kiss you.”

He slows the kiss down and slows it down more. He grabs at the comforter and rolls them carefully across the bed until Bruce is in a burrito of sheets, languidly mouthing at each other until Bruce’s breaths becomes even and deep.

*He’s asleep.*

Clark smiles, wryly, and gets up.

Quietly leaves.

Chapter End Notes
**Superman:** I have many enemies who have tried to control me. And I live in fear that someday, they might succeed. If that should ever happen — if I should ever lose control — there would only be one sure way to stop me.

**Batman:** Do you realize what you're asking?

**Superman:** I do. I want the means to stop me in the hands of a man I can trust with my life.

— *The Death of Superman, re: The Kryptonite Ring Trope*

Was there any line you particularly liked? Is there an emoticon or gif that expresses your feels? ;D
“I can’t believe you did that!” Batman hisses at him in greeting, like a sodden cat.

“This morning, or this afternoon?” Clark steps off the air and onto the eaves. Tucks himself into the shadows in the deeply recessed windowsill and makes sure his cape hasn’t snagged onto anything.

He starts pulling out takeout boxes.

At 3pm, Clark had dropped in with more snacks and tea, but before Bruce could drop to his knees Clark had fetched him up and laid back on Bruce’s ridiculous office couch. It could fit them both lying down, without his legs dangling off, so Clark did so, draping Bruce over himself like a large blanket.

“What.” He’d said.

Clark had held tightly as Bruce squirmed and yelled at him in an undertone; there were people outside the room. Clark laid a hand on Bruce’s neck and when he stilled, ran it gently down his spine. After doing it maybe three times, Bruce finally suffered himself to melt into it; by the fourth time Bruce was asleep.

“I know my limits!” Batman says.

Clark hums agreeably and pushes a box over, not meeting his glare. He places a set of wrapped chopsticks carefully on top.

“That was absolutely the most condescending and presumptuous thing I have ever—”

“Yes.” Clark agrees, looking up finally, opening his own container of golden stir fry noodles. He watches it halt the other man, “It’s one of the rudest and most selfish things I’ve ever done.”

Slowly, “You’re admitting that Superman is ‘rude’ and ‘selfish’. ”

“Yup, just like it was rude and selfish of you to give me a blowjob without so much as a ‘by your leave’. ” Clark shrugs, “I wanted to nap with you. I was selfish.”

He stares into the box and picks out the green bell peppers, eating them first. The wind is blowing wet and chill and the low sad call of the buoys echoes off the water, making everything in the night seem miles further apart than they actually were.

Clark hears a sigh. Senses Bruce drop down next to him.

“The ship looks maybe 30 minutes out,” Batman says, snapping his chopsticks apart and cracking
open the box’s lid.

Clark relaxes. Eyes it over there on the water, “Seems pretty far to come in that fast.”

The vigilante nods, “They’ll rush the entry to catch observers off guard. They don’t have authorization; something’s spooked Luthor and he’s doing this without government backing.”

“Any idea what it is?”

Batman taps his chopsticks lightly on the container. “There were no files on the Gotham Bat.”

“In the leech you retrieved?” Clark chews some more, “Maybe Luthor was only after metahumans.”

“There were also no files on Superman.”

“You don’t count all the research on Zod, and on Black Zero, and the xeno-mineral?”

“The others he’d researched were in separate files, clearly labeled. He’d had security camera footage, facial recognition, family members, jobs, friends, location sightings. They’re all extensive. And they all have a shorter cumulative history of vigilante events than I have. And are less prominent and eye-catching than your events do.”

Unsaid: nothing on Superman’s activities, or on his life, his work, his family.

“So we’re both on a different server.” Clark looks at Bruce bleakly because that meant—

“Maybe I was meant to find the files.”

The words strike Clark hard. “ Doesn’t matter for our plans tonight.” Less a question than a statement because he figures Bruce would have brought it up this morning, or this afternoon, if it really mattered to their plans.

“Luthor can’t be allowed to keep the rock.” Bruce agrees.

Clark thinks, *Luthor was setting you up as a sacrifice. He all but put a weapon in your hands. Gave you nothing with which to humanize me. You could’ve died, trying to kill me.*

Bruce had been willing to, he realizes.

Clark puts his hand on Bruce’s shoulder, not sure who he was trying to comfort. Bruce pushes into the touch, sliding it to the hot points where his body was trying to heal. Seemed to lean in the moment Clark was pressing on his hurts.

“Stick to the plan. Stay back and out of sight; try to determine the radiation’s physical limits but retreat if it’s further than we’d estimated.”

Unsaid is that Clark is on extraction duty. Unsaid is that they need to make sure Luthor thinks they’re working separately, now more than ever, especially since Luthor probably has footage of them together at the library gala.

Unsaid is that tonight’s altered contingency plan means that Bruce is positioned to be in more danger, in order to protect Clark. Who is invulnerable. That they fell on this contingency at the last minute because Bruce withheld information. And he’d done so to put Clark in this very position.

Clark thinks, *You don’t value yourself.*
Clark thinks, *You think my life is worth it.*

Clark remembers what Alfred said to Bruce all over again, ice down his spine, “*stop chasing that early grave.*” Remembers that conversation in the diner, where Bruce judged Clark’s *career* worth more than Superman’s help.

He’ll have to be extra alert. He promises to himself that they’ll talk about this. Because Bruce deserves a choice but there’s some things that Clark can’t—

He can’t—

But later. Sometime later.

He’ll find the time to bring it up.

Chapter End Notes

I’ll only talk if I’m gripped with both hands.”
- “Book of Numbers,” by Joshua Cohen.

Any favorite lines? Any questions or thoughts or particularly alskdjflja or sldkjlf feels?

I'd planned to post this tomorrow but I was encouraged to post sooner by the lovely comments on my last chapter. I'm moving in the next couple days so I don't know when I'd be set up enough to post the chapter after this, which is a long one anyways, but I'm super excited to post it as soon as it gets a little more edited and I get more writing done on the last three parts.
Catharsis [7/13] (if you hurt him you might kill yourself)

Chapter Summary

Hijacking Luthor's xeno-mineral was the easy part...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clark stares down the lead box in front of them.

Bruce is staring, himself.

His car’s somewhat dinged up, and so’s Gotham, but the plan went off without a hitch. Its engine is ticking as it cools down. The waterfall is loud, shushing down rocks and tapping impatiently on the stainless steel floor. The bats chitter in their conversations, irreverent to the mood.

Alfred had come up to the table, arms crossed, grease cloth sticking out where his hand folds in his elbow. Inquires, “Are you waiting for Jack to come out?”

Clark glances at him, frowns a little, then looks back to the ominous dark container. Reaches to open it.

Bruce makes himself stand still.

The green glow that lances through the crack is brighter than he’d expected, based on the videos. It immediately brings Clark to his knees.

Bruce keeps his hands steady, locked behind him. He’s controlling his heartbeat.

Not letting himself look away.

Clark stares down the box, face ashen, and trying to stand up. His veins are starting to darken.

Alfred slams the container closed. “I think that’s quite enough.”

“It will be stronger when refined.” Bruce finds himself saying.

Clark nods, still kneeling, still looking ill. “Go ahead and process it,” he says.

“Master Kent, have you considered that this could be part of a larger scheme wherein you’re the instrument of your own demise?”

Bruce closes his eyes and turns away. Walks off like he’d been physically torn from the floor.

“I don’t give much weight to Greek tragedy,” Clark huffs. Sounds like he’s standing up, “I think we all end up the sum of how we lived, by definition. There’s nothing especially greek or tragic about it.”

Bruce senses Clark come up to him, shoulder to shoulder.
“I would rather you have it and not need it,” Clark says, “Than for you to need it and not have it.”

Bruce turns to him, with a sneer, “What is it that woman said? ‘We are raised to make it difficult to say no to a man, would it not even be more difficult... to a superman?’”

“Exactly.” Clark meets his gaze, with only a tiny flinch at the corner of his eye. “I want you to have options.” He looks over to Alfred, “I’ll make myself scarce so y’all can start in on that.” Calls out as he climbs the stairs, “I’ll text you.”

Bruce turns back to the glass case.

Joke’s on you, Batman.

The door clicks shut above them.

Alfred tabs through to the monitors to show the security cameras around the lakehouse. Bruce walks over to join him. Together they wait until Superman has disappeared from the property.

Bruce cracks his neck. Goes over to the box and opens it and hauls the rock over to a shatterproof clear enclosure, about the size of a phone both, that contains a set of computerized drills and sanders. He clamps it down and hermetically seals the chamber.

“Readings are consistent with measurements from the leech,” Alfred reports as lasers emit from the edges of the containment to slick over the xeno-mineral.

“Set it up as we’d planned then,” he says, and then turns away to wash away any residue he’d picked up.

Bruce looks at his hands sightlessly. The soap sluices away, clear, instead of blood. He abruptly strides to the computer. Pulls up one of the folders from the leech. Stares at the people in it.

Maybe if others are able to contain Superman, we won’t need to resort to the mineral.

They’ll get in contact with Diana later tonight, at the museum. She’s probably the most seasoned warrior out of all of them, unless the ‘Aquaman’ is also older than he appears. Barry Allen is close by, but… his youth makes Bruce hesitate.

Barry is already older than Jason would ever be, but.

But.

The drill starts up in the corner of the cave and it makes Bruce’s teeth ache.

...a fourth of a hin of wine as you bring a lamb to slaughter.

He shuts his ears against it and pulls out his phone.

—

what do u think of contacting more of the ppl in the files

set up a team

—
C: What, really?

—

yes

why

—

C: I dunno. You seem kind of ‘James Bond’ about things.

—

what does that mean

—

C: I’m glad you’re not insisting on working alone.

—

just for emergencies

special projects

not everyday things dont think its an invite

—

C: Use punctuation.

—

u say that like ppl r judging ur texts

—

C: ...let me guess. It’s not paranoia if they’re actually out to get you?

—

exactly

—

C: Glad we understand each other. Yes, by the way. We could try Al, say, Tuesday or Wednesday?

—

k

—

C: Awesome! <3
Being hacked is always a concern for Bruce Wayne, it would be eyebrow raising for a playboy idiot to have military grade encryption on his phone, but Clark caught on quickly to the nature of their unsecure line. There’s something infinitely refreshing about not having to explain himself.

He examines the message thread and wonders if Clark’s texting style is a product of having superspeed or part of his cover as a journalist or if it’s an indication that there’s not that many people Clark texts. That he’s not used to texting. If Clark combines sentences like that because he’s used to a texting limit, for a plan within his budget.

Which are awkward thoughts all around and Bruce knows that he’ll never end up asking Clark about it because of those latter possibilities.

Bruce watches the drill screech across the green mineral until Alfred walks by on his way to his cottage, accessible through a basement entrance via an offshoot of the cave. “It’s automated at this point, sir, everything is within parameters and fully calibrated.”

What he means is, *Get some rest for godsakes.*

“Good night Alfred.”

What Bruce means is, *Not yet.*

“Good night, then, Master Wayne.”

Ah, the familiar cold shoulder.

Bruce stands up. Keeps an eye on the spear revealing itself, as he throws himself into his gym. Every piece of stone has a shape inside it, the sculptors all say; that one is revealing Death. He exhausts himself enough that when the machine shuts off safely in the early morning, and after he attaches the spear’s tang to the handle, he is able to finally drop off into a dreamless sleep.

He stumbles into his office sometime after lunch.

His phone lights up as his computer starts as he’s slurping down his third cup of coffee, sinking into his chair which squeaks.

—

**C:** Penny for your thoughts.

—

Bruce peers at it. His assistant knocks and he waves her in, scratching at his nose. She’s updating him on his meetings, especially the one during lunch that got rescheduled, and the various paperwork that needs to be signed off on by the end of the day.

Bruce makes mental notes but mostly he has his phone open because—
The clothes of the reporter ‘Clark Kent’, both that he’d seen personally and the ones that show up on the searches Bruce runs, describe a sort of a ‘nerdy country hipster’ aesthetic, falling a little short of the mark due to frugality. The jacket comes across as off-the-rack, ill-fitting; too long in the sleeves, too long along the sides, and bunches up at odd places around the waist. The only thing it did well was in the span across his shoulders.

Bruce wouldn’t be surprised if it’s on purpose; he’s in fact about 95% certain of it. There’s a mildness about Clark’s demeanor that’s only present when they’re in public. Easily flustered. Shy, with a streak of midwest passive aggressive stubbornness.

It made Bruce want to test it during their dates this week, how well that persona would hold up against the blitz of dating ‘Bruce Wayne’. Made him want to push at that country shyness, shove his money into Clark’s face to see if it would make Clark leave.

Bruce wants Clark to fit him, is the thing, even as he fears it. He doesn’t care one way or another for his own happiness, and shouldn’t care; but Clark wants them to ‘be a pattern’. Clark Kent has arranged his work to accommodate the potential of Bruce Wayne, to a degree that it would be humiliating if Bruce was to break it off now. Superman is asking the Bat to safeguard possibly the
only known thing that can damage him, that can literally make Superman kneel. Clark is continuously, continually, asking to be close, to participate, and to stand by him, and—

The amount of trust he’s putting in Bruce is unfathomable, incomprehensible. Destroying. Because Clark wants, is the thing, and Bruce wants to give it to him; Bruce wants Clark to look like he belongs on his arm. With a shocking intensity.

He texts Alfred to look into getting one of his suits altered. The computers should be able to skim relevant measurements off of surveillance. Bruce nods absently to his assistant and waves her off.

Clark could probably even pull off ‘nerdy hipster’ in one of Bruce’s old suits, which are all designed to make him look less built anyway. (The joys of hiring an expensive tailor who knows how to hide bulk.) Let Clark use his usual accessories, but Bruce’ll give him a higher end tie.

And maybe a fluffy scarf.

—

do u have a scarf

plaid or paisley maybe flannel?

—

C: ???

—

nevermind

I got it

just bring urself

—

C: Ok. It’ll be weird not going to one of these things as a reporter.

—

not much to it

drink champagne

xperience art

bs art faqs

—

C: I can just look into museums myself, you know.

—
Was that a reference to his xray, Bruce wonders. Then something in him twists at that mental image because Clark should never be on the outside looking in.

—

u don’t have to

ur my guest

besides we have to meet ms prince

—

C: True.

—

and I would like to show u off

—

C: You would?

—

...would you like to be shown off Mr. Kent?

—

There is a beep of a priority email arriving on his phone. Alfred’s sending some updates on the residue collected from shaping the spearhead, disguised as notes for last-minute tailoring. It’s a godsend that he’s willing to work on that project while Bruce is tied up at the office; Alfred’s managed to make five and a half gas canisters from the leftover mineral instead of just the original estimated three and a quarter.

The canisters would be toxic to Clark, but in theory he would still be able to recover from it. They’re going to test at least a quarter canister on Clark next week. Clark had insisted on making sure it was going to work as an aerosol.

Which makes sense. They should know the limits of Clark’s weakness; it’s what Bruce does for any of his own.

But it’s—

It’s—

He spends a long moment staring at his phone. He wants to press it against his incipient headache.

Instead he locks it and lets it fall to his desktop with a petulant clatter, leaning back in his chair and staring out the wide windows. He breathes out.

It’s 3pm.
The Gotham sky is empty, overcast and grey.

He’s, for a long quiet moment, alone.

Then: There’s a cup of matcha tea suddenly at his desk. One of Alfred’s muffins, still warm, on a napkin.

Bruce registers this, as papers fly around his office from the displaced air, as his balcony door clicks shut. His phone lights up with a new message. With a matcha emoji.

—

C: :tea: Gotta finish this article then if I want to head out early tonight, so you can show me off. ;D

—

Tonight’s trip to the Museum of Antiquities would make it their ninth ‘date,’ within three days. By Clark’s count.

*Ridiculous.*

This whole thing is ridiculous.

There’s something in his throat Bruce does not know how to get past.

He wonders if it meant anything that the tea is green.

Chapter End Notes

For those too young to remember: cell phone plans used to be ‘per text,’ each separate line is counted as one text and the cheaper plans include a text limit of, say, 100 to 200 text, etc. or you had to pay for each text you send (not limited by characters).

This is one of my favorite chapters, and kinda wrote itself despite how much I complained about writing it, lmao. I was originally going to push this back to maybe next week because I’m STILL not fully moved in but y'all's feedback encouraged me to just post this now.

Please let me know if anything is confusing in it or you'd like me to elaborate on
something! I'd love it too if you'd let me know if you have any favorite lines or bits, it's really encouraging as a writer to know what works!
Catharsis [8/13] (he’s going to ruin you for all other kisses)

Chapter Summary

takes place after meeting Diana at the Museum of Antiquities event but first Clark has a
daydream about that first night...

Chapter Notes

So, new job, new living situation in new state, means so much adulting and lack of
spoons. But I said to myself: Self, you have been sitting on over 10k for MONTHS.
There is legit like 4k worth of porn that people are being blue-balled from.

So here I am, posting the thing. (I've also received some comments to the effect of
needing more setup to figure out where in space/time they are, which is... valid. so I'll be
going back and editing things as well as answering comments, I LOVE YOU ALL, and
honestly was part of why I kicked my ass into gear posting this)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With clarity Clark remembers coming back that first night, after Alfred retrieved their tea mugs with a
distinct British air of ‘would the gentleman please see himself to the door’. He'd found the billionaire
wrapped in a fluffy bathrobe. Bruce’s hair was wet but air drying slowly, and he was assembling a
sandwich on rye bread.

Clark had returned because he couldn’t let the night end, not where it did with Alfred all but flashing
the porch lights on them and standing by with a shotgun, not after so many years drawn to that heart.
Even if he felt like a trespasser.

“Did you forget something?” Bruce asked as he opened the deck’s door, before he headed back to
his kitchen.

“We never finished our conversation.” Clark answered as he closed and locked the door behind him.

Bruce hummed in agreement then launched into a discussion of the White Portuguese’s ETA and its
most likely shipping lane. He talked about its possible docks, various overland routes to Luthor’s
labs, and several points where they could intercept. He finished up the sandwich in the meantime,
sliced it down the middle. And handed half to Clark.

With a paper napkin.

Clark paused, the way only he could Pause, the night more still and frozen around him than it
normally would be this close to morning because he is what he is: Alien. Other. Ill-fitting and odd no
matter where he’d landed in his travels.

In this monochrome room, in this glass box of a house, maybe he should feel even more strange and
displaced. Being trespasser, and alien, and its only point of color.
But they were standing in a kitchen, in a warm bubble of light with the suspended glitter of half-fallen dust, and Bruce had just given him half the meal he’d prepared for himself. Bruce’s heart had thrummed along as if he had given no thought to the action. As if it was a movement as natural as breath, as heartbeat.

(Bruce had already proven that he could control both, with intent.)

And feeling welcomed, Clark let himself be swept back into Time and its drumming chorus.

Clark bit into the sandwich. It was nicely balanced between condiments and filling. He watched Bruce, leaning against the counter, continue detailing their options. The intense consideration the man put into everything was intimidating. Energizing.

(Adorable.)

“You forgot about your sandwich,” Clark pointed out.

Bruce blinked at him, and then picked it up, taking small efficient bites. The compact fluorescent bulbs hummed honeybee gold. Bruce offered drinks. Clark requested water, asked some questions clarifying the plan, and honestly he had some objections but he’ll bring them up later because—

“Hey, is this a date?” —because the conversation that they didn’t get to finish had multiple parts.

Bruce slowly wiped away the last of his crumbs, eyes hidden by shadows. “I thought our first was going to be tomorrow.”

“I was hoping you’d consider that our fourth,” Clark hammed it up. First at Luthor’s gala, second at the patio, and now would make it the third.

A flicker of thought and disbelief sprinted across Bruce’s face. “Superman thinks food and a shred of conversation is enough to make something a date?”

“Are you saying you don’t know me well enough to count tonight as a third date?” Clark challenged. Bruce had shown him the files on Superman, both from the leech and the information Bruce had gathered on his own. It was as invasive in its own way as Clark’s listening in had been.

Clark knew this: there was a massive series of rooms hidden underneath Bruce’s house, there were illegal police scanners and security camera footage on some of the monitors in the cave, Bruce’s entire alter-ego as a vigilante lived in the shadows. These facts combined into a picture of passion and ability and, most of all, paranoia. Focus. Intensity. Knowledge.

This sort of man did not lightly let someone else close and lock his door. Did not lightly invite someone in, nor lightly offer food.

“You’re calling this a third date?” Bruce looked at him, a long sweep from head to toe.

“Yes, if you want to invoke the ‘third date rule’.” Clark said with full intent. He moved closer.

Pushed forward into Bruce’s space slowly enough for Bruce to whisper, yes, but only loud enough for Superman to hear.

Bruce tangled his hands into his cape as if he’d wanted to do so ever since he’d laid eyes on it.

And dragged Clark to his knees.

Clark flowed with it, and in doing so, swiveled Bruce to the nearest glass wall. Pressed against the
stars and the moon and night sky, Bruce was magnificent, and Clark unfolded his bathrobe like opening a gift, took his cock in like taking in air, in throat-burning gulps, as if he hadn’t breathed for years, or ever, tongue against a vein, mouth full of heat, head full of song. Full of a full-bodied heartbeat and its owner twining fingers into his hair.

“—that good is he?” Lois laughs, breaking into Clark’s daydream.

Clark lets his blush take over his face and climb up his ears. He nods a thanks, as she hands him a cup of coffee then straddles a chair, her face a clear declaration: give me all the details.

“I’m not gonna kiss and tell, Lo,” Clark protests and shoves his face into the cup. But he can’t help smiling into it.

She eyes him and then says seriously, “No, I think you’re too invested for that.”

He looks at her quietly, and sees her next words coming.

“Clark, be careful.”

“We are,” he says with a smirk.

“Not just,” she rolls her eyes, “protection but. I mean, does he know?”

And Clark knows she’s saying ‘about Superman,’ but to tell her one thing means to tell her everything because Lois is the sort to see the truth of things once she’s caught a whiff. And Batman’s secrets aren’t his to tell, “It’s fine.”

“Given his history—”

“He’s a better man than he lets himself be.” Clark insists.

Lois eyeballs him and tchhs her tongue hard against her teeth, “Well, get past tonight and this weekend first, the vultures will be out in force.”

“Cat mentioned what to expect already.”

She sighs. “You don’t get it because you weren’t here for Bruce’s last go-around with the media. And frankly Wayne has mellowed out the past decade.”

“As he?” Clark can’t help but laugh, if the highly intense man that he knows is ‘mellow’, he can’t even imagine the debacle had they met when either of them were younger.

“He really has. So the gossip hounds are starving and you’re fresh meat.” She joins him in laughter, “How are you planning on dodging the photographers anyways?”

“We have a plan,” Clark says.

Bruce had let him know about the image disruptor last night but they’d have to let the paparazzi get at least a couple shots of them as they enter the museum or they’d be hounded even worse. For that, Clark planned to tint his eyes with a little heat vision, and loosen up the muscles around his eyes, his cheeks, and his jaws in a certain way that changed the shape of his face just enough. He shows it off to Lois as a test.

She startles. “Okay that’s creepy.”
Clark lets the tension on his face go, “Too uncanny valley?”

“Seriously. Pull that out only for the catwalk.” She smacks him lightly on the shoulder. “Speaking of shutterspeed, you’d probably be best off holed up together until it all blows over.”

“Yeah?”

“At least for the weekend. And don’t google yourself, nothing good comes from it.”

Clark repeats her words to Bruce as they pull up to the lakehouse after the Antiquities event. Touching base with Diana had gone well and there was something about their interaction in the car after the museum that had Clark feeling not only hopeful about what’s been happening between them but increasingly certain that their intensity is mutual.

Being public, to Clark, being part of a community, and their social consciousness, is tantamount to being real. Clark had pushed for their relationship to be real in the ways that felt real to him and his Kansas upbringing.

But he knows, just by the layers of Bruce’s home and the ways that he presented himself in various settings, that this is not quite Bruce’s truth. Bruce’s truths and reality lives in small safe spaces, hidden, much like Lois suggested them to be. ‘Holed away,’ indeed.

“She’s not wrong,” Bruce concedes.

Earlier, photographers had piled up outside the Museum of Antiquities for the Ages Of Weapons exhibit’s invite-only Grand Opening. A small tide of cameras held back by velvet ropes.

Who is that? What’s your name? Bruce, who’s your date? Mr. Wayne can you comment on your companion—

They both just smiled enigmatically and swanned past. Bruce had agreed to let the Cat publish the details in a short blurb on Saturday with a Sunday edition containing a couple inches of facts mixed with speculation. Jenny had probably been in the crowd somewhere, to catch a shot of them.

Bruce had quirked an approving look at how Clark had held his face uncannily, and challenged him to keep it up until Alfred picked them up again.

Clark, laughingly, agreed. Watched as Bruce put on his own mask of chipper besotted billionaire, introducing Clark to various people only to overshadow him almost immediately, while Clark hid his smiles behind Bruce’s shoulder.

Have you met Clark? He’s amazing, he’s so smart, why the other day he said this fascinating thing about charities and how vocational training programs are more effective—

Clark said no such thing to Bruce, but it’s a sentiment he couldn’t disagree with. He’d written an article about it early on in his reporting career and wonders if Bruce had read it or had come to the same opinion independently.

As they spill out of the car and into the garage, Clark glances at Bruce. Perhaps it would help Bruce to have an excuse to say such things that were normally out of character? It’s almost nice, to be able to help out in this way, as Clark Kent.

Bruce glances back, in question. Clark feels his mouth twitch upwards.
“I’ll take my leave then.” Alfred says.

“Good night Alfred,” they chorus back.

The garage is set into the slope of the land. The lakehouse itself built onto a little rise that overhangs the lake, on rock that’s firmer than that which the waters had cut caves through. Bruce’s main garage sits in a nook that’s half-natural and half-manmade, the cars lined up like children’s marbles. They pass them by, heading to the staircase at the back. There’s steps that lead up into the lakehouse, and its streetlevel carport; the staircase upwards hide the fact that twined beside it is another staircase leading down into a Cave.

It’s with a comfortable silence that they head up. Bruce veers off at the level just beneath the house.

“Wine cellar?” Clark asks.

Bruce gestures to his left. “Over there.”

Instead, he opens the door in front of him to reveal a cavernous dressing room; less a walk-in closet with delusions of grandeur than one with an olympic gold. Suits are hung and arrayed in some obscure order, shoes displayed pristine on tilted displays below them, and interspersed at hip height are several series of slim drawers, in dark woods, above which lurk a terrifying squadron of silk ties. Two chairs, in dark leather. A full length mirror, with angled sides to show a persons left and right profile.

Bruce opens one of the slim drawers and sets down his watch, his cufflinks, his tie pin; when Clark peeks inside them with x-ray vision there are arrays of matching sets of paraphernalia, including pocket squares, rings, lapel pins, and a silver wristcuff or two. Bizarrely: a heavy gold link chain as well, with a thinner one that holds a cross, that sits next to what appears to be a set of gold rings and a fake moustache. Bruce has removed his tie and his shoes and is hanging up his suit jacket and pants on a coat rack by the time Clark looks back at him.

Clark sucks in air as if punched in the lungs. Bruce’s black-socked feet, the fabric clinging on the lush curve of his calves, held up by black sock garters. The naked skin of his thighs, shirttails loose around them as Bruce removes his shirt stays. The hint of his ass as Bruce bends a little to unclasp the strap around his thigh.

Clark is pulled closer to the sight as if dragged by his tie.

“It fits you.”

Clark hums in question as Bruce reaches out to smooth his hands across Clark’s shoulders. They then skim down to his waist as if checking the tailoring.

Clark looks up into Bruce’s eyes in question as they slide down Clark’s body.

“The suit, the tie, and the scarf. You should keep them.” Bruce’s hands let go suddenly, at Clark’s sharpened look. “I’m serious. Don’t be weird about it.”

“What if it’s already weird?” Clark says, shucking off the jacket at the pause. He looks down at the expensive fabric and knows it to cost more than the sum of everything he owns.

Bruce is suddenly three feet away, a quick stride that brings him to an empty rack, “Says the man flying around in bright red and blue.”
His uniform? Clark blinks in thought. “Are you saying—”

But Bruce has already grabbed a hanger and walked back, offering it to Clark.

Clark darts his eyes around the room, at the otherwise full racks. At the empty one that Bruce grabbed the hanger from. The shelves below it are empty too.

He sees, suddenly: some of the watches contain incongruous electronics. A couple pairs of shoes contain blades. There are more false hair pieces than just the moustache. There are a couple poison rings.

His uniform.

“—I should keep this here then?” Clark asks, for clarity, as he drapes the scarf over a hanger and loops the tie next to it. He hopes he’s not breaking whatever this moment is.

“It would be efficient.”

Clark quietly puts his jacket on the hanger, his pants too, after slipping off his shoes, watching Bruce putter around removing all their garters and stays and whisking them away to their places. He hands the hanger to Bruce who places it next to his own, to be cleaned, and knows with a quiet certainty that the suit that Clark wore tonight will appear in that empty section of closet space after they’ve been restored to Alfred’s satisfaction.

Bruce had cleared a space for him on that rack.

Clark lets his thumb run over his scarf, plaid but somehow upscale and pretentious, and his raw silk tie, its slight unevenness making it more touchable for all its lustre. There’s a certain galling uneasiness attached to receiving gifts you can’t match, but Clark supposes that comes with the territory of dating the 1%. For the costume of someone dating Bruce Wayne.

And the thing is, he can’t figure out if this gift of a space, here in Bruce’s home, is just another sign of that same billionaire extravagance. Or if Bruce is just that intense in all things, and dating is among them.

If Bruce doesn’t realize, somehow, what he’s giving with each new room that he shows Clark of the mansion of his inner self.

Clark hangs the scarf up on a hangar, slides the tie onto its specialty holder. Drops his own cufflinks and pin into the drawer. And Bruce starts crowding him against the wall. Hands hot at his hip bones.

He doesn’t meet Clark’s eyes.

There’s no way Bruce doesn’t realize.

Clark puts his hand to Bruce’s face to catch his gaze.

There is, Clark thinks, a certain kind of reckless bravado needed to put on a costume and do these impossible uncertain things. To jump off a building, or a cliff. Or the world.

To face cameras, or to meet someone’s eyes.

To put a particular scarf in a particular space, hidden away from everyone else.

Clark rises on his toes slightly to kiss against Bruce’s mouth the words, “When’re you going to take me to your bed?”
He settles back onto his heels with a smirk and watches the bravado around Bruce settle into something less false. He lets himself be tugged out of the dressing room but stops them at the stairs when Bruce makes to walk up.

“Your real bed.” Clark says pointedly, “Not ‘Bruce Wayne’s.”

“You looked.” With his kryptonian vision, is implied. Bruce’s face is inscrutable.

“I guessed,” Clark corrected. “That bed up there? It’s not you.” The lakehouse is a display case that proclaimed its owner had nothing to hide. The rooms that really housed the heart of Bruce sat below.

Bruce stares at him steadily.

“You said you wanted me to stop being a ‘distraction’; everything up there is just that. A distraction,” Clark says. “What happens if you bring me down there?”

Clark takes a second to brace against the sound of Bruce’s heartbeat, suddenly loud and crashing against him like a tidal wave.

“What happens if you let me fuck you there.” Clark says.

Thoughts race visibly in Bruce’s eyes as the words strike him.

“You’re not going to be able to stop thinking about it now, I’m guessing.” Clark’s barely able, himself, past the thunder of Bruce’s heart, fitting his hand to his fingerprints on Bruce’s shoulder. Clark watches Bruce lean into his hand, deepening the bruises ever so slightly.

“You think I’ll ‘let you’?” Bruce demands, “What makes you think you could?” There’s a fine tremble in his stance that Clark knows that no one but him could see.

Could anyone else tell from Bruce’s expression how fast his heart is going? Could someone also know Bruce well enough to understand that while the words were angry, underneath them was fear?

Because I’m Superman. Because I’m stronger than you. Because I can hold you down and make you take it.

They both know these words, these thoughts, this script.

Instead, Clark squeezes Bruce’s shoulder with measured force, and says instead, “Because you’d ask for it. Because I’m patient.” And takes a breath as a smirk cracks loose, “Because I already know you’re a lot of work.”

There’s a quiet sound that might have been a scoff, or a dry bark of laughter, that escapes from Bruce’s mouth as he looks down. Pure fury suddenly flashing through Bruce's face and heartbeat. And then he’s slipping free of Clark’s touch. Goes down the stairs so smoothly it looks like gliding. Slides open the false wall and descends into the cave.

There in that monochrome cavern, instead of turning to the right, to where the monitors radiate coldly, he turns left. He pulls open a dark shadowed door.

Then: a burst of color.

Like an open wound, lancing out from a dark crack in the wall, glowing. It reveals a trapezoidal room, like a tent, full of rich red-orange woods and dark metal accents. When Clark follows Bruce
into the space, there’s armor and weaponry of Japanese make, what appears to be an early version of a suit for the Gotham Bat, a small zen garden, and golden light coming from overhead panels softened by parchment paper screens.

Bruce stalks to the back of the room, visibly not letting himself watch Clark’s reactions, and slams open a section of wall to the left. Its seams were invisible.

He looks back at Clark from the revealed doorway as if taunting Clark to follow.

Clark follows. Throat tight against Bruce’s anger.

The room Clark enters is small.

Practically empty.

The trapezoid in this room is inverted. The ceiling is wider than the floor, giving a feeling of immense airy space due to the massive panels spanning above them. The wooden walls funnel down to the slightly disheveled futon that lies in the room’s golden-orange heart.

Bruce stands there as if in judgement, stiffly by the bed, framed by the space, watching Clark pause at at the sloped doorway and take in this barren room. He’s all but reeking with confrontation, eyes hard, hackles up, heart ready to go to war. The sound of it sets Clark’s mind to racing, wishing to avoid that sound and find himself some space to process; and Bruce, mouth opening to speak, becomes caught as if in amber.

Clark Pauses.

He thinks of Bruce as he’s seen him all these few days. The incredibly put together man that met him across various tables, all chrome and polish and bespoke suits. The breathtaking, highly experienced lover that was all velvet control. The Bat that he met, in armor and argument and violence on the Gotham streets, the incredible skill that he’d displayed that night.

The exhaustion that he hides.

Clark thinks of the lakehouse and how incredibly hollow and colorless it is, the desolate shell of it, and the dark caves below with the various pristine armors of both Wayne and the Bat. How clearly Bruce takes pride in how his walls and his doors are seamless.

Clark is standing in the crack of one wall.

Clark is awkward, standing there, half-dressed; Bruce must be too, even though he doesn’t look it. The futon does not have army corners. Bruce’s socks are starting to collapse down his calves, his shirt is still buttoned up as if he’s still wearing pants.

Bruce is not wearing pants.

And the rage he wears on his face as if it’s all Clark’s fault makes Clark’s temper rise up as well. Is Bruce going to pretend Clark did this? That Bruce has taken no part? Clark was invited here, to Bruce’s place, to this room, to the heart of his home; why does he still resist? Does Bruce think, after the events of these days, that Clark would take any part in truly breaking him? That he isn’t here for the sum of who Bruce is, and here trying to be careful, trying so hard not to shatter the moment?

It’s like Clark isn’t trusted. Like he’s no better than the alien Bruce had been afraid of. Clark looks into Bruce’s eyes and tries to understand despite his hurt and nausea and something about the tightness around those eyes—
the way he holds his mouth, his chin, his shoulders

—Clark’s reminded abruptly of that bar he’d worked at, ages ago, and the woman who told him, let it go, as a man threw a beer can at his head. He’s reminded abruptly of his travels and the ways people look and react when backed into a corner.

(Superman could have saved her. Hell, any man could have ‘saved’ her. But she didn’t want him to.)

(Superman could have saved Jonathan Kent. But he didn’t want him to.)

(Clark is reminded of his tiny carvings, trembling.)

Reminded of a penthouse room and of take-out and reminded of a fancy restaurant and of Bruce’s fingers, at the base of his wineglass, pulling it towards him and pushing it away. The bruises Bruce’d let the world punch into him, that he goads Clark into making. Clark’s fingers, withheld from the case of armor. And Clark realizes that Bruce had not let Clark touch it but also Bruce himself has never done so. Though he wished to.

(Bruce was standing there, trembling. Angry. And something else.)

(Like Bruce knows he can shatter everything. Like Bruce has held lives in his hands and knows he could crush them. Like someone has crossed a rip in the world and told Bruce he is a danger to everyone and there was nothing anyone could do that could possibly make him stop, make him kneel —)

(Oh. Clark thinks of wealth and power and shadows and everywhere they’ve tripped against each other this past week. He thinks of bruises. Oh.)

Clark then quietly thinks back to that first night with Bruce, in the glow of his kitchen. When Bruce made a sandwich and gotten lost in his explanations.

Clark inhales. Lets time rush back in.

“I barely use these rooms.” Bruce says.

Only when he’s too tired or strung out to go upstairs after patrols, Clark mentally translates. When he’s unable to keep up appearances.

Clark nods and instead of crowding Bruce, heads to the room’s other opening. Lights come on when he curiously opens the frosted door to reveal a bathroom with a large covered rectangular tub. It’s slightly humid.

“A hot tub?” Clark says.

“An ofuro. A soaking tub,” Bruce corrects, from behind him. From anyone else, the words might sound confused.

“Huh, never seen one. Show me the ropes then.”

Bruce does so, the words spilling out, his shoulders going loose, and Clark could see it all play out in a sudden joyous rush. Bruce will explain and then maybe demonstrate, relaxing from the soaking and from a script he knows. They will sit in the water and Bruce might unwind and Clark will probably do something to raise his hackles up again.

It’s inevitable. Their experiences have led them both to wear various selves and sometimes their
armors keep them apart.

But Clark knows how slip through the cracks of it now, if not in this way then in another, because if you ignore all the distractions they are the same. Neither of them want to hurt the other but, due to how life has crafted them, violence and strength is a desperate necessity as much as a terrible fear.

Clark is a millennial, he’s grown up with the world at his fingertips, the internet being the one place where Clark’s physical body can’t out himself as alien, and watched people tear at each other through words because their defenses triggered other people’s hurts inadvertently. He has seen and experienced these cognitive and culture clashes as he’d slipped through the cracks of the world, through his travels, watching and learning and searching… for some echo of himself.

He’s standing in front of one.

And Clark knows how to read these echoes, that heartbeat, even when the heart itself lies. Even when the heart lies to itself. Even when Bruce wraps himself up in lies and doesn’t believe himself to be made up of more.

Untangling the lies makes the discoveries sweeter, the knowledge and joy thus gained made more delicious. Clark lets himself smile as he turns over and over the thought that he could spend his entire life chasing this taste.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve never seen the difference in Clark’s face between Snyder and Whedon cuts of JL and how a little change in lighting (ie. the planes of where light falls and you can kinda affect this by microexpressions and how you hold your jaw/cheekbones) can utterly change a face, it might be worth looking it up.

If you’ve never seen suit garters and stays, this fanart will be highly relevant to your interests. And more info on sock garters if ya'll are doing research.

Comments give me life and motivation. Emoji’s and keyboardsmashes are also highly appreciated. =)
Catharsis [9/13] (you still aren’t sure he isn’t a dream)

Chapter Summary

Right after the previous chapter, after Clark gets his lightbulb moment...

Chapter Notes

Smut and a lot of it that I’ve been dying to post for way too long. Inspired greatly by this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bruce presses his forehead against the futon and tries to scrape together his words, breaths unsteady in his throat, hands clutching at his sheets, somehow finding himself spread out on his bed and feasted on.

He is not entirely sure how he got here; he’d been readying for a fight. Tensed ever since they’d been in the car after the meeting with Ms Diana Prince and Bruce realized how far he’d fallen.

Bruce had held it together by not thinking The Words; fallen, he thinks, ridiculous, he thinks, as you wish, he thinks.

But there his heart went anyways, when Bruce didn’t pay attention, leading Hope down into the holes of the land. Into his caves and cramped spaces filled with all his sharp edges.

(Or, worse: with nothing.)

If Clark expected his bedroom to be filled with knick-knacks and sentiment and life, he must have been disappointed. (Clark deserves more than being left with nothing.) There’s no life in this room. No light except what Clark had brought, himself. And Bruce knowing this had been fully ready to chase him away, or somehow make Clark’s experience so terrible that he would refuse to repeat it.

Yet somehow instead Bruce had lead Clark into the ofuro, had let the heat sink into his shoulders, had ended up hauled out and whisked over to the mattress, and even though Bruce could trace every step he made with clarity and with logic, Clark had somehow managed to subvert Bruce’s goal. Clark’s hand pressed at the back of his neck until Bruce was belly down against the sheet, fingers then sliding up to the base of his skull, slick with the coconut oil that Bruce kept on hand for wound healing and scar reduction. Then those fingers slid down his neck, then along his spine a thumb on either side of the vertebrae, working loose the knots in his muscles. Those broad hands spread, pressing firm enough to be just shy of bruising.

“Clark,” he protested.

Harder, he’d meant.

Clark made a shushing noise, only slid those slick hands lower, to clutch a handful each of his ass and gently spread them apart. Bruce had felt exposed, scrabbling a little, fighting to get up, but Clark
just quickly kneeled on Bruce’s calves. Firm enough that he stayed in place, but floating the rest of his weight off of them so it was only pressure, no damage. Not a single hint of being crushed.

One hand had moved to the small of his back, pushing Bruce back down.

“Let me look at you.”

Bruce’s face burned. He told himself he was furious at being made so vulnerable, twisting some more, trying to buck him, but Clark ran one thumbnail down the crease of his ass, and Bruce froze. It was like the dull of a blade. A threat against his skin until the nail stopped right where Bruce’s nerves were a flail of sensation.

Those nails could cut through steel, could cut through diamond, could cut through the delicate skin where his body opens up with no resistance.

Bruce’s traitorous dick blurted out precome at the thought. He’d tensed everywhere Clark touched him, clenching around nothing as if his ass was cringing away from the sensation. (Or as if trying to clutch that knife edge.)

Clark chuckled. Brought his other hand down, so that he could spread him open with both thumbs, to better mouth a kiss there.

Bruce stuffed a fist against his mouth.

And that was… that was some time ago. Minutes? Hours? He doesn’t know. He’d lost track of how long; Clark spent an eon lavishing attention on his hole and his taint and his balls and even upper thighs, until that whole region was a completely sensitized mess and Bruce is sweating from his need, his dick a soppy and violent red.

“Fuck me already,” he demands, in a bid to wrest control back, to find a sensation that is sharp instead of smooth, bitter instead of sweet. He wants it like he wants fingers digging into the tense knot of sore muscles, wants Clark dug in so hard Bruce comes out bruised, wants the imprint of Clark left behind.

“You’re still too tight,” Clark denies.

“I’m ready.”

“No you’re not.”

Bruce snarls, and focuses, hyperventilates purposefully to make his heart go strange. And the moment Clark’s grip slackens, he flips them.

He knows Clark let him. He stares imperiously down at Clark beneath him, his alien erection still marble pale but perfect, perfect. Bruce is going to sit on it, goddamit, and maybe make up some of this strange unequal scale they’ve formed between them.

“You’ll tear.” Clark protests, hands at Bruce’s hips, but they are slippery with oil.

Bruce pivots his torso, a mid-air hip escape, and for a moment manages to have Clark’s dick press hard and hot at his hole.

But Clark finds his grip again and pulls Bruce forward instead, pulling until Bruce sprawls fully on top of him, plastered together chest to hip. Clark protests, “You’ll bleed.”
“I’m human,” Bruce hisses, “It’s what we do. That’s how you tell.”

Clark just tilts his head up and captures those words out of Bruce’s mouth. Tastes them on his tongue like he found them wanting and searching for more as if Bruce has anything to give. As if—

“Close your thighs.”

Bruce does.

And Clark thrusts up between them as if that’s worth anything at all and yet his thighs flare in sensation, and the skin between them run amok with nerves already made wild from how long Clark’s mouth had spent there. When one of Clark’s thrusts hits his cock against his perineum a high pitched sound shrills out of Bruce in surprise.

“I know you,” another reality-bending thrust, as Clark pants into his neck, “have a thing, about bruises. About pain. Maybe danger. They—ah!—they get off. I get it.”

He’s scrabbling against Clark, the both of them sweat-slicked, but can’t find any purchase. His grips and holds, fingertips forged against Gotham’s brickwork, turn into caresses on that impenetrable skin. Even his fingernails slide off harmlessly. Clark’s arm is at the small of his back, the other hand hooked right where his thigh meets his ass, hitching his thrusts against Bruce, who did not know that intercrural could be this intense.

“But I’m not gonna—nngh—here, not here. Not today.”

Bruce moans brokenly behind his teeth, deep and low, holding back on the word, please. He can’t even say Clark’s name for fear it would come out.

“Except for this one,” and Clark presses his dick unceasingly hard right behind his balls, jolting into Bruce’s prostate from the outside. “A bruise right here.”

Bruce’s eyes rolls back in his head and he’s just barely holding on now, breathless, ribcage hurting from every sound he’s clamped down on.

“Somewhere you can’t even press on discreetly.” Clark rolls out as if one long desperate word and the sheer ballsy thought of it, walking into his office in his three piece suit with the purpled imprint of Superman’s cockhead between his legs, had Bruce coming so hard he saw stars.

Distantly he’s aware of Clark coming too, an incredible burst of it, hot and sticky in every inconvenient wedge of skin.

Bruce doesn’t even care.

“Let me do this. Bruce,” Clark pants out against his ear, “We can do the other stuff later, but not here.” Like a secret, “Today I want you to not fight me, or not hurt yourself on me, or at least try, until we leave this room.”

“Why should I?” Bruce murmurs, eyes still closed, aftershocks still making his skin feel unstable.

“Because if you do,” and Clark rolls them over, backlit by the glow from above, “I’ll leave your ass worn out enough that you can feel me when you move.” His fingers slide between Bruce’s legs again and tease at his still tense and uncooperative hole. “Not too much, not so that anyone will be able to tell when they watch you walk.” Clark takes a long shaky breath and Bruce feels the tremble of it in his fingers, there, between his legs. “Except you would know. You would know how good you were.”
Bruce swears under his breath as Clark starts petting him there, staring up at that halo’d being until he was blinded, eyes watering. “You’re impossible.” He closes his eyes against the brightness. The light panels are making them sore.

“Am I?” Clark lets his fingers slide back to the bruise his cockhead left and gently ran across it. Bruce almost arches off the bed.

“This isn’t enough proof of existence?”

“Why are you bothering with this?” (With me, he means, with trying to do something most had lost patience with.) He pants, forcing his hips back onto the futon. Back towards Clark’s touch.

“God, Bruce, I’m not doing this before you’re ready.” Clark says as, after a pause, his fingers return newly slicked with more oil to lightly play around his asshole.

“Just get in there, already. I’ll adjust and get used to it.”

“You gotta unclench more.” Clark snorts in refusal.

Bruce glares at him but Clark only deigns to press in the barest sliver of fingertip, the bastard, and only that. Then holds it there even when Bruce tries to shove himself onto it. Moving with his movement so that fingertip remains only a tease. Clark huffs, “you may be bigger than the other guys I’ve fucked but you’re much more tense. So it evens out.”

Bruce has to squint at that statement.

“They were cyclists and runners? You know, short.” Clark blushes. “I mean the only person was that was your height was Valerie but she was—” he breaks off, blushing harder.

He side-eyes Clark harder, considering the patterns. Clark had listed the two types of athletes who were exceptional at having endurance training and cardiovascular health. Clark was drawn towards him because of his heartbeat. Clark mentions a ‘Valerie’ who shares Bruce’s stature... “So you visited an Olympic village at some point.”

“That... that wasn’t a question,” Clark protests.

“No, it wasn’t. I’m glad I got you tested.”

“There were free condoms everywhere!”

“Yeah, I know.” Bruce says smugly, at catching Clark out.

Clark opens his mouth, then shuts it in defeat. Peers at Bruce in return, “and you would know from personal experience? Tales of your misspent youth?”

“Are greatly exaggerated.” He says, “but I did put in an appearance at one or two.”

“You must have been popular,” Clark smiles, leaning in to rub noses.

Bruce nearly sneezes in his face in retaliation. Clark dodges away, and Bruce says, once he does, “An exaggeration.”

He knows he’s difficult and easily irritated and touchy, it’s in fact what makes it so easy to hold himself impartial when he deals with people or companies as Bruce Wayne. The people who’ve met the truest parts of him tend to be repelled (or they leave, or they die) unless they’re paid to be there.
The Olympics that Bruce had attended were covers to hide investigations he’d been looking into, either certain attendees or the hosts themselves.

“Then they were blind or you were hiding yourself,” Clark murmurs, having been all this time rubbing gently between his cheeks and finally slicking one finger in, to the first knuckle.

It’s a deluge of skin compared to what felt like hours of teasing in and about the area. The couple centimeters feels like acres because Bruce is that highly sensitized. Anticipating and dreading it, both.

Clark’s finger doesn’t move.

He’s gonna kill him. Bruce pushes the heel of one hand to his forehead, closes his eyes tightly, whispers, “Just fuck me, Clark. Fucking christ.”

He feels a uncertain sort of uncomfortable that Clark has to spend so much time with this, with stretching him, feeling so so ready to feel that perfect cock absolutely nail him to the mattress. Wants the lightning shock of it, wants the ache, wants to carry a bruise inside him the exact length and shape of Clark.

“No.” Instead Clark slides the finger a little more inside, to the second knuckle, and crooks it. His aim is perfect. (he’s staring, the cheater)

The heels of Bruce’s feet slam into the futon without his control, digging deep, toes curling. It feels—oh god it feels—Scrabbling for traction, but Bruce has none. Now the heels of both Bruce’s hands are pressing against his eyes.

They feel wet.

Bruce is shaking and dripping with sweat and even his unsteady breaths sound wet. He’s hard again already, cock dripping with the steady perfect pressure on his prostate, and his throat is sore like he’d been screaming. And he hasn’t. Bruce is sure of this because it’s taking up so goddamned much of his control to make it so.

When Clark’s finger retreated it feels like some divine exhalation. A weight lifted away from his ribcage, from his throat. There’s pressure stars exploding in his vision; Bruce lets his hands fall to rest on his forehead, chest trembling up and down, knees collapsing askew. He doesn’t deserve this.

Clark kisses one of his knees.

Says, nonsensically, “Beautiful.”

Bruce lets the sound of his uneven breaths answer for him.

“You are.” Clark insists, mouthing his way up the thigh, wandering from scar to scar, “this is,” open-mouthed light suction on each of his balls, “so good.” And Clark is laving his dick with short firm licks like he was somehow savoring Bruce’s feel and scent, like Clark’s just indulging himself with Bruce’s dick.

And Bruce just happened to be attached, going slowly out of his mind.

“Clark, please.”

Two index fingers are at his hole now, stretching by the fingertips gently in opposite directions. Clark lifts his mouth from Bruce’s cock and leans his head against Bruce’s hip, glancing sweetly up...
at him, “If it’s really too much, I’ll stop and let you come. Say ‘please’ again and I’ll let you come and we don’t have to do this. But if I’m going to fuck you here, I’m going to make sure you’re ready for it.” He stares up at Bruce in a determined blaze of blue, “Whatever else we do, I want you to remember this being painless, and I’m fully prepared to spend hours to get you to open up to me.” Clark pauses. “For me,” he amends quickly.

But Bruce? Bruce gets it.

It wasn’t a slip of the tongue; the idiot actually thinks that way— “One has nothing to do with the other,” he grits out.

“Depends on the person,” Clark says, and hums as his fingers sink in.

Bruce swallows down a gasp as they both hook on his sphincter and start easing the muscle looser.

“I want you to know, really know, that I can.” Clark lets his erection touch Bruce’s leg. “But I won’t.”

The fingers leave, and two from the same hand return. They slip in easily from all the oil and the fingerpads gently rest inside him, as if reading his heartbeat from the pulse at his prostate. Bruce could almost feel the way his heart jacks up in reaction.

“Its singing,” Clark says with an unearthly smile, looking down as if to watch what his fingers are doing. Lightly, “You know, I’m pretty sure when I was wandering around South Africa I picked up some raw diamonds.” Looks up to meet Bruce’s gaze again, “I could crush them to powder between my fingertips.”

Those same fingertips are lighting up his insides, gently pushing against his prostate as if sensing Bruce’s thoughts and doing its utmost to disprove it. Bruce’s toes curl.

“You are safe here, you are safe here. The one bruise that Clark had left on him is twinging with every small thrust, and it’s making Bruce’s eyes roll up in his head.

“Clark,” he begs, trying not to say please. Not wanting to test if Clark is really going to stop. Bruce flails his hands down between his legs, to grab Clark by the wrist so he could ride his hand, but the bastard just slips them out entirely.

Bruce ends up gripping Clark’s forearm, tugging uselessly, and sitting up with the effort.

Clark quirks his mouth at him.

“Do not.” Bruce demands. He’s wild with both the need to come and the need for Clark to fuck him, but knows that he could only choose one. He closes his eyes and thinks, feeling backed to the wall, breaths ricocheting in his lungs incoherently, and shoves himself closer to grab Clark’s face with both hands. “I want to feel your cock,” Bruce breathes against Clark’s lips with every bit of seduction that experience has taught him.

“Bruce I don’t—”

“Go slow,” Bruce hisses, “You’re so sure you can do this, then you can go slow.”

Clark groans into his mouth. His fingers return, newly lubed again, to test Bruce’s give. Bruce closes his eyes and tries to relax, to focus, imagining himself opening up for Clark’s insistent erection, imagines Clark’s hand at his chest, at his throat, and three of Clark’s fingers sink in as if consumed.

“A-ah—!” Bruce breathes out, rising up in pitch as Clark’s fingers... spread.
Christ.

It still might be a bit of a stretch but he can, if Clark would just, “See, it’s fine, just go slow, just—Clark come on—”

But Clark’s already moving, bringing Bruce’s legs up, hooked to his elbows. His cock is practically dripping, glistening with oil and precome. “By slow,” Clark says almost conversationally, “I assume you mean you are fine with torturously slow, because—”

Bruce waves him off with one hand and clutches at the sheets above his head with the other, mouth open, neck arching. Because Clark has one hand at the small of his back, holding him up, and the other had pressed his cockhead to that bruise. That perfect imprint sending lightning up Bruce’s spine.

It kissed him there, then slid back, and back, until it dips in a little, where Clark just paused rubbed it back and forth, back and forth.

“Clark.”

“This— hhhngh— is entirely for me.” Clark babbles, his breaths quickening, and Bruce subsides awkwardly at that. If Clark is doing that for himself, then there’s nothing for Bruce but to close his eyes and let that velvet sensation undo him. The fitted sheet gives way in Bruce’s tightened grip, curling up the futon’s corner then sliding off with barely a whimper of protest. The sheets lump loosely beneath him.

Bruce is gasping, overwhelmed. Clark’s cock is being an utter tease, but Clark is enjoying himself and Bruce just —

There’s nothing solid to grab.

“Clark, can—” Bruce reaches forward, gets a handful of hair.

“Yeah,” Clark leans in and folds him up in half, both of Bruce’s hands scrabbling at Clark’s shoulders until they hook around Clark’s neck and dig into his hair.

“Come on.” Bruce tugs. His thighs tremble uncontrollably, as does his rim where Clark’s cock plays and everything feels silken and amazing.

Clark hisses a laugh as Bruce tries to clench around Clark’s cockhead, as if to try to grab at it. “Didn’t you say ‘slow’?”

“Didn’t you say ‘torture’? This is nnnoot-oh christ—” Bruce swears.

Clark is a steady, steady, mindbending pressure between his legs.

Bruce closes his eyes and bears down on it, drunk on the sensation, remembering how Clark had gone incoherent in the penthouse, getting fucked, as if it was even a quarter this delicious. His thighs are clenching around Clark, begging silently for more. His fingers are tight in Clark’s silken hair, recalling the otherworldly sensation of the cape, recalling Clark kneeling at his feet, throat working around his cock, trusting.

Recalling Clark, lined by the green glow from the monitor, looking up at him and asking, So what’s the plan?

(You are safe here.)
“—hhnnngh.” The sound escapes him at the shock of the head slipping in. Bruce has to cover his face with one hand. Breaths. Mutters, “It’s so hot.” The cock is terrifically warm.

Clark is pressing his smiles into Bruce’s chin and jawbone, but his chest is shaking and gives his laughter away.

Bruce frowns, “Look your dick is— fuck—”

Clark had pressed in just the littlest bit more and Bruce’s toes are curling.

“—is alien and—a- ah!— and pasty white, how—” He breaks off into a string of curses as he watches Clark look between them, and he knows the little shit is watching his dick knock up against prostate dead on as Bruce’s cock twitches violently. God, he needs to come.

“You’ve had it your mouth before.” Clark says.

Bruce shakes his head, teeth gritting as another wonderous, and tiny, push, threatens to shove a whimper out of his mouth, “Doesn’t— mngngh— feel like—” it was ever this hot, like leaning against it would pull him apart, all of him loosened and languid and ready to be reamed.

And Bruce can’t even beg for it, he’s not taking the chance that somehow Clark decided ‘please’ would be their safeword. Doesn’t want to go through that conversation now when he’s so close, driven insane with unfathomable want.

“Don’t cover your face,” Clark says, rocking his cockhead back and forth exactly over that bundle of nerves.

A scream is working up his throat. Bruce wants to punch him, “ Then fuck me.”

Clark snorts, but then resumes the slow steady press in that became just as much torture as promised, achingly slow, unconscionably tender, and absolutely not what Bruce asked for, but Bruce couldn’t find it in him to give any of it up. Could only be dazed and uncomprehending as Clark is finally pressed flush against his hip.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Bruce murmurs vaguely surprised.

Clark just presses kisses against his throat something undefinably sad about his motions. “You’re okay? Good?”

“Quit it, it’s not like,” Bruce huffs out a breath, “No one’s ever.” And also, “It’s old injuries, they usually—” he thinks with a sudden shock that he’d usually have to pretend they weren’t there: the usual hurts from patrol, in addition to the sustained pressure on this joint, the strain on that repaired tendon, the hyperextension on his hip, the weak spot on his spine.

Clark had wordlessly compensated for them all, and more besides. Bruce usually leaned on some of the nicer soreness from a workout or a favorite bruise and some focused meditative training to power past the pain.

Bruce stares up through his fingers at the blinding ceiling.

“Stop thinking,” Clark says, and draws out, slowly, like an incoming storm. Bruce instinctively sought purchase for his hands, flails out at Clark’s neck and Clark brought them close.

Clark pauses, almost fully out, and brings one hand to clutch at Bruce’s chest, over his heart. Catches Bruce’s gaze, asking, “Let me hear you.”
“Make me,” Bruce demands, clenching around what little of Clark is still inside.

Clark’s grip changes to a palm holding him down by the sternum, other hand slipping slightly lower on his back, lifting and changing the angle of his hips, something about his mouth distinctly evil.

When the thrust comes, it starts off innocuous, just the slick push of skin in and in and in but the hand at his back shifts Bruce’s hips higher as the cock lands against just that perfect spot and then proceeds to press the entire length of it across, hard, an avalanche of sensation that Bruce is entirely unprepared for. And then again.

And it just keeps—

And Clark’s hand lands on his dick and vibrates and it just—

Bruce whites out, able to register that he’s being thoroughly fucked but unable to see past his blurry vision, fingernails dug into Clark’s neck, pinned to his mattress, in this safespace as Clark takes him methodically apart. He’s screaming with it, at some point. He doesn’t know.

He doesn’t. He can’t—

He—

He’s shaking. Currents running under his skin as he comes, as if he’d been pulled to pieces, melted. Remade.

The room wobbles as if uncertain of its mooring. He breathes as if his lungs aren’t quite where he’d last left them.

Bruce presses a trembling hand to his face. Wipes at it.

When he looks down at his chest he’s a bit astonished; he hadn’t come that much in years.

Clark is still hard, inside him. The aftershocks make Bruce clench uncontrollably around him.

He can’t really feel his legs.

“Oh god oh god oh god,” Clark presses his face against Bruce’s neck and moans, brokenly, “You’re so good.” Runs a finger around where they’re still joined, and it’s a volatile cauldron of sensation. An itch that still wants to be scratched. He’s barely even sore; usually coming that hard would make him oversensitive but something about Clark makes him want to cut himself open on the pleasure. Wants it again, immediately, and harder.

“One.” Bruce says.

“Whu?”

“That’s one of the positions down. We have at least eight more of my favorites to go through, plus variations.”

Clark noses along his throat, shaking, shaking, “Do we now.”

Bruce can feel the tremble in Clark’s words as they’re said against his throat. He must want to thrust
so badly at this point but his cock is barely moving despite Bruce quivering around it, clutching at the heat of it, for the sensation. As if Clark is still waiting for Bruce to say the word, and if that is the case—

“I cleared the weekend,” Bruce hums, pushing back a little against Clark’s tiny thrusts, they sent shivers up his spine, “excepting major emergencies. There’s at least three positions I’d like to fuck you in while your fingers are up my ass.”

Clark freezes. And raises his head.

“If you are amenable.” Bruce says quickly, "I mean you’ve spent so long working me open and—”

“Yes.”

“—it would be… You’d—?” There’d always been something that changed in the men from his past. After. That’d made them less willing to—

“Yes.”

“Well,” Bruce tries to find his mental footing, realizes once again that he can’t, simply can’t, judge Clark by any of his previous experiences in any way, shape, or form. Superman, for all that he is literally the most powerful man, does not react like any man with power that Bruce has ever met. “Then I trust you to fuck me until I’m hard again, what are you waiting for?” He spreads his legs a little more in Clark’s hold, opening up his hips for a better angle. Gives a kick at Clark’s ass with the heel of his foot for good measure.

And instead of leaping onto the invitation, Clark’s laughter cracks loose and fills the room golden. He’s smiling, as if he isn’t rock hard and needing to come, placing a hand at Bruce’s cheek as if he’d said anything remarkable. As if Bruce is everything worth looking at and Clark is honored to be allowed to do so.

Bruce looks at him, and looks at him, and doesn’t know how he’s real.

Chapter End Notes

"All men are Good." ^_~

Also:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cycling_at_the_2012_Summer_Olympics_-_Men%27s_individual_road_race
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerie_Adams

Anyways, this is basically the penultimate chapter. Chapter 10 is mostly the final chapter and then there’s three chapters of epilogue. I have alot of thoughts and threads to tie up in Chapter 10, what are questions you still have, things you’d like to see resolved, wishlists, wants, etc etc.? It's roughly 75% written and undergoing revisions but due to it's structure I can always stick in a flashback to explain/elaborate on some things.

I love all you commenters and hope you stay safe and sane (and consensual ^_~).
Catharsis [10/13] (if you kiss him, you might wake up)

Chapter Summary

_The book fell that is always turned to at twilight_
and my cape rolled like a hurt dog at my feet.

_Always, always you recede through the evenings_
towards where the twilight goes erasing statues.

-Neruda

Chapter Notes

Much love to Moonbelowsea and uzumaki_rakku for beta.

Additional thanks to maranhig who gave me a comment that kicked my ass into gear to run this thru final edits and posting already instead of waiting to finish ch 13 first. Also 007inahauntedhouse and susiecarter who’s kind words kept me going through the slog of writing the hardest parts of this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bruce, distantly, walks across the tarmac. Thinking of that weekend.

Thinking of—

He feels like he’s viewing his feet from miles above. From ground level. From every angle and every past moment as they carry him forward.

His private plane landed moments before and has already come to a stop. The rolling staircase slides into place, attendants are locking the wheels. The door opens.

He looks up, towards the heavens.

—

(then)

“Hey Ma,” Clark had said that remarkable breathtaking weekend. His cell phone was on speaker. He’d been propped up on his elbows, belly down on the mattress, the afternoon sun from the windows making him glow. They’d migrated upstairs to the lakehouse after the futon downstairs had become too disgusting for either of them to stand.

The bed had devolved into a nest of blankets. There were half-eaten sandwiches on the side table, among other things far less innocent. Clark was making a phone call to his mother. And Bruce—
Bruce had buried his head under a pillow in disbelief. Clark was using his own phone and Bruce wasn’t going to be ridiculous, trying to snatch it away from him.

This whole thing was ridiculous enough.

“Hey Ma,” Clark repeated, like an explosion of sunshine. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

“What’s this?” Martha asked.

“It’s too soon,” Bruce protested weakly from beneath the pillow, knowing Clark would hear.

Knowing Clark would ignore him.

“I found him Ma. I found— He’s the heartbeat I’ve been listening to all this time. He’s,” Clark had looked at him with an intensity that Bruce could feel through the mass of egyptian cotton and feather-down shielding his head. “He’s amazing, I— when will you have time to come over for a visit? Or we could go to you?”

“She can use my plane,” Bruce said, pillow still stuffed in his face.

Clark repeated his words and Martha laughed.

“His ‘plane’?? What have you gotten yourself into Clark?”

“Bruce Wayne,” Bruce answered, glad to be inaudible to the human ear, and Clark threw another pillow at him.

“He’s... turned out to be pretty rich?” Clark hemmed. “His name is— well— he’s Bruce Wayne.”

There was a loaded silence.

Bruce waited a beat, then took the pillows off after the silence stretched too long. He wormed his way over the bed to awkwardly speak into the phone, “Mrs. Kent, I know what the media makes of me and what you must be thinking. I can only tell you that there’s more to me than what they say and,” he looked at Clark. “I know your son has hidden depths. As do I.”

“Hidden depths,” she repeated with emphasis.

“This isn’t a conversation for the phone,” Bruce said, knowing that Clark’s line is unsecured.

Knowing and letting it be that way because something in him wanted a record of this call, wanted the permanency and the proof.

“You must know this.” He ended his statement firmly but didn’t know how to continue onwards, so it just sounded bruce and abrupt.

He didn’t know how to soften it. It made him feel wrong-shaped, as it ever does.

Fortunately Clark stepped in, “I really want you to meet him face-to-face Ma, I think you’ll get along great.”

There was a warmth in her voice when Martha next spoke, “Alright Clark.” And then she laughed, “But the church bake sale is next weekend. I’m already committed, and I can’t go back on my word. It’ll have to be the weekend after.”

“That’ll be perfect,” Bruce said. “We can set everything up on this end for you. Travel and
accomodations. You won’t have to worry for anything, just bring yourself and toiletries. Clothes, if
you like."

"If I like." Martha laughed again, voice going abruptly vast as if putting them on speaker phone.

“He likes dressing people up,” Clark confided.

Bruce sputtered in response.

“Well thank goodness someone is finally dressing you right,” Martha chided.

“What?” Clark asked.

“I looked him up just now on the computer, and there’re pictures of you on his arm.”

It was Clark’s turn to sputter as Bruce smirked.

“I do know how to use the internet.” Martha said, a smile in her voice.

“Don’t believe everything you read Ma.”

“I suppose I’ll have to see for myself won’t I?”

“The weekend after next?” Bruce asked, to confirm.

“I’ll see you then,” Martha said. “Take care of yourselves, now. I won’t have you go rescheduling
on me, Mr. Wayne.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

—

(now)

Martha appears at the door of the plane, at the top of the stairs.

Bruce looks up at her as if through a tunnel.

The wind on the landing strip is very strong.

The next thing he knows, she’s hugging him. He doesn’t know why. He doesn’t know what his face
is doing.

He brings his arms up and pats at her awkwardly.

The paparazzi are at a distance, but their hi-res lenses are enormous and rather unmistakeable.

“They’re taking pictures of us,” Bruce reminds her.

“I know,” she says.

It’s part of the plan.

“We need to be seen like this,” he reminds himself, pulling back and placing more distance between
them.

“I know, Bruce.” Martha examines his face. “This is an awful way to meet.”
He wonders what is an appropriate amount of devastation and grief to express to the surviving mother of someone whom you’ve only known for a little more than two weeks.

\textit{(Two weeks? But it felt like—)}

Bruce thinks he may have nodded. He leads her to the car. Alfred greets her stoically and holds the door for them.

As soon as they get in, and the world is shut away from them, Bruce turns to her.

“I’m so sorry,” he says.

“I was wrong,” he says.

“I—”

Martha looks at him. Bruce can’t read her face.

“This is my fault,” he says in a rush, “and we have some indication that Clark’s not— his death might not be permanent, and I promise I will find a way—”

She holds up a hand and Bruce’s mouth snaps shut.

\textit{That was inappropriate, he thinks. I put my foot in my mouth, he thinks.}

\textit{(Why didn’t I just stay in the shadows. Why didn’t I just give her money. Why didn’t I just follow however she wants to proceed, Bruce thinks, this isn’t the place for Bruce Wayne.)}

Martha put her hand on his as if she’s consoling him.

He doesn’t understand.

—

\textit{(then)}

Eventually they had gotten off the phone with Martha and Clark dove at him.

“Thank you,” he’d said against Bruce’s mouth.

“There’s nothing to thank,” Bruce protested.

“There’s everything to thank,” Clark said, and looked at him for a short moment that felt long, for how much Clark’s gaze changed throughout it. “Look, I know how hard it is for you to agree to that.”

Bruce glanced at him sideways, distancing himself from Clark’s embrace, “Seemed easy enough for you.” He reached out towards the nightstand and hovered his hand over Clark’s phone, then let it drop away. “I would’ve never thought to tell her. I would’ve thought eventually finding out from the news would be enough.” He cleared his throat, “But you’re right, it’s better she hears it from you.”

“So?” Clark made an inquiring sound at him. “There’s something that’s bothering you, I know you. What’s up?”

“I would’ve \textit{never} thought about it.” Bruce emphasized again, running a hand through his hair, “Clark, I’m. You’re.”
He wanted to hold Clark’s face in his hands.

He curled his hands into fists instead. “You’re more human than I am.”

Clark only grimaced and looked out through the glass walls, over the lake. Fog was creeping through the trees in curling whisps obscuring the view of the shores of the property. They’re not even facing the right direction but Bruce still felt the presence of the ruined Wayne manor lurking over his shoulder like a gargoyle.

Clark hunched in on himself.

“I’m not what they call me on TV.” Clark struggled a moment for words, “I’m not a god, that’s stupid. And I mean, ‘more human’ than you? You’re actually human and you’re brilliant. What you’ve been doing the last two decades, just with your gear downstairs, you—”

“Don’t.” Bruce violently gestured as if to sweep that all away. “I was born into money. It makes it easy. You have more heart, more empathy, more humanity, I’m—”

“Brilliant.” Clark insisted, “You’re brilliant, I’m just fast. I have more time, subjectively, to work through things. To be frustrated. To be angry. How did you think I have enough control to do what I do at the speeds I can go?”

A breeze and then suddenly there was something very small in his hands. When Bruce looked closer, he realized it was a tiny model of the Cave.

Delicate.

Clark sat next to him now, chin on his knees and arms around them. Somehow he looked small, too, despite all the space he took up. “I used to make these as a teenager, because there’s too much Time on my hands. I couldn’t figure out how to slow down, not without the soun— well.”

The detailing on the model was exquisite. The staircase and the computer monitors and his car, Jason’s memorial, and all the rooms that were tucked away—

“Did you make this just now?”

“Yeah.” Clark reached over and plucked it out of Bruce’s hands to hold between thumb and forefinger. “I would have to crush these after I made them because Pa insisted on me staying safe.”

There was a long moment as Superman stared at the model of Bruce’s life’s work, held between his fingertips.

The air seemed to tremble as it waited for those fingertips to close. Bruce barely breathed, waiting to see it.

Wanting to see it.

“I broke so many.” Clark placed the cave in Bruce’s palm again, safely. “I’m not more human, Bruce. I’m just lucky enough to be able to be a dumbass where no one sees.”

“But you still feel it all. All that time,” Bruce realized, belatedly. “Even at that speed, and your strength, you can still perceive everything? Clark,” He took a breath and grabbed at Clark’s wrist, uncaring of where the carving fell, “How precise are your senses?”

What Bruce didn’t want to ask, didn’t want to know, and knew he should have asked himself from the very beginning is, ‘How much does the world hurt?’
Pain was used by the body to tell you when something was wrong. The double-edged sword in being flexible was over-extension. Sharpness in one’s vision was matched by sensitivity to light. Excellent hearing countered by being more easily deafened.

Pain was how the world had set limits on the Waynes; the once great family whittled down to one.

Pain was how Bruce found his limits, and surpassed them. How he found other people’s limits, and used them to understand and control them as the Bat.

What living thing didn’t know pain? Who out there could not get hurt? (Who among us doesn’t bleed?)

Because that was who he’d thought Superman was.

The more fool, him. Bruce realized, staring at Clark’s flickering expressions, trying to grasp the whole of what he was seeing.

“The world is very loud,” Clark replied lightly, looking out the window.

Bruce couldn’t swallow.

Clark shrugged. Didn’t meet his eyes. “You learn to focus past the noise.”

To survive when the entire world hurts, Bruce heard. But what a goddamned miracle it was that Clark was still sane past all that cacophony.

He wondered if it might be possible to somehow craft a room where Clark could be given a moment of peace.

—

(now)

Alfred parks the car in the spot closest to the staircase. Bruce gets out of the car and holds the door for Martha. He leads her down into the cave. To the table in the medical bay, where Clark lies on a hospital bed, under a sheet and some sun lamps.

Martha had told Bruce about Clark’s reaction to them over the phone, and he’d been willing to try anything. The wounds had reacted to the lamps by closing up. So did his uniform, before it’d retracted back into a small metal crest.

Clark looks like he’s sleeping

Like a kiss might wake him.

(it hadn’t)

Martha, back very straight, picks up one of Clark’s hands. She clasps it between two of hers, and even so, hers hands are dwarfed.

“He’s cold,” she murmurs.

“Rigor mortis never set in,” Bruce says in return. “From data the government had on Zod, this seems normal for Kryptonian biology.”

He doesn’t know what to say next that wouldn’t be wishful thinking. He doesn’t know how to talk
about the days where he and Clark researched the green mineral and Zod and Luthor. How to talk about how there had been a rip in the world, and the young man who’d spoken as if today were the past and Clark had always—and will always—exist in the future.

A future that now might not exist.

_Salt on the wound._

She sets down her son’s hand, and goes over to Bruce. She grabs his hand instead with both of hers and looks at him.

Bruce has nothing to give her.

He feels very small.

“...lets get some tea into you. Warm you up.” Martha says at last.

“A fine idea,” Alfred agrees, materializing by the stairs with a tray already in hand.

The butler enters Bruce’s tea rooms in the cave, leading the way, without so much as a word of permission.

But then, Alfred never needed it.

—

_(then)_

Bruce stopped before he rounded the corner to the kitchen. He’d dropped down to the cave to fetch some chains but the bedroom was empty when he’d returned. He’d set the heavy links carefully, quietly, on the mattress and then tracked the sound of voices.

“...and he’s followed this insane schedule for years?”

“A little over two decades by this point,” Alfred said.

“To try and save Gotham.”

“Yes.”

“But,” Clark spent a long moment silent and Bruce wondered how much an eon that was for Superman, subjectively, “Why does he love Gotham so much?”

Alfred spent just as long a time silent in response, and there’s the sound of cloth shifting, as if the older man had leaned heavily against the counter. “Bruce has always been such an intense child. Needing the details of things. After his parents died, it turned into needling the details of their death, then death itself, then pain, and fear. How to master it, and reduce it. In himself. In the city.”

“Yes?” Clark said, “But to love the city so much that he pretty much burns himself out for it?”

“Master Clark,” Alfred said heavily, “Master Bruce loves nothing so much as that which is difficult, that which can control him, those things and those people who can overwhelm him. And hurt him.” Pointedly, “But surely you know that.”

Clark was silent.
“Understand that these words are not an indication of my disapproval,” his caretaker continues. “But that of all of Master Bruce’s options to cleave himself to...”

There’s a long pause that made Bruce strain his ears.

Alfred cleared his throat, “Well. I give you my blessing.”

Bruce has to walk in and interrupt, “He’s joking, of course.”

“Am I?” Alfred tilted an eyebrow at him as if he’d known Bruce had been eavesdropping this entire time.

“You are.” Bruce insisted.

Clark raised an eyebrow too.

“Then, all joking aside, as the man who’ve changed your nappies you must understand that you are fully grown enough to take care of your own laundry this weekend.”

Bruce’s neck grew hot, thinking of the disaster downstairs. “Understood.”

Clark ended up helping out, helping him wrangle the sheets into the machine and laughing at Bruce, as Bruce peered at its settings.

It was there, in the laundry room, where Bruce was hit with the dreamlike surreality of the situation. He wondered when he would wake up.

—

(now)

Bruce hands Martha and Alfred mugs of coffee. They’re both staring at his monitors. Bruce has to steel himself internally before he can glance over too, stomach a hollow ache.

_The Death of Superman!_

He has had all monitors scanning news feeds and internet chatter, tabulating the responses from various media outlets opining on the event and the global outpouring of grief.

However Martha has positioned herself at the edge of one of the main screens. She’s instead reading only the feed Bruce had dedicated to hits on searches of one Clark Kent.

_It’s being reported that Kent was injured trying to help out during the Doomsday disaster, and has been moved to the Wayne Estate due to his recent relations with the Wayne heir. Bruce Wayne expresses general remorse at the news of Superman and all those who were caught in the fallout, donations pending, ‘...excuse me I have pressing matters to attend to.’_

_Regarding ‘pressing matters’, are you referring to the status of Clark Kent? ‘No comment.’_

_Medical equipment has been seen going to his lake house, as well as Dr. Leslie Tompkins. ‘No comment.’ The doctor herself was under too many NDAs to be able to release a statement. Speculations are flying that Kent is in a coma, Bruce Wayne has been seen in the arms of Martha Kent at the airport. Scandalous relations between Bruce and his paramour’s mother, details on page 9!_
“Tabloids will do anything for a sale,” Bruce remarks uneasily.

Martha gives a weak laugh. “You’ve known Dr. Tompkins long?” She asks

“Leslie has been with us through thick and thin,” Alfred says, with a pointed brief glance around the Cave.

Martha takes a look herself, hums in acknowledgement, and then goes back to the monitors. “I’d like to meet her then, give my thanks.”

“She should be coming by later today,” Bruce says, heart unsteady, “But we’re both not sure what more good she can do.”

“Clark’s been stabilized?”

“If by stable you mean inert,” Bruce says harshly, then winces as Martha flinches back.

They both stare uneasily at all the equipment surrounding Clark. Bruce had turned off the sound because they were all flatline.

“We might want to think of worst case scenarios,” Alfred says gently.

“It’s important in any scenario to separate Clark’s identity from Superman’s.” Bruce says. “The longer Clark registers to the general public as being comatose, but still alive, the safer all those who associated with him are.”

Bruce is sure that Clark would want his mother safe, and is determined to protect everything in death what Clark would have in life.

But Martha, to his surprise, looks at him with relief, “Then you don’t plan on stopping with the... well, what do you prefer to call yourself? The papers seem to refer to you as the Gotham Bat.”

“I meant distancing Clark’s enemies from you,” Bruce protested. Paused. Conceded, “However, you’re right. This is the time that those of us with the ability to help should step up.”

“It’s good to keep busy,” Martha says quietly.

Bruce doesn’t know how to respond to that. He instead lets himself stare at the multiple videos of talking heads, on silent. Below them all are a running transcript, being data-mined as they went.

(A Travesty.

Who will step up?

A disaster, A Doomsday.)

His mind runs like a hamster wheel over those phrases, over how Clark had looked caught on the Luthor’s monster with his chest cracked open. How heavy Clark’s body seemed as Bruce passed him over to Diana—

Clark was not moving. He wasn’t breathing.

—as the helicopters circled overhead, searchlights lighting them up.

Cameras, too. And Bruce made his movements sterile, when he realized their presence. Made himself step away. Made himself plan how to extract themselves from the spotlight and—
Clark looked like he was asleep.

—how to move forward in a world where here Superman has fallen. Where Superman—

Where Clark has been impaled. Chest broken open because an alien monster has pushed his hand through it. Like some nightmare—

It should’ve been him.

—It feels like it’d been Bruce. Like his own heart had been pulverized, lungs compromised, ribs shattered and stabbing into him with every movement and breath.

“Bruce, we should go out for lunch,” Martha says suddenly, firmly.

“A public appearance,” Alfred agrees, immediately starting to herd everyone upstairs in an uncharacteristically blunt manner.

“I suppose.” Bruce peers at them, thrown, and feeling ‘managed.’ “Bruce Wayne should probably be seen touching base with Clark Kent’s mother.”

He can already imagine it as the photographers might capture them. An upscale bistro perhaps, something that’ll suit her, but is clearly something Wayne would go to. The both of them would be attempting to warm themselves on coffee and not particularly tasting the food. Because Clark is in a coma. (Just a coma, nothing more, nothing less. Nothing to see here.) Tiredness would shadow their eyes, voices in low murmurs, stress curving their spines.

“A hardship shared is halved.” Martha agrees.

Bruce wishes she didn’t even have half.

“I never got to thank you by the way,” she says when they’re ushered into the limo.

Bruce blinks. “For what?”

“If it wasn’t for the car you sent to the diner to pick me up for the flight, I would have gotten caught up in the break in.”

“Was there some trouble at your work?” Alfred asks from the driver’s seat.

“Louise said there was a holdup when some robbers came in during shift change,” Martha says with a frown. “They’d slipped in through the alleyway where the dumpster is and had everyone line up by the windows. The sheriff was prepared for a hostage situation, but they all got away.”

“Should I look into it?” Bruce asks.

Martha shakes her head, “They were cowards and fled at the first sign of trouble, didn’t even bother taking any of cash from the register or asking for people’s wallets. No one was hurt.”

“Small mercies,” Alfred says.

They’ve arrived at the bistro; Bruce frowns thoughtfully and makes a mental note to look into it later.

(then)
“You don’t know what snakes you’ve invited into your bed,” Luthor said that horrific night, on that windy skyscraper rooftop. “What adders offering apples will kick you out of peaceful Eden.”

“Oh, I think I have some idea,” Bruce Wayne replied, setting down the champagne Mercy offered him on a handrail without taking a sip. “I thought we were here to talk business?”

Luthor eyed the glass quickly, then looked back up. “Still holding onto that pretence? You sure do like to derail things, don’t you Brucie? Or should I call you by a different name?”

Huh. Bruce hadn’t thought the other man would be willing to show his full hand. Bruce had finangled a meeting with Luthor, knowing that his extracurriculars were probably known; but he’d thought Luthor would have wanted to hold that knowledge in reserve. In the past week they hadn’t managed to get any proof to hold Luthor accountable for misbehavior and Bruce got impatient. He’d let himself be lured to the other billionaire’s building, to this rooftop. Setting himself up as both bait and trap.

It was best if he’d confront Luthor with Clark nowhere near any of the green mineral.

Luthor turned to him with a manic look, walking backwards towards the skyscraper’s edge. “A fellow always has to factor in contingencies for his grand plans, but being forced to use all of them?” He heaves a sigh, “Why I hadn’t had to do that since dear ol’ pa and I’d hate to call you daddy.”

“What specific plans are you talking about?”

“Do you expect me to just tell you? What would our audience say?” Luthor nodded up to the side and when Bruce followed his sightline, there was a camera there on the eaves. It’s angled to capture anything that happened over most of the helicopter pad covering the roof. If Bruce dropped his cover, anything recorded could be held over his head as blackmail as incontrovertible proof of being Batman. Or worse, simply given over to the internet or the media, ruining decades of secrecy and putting Alfred in danger.

Luthor, standing at the edge of the pad, was in the camera’s blindspot.

“They would hear a man being provoked to the edge of his patience.”

“That is if it was, hypothetically, capturing audio.” The man pulled a small black box out of his pocket. “But I don’t need audio for this.”

The box opened, revealing a green glow. It’s coming from the tip of a long thin cylinder.

A bullet.

“Special order military grade. The absolute cutting edge in design,” Luthor winked. “Super hush hush.”

Bruce took a step forward.

“Well that got your attention!” Lex snapped the box shut and tossed it casually up, then snatched it out of the air. “You know, I’d rather thought you’d be on my side in this.”

“What?” Bruce took several measured steps, trying to seem casual, to make it so that his earlier slip in composure was just a trick of the light.

“You’re just a simple man of very wealthy means, as am I. And we worked hard for our means to mean anything, didn’t we?” Another toss.
Bruce’s fists wanted to clench even as he held his face steady and calm. He approached Lex but Lex only started circling him, keeping Bruce at a distance.

“Gathered our power even though it corrupts, ‘for everyone on earth was corrupt’, innit that right?” Lex laughed, “I know well the price of doing business, but how much blood is on your money?”

Bruce stilled.

“Meanwhile God in a red cape is just there, like a sword hanging over your head. Everything you’ve made with your own two hands sit in judgement for him to just,” Luthor’s hands flapped manically, “Zap it all away. Tear it all down like a tower or two, but you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you, Mr. Wayne?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he grits out.

“I suppose not, if you’ve already made God kneel for you,” Lex murmurs thoughtfully.

Bruce almost lunged for him but Lex cracked the box open again.

“Do you think he’d come if I call, too?”

Clark can’t be within five feet of the exomineral without feeling its effects, they’ve tested.

He hoped Clark wasn’t listening in, hoped that Bruce’s command of his body held and that his heart remained steady. Hoped that Clark stayed away.

Bruce would rather be shot than to watch a loved one yet again step between him and a gun.

“They would still be able to piece together evidence of your wrongdoing based on the tapes,” Bruce stalled, as Les loaded up a long barreled handgun.

“Tapes? Whose building do you think this is? Certainly not yours.” Lex smiled as he brought the gun to bear on Bruce. A helicopter is approaching. “I’d initially wanted to set the Son of Krypton and the Gotham Bat up against each other—a fight to the death!— but I suppose this will have to do.”

Bruce had at his disposal at least five ways to close the distance, disarm Lex, and retrieve the bullet; to hell with keeping up the facade of his identity, he’ll do cleanup later.

But the helicopter came in faster than is safe or sane, the whump of its rotors vibrating the floor, the wind slashing across the landing, and taking away some of Bruce’s options. No matter. He was willing to risk charging Lex head on.

Flesh will heal.

But the door to the rooftop banged open. “It’s fake,” Lois shouted. “It’s a distraction!”

Now that he knew there was no danger to Clark, Bruce sent a mini-grapple from his wristwatch; its wizzling distinctive as it caught the gun. But Lex let go of the gun immediately instead of letting himself be reeled in.

From Centennial Park an explosion boomed.

“Needs must,” Lex chirruped and hopped onto the helicopter, it’d immediately started lifting away, “I’ve had to speed things up dreadfully, wasn’t even able to give things a personal touch, but you know how it is. Delegate delegate delegate.”
“You—!”

“Can’t pin a thing on me! My hands are clean and I’m nowhere near the scene of where you need to be.” Lex shouted pointedly as he rose into the air, “Where is your God now?”

A roar shook the city.

Something exploded out of the building encasing the Kryptonian ship. A red and blue streak met it in a thud felt even from this distance.

The combined mass flew off to crash onto one of the islands in the bay.

Bruce turned towards Lois, “What do you know.”

“Luthor has been after certain government contracts—”

“To create munitions against alien threats, I know.”

“Not just that,” Lois said with annoyance, “But something that at first looked like biological warfare.”

“What makes you think that it isn’t?”

She pointed at the island where the battle was now taking place. News helicopters were already circling, lighting the area up. “Luthor snuck Zod’s body onto the Kryptonian ship.”

“And something came out,” Bruce said hollowly.

“Something came out.”

A blur attached to something bulky shot into the sky.

They both waited, watching, hoping, and suddenly the entire night went nuclear.

“Idiots,” Bruce muttered, “Superman gets stronger in the sun, which is just an immense nuclear reaction. You’d have to assume that’s true of all Kryptonian-based lifeforms.”

Lois shot him a glance. “So what would make them weaker?”

Bruce took in a breath, feeling punched.

Numb.

He closed his eyes. Tapped his earpiece.

“Alfred, did you get all that?”

“Loading up the plane with gas and spear as we speak.”

God help him.

—

(now)

“Hey, um I saw you were here and I just wanted to say I’m sorry, like, you know, in person.”
Bruce has them seated out on the patio, Martha approving of the fresh air and sunshine, Alfred approving of the visibility.

His back was to the wall of the bistro, he has line of sight from all approaches, and the cement planters dividing the patio from the street are big enough to hide Martha behind if needs must.

He didn’t need to hide her from Barry.

Martha glances at Bruce then looks back at Barry in slight confusion.

“Oh! I was, you know, there,” the Flash makes a small *whoosh* motion with his hand. “That night. Helping out. But I couldn’t get close enough to do anything,” he flushes.

They’d made contact with the Flash in the middle of the week, but Doomsday happened soon after. The kid had looked up at the monster, clearly out of his depth and terrified. Bruce had set him on evacuation of the port and containing the damage once he saw the battle was heading back towards more populated areas.

Bruce himself had been too busy with the spear and the canister gun— and arguing with Clark over who was to do what— to give the young man the attention he deserved.

“It’s not your fault,” Bruce interrupts.

Martha frowns at him.

“I just feel like I could have helped more.”

Bruce shakes his head, trying to make Barry more aware they were in public, “Don’t we all.”

Martha reaches over to lay a hand on Barry’s arm, glancing at Bruce, “You were probably where you needed to be.”

“It’s probably more my fault than yours,” Bruce adds.

“It’s *no one*’s fault,” Martha asserts. “Clark just has… a great sense of responsibility.”

Her eye catches on a lurking mediahound that Bruce had been observing. The woman draws near their table.

Bruce’s mouth twitches wryly, “Yeah, he always talks about wanting to be first on the scene.” He tries to subtly signal to the Flash to make himself scarce.

“Getting at the truth,” Martha adds.

“Being an *ace reporter,*” Bruce nods. “And speaking of which, Vicky. I’m afraid this isn’t the best time.”

Vicky Vale, with the Gotham Gazette, openly dissects the group with her gaze, immediately dismissing Barry as unimportant. The kid finally catches a clue and eases himself out of their company with more discretion than one might give him credit for.

“But you’ve practically been a ghost lately, Brucie, the people are curious.”

“I’ve been busy.” No, too terse for the Bruce Wayne persona. “I’m… hosting, and I’m tied up in commitments.”
“Commitments?” Vicky’s eyes narrow, “And here I am thinking you were just making the rounds.”

“The rounds?” Martha echoes.

“You know,” Vicky says faux casually, “Being in bed with the fourth estate. He does that, quite literally.”

Martha lets that sit for a long second and meets her eyes with a steely gaze, “For someone in the media, it’s awful tone deaf to let bitterness over being a fling affect your interactions with a grieving family.” She sips her tea.

“The prognosis is that grim? You consider yourselves ‘family’ then?” Never let it be said that Vicky’s easily shaken.

“Considering all that’s happened, yes,” Martha says.

“We’re monitoring his status,” Bruce adds. “We’re trying to stay hopeful.”

But Vicky’s undeterred. “But they’ve only known each other for two weeks, Mrs. Kent—”

“There were only 17 dates in my entire life that was worth a damn; those with Clark make up most of them,” Bruce interrupts.

“And Clark’s recovery is—”

“None of your business.” Martha replies.

“I think you’ve outworn your welcome Ms Vale,” Bruce adds.

She measures them, then nods, “My apologies then. And my well-wishes for a quick recovery, if you’ll accept them. I’ll leave you to your meal.”

The both watch her leave.

“That was incredibly out of line.” Martha fiddles at her cup.

“Gotham,” Bruce apologizes. He leans to pour more tea for her.

There’s maybe three paparazzi that captures the moment.

Martha suddenly pins him with a Look. “Only seventeen dates, you say.”

Bruce shrugs uncomfortably. “Tales of my exploits are greatly exaggerated by the media.”

“Not helped by the fact that you sleep with the media.”

He concedes that with a nod.

“So in the eyes of the world, your relationship with my son was just another one of Bruce Wayne’s one night stands?”

Bruce bit down on the words that it was more than one night. “The world won’t think anything’s amiss, no. Except for my subsequent reaction now; I don’t think anything with Clark can be classified as ‘just another’ one of anything.”

“He’s unique,” Martha’s mouth quirks.
“Not just that,” Bruce waves off the implication of Superman, “He… There are very few men of my acquaintance who are so genuinely good that when they are given the ability to do anything at all, with zero consequences, that they choose to give back instead of enacting the worst versions of themselves.”

Bruce has seen this pattern over and over, all over the world. Seen it in these wide disparities of power— when there is a lack of your own consequences being enacted on you— in master and novice, in priesthood and congregation, in free men and slaves. In being unknown also: as a person in a riot, an asshole on an online forum, an unidentifiable robber at night, holding up a family just leaving the theater. Being wealthy and paying your way out of courts and prisons. Or even before that, having just enough people to look the other way. Whenever there’s a disparity of consequences being enacted— be it from anonymity, wealth, or power— corruption and abuse grows.

The women that he’d freed more than two weeks ago had survived such a disparity; he’d known that, to the men who’d caged them, the women had been little more than meat. That anything, anything, could have been enacted onto them and none of the women could have stopped them.

The same way no earthly being could stop Superman.

He’d had no idea, then, that none needed to.

“You know, his father gave him that sense of responsibility.” She looks into her teacup as if divining for answers. “Sometimes I find myself regretting it.”

Bruce looks away.

—

(then)

“—and if he would only let me help him, he would still be alive.”

Bruce had been listening with a pit in his stomach and growing dismayed rage. “Don’t project him onto me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You can’t… Is that why you even want me? Am I some sort of stand-in?” Bruce started pacing, needing to move. Was Clark somehow putting him on a pedestal? The idea of Clark looking up to him seemed ludicrous, the idea of living up to that standard exhausted him beyond measure after having been beaten down by two decades of living up to Gotham herself, in memory of his parents.

“Of course you’re not, stop reading into things, it’s just—” Clark paused in that way that meant he was thinking. But the idea that Clark needed to search for words suddenly aggravated Bruce beyond measure.

“I’m not your redemption, get that straight in your mind. I can’t soothe whatever daddy issues you might—”

A large hand clamps around his wrist. It’s still intact, but Bruce is abruptly reminded once again of the enormity of provoking Superman. His wrist could be ground to powder faster than he could see it happening, and far faster than he could react. Not that any reaction would be effective in Bruce’s current state, with his current supplies.
He found himself saying, inexorably, “Making me accept help won’t make him any less dead.”

“Stop.”

Bruce watched the thoughts flicker through Clark’s eyes, faster than he could parse.

He knew Clark was fast. He was faster than the human gaze can follow, faster than even off-the-market high-speed cameras could register, faster than any bullet. Which means he can move at least faster than 1000 m/s, maybe far more, perhaps even approaching the speed of light.

Before Bruce had known Clark, when he’d been at a distance and analyzing Superman through recordings only, he’d presumed that the alien experienced time dilation. In that, as one approached the speed of light, one would experience less time. Less experience.

It’s no surprise to Bruce, knowing him now, that Clark broke the laws of physics. That Clark experienced every moment of his speed. It made Bruce wonder how old Clark was in subjective experienced time.

He wondered how long Clark was spending within himself to reconcile the fact that Bruce has said something irrevocable.

“Bruce,” Clark finally said, like a hammer falling, “I’m not yours either.”

Bruce tugged at his wrist in a sudden breathlessness, needing to get away, seeing the shape of the words threatening to barrel down at him before they were even said.

“Listen, I get it, but you can’t say that about my father, about me, without realizing that I’m not your redemption either.”

“I know that.”

Clark blinked.

Bruce disliked how he said that, but he can’t take it back. He can’t take back his anger, or the hurt; neither the anguish, nor the resignation.

Clark can’t save him, he knew that.

He would be trembling at this point, if he were any other man. Instead, Bruce mastered himself like he’d been taught. And lets the moment lay tense between them like air full of fuel.

“You can’t make me judge you,” Clark said.

He felt himself shutting down in incomprehension, his wrist still in Clark’s grip. “I don’t need your judgement.”

“But you want it.”

He wanted to live up to Clark’s impossible standards, yes. To have some proof that he was finally getting something right. It was so easy for Bruce to twist so he could grip Clark’s arm in return, lay his thumb on one large vein.

Clark’s pulse was racing.

“You’re enough. You’re good. You probably don’t want to hear it from me but,” Clark reeled him in until he could fold Bruce up like some sentient weighted blanket. “You’re already—”
“Forty-eight people died in Wayne Tower on Black Zero Day.” Bruce said in challenge.

“Yeah. I heard them.” Instead of taken aback and defensive, Clark was only apologetic, “I’m… I’m sorry about them. I figure in the future I could—”

“The brands,” Bruce desperately leapt on another avenue, “I know you hated them. I can’t say I wouldn’t do it again. I know the names, faces, and history of each person I used them on. I researched them to know how to best to hunt them down. I know their triggers, their fears. I know each person I’ve ever ruined, like I was their family.”

Clark’s face was very still. “I heard each of those 48 people die. That day, in total, Zod and I caused 5689 deaths. 638 of them under fourteen years old. Of those over five thousand people, one fifth died slowly over the course of days or weeks due to injuries or complications.”

“No, stop. Clark.” Bruce knew these figures and had been using them to goad his anger, but hearing them now, from Clark himself, was nothing that he’d wanted.

But Clark continued, unrelenting, “There are maybe 1458 rescue workers I’ve been listening in on... on their lungs. I want to write an article about their exposure to toxins—”

“You will give me their names,” he interrupted sharply.

“Bruce.”

“Their insurance will be covered.”

Clark barked a laugh, “How could you not think that you’re doing enough?”

“Speak for yourself,” Bruce says into Clark’s hair, letting his weight fall against the shorter man.

“Still working on that.”

“Then stop throwing stones in your glass house.”

“I’m not the one living in a literal glass house.”

Bruce snorted. "It's not like I can solve everything by throwing money at it." And then cracked up; and he didn’t know what that was so funny except Clark’s laughing now too, shaking against him, and the moment Bruce thought he’d gotten control of himself, Clark would start giggling again, and then Bruce couldn’t stop.

Didn’t stop until his lungs felt sore, until he’d felt hollowed with it, breathing hard. And then just existed for awhile, relearning how to breathe again.

Everything smelled skin warm.

Like Clark has filled the room.

“I’m gonna go grab us something to eat.” Clark gently detached himself.

“Sure,” Bruce agreed quietly, not looking back.

Wisps of fog gamboled across the lake outside the windows. They curled around outside like they were alive, pouring through the grasp of the trees, snuggling up right against the glass as if buffering them against the world.
“Hey.”

A cup of warm soup was nudged into his hand.

A bird fluttered out of the trees and started splashing about in the shallows.

“You know,” Clark said quietly, shoulder to shoulder with him now, cup in hand as well, watching the lake. “I almost feel like a normal person here.”

Bruce hummed and absently took a sip.

Next to him Clark did too.

“But you’re not,” Bruce said.

“But I’m not,” Clark agreed.

*There’s a responsibility to having power,* Bruce knew, though not many took up the duty.

“I get it,” Clark said.

There’s a responsibility to *not* use it, sometimes, too.

Bruce looked to the tiny model of the Cave sitting on his side table. And took another sip.

—

(now)

“This ship’s healing capabilities extends to humans.” Victor murmurs to Bruce as he interfaces with the controls on the Kryptonian ship. “If it was modified. And if you are not asking it to bring a human back from the dead.”

The room glows brighter, briefly, twice.

“There’s not many that could make use of it.” Bruce counters, watching Barry and Arthur maneuver the rolling hospital bed into the womblike room. “We don’t know how much power Barry can generate, or how much would be left after we revive Superman.”

“Barry could activate it more than once.” Victor glances at him. “You could make use of it.”

“What.”

“You realize you’re operating at less than 50% capacity due to your various—”

“Do you have any concept of *privacy*?”

“Do you? I’ve *seen* what your computers are running.”

“Irrelevant.”

“It’s part of your gig,” Cyborg concedes, “And this is mine. I’ve run the calculations, if we’re to stop Steppenwolf we need everyone at peak performance.”

“We just need Superman.”
Victor shakes his head, “I think you’re compromised.”

“If I were, wouldn’t I have brought him back sooner?” Bruce counters.

“You couldn’t. You didn’t have the Motherbox.”

“Exactly. Wouldn’t a fool have rushed in without it?” Like Lex rushed in, unless the monstrosity known as Doomsday was exactly what had been planned. “Everything in this room, it’s not for us to have.”

“Well,” Cyborg’s eye flashes, and looks down at the body Barry and Arthur were lowering into the orange liquid. “I guess I’m not the one able to change your mind.”

The room pulses, as if in agreement.

—

(then)

“You could have gone harder.” Bruce stretched slightly, pleased. His voice was sore and he was probably bruised all around the throat and chest.

The chains that held him up clink as Clark unwound them from Bruce’s hands.

Clark hummed absently, all but a negation.

“You know I can take it. You can get into it more.” What he meant was, get into character more. What he meant was, I trust you.

The last loop fell and Bruce sagged into Clark’s arms. Clark lowered them gently to kneeling on his mattress.

Bruce saw the image of them both over Clark’s shoulder, reflected from all sides, on the windows of the lake house. They make perfect mirrors at night.

Clark’s back rippled with his movements.

Bruce hummed against Clark’s hair while Clark kneaded his fingers against Bruce’s shoulderblades, other arm around Bruce’s waist. They were swaying slightly, back and forth, and Bruce didn’t know why but it suited his mood perfectly.

Even the way Clark’s come still seeped from his ass felt decadent and just right.

“Can I take care of this first, then?” Clark’s fingers ran his fingers across the meat of his shoulders and Bruce laughed a little.

“You’re already in the middle of giving me a massage.”

“I’m not talking about a massage.” His finger traced a little more pointedly and Bruce realized it was following the line of an old scar. “I can— with the heat vision?— reduce scarring. You might get some flexibility back.”

“No,” Bruce sighed. He was too mellow to be strongly upset about this.

“What?” Clark’s blink was audible. “I’ll be careful, it wouldn’t hurt.”
“It’s not about that.”

“Then what is it about? It’ll help you help more people.”

“Would it really,” Bruce muttered.

“What do you mean? Your work as the Gotham Bat—”

“Is only really a stop-gap measure,” Bruce shook his head slightly against Clark’s hair. “The people at the Wayne Foundations do better and more effective work keeping those from lives of crime.”

“But you pay the people at those charities, you donate to them and raise fundraisers—”

“It’s just money, Clark. They do the actual work.” He let out a brief chortle, “If it was just the money, they’d be better off if I’d kicked it sooner. Alfred would get enough to keep him in comfort, but most of my personal wealth is set to go into a trust for the Foundations. They should be solvent for at least a century if not more.”

“You’ve already planned for your death.”

“It’s only responsible, given what I do.”

Superman breathed against him shakily. Then stilled as if in decision.

His spine straightened as if crafted from marble. He lifted his face away from Bruce. Smiled as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Said, with with a hard edge of the alien, “You’re going to deny yourself healing? You would deny me this, giving this to you?”

Bruce’s tired cock gave an interested twitch despite himself.

Superman’s hand met his throat and Bruce struggled against it even as it bore him down into the sheets.

Oh god.

“You’ll take whatever I choose to give you. Even if you resist. Especially if you resist.” The kryptonian pressed his face against where his thumb threatened Bruce’s jugular and whispered, “Because I know you.”

Bruce moaned.

“But!” Clark popped back up, wreathed in farmboy smiles, “Maybe later. I’m starving right now and you should really eat something too.” He headed to the kitchen.

“Raincheck?” Bruce asked the ceiling weakly, his boner fell back down in dismay but it’s not like they hadn’t already gone four rounds. He’d been coming dry after the first.

“It’s gonna have to be after mom leaves. She’s flying in for the weekend remember?”

Bruce grunted in agreement. It would be an awkward headspace to fall into while attempting to Meet The Parent for the first time; and she’ll be arriving in a day and a half.

Clark ambled back in with a plate of sandwiches and teased, “You set up her up in your own plane. Did you forget the date, or which one?”

“I would never.”
“Is she going to arrive in something bat-themed?”

Bruce glared at him.

“Am I going to have to make apologies while you dash off in a swirl of black cape?”

“I’m not going to let any… surprises interrupt her visit. Barring emergencies.”

“‘Emergencies,’ he says.”

“She seems to be an intelligent woman, and have probably already figured me out given the hints we’ve dropped.” Bruce sniffed. “I’m sure she’ll be understanding if special circumstances comes up.”

“Let’s make sure none come up then!” Clark took a huge bite out of his sandwich.

Bruce nodded agreeably, and did the same, already making plans.

For the first time feeling hopeful.

—

(now)

Bruce clutches at the small metallic crest that Superman’s kryptonian cloth had folded itself into. Clark had told him the emblem on it, in his birth parent’s language, meant ‘Hope’.

Please, he thinks, hand clenching around it as Barry crouches down into starting position.

Cyborg in place. Motherbox in place. Body in place.

Clark’s body; in golden amber.

Please.

Barry runs, becoming a streak of light.

Chapter End Notes

WHEW.

Catharsis2:
“Clark, we are talking about your life.”
Clark breathes in sharply. “…Alfred was right.”

Ch1: “What if I prefer you stop chasing that early grave, sir.”

So, basically ch10 was the original concepts that I wanted to get at for the epilogue of Drunk With the Great Starry Void, involving how the fuck the relationship actually went down with all the hinky power dynamics and how much one is ever really 'allowed' to help, and depression, and being on the autistic spectrum, and I thought it would be a quick 3k.
hah.

By the time that I realized I should’ve split this off into it's own series I kinda was already committed to just tagging this onto the original fic, so. That was an oops.

If you want the more intense pain kink in fic I think several others, among them Holdt, already wrote more and better. But given Bruce's whole Everything in BvS, and confirmed basically in JL, I can't unsee him having very *complicated* boners for Clark.

Any thoughts? Favorite lines? Incoherent screaming?

The most ridiculous emoji that you can find that encapsulates the breadth of your experience? (I love it all, honestly.)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofour.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!